On the institutional work of widening participation practice

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for Dad and Nicolette, my two favourite hellenists

Abstract

This study is motivated by the following question: when practitioners engage in the project of 'widening participation' (WP), what are they hoping to do? Due to both its grounding in neoliberal logics and its aspirations for social justice, the very idea of WP is contested and subject to contradiction. WP, therefore, can mean substantially different things to different people, particularly to practitioners. While practitioner perspectives are chronically understudied in WP research, a nascent body of work on WP practitioners demonstrates that practitioner perspectives are crucial to understanding how policies are translated into material realities on the ground. Contributing to this work, I explore the ways in which WP practitioners understand and assess the institutional change work they are tasked to perform. To do so, I conducted a qualitative case study of the diverse community of WP practitioners who work on the UNIQ residential outreach programme at the University of Oxford, which comprises career WP workers and two previously unexplored subpopulations of practitioners: student interns, and in-house evaluators.

Through a conceptual review of WP literature, I show that dominant conceptual models in what I call 'critical WP research' are insufficient for capturing how actors agentically navigate change-work in institutional and organisational contexts. This thesis' primary theoretical contribution is its proposal that the neoinstitutional sociology of institutions and organisations—often referred to as 'organisational institutionalism' (OI)—lends us powerful tools for understanding how actors actively intervene within and/or against institutions as they work toward making higher education institutions (HEIs) more accessible and inclusive. Namely, the growing institutional work perspective (IWP) offers a cogent model for examining how organisational actors engage in purposive action in service of creating, maintaining and/or disrupting institutions. In the WP context, I argue that WP represents a recognisable 'organisational field' in UK social life, and thus operates via a unique set of institutional logics, and that higher educational institutions are better understood as organisations that are governed by wider institutional forces. WP practice, I contend, amounts to a form of institutional work, which is enacted in/on HEIs.

To explore the empirical realities of institutional work in the WP context, I selected Oxford WP as my object of inquiry because Oxford represents an exceptional case of how the institutional forces buttressing WP—massification, neoliberalism, an increasing societal priority on inclusivity and social mobility—clash with the formerly hegemonic elite paradigm of education that Oxbridge embodies. Palpable contradictions find their way in every aspect of an Oxford WP practitioner's work: from selecting and targeting students, to determining which 'myths' about Oxford to debunk, to evaluating the 'success' of their interventions. Practitioners draw on an array of strategies of institutional work, like identity work and category work, to navigate these contradictions. I found that any attempt to make sense of the contradictions inherent to WP practice at Oxford amounts to acts of (de)legitimising Oxford WP. Depending on how they 'come up against' (Ahmed 2012:26) these contradictions through practice, WP practitioners either reify the institutional order, or gain access to transformative knowledge that inspires them to push against it.

Acknowledgments

I rejoice, and complain.
Julien Baker, 'Rejoice'

A project as long-lasting as a doctoral thesis will invariably see many rabbit holes, dead-ends, and diversions. A lot of this is for the best; I still can't fathom why I entertained some of the lines of thinking that I did. There are a few things I mourn the absence of, though. I have been particularly taken by two sociological classics, which both incidentally belonged to the Chicago school of thought: Harold Blumer's work on symbolic interactionism and George Herbert Mead's theory of the self. Without diving into the particulars of either, both underscore the sociality of self-definition and meaning-making. I think I find them so compelling because, if nothing else, this thesis is a testament to how research projects are fundamentally products of co-creation.

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Acronyms

APP	Access and participation plan
DBIS	Department for Business, Innovation & Skills
EDI	Equity, diversity, and inclusion
HE	Higher education
HEFCE	Higher Education Funding Council for England
HEIs	Higher education institutions
IWP	The institutional work perspective
NCOP	National Collaborative Outreach Programme
NNCO	National Networks for Collaborative Outreach
OfS	Office for Students
OFFA	Office for Fair Access
OI	Organisational institutionalism
PDWP	Policy discourse widening participation scholarship
SCWP	Student-centred widening participation scholarship
SJWP	Social-justice widening participation scholarship
TASO	Transforming Access and Student Outcomes
ToC	Theory of change
UAO	Oxford University Admissions and Outreach
WP	Widening participation

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Introduction

τὰ πάντα ῥεῖ
Everything changes.
—Attributed to Heraclitus

At the core of this thesis' inquiry are questions subject to many interpretations: when practitioners, policymakers, and researchers engage in the project of 'widening participation' (WP), what are we hoping to do? What kinds of change are we seeking to effect, and how do we interact with the institutions facilitating, or stonewalling, this change?

These questions can be complicated to answer because the idea of WP is not an internally stable one. Today, seeing as 'widening participation' has largely been usurped by 'access and participation' in the HE sector, it is subject to even more of a conceptual free-for-all. I intentionally use the term because it is indicative of a consistent, though contradictory, endeavour that remains highly operative in UK higher education (HE) policy. While the drive to make English higher education more accessible far predates the late 20th century (see Thompson 2012), WP is an outgrowth of New Labour's distinct *ethos* toward education and social policy as a whole. As its 1997 manifesto stresses, education was New Labour's 'number one priority'; indeed, the government was 'almost hyperactive' in its creation of educational reforms and initiatives (Heath et al. 2013:228). The national drive to 'widen participation' in HE, embodied in the 1997 Dearing Report, was one of its most significant and defining interventions. In Dearing, we find a comprehensive vision for transforming the United Kingdom into a 'learning society', in which the massification of HE participation among underrepresented communities increases human capital and socioeconomic equality. New Labour proceeded to

implement many of Dearing's proposals, from a raft of national and local outreach programmes to introducing tuition fees.

Critical WP scholars have long suggested that there is a contradiction at the heart of WP (McCaig and Bowers-Brown 2007; Burke 2012; Doyle and Griffin 2012; Harrison and Waller 2017). To widen participation is both to break down barriers for disadvantaged populations as a 'matter of equity' (Dearing 1997 1.17), *and* to massify education participation with the aim of maximising economic growth by increasing human capital (Leaney and Mwale 2021). Across time, cultural shifts, and governments, the tension between WP policy's neoliberal and social justice-oriented aims has only intensified. The 2010s saw the government steadily recognising that the project of HE access demands far more than the mere increase of participation; we must attend to the 'whole student lifecycle' if we are to realise an equitable, inclusive HE landscape (HEFCE and OFFA 2014). This has culminated in the Office for Students (OfS) stating its aspirations to *eliminate* inequality in not only participation, but student experience and outcomes after graduation.

Over the same decade, the Coalition government worked fervently to transform HE into a marketplace in which HE providers competed for student consumers (McCaig 2015a; 2015b; 2018). Student tuition fees, first proposed in Dearing, tripled to an unprecedented £9,000 in 2012, stoking protests. In 2010, in the policy development perhaps most salient to this study, the government slashed funding to the national outreach initiative, AimHigher, shifting the onus of outreach and access work onto HEIs. WP, once a national ambition, became an atomised organisational pursuit saddled with confusing, and even perverse, incentives: the work of outreach became synonymous with WP teams convincing students to attend *their* universities, blurring the lines between outreach and recruitment.

While the contradictions in WP policy are manifest, and have been subject to fruitful scholarly critique for decades (see Ch.2 for a review), my interest is in examining

how actors on the ground navigate the 'confusion of tongues' (Stevenson et al. 2010) surrounding WP: namely, the WP practitioners who deliver outreach and access programmes for universities. While practitioner perspectives are chronically understudied in WP research (see Ch.2 for my hypothesis as to why), there is a nascent body of work that investigates the experiences of WP practitioners who work on outreach and access projects for their respective universities (Wilkins & Burke 2015; Rainford 2021a, 2021b, 2021c). Rooted in critical policy studies, such scholarship demonstrates that practitioner perspectives are crucial to understanding how policies become translated into material realities on the ground (e.g., Ball 1993; 2015; Ball, Maguire, and Braun 2012).

My interest, however, is not necessarily on how practitioners 'do' WP, but what doing WP means to them. Jon Rainford (2021c) empirically validated a phenomenon intuitively known by those working in the WP sector: WP practitioners are a 'particular kind of person'. Those who choose to dedicate their professional lives to education access tend to identify with the ideals of social justice, arriving at this conviction from a variety of paths and experiences. Many see WP work as a vocation, or, in Sarah Jaffe's (2021) formulation, a labour of love. As Rainford found, however, practitioners conceptualise the project of social change in astoundingly different ways. Some feel allegiance to their institution, exhibiting faith in its ability to make good on its commitments to access and inclusivity. Others take a transgressive stance toward not only their universities' work, but the neoliberal policy ethic in which WP is ensconced. Some hover in the middle. Indeed, WP can mean different things to different people.

In the study that follows, I examine how WP practitioners, broadly defined, at the University of Oxford understand and assess the institutional change work they are tasked to perform. Specifically, I probe how they navigate doing WP work in an institutional context that renders WP a confusing, contradictory, yet high-stakes enterprise. I have become convinced that the only way to understand WP practice–or any social change

project, for that matter–is to take a critical eye towards the institutions it operates within and against. Accordingly, I find my conceptual grounding in the neoinstitutional sociology of institutions and organisations. This, however, was not my original vantage point. In an oft-cited guide to research questions, Jane Agee (2009:432) urges that 'good qualitative questions are usually developed or refined in all stages of a reflexive and interactive inquiry journey'; hence, ongoing questioning is an 'integral part of understanding the unfolding lives and perspectives of others'. Over the course of this thesis' development, my understanding of WP practice and the institutions surrounding it has evolved profoundly. This study is a testament to the iterative, reflexive, and sometimes tumultuous ways in which an inquiry journey can unfold. The aim of this brief introduction is therefore to explain the theoretical, empirical, and ethical choices I have made, and show how they have cohered in the thesis at hand.

Theories of change, changing theories

I began working on this thesis in late February 2020, and the rupture, crisis, and instability characteric of that time were more than incidental to its origins. The current project was cobbled together at rapid speed in response to the unravelling of my original DPhil idea: an ethnography of Burmese migrant students' experiences pursuing HE in Thailand. A confluence of professional obstacles had made that project increasingly untenable, and in March, COVID-19 sealed its fate. Rather desperately, but with the help of new supervisors and mentors, I turned to my immediate context and workplace: WP at Oxford.

At the time, I was working as an evaluation assistant at Oxford's admissions and outreach office, and I was captivated by theory of change (ToC), a method of evaluation that makes explicit 'how and why an initiative works' and the assumptions undergirding the initiative's operations (Weiss 1997). ToCs are becoming increasingly popular among WP practitioners (e.g., Childs et al. 2016; Raven 2018; Barkat 2019; Dent et al. 2022), and

are endorsed by The Office for Students (OfS) and its affiliate Transforming Access and Student Outcomes (TASO) as a rigorous means for linking a WP intervention's inputs, aims, and outputs. My fascination with ToCs, however, derived not from their utility as tools for evaluation, but as artefacts that illuminate how practitioners working on a programme understand the change they hope to achieve. I sought to study how practitioners, student ambassadors, evaluators, and affiliated faculty working on one of Oxford's flagship access programmes, UNIQ, differentially conceptualised the programme's theory of change. Through constructing a composite of their perspectives, I sought to ascertain the assumptions and goals of the programme, which would lend insight into Oxford's wider WP strategy.

To provide conceptual backing for my proposed ToC approach, I drew heavily on constructivist approaches to evaluation, which acquainted me with the wider intellectual world of social constructionism. The notion of social construction is unwieldy, since the term is subject to what Anthony Giddens (1984) named a 'double hermeneutic'. That is, what began as a (relatively banal) theoretical term has pervaded discourses far outside its original social-scientific context, creating an irreversible conceptual spillage between lay and academic discourses. In light of this, social constructionists James Holstein and Jaber Gubrium are correct to say that 'constructionism now belongs to everyone and to no one—a highly-variegated mosaic of itself' (Holstein and Gubrium 2008:4). Now when someone says 'X phenomenon is socially constructed', we assume they mean that X phenomenon is not real, or that it should be disavowed.

As I learned more about anglophone social constructionism's origins in the work Berger and Luckmann (1966), I found that the original intent of social constructionist inquiry was to achieve the opposite. Berger and Luckmann's quest was to examine the social processes that are constitutive of everyday *reality* (Vera 2016). Social constructionists make the ontological assumption that institutions are granted objective facticity (or, in formal parlance, objectivated) by the social processes through which

taken-for-granted realities are constructed—namely, the formation of institutions. While social constructionist sociology is a diffuse school of inquiry in its own right (see Best 2008; Weinberg 2014), one of the most enduring descendents of early social constructionism is the neoinstitutional sociology of institutions and organisations, often referred to as 'organisational institutionalism' (OI).

According to an OI framing, institutions are the entities responsible for the regulation of all human action, intervening across all levels of social life, from the world and societal to the organisational and sub-organisational (Scott 2014). Because of their pervasiveness, and the ways in which we take them for granted as simply the way things are, institutions can be hard to see. Phillips et al. (2004:647) define them as 'conventions that self police', and these conventions can take on a wide array of forms: from the abstract ideas to brick-and-mortar spaces. The pioneering OI theorists DiMaggio and Powell quipped that 'sociologists find institutions everywhere, from handshakes to marriages to strategic-planning departments' (1991:9). Though I dedicate to two chapters to conceptually grounding and justifying how I theorise WP (Ch.3 and Ch.4), I will front now that I understand WP to be a meso-level institution called an organisational field (DiMaggio and Powell 1983; Wooten and Hoffman 2017). Furthermore, I understand Oxbridge to be an institution that was formerly synonymous with HE's institutional configuration in England. The WP practitioners at the heart of this study are asked to make an uncomfortable marriage between WP and Oxbridge workable, which requires a great deal of intentional institutional work.

The distinguishing feature of OI among neoinstitutional approaches is its 'cultural-cognitive' approach to institutional analysis (Scott 2014). According to this framing, institutions do not merely regulate human activity through brute force, but through conditioning how we see the world, down to our very cognitive processes. Salient to this study, institutions set the terms of *legitimacy* in a given institutional environment (Suchmann 2017). Legitimacy is a highly normative entity, as it dictates

what is deemed good, valuable, and appropriate in a given institutional environment. As we have established thus far, the terms of legitimacy in WP are confused; the standards of social justice–transformation, radical change, and redistributive equity–intermingle with neoliberal priorities of cost-effectiveness, market logic, and merit.

While I found traditional OI's analysis of institutions and legitimacy compelling, it did not at all accomodate what I was witnessing in practitioner interviews. Throughout much of its existence, the core supposition of OI has been that institutions are almost insurmountably socially reproductive, so much so that the observable reality that actors can change institutions represents a paradox: 'How can actors change institutions if their actions, intentions, and rationality are all conditioned by the very institution they wish to change?' (Holm 1995:398). Across interviews, however, I noticed practitioners questioning institutions, identifying institutional contradictions, and using an array of legitimacy frames to understand and assess their practice. To use the notion of ToC metaphorically, practitioners were describing not only UNIQ's theory of change for Oxford WP, but their own theories of change for how WP ought to be.

As I was conducting interviews, I turned back to the literature, and I learned that new OI theory does offer conceptual tools that capture this kind of practitioner action. Practitioners were engaging in institutional work: purposive, intentional action aimed at shaping institutions. The institutional work perspective (IWP) is a recent development in OI literature that seeks to 'bring actors back in' by focusing on the manifold ways in which actors move agentically within institutional contexts. IWP proposes an ontology of institutions that acknowledges both the socially reproductive power of institutions *and* the agency of actors to apprehend, critique, and act against institutional orders. IWP provided a set of conceptual tools to capture these nuanced and surprising instances of institutional work.

My inquiry journey had reached a satisfactory place. Returning to Agee, it is often assumed that there is a fixed, linear relationship between theory, method, and

interpretation. We theorise, we collect data, we interpret it deductively according to the theories we selected. Agee (2009), alternatively, recommends that we regard theorisation, literature review, and data analysis as interlocking tasks that, though discreet in certain respects, are best performed in confluence. As I will elaborate in the next chapter, I believe this iterative, reflexive approach to inquiry is not only acceptable, but an ideal way to conduct qualitative research.

I will now clarify the thesis' arguments and structure and, in turn, consider its contributions to relevant bodies of knowledge.

Arguments, structure, and contributions

The thesis is divided into three parts. Part 1 seeks to situate and justify the thesis' theoretical and empirical moves. It comprises this chapter, Chapter 1, and Chapter 2.

Chapter 1 explicates the philosophical priors that grounded all dimensions of my inquiry, which find their form in the study's qualitative paradigm (Lincoln and Guba 1994). In Chapter 2, I provide a conceptual review (Kennedy 2007) of the body of literature to which this study contributes, a subset of WP research that I term 'critical WP'. Given this thesis' interest in what practitioners hope to achieve by participating in WP, Chapter 2 is motivated by a corollary question: how do critical WP researchers understand what WP is and should be? After identifying and analysing theoretical trends in critical WP inquiry, I argue that the conceptual apparatuses that are currently dominant in this body of inquiry are insufficient for 1) capturing the occasional fragility of the social reproduction of inequality in HE, and 2) for meaningfully theorising how HEIs operate with/as institutions, since the role that HEIs play in social reproduction is one of critical WP work's dominant interests. Where these dimensions of WP meet, it contends, is in the figure of the WP practitioner, who, albeit on a micro-level, actively intervenes within and/or against institutions as they work toward creating more accessible, inclusive HEIs. The goal underpinning the thesis' theoretical and empirical

work is to redress the two conceptual weaknesses that Chapter 2 lays out by examining the experiences of WP practitioners.

The remainder of the thesis—through its theoretical interventions and empirical findings—works toward addressing these injunctions by demonstrating how the neoinstitutional sociology of institutions and organisations enables us to make sense of WP practice, both theoretically and as an empirical phenomenon. In service of this aim, Part 2 furnishes the theoretical and methodological backbone of my inquiry. Chapters 3, 4, and 5 provide the thesis' conceptual framework and core theoretical contentions, and Chapter 6 details its research design. Chapter 3 is essentially a conventional conceptual framework chapter; following from the paradigmatic priors I outline in Chapter 1, it provides a broad introduction to the core constructs, goals, and debates within theoretical tradition I am working, and explains and justifies how I engage with said tradition. In putting critical WP studies in conversation with neoinstitutional sociology, however, Chapter 3 engages in some unavoidable conceptual work: it must theorise WP, HEIs, and other relevant entities using an institutional-organisational framework. I argue that widening participation is a key *institution* in UK social life, taking form at the meso-level of the 'organisational field'. HEIs, it follows, are better understood as *organisations* that are governed by wider institutional forces, like WP and the related institutions surrounding it.

Chapter 3 scaffolds as much as it problematizes. After demonstrating how WP operates as an organisational field, it canvasses how recent lines of inquiry disrupt classical neoinstitutional theory's 'oversocialized' conception of institutions as homogenising, self-policing, inescapably powerful structures that govern human action. Its final sections introduce the institutional work perspective (IWP) (Lawrence and Suddaby 2006; Lawrence, Suddaby, and Leca 2009; 2011; Lawrence and Phillips 2019), whose inquiry prioritises the micro-level agentive acts of 'institutional work' that actors perform in service of creating, maintaining, and disrupting institutional orders. IWP, I

show, is an ideal conceptual home for exploring WP practice, and especially this study's investigation of WP practice at Oxford.

But what about Oxford? As I have explained, I am exploring WP at Oxford because it is an exceptionally representative case in the realm of WP practice, arguing that its singularity renders it intrinsically interesting *and* that Oxford's relationship with WP represents an extreme instantiation of WP's fundamental contradictions and confusions. The tail-end of Chapter 3 and entirety of Chapter 4 demonstrate why this is the case. At the close of Chapter 3, I stake the claim that Oxford is best understood as both an organisation, and the manifestation of the institution 'Oxbridge'. I then contend that the logical conclusion of this claim is that WP practice within *all* HEIs amounts to institutional work, a controversial argument in light of Lawrence and Phillips' (2019) recent coinage of 'organisational work'.

Chapter 4's task makes good on the Chapter 3's bolder claims through turning the following question: if WP and Oxbridge are institutions, what kind of institutional work does WP practice at Oxford represent? It begins by tracing an institutional biography of Oxford (as half of the institution, Oxbridge), illuminating the precise institutional position Oxbridge has occupied for nearly a millennium. It recounts how the global trends toward massification and neoliberalization of education from which the New Labour WP agenda emerged ushered in a new institutional order for HE, and then furnishes a policy history of WP from 1997 to the mid 2010s. In the early 2010s, when the responsibilities of WP were devolved to HEIs, Oxford was finally asked to meaningfully integrate this new order into its institutional structure. Following the history of Oxford WP and its flagship initiative, UNIQ, I show how 'Oxford WP' is a project of merging incompatible institutional logics, which renders it a fundamentally contradictory enterprise (Bjerregaard and Jonasson 2014). Specifically, I argue that WP practitioners are asked to perform the self-contradictory task of 'maintaining disruption' at a hidebound institution.

Chapter 5 outlines the study's empirical goals, and introduces and justifies the concepts that guide its analysis of empirical findings. Conceptualising institutional work as something that an institution *invites* (as opposed to a spontaneous or resistive act) is novel within IWP. To buttress my argument that institutions can prescribe institutional work, I draw on Sara Ahmed's scholarship on diversity workers in HEIs (Ahmed 2012; 2017). I compare and contrast WP practice with Ahmed's analysis of diversity workers, ultimately arguing that to show that WP workers are liable to differentially interpret what maintaining disruption means, and whether it is a good thing, depending on their identities and ethical commitments. I demonstrate how tracking two forms of institutional work that practitioners engage in—identity work and category work—lends us profound insight into how they make sense of WP practice, and whether it is a good and transformative enterprise. In doing so, Chapter 5 closes the circle of Chapter 3's discussion of advances within IWP, discussing and appraising current moves in the identity work and category work subliteratures. Chapter 6 then details how I developed an appropriate research design to apprehend how these strategies materialise in their empirical realities.

In addition to outlining how I determined, collected, and interpreted the data I include in my findings, Chapter 6 also justifies why I chose UNIQ as a case study, and how I came to understand who counts as a WP practitioner in the Oxford context. I opt for a broad understanding of practice, highlighting the ineluctable intersection of practice proper, academics, and evaluation in the WP context. Moreover, I specify the role of temporality in the study and how my design foregrounded the retrospective nature of how practitioners come to understand and assess their work.

Finally, Chapters 7, 8, and 9 present the study's empirical findings. Each chapter foregrounds the experiences of a specific sub-community of practitioners who interface with UNIQ: career practitioners, student ambassadors, and evaluators, respectively. Chapter 7 is dedicated to career WP practitioners, and tracks how practitioners navigate

the contradictions inherent to the enterprise of maintaining disruption. Chapter 8 centres the experiences of student ambassadors who intern for UNIQ, a community of WP workers that, to my knowledge, has yet to be studied in critical WP research. For student WP workers, identity work is a central dimension of their experience with WP practice; the questions of 'who am I as a WP student?' and 'who am I to the institution?' are interlocking. Chapters 7 and 8 underscore how the institutional work practitioners perform invariable involves either legitimising or delegitimizing Oxford WP, affirming the link between institutional work and legitimacy observed in neighbouring empirical contexts (Gray et al. 2018; Fernando and Kenny 2021). While Chapters 7 and 8 explore how practitioners assess the legitimacy of Oxford WP, Chapter 9 turns to how legitimacy is construed at the field-level; namely, it lays out the terms of legitimacy that practitioners are expected to follow. I argue that evaluation plays a key role in setting the terms of legitimacy that WP, as a sector, follows. WP work is considered legitimate insofar as it is evaluable, and insofar as it produces measurable change. However, my interviews show that practitioners generally refuse the terms of legitimacy that the field hands them, opting for conceptions of change that are less measurable, less positivistic. While one would expect evaluators to align themselves with field-level standards of legitimacy, I found that evaluators cannot resist the pull of practice. They must conduct their own institutional work to negotiate the relationship between the 'theory of change' that they are asked to represent, and the 'theory of change' that they glean from practitioners.

Contributions

This thesis makes several core overarching contributions to the body of knowledge surrounding critical WP. On the theoretical front, it demonstrates the utility of OI and IWP as powerful conceptual frames for critical empirical work in WP. It shows how OI is not only apt in a general sense, but that it specifically offers robust tools for redressing

the two weaknesses within critical WP that the conceptual review lays bare: critical WP's apprehension toward embracing agency, and its underdeveloped account of institutions' and organisations' role within social reproduction. While there is nascent interest in OI and related conceptual frames within critical WP (see Ch.2), there has yet to be a study that systematically considers the implications of a neoinstitutional reading of WP. This thesis does so, dedicating three chapters (Ch.3, Ch.4, and Ch.5) to providing a comprehensive theorisation of WP the organisational field and how actors interface with it. Situating my conceptual frame within IWP specifically, I furnish an account of agency and actor intentionality that is up to the task of capturing the big, the small, and the sometimes confounding ways in which practitioners navigate the contradictions inherent to their work. I add a compelling concurring opinion, as it were, to other theoretical interventions in critical WP (e.g., various conceptual frames rooted in critical and social realism, from Jon Rainford and Neil Harrison, respectively) that seek to redress WP research's oversocialized understanding of action.

As heavily focussed as I am on the granular conceptual questions attendant to marrying OI and critical WP, it is my conviction that empirical concerns make theory worth doing. The subject of my empirical inquiry is WP practitioners working on the UNIQ programme at Oxford. Paying attention to these actors in their institutional setting itself amounts to a substantive contribution to WP research. As I have discussed, practitioner perspectives have been sorely understudied within WP research, although a growing body of scholarship has started to rectify this. Within this body of work, moreover, there has yet to be a study dedicated to WP practice at Oxford or Cambridge, an enterprise that, given Oxbridge's singular status in English HE, is distinct in the broader landscape of WP practice. As I will discuss at length in Chapters 3 and 4 and in the conclusion, it is paradoxically Oxford's non-representativeness that makes it a compelling case for testing the conceptual tools I propose. Institutional work occurs in response to institutional contradictions: widening participation to Oxford, which has

represented and reproduced an elite paradigm of education for just shy of a millennium, is a task rife with contradictions. The WP practitioners charged with merging these incompatible logics are forced to confront these contradictions head-on, which leads to rich acts of institutional work that were well captured in interviews.

In my view, however, the thesis' strongest substantive contribution lies in how broadly it defines practitioners. While I dedicate much attention to career WP practitioners (Ch.7 and part of Ch.9), I examine the perspectives of both student ambassadors (Ch.8) and in-house evaluators (Ch.9), advocating that they be classified as WP practitioners. There has yet to be a study that focalises either of these communities or the role they play within WP practice. As the findings chapters will repeatedly demonstrate, inclusion of these perspectives adds rich insight into how WP practice operates on the ground. Rainford (2021c) demonstrates that WP practitioners, while a distinct kind of institutional actor, are far from a monolith: practitioners hold a wide range of lived experiences and ethical dispositions. This thesis' disaggregation of the category of practitioner expands our understanding of how vast and diverse a space WP practice is, which itself constitutes a call for more concerted research into practitioner perspectives.

Chapter 1

Paradigm and Priors

This brief chapter will set out the philosophical priors on which the study rests. In simple terms, I subscribe to a 'big-Q' qualitative paradigm. I draw my understanding of paradigm from Lincoln and Guba's classic work on paradigms in qualitative research. In Lincoln and Guba's conception, a paradigm entails 'a set of basic beliefs (or metaphysics) that deals with ultimates or first principles' (Lincoln and Guba 1994:107). While paradigms are generally expressed in terms of a researcher's or research community's philosophical assumptions, paradigms often hold more individualised existential value, '[representing] a worldview that defines, for its holder, the nature of the "world", the individual's place in it, and the range of possible relationships to that world and its parts, as, for example, cosmologies and theologies do'. Writing during the height of the paradigm wars, they initially proposed that four relatively distinct paradigms governed qualitative research: positivism, post-positivism, constructivism, and critical theory. They agreed, however, with a prediction of Clifford Geertz (1980) that paradigms would eventually 'blur' and 'interbreed' into manifold configurations (Guba and Lincoln 2013:86). In a 2018 retrospective, they reflect on how Geertz's prophecy came to pass. In particular, there is a promising blend of constructionism's micro-level inquiry into human subjectivities and critical theory's unflappable commitment to critiquing social inequality.

While Lincoln and Guba attend to the sub-paradigms proliferating *within* qualitative research, I concur with the methodologists Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke that qualitative research itself should be understood as an umbrella paradigm. Drawing on Kidder and Fine (1987), they distinguish between big-Q and small-q

qualitative research. Any research project that uses 'words as data' can be classified as small-q qualitative. Big-Q qualitative inquiry, alternatively, proposes an ethic of knowledge production that can be readily distinguished from quantitative, mixed-methods, and other more positivist pursuits. This conception has a strong pedigree in methodological literature. In the classic first edition of the now-standard *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, Denzin and Lincoln understand qualitative research as a 'field of inquiry in its own right' that 'cross-cuts disciplines, fields, and subject matter' (1994:1). Qualitative research should be understood less as a constellation of sanctioned methodologies and theoretical approaches, but rather as an attitude toward inquiry buttressed by a set of broad, interpretable, yet nonetheless recognisable philosophical priors.

The anatomy of this study's paradigm

I will now turn to how I adopted a big-Q paradigm in this research, and how I adapted it to the various contingencies at hand. Lincoln and Guba originally proposed that paradigms are constructed along three philosophical dimensions: the ontological, epistemological, and methodological. In later years, they added a fourth axis, insisting on the importance of the axiological to qualitative inquiry (Lincoln, Lynham, and Guba 2018:229,230). For big Q qualitative research, I would argue that axiology is the operative dimension that motivates and shapes the other three, since it is constitutive of a 'knowing' approach to inquiry.

Figure 1.1: The paradigmatic questions (adapted from Lincoln and Guba 2013:37)

The ontological question	'What is there that can be known?' 'What is the nature of reality?'
The epistemological question	'What is the relationship between the knower and the knowable?'

The methodological question	'How does one go about acquiring knowledge?'
The axiological question	'Of all knowledge available to me, which is the most valuable, which is the most truthful, which is the most beautiful, which is the most life-enhancing?'

While I will offer a broadscale discussion of my ontological, epistemological, methodological, and axiological assumptions here, I want to caution that this discussion does not start and stop in this chapter. Take the case of ontology. The question, 'What is the nature of reality?' is often reduced to 'is there a presocial reality?' Schools of thought within qualitative inquiry come down on different sides of the debate; critical realism affirms the existence of an external reality, while strong forms of constructivism urge that there is no reality external to perception.

My answer to this ontological question can be summed up in three words: I don't know. I would wager that the question of pre-social reality is secondary, if not immaterial, to *empirical* qualitative inquiry. Berger and Luckmann (1966:1-2) describe this situation succinctly:

> We immediately disclaim any pretension to the effect that sociology has the answer to these ancient philosophical preoccupations [e.g., the nature of reality]... The philosopher... is professionally obligated to take nothing for granted, and to obtain maximal clarity as to the ultimate status of what the man on the street believes to be 'reality' and 'knowledge.'... This the sociologist cannot possibly do.

Taking a cue from Berger and Luckmann, I dispense with the intractable philosophical question of whether the 'surround', as Lincoln and Guba call it, that we experience as reality is presocial. There are, however, an array of ontological questions and assumptions that are central to this study. As I mentioned in the introduction, an ontological assumption of much sociological inquiry into institutions is that they have, in Durkheim's formulation, 'objective facticity'; they are *real*. How they are real, what

they do, and where they intervene are all ontological questions. Chapter 3 is dedicated to exploring these questions, which also reverberate throughout the remainder of my inquiry.

While ontological questions can, and should, vary greatly across big-Q qualitative inquiry, I would argue that there is a more standardised approach to questions surrounding knowledge (which correspond to Lincoln and Guba's epistemological and methodological questions). Whether or not a presocial reality exists, big-Q qualitative research presupposes that objective reality epistemically eludes humans. All pursuits of knowledge production are mediated by the limited and biassed subjectivity of the researcher. Big-Q research, accordingly, foregrounds the interpretive role of the researcher as an active meaning-maker, not an objective observer. Such a posture can take various forms; for example, post-positivism, though some would like to see it excised from the wider qualitative pantheon, acknowledges how one's positionality, experiences, biases, and values influence how they apprehend reality.

I would classify my epistemic orientation in this study as transactional subjectivism. In addition to assuming that knowledge production is influenced by researcher subjectivity, transactional subjectivism underscores that the relationship between the knower and the knowable is contingent on the context of their encounter (Guba and Lincoln 2013:40). My empirical contributions in this thesis are drawn from semi-structured interviews, an interactional encounter in which the interviewer and subject collectively build knowledge that is irreproducible beyond that encounter (see Ch.6 for a discussion of the limitations and promises of this outlook). Another reason I find transactional subjectivism valuable is that it does not merely reduce an analysis of subjectivity to the researcher's positionality, which I will discuss shortly.

Regardless of the particulars of a given study's epistemological outlook, big-Q qualitative inquiry assumes that meaning and knowledge are quite literally made, not

discovered. Or, as Braun and Clarke colourfully put it, 'knowledge seekers are sculptors rather than archaeologists' (Braun and Clarke 2013:92). Good qualitative research situates, questions, and critiques its meaning-making processes, and justifies the knowledge it seeks to build.

This is where axiology becomes operative. If qualitative researchers wield the power to produce knowledge, then the question of what knowledge they *should* build is central. In their retrospective on paradigms, Lincoln and Guba track a move within all qualitative paradigms toward a 'call to action'. 'The sharpest shift' they have witnessed, is constructionists and phenomenologists taking a 'a step beyond interpretation and *Verstehen*, or understanding, toward social action' (Lincoln, Lynham, and Guba 2018:232). This is a direct product of paradigm blurring; that is, the liberationist aims that were once siloed to critical theoretical perspectives have melded with constructionism's dedication to understanding how actors differentially confront their surround. Lincoln and Guba themselves feel the pull. Lincoln, along with Denzin, stresses that the latest edition of their Sage Handbook is a 'critical' project, meaning that

> [it] privileges practice, politics, action, consequences, performances, discourses, methodologies of the heart, and pedagogies of hope, love, care, forgiveness, and healing. It speaks for and with those who are on the margins. As a liberationist philosophy, it is committed to examining the consequences of racism, poverty, and sexism on the lives of interacting individuals. (Denzin and Lincoln 2018:12)

The unabashed endorsement of emancipatory research expressed above resonates with me. When it comes to the context at hand, it is perhaps not a surprise by this point that I personally adhere to what Jones and Thomas (2005) call a 'transformative' approach to WP. That is, I believe that the project of access should not limit itself to the arithmetic question of who is included in HE, but to the existential questions of whom and what HE is for. It follows that the project of HE access should be a radical one, in that it should change HE down to its roots. HE continues to be a prime site of the reproduction of inequality. This is particularly true in England, where the institution of

Oxbridge has acted as a formidable engine of class inequality, coloniality, and essentially every other manifestation of systemic inequality. Redressing this will take nothing short of utter transformation on a sociopolitical scale.

This research has been an exercise of balancing my own worldview with my attempt to understand the worldview of others. In earlier iterations of the thesis, I found myself critiquing participants whose normative vision for HE access did not resemble my own. I learned that I had to take on a more constructionist sensibility, seeking to understand the lenses through which others make sense of the world. Nonetheless, such relativism can only take one so far; fronting one's principles is imperative in a critical project. There is no straightforward path for perfectly balancing a qualitative project's aims to understand and critique. Rather, Braun and Clarke urge that strong qualitative inquiry is marked by a posture that they call 'knowingness'. By knowingness, they 'mean evidence... of research being treated as a deliberative process' in which reflexivity over one's methodological choices is 'consistently, coherently and transparently enacted throughout the analytic process and reporting of the research' (Braun and Clarke 2019b:594). My goal is for knowingness to infuse the entirety of the thesis, from how and why I understand 'criticality' in WP research, to how I negotiate OI's problems, to how I handle the interpretation of data.

Finally, a brief addendum on positionality. Positionality acknowledgements have now become standard in peer-reviewed articles and graduate dissertations (Holmes 2020). This is, in most respects, should be seen as a welcome development in qualitative research, as acknowledging positionality is a reflexive research practice. I have noticed a tendency to conflate identity with positionality, and, in turn, positionality with axiology. My positionality, of course, influenced how I approached the study's inquiry: for example, my coming from a heavily under-resourced educational background, and my being from the US, both shaped how I approach the matter of WP. However, expressing one's values through positionality alone risks solipsism. Not only are values irreducible

to identity, but positionality is not fixed. As a white person, for example, it would be ludicrous to stake my claim to antiracism on the basis of my own positionality. I was moreover not born a critical WP researcher, even though my class background and various other identity-based interests point to such an ethic. Indeed, as the findings of this study bear out, how one understands a social justice project is mediated by a confluence of identity, interaction, practical action, and an array of other factors.

Chapter 2

A conceptual review of theoretical directions in critical WP literature

> If an optimist is someone who believes that we live in the best of all possible worlds, and the pessimist someone who suspects that the optimist may be right, the left places itself in the third camp: that of hope.
> Zygmunt Bauman (2007)

This chapter preliminarily stakes out the lines of inquiry to which I intend to contribute, an interdisciplinary body of work that I will provisionally call 'critical WP scholarship'. I will argue that, while critical WP scholars do not currently identify as part of a self-conscious community of inquiry, the addition of this category to WP is useful, as it enables us to track some overlooked trends and tendencies within emancipatory and critically-oriented WP literature conducted in the UK.

My aim in this chapter is not merely to survey literature that falls into this category, nor to suggest that this category is fixed or stable. As I laid out in the introduction, the overarching goal of this thesis is to interrogate how those invested in WP understand the enterprise, and the social goals it works toward, *vis-a-vis* their own particular vantage point(s). This chapter appropriately turns this question onto critical WP literature itself, probing how critical WP scholars themselves make sense of WP, and scrutinising the ramifications of their 'sensemaking'. Therefore, in lieu of a traditional literature review, I have opted to conduct a more focussed 'conceptual review' (Kennedy 2007) of theoretical directions in critical WP scholarship. By examining and critically assessing the theoretical state of play in this segment of literature, this conceptual review itself amounts to a contribution to WP research.

The chapter is organised into two parts. In Part 1, I discuss the thinking behind my conceptual review, outlining the questions, criteria, and search processes through which I defined the literature with which I work. Part 2 presents the review itself, which comprises three sections that correspond to three 'clusters' of inquiry into which I grouped the literature. In turn, I discuss what I regard as the defining features of each cluster—namely, the operating conceptual approaches, empirical foci, and ethical priors shared across scholarship. I anchor my analysis by regularly returning to the guiding question: 'how does this theoretical move inform what scholars believe WP to be?' After clarifying conceptual trends within the literature, I close with a brief assessment of current directions in critical WP work, setting the stage for the interventions I ultimately propose in Chapters 3, 4, and 5.

'Defining a literature' through conceptual review

'Critical WP literature' is not currently a recognized segment of WP literature *writ large*. While many key figures in this space identify their work as critical and/or emancipatory (e.g., Penny Jane Burke, Diane Reay, Jon Rainford), they do not explicitly situate their work in a broader tradition of critical WP scholarship. Critical WP scholarship is thus a *post hoc* designation, whose boundaries need to be explained and rationalised. Conceptual review, as I will demonstrate in this discussion, is a rigorous means for defining and critiquing a body of scholarship that previously existed only implicitly.

Conceptual reviews are careful meta-reflections on a body of literature that is ultimately defined by the reviewer in question. Although they are often conducted 'systematically' (Amundsen and Wilson 2012), they seek to answer fundamentally different questions than systematic reviews, which are generally more empirically focussed. While systematic reviews often concern themselves with cause-and effect-questions (e.g., *Which WP interventions have the greatest impact? How does disadvantage influence attainment?*), conceptual reviews cut a layer deeper: they explore,

among other questions, 'how the study of a topic has been represented in the literature; what approaches have been used in its study; what areas of contest are emerging' (Fitzgerald and Palincsar 2019: 229). In WP, conceptual reviews might consider questions like: *What aspects of WP matter to self-professed 'critical' and 'emancipatory' researchers, and are there indications as to why? What theories and conceptual tools are deployed to study these matters, and what are the implications of using them?*

In exploring these kinds of questions, conceptual reviews distinguish themselves from standard literature reviews in two ways. First, they anchor their analysis to the conceptualisation of a *topic*, which means that they cross-cut disciplines and conceptual paradigms throughout their exploration. In a highly interdisciplinary body of scholarship like WP, I would argue that this approach is apt, since it can shed light on how intersecting communities of inquiry have approached the common matter of WP. Indeed, the most promising aspect of conceptual reviews is that they creatively work to define a literature by identifying the aims, assumptions, and approaches held in common across seemingly disparate lines of inquiry (Kennedy 2007). In this way, while I maintain that conceptual reviews are distinct from more traditional literature reviews, they shed light on which aspects of the latter are already dependent on demarcating the boundaries of a literature–that is, they embrace how researchers' choices, perspectives, and biases invariable shape all forms of literature review.

Second, conceptual reviews disproportionately consider the conceptual, or theoretical, dimensions of a body of work. While considering how a body of literature represents and approaches a topic, one naturally brushes up against theory. I am drawn to conceptual review precisely for the opportunity it offers to foreground the role that theorisation plays in WP scholarship. WP scholars have periodically floated concerns about how atheoretical scholarship around the topic is (e.g., Burke 2012; Webb et al. 2017; Thompson 2019; Lumb et al. 2021). This reflects wider anxieties about theory within HE research more broadly, which Tight (2007) infamously described as an 'atheoretical

community of practice' (see also Clegg 2012; Hammersley 2012; Trowler 2012). While such critiques are certainly credible, I have found that WP scholars self-consciously working within critical research programmes engage with theory in complicated, yet formulaic, ways. A goal of this chapter is therefore to understand and assess the theoretical moves made across critical WP literature.

Demarcating the bounds of critical WP scholarship

So, how did I define 'critical WP'? Conceptual reviewers approach the process of demarcating the boundaries of a literature divergently. Sometimes they opt for highly top-down and systematic strategies. Amundsen and Wilson (2012), for example, followed established protocols for systematic review to conduct their conceptual review on educational development literature in higher education. Other reviewers, like Jeyasingham and Morton (2019) approach the process more flexibly and inductively, recognising review to be an interpretative act. In line with the philosophical priors discussed in Chapter 1, my review falls into the latter category. I defined the literature by iteratively defining, and refining, the bounds of 'critical WP literature', and through honing a set of guiding questions to direct my analysis in the review.

The iterative process unfolded as follows. First and foremost, I only considered scholarship that bills itself as 'WP research' (whether *via* vocabulary of 'widening participation', 'widening access', or 'widening access and participation'). This choice follows from my argument in the introduction that WP is, and remains, a distinct enterprise in UK education policy and practice that occupies a unique role in the public and scholarly imaginaries. In my analysis of 'critical WP', therefore, I took both aspects seriously. For the sake of honing my focus and time and resource constraints, I also limited my search to work examining critical WP in the UK, and England primarily.

I developed an interest in critical approaches to WP during the early stages of conceptualising this thesis project. As I am politically invested in developing an

emancipatory, theoretically-grounded vision for WP (see Ch.1), I extensively read the work of critical education stalwart Penny Jane Burke and various colleagues (e.g., Burke 2006; 2012; 2017; Wilkins and Burke 2015; Webb et al. 2017; Lumb and Burke 2019; Lumb et al. 2021).

Burke's scholarship, as will become evident throughout Part 2, engages deeply and widely with Bourdieusian, post-structuralist, and critical theories. This feature of her work motivated one of governing criteria I used to distinguish critical WP literature: an intentional engagement with theory. The review therefore covers *theoretical papers, discourse analyses, and empirical studies that expressly engage with theory and retain a critical stance toward the philosophy, policy, and practice of widening participation in the UK*. As Clegg (2012:407) stresses, however, HE researchers generally 'theorise' by engaging a 'messy and complex… dialectic between theory and data, which is not reducible to either inductive or deductive logic'. My threshold for 'express[ing] theoretical engagement' is, therefore, less strict than the careful, deductive examination of data using an internally coherent conceptual frame (a pursuit that is not necessarily methodologically or practically appropriate, anyway). In Cluster 1, for example, depth, and rigour, of engagement with theory varies wildly. In conducting various discourse analyses, studies widely, and occasionally conflictually, engage with an array of theoretical frames. Indeed, two of the most enduring contributions from Cluster 1, Jones and Thomas (2005) and Archer (2007), are theoretically omnivorous, which I will argue is accountable for their staying power in critical WP in the UK.

Through repeated processes of bibliographic branching from Burke's work, I encountered an array of theoretically-engaged scholarship that self-consciously orients itself as 'critical' toward WP (see the following section for a disambiguation of 'criticality'). Within this body of work, I noticed two complementary, but distinct, veins of inquiry: 1) deconstruction and critique of the problematic WP *policy discourses*, and 2)

a vested interest in how HEIs operate as sites of social reproduction. These ultimately comprised Clusters 1 and 2 in the final review.

Where Clusters 1 and 2 overlapped was in their explicit critique of the *neoliberal* ideology underpinning WP. To check if there were additional clusters, I rather cumbersomely conducted an exploratory search for peer-reviewed papers on Google Scholar combining WP stems and 'neoliberal'. I reviewed abstracts from papers from 1998 (the year following the publication of the Dearing Report and New Labour assumption of power) to 2021 (the current year). In addition to confirming the strong presence of policy discourse analyses and Bourdieusian approaches, the search exposed me to work merging capabilitarian theory and critical pedagogy to advance 'transformative' accounts of WP (Jones and Thomas 2005). I grouped this work as Cluster 3.

Finally, to ensure I captured all relevant papers in each of the three clusters, I then conducted the specific searches in Google scholar: WP stems + 'Bourdieu' + 'discourse', + 'Fairclough', + 'Ball', 'widening participation' + 'capabilit*'.

What constitutes 'criticality'?

In addition to explicit engagement with theory, I delimited 'critical WP literature' on the criterion of 'criticality', a quality that I ultimately discovered to be more contested than I had assumed. While I will spend a good portion of the review itself discussing the promises and limitations of critical academic work, it is worth briefly clarifying what I mean by 'critical' at the outset.

My process for defining 'criticality' was, like the wider process of review, iterative. Initially, I drew my understanding of criticality from the WP scholars I encountered in the exploratory searches I detailed above. A great number of the scholars whom I read explicitly self-identified their research as critical—or as 'action research'—conducted with 'emancipatory' 'or 'social justice' aims. They situate their scholarship under an array of

interpretivist theoretical lenses, which I will discuss in detail in the following section. Burke, as I have discussed, locates her work in the tradition of the critical sociology of education, relying heavily on poststructuralist, feminist, and critical theoretical perspectives to forward an emancipatory vision for international WP. Diane Reay's foundational work on operationalising Bourdieusian theory for critical research agendas (Reay 2004) has inspired a wave of scholarship that interrogates the (re)production of social inequalities in WP. Working under a critical realist paradigm, Jon Rainford has recently published on 'institutional doxa' in WP (Rainford 2021a) and the situatedness of WP practitioner perspectives (Rainford 2021b, 2021c) using Fairclough's critical discourse analysis as both a method and wider normative lens. Rainford's positionality statement in his doctoral thesis encapsulates the positioning of action research in WP:

> This research comes from the perspective of an engaged practitioner who is embedded in the social world being researched and not as a detached outsider… I am not neutral, the recurring themes in my research diary questioning the morality of my own practices pay testament to this. Whilst the research is rigorous and critical, the concerns are not simply an empirical issue I investigated as a researcher but issues which are embedded within my everyday professional life. (Rainford 2019:7-8)

As I carried out my searches, however, I found that 'action research' as a category fails to capture the work that is deliberately attempting to critique dominant discourses and paradigms in WP policy and practice. Neil Harrison, who firmly advocates for realist approaches to WP evaluation (e.g., Harrison and McCaig 2017; Harrison and Waller 2017; 2017b; 2018; Harrison et al. 2019), proposes 'possible selves' (Markus and Nurius 1986) as a conceptual corrective to dominant deficit models in WP discourses (Harrison 2018; Harrison and Waller 2018). Much of his critique of deficit models, as we will discuss in later sections, is levied at self-identified action researchers themselves. Admittedly, while reading Harrison, I was forced to confront my own bias toward researchers with philosophical and political sensibilities similar to my own. If critique, as critical pedagogy pioneer Henry Giroux puts it, is a tool for '[interrogating] texts, institutions,

social relations, and ideologies as part of the script of official power' (Giroux 2020:2), critique is far too broad to be the property of any one school of thought or political community.[1] Clifford Geertz' famous (and accurate) prediction that research paradigms would ultimately blur comes to mind (Geertz 1973). The category of 'critical research' invariably transcends paradigm, methodology, and empirical object.

I therefore reconducted my key-term search and the manual searches through relevant journals. During this search, I used the aforementioned adaptation of Giroux's definition of critique to designate criticality: critical WP scholarship retains a sceptical stance toward WP, *interrogating any underlying philosophies to WP, policy enactments, and modes of practice that have become hegemonic*. I found that this criticality materialises in multiple, though confluent, ways, which are the subject of the review's discussion. I concede, however, that designating a piece of work as 'critical' is unavoidably discretionary, and that, by virtue of its other inclusion criteria (theoretically focussed, peer-reviewed, limited to WP in the UK), this review invariably excludes scholarship that could justifiably be deemed critical.

Guiding questions

Like systematic reviews, conceptual reviews generally anchor their exploration to predetermined questions or research aims (Kennedy 2007; Amundsen and Wilson 2012). Unsurprisingly, the questions guiding conceptual reviews are meta-reflective in nature, often aimed at understanding the definitional concepts operating in the chosen field or body of inquiry. For example, Welsh and Swain (2020) performed a conceptual review to examine, and ultimately problematize, the dominant definitions of 'urban education' at play in educational studies. They complement their review with an empirical exploration

[1] Writing in 2022-2023, I would be remiss if I did not point out that the the mantle of 'critical' is currently invoked by groups with wholly incompatible philosophies and political aims–the 'gender critical' radical feminist movement and critical race theory (and its critics) being two particularly contested, non-overlapping examples.

of urban education contexts in order to redress gaps they identified in criteria for constituting urban education. Jeyasingham and Morton (2019), similarly, set out to understand how racism is understood in literature about BAME social work students in Britain, ultimately advocating for a more substantive 'epistemic reflexivity' in scholarship concerning BAME students of social work. Both Welsh and Swain (2020) and Jeyasingham and Morton (2019) conduct conceptual reviews with ameliorative aims, proposing alternatives and/or correctives to the conceptual landscapes they analyse. In this chapter, I will follow a similar approach. The governing injunction of this review is to understand how critical WP scholars in the UK conceptualise WP and to identify areas where new ground can be broken. In examining the studies that I included, I considered the following guiding questions in service to my governing question:

1. How is WP characterised and understood throughout the study?
2. How might the theoretical framework the study adopts inform the study's conceptualisation of WP?
3. If applicable, how does the theoretical framework inflect on the study's empirical focus, and *vice versa*?
4. How does this study's working conceptualisation of WP track with trends noticed in other studies? Are there noticeable patterns?

There are clear benefits to organising inquiry around stated questions and aims. Nonetheless, reviewers must acknowledge that research questions do not arise *ex nihilo*, nor are they particularly stable entities (Agee 2009; *contra* White 2013). Our methodological allegiances, positionalities, and other various idiosyncrasies unavoidably colour how we approach academic topics of interest, especially in an area of study as value-laden as education. The questions I enumerated above emerged from a crucible of factors: my prior engagement with WP literature, philosophical commitments, experience with WP practice, and my own normative vision for WP. This is not a bad thing, *per se*. To reiterate Agee (2009:432): 'good qualitative questions are usually developed or refined in all stages of a reflexive and interactive inquiry journey'. 'Ongoing questioning' is 'an integral part of understanding the unfolding lives and perspectives of

others'. The same is true of defining a literature through conceptual review, a process that invariably involves active decision-making (Kennedy 2007:146).

Limitations

While the reflexive decision-making core to conceptual review enables the gain[ing] of 'new insights into an issue' (Kennedy 2007:139), its reliance on the biases and epistemic limitations of the *reviewer* introduces several limitations. I will close this section by discussing two particularly salient limitations in turn.

The first limitation is the risk of tautology. Conceptual reviews involve defining and organising a body of literature one ultimately assesses: this renders reviews vulnerable to misrepresentation and strawmanning, since the reviewer could theoretically selectively define a literature in service of *a priori* aims. Take, for example, Cluster 2, which I called 'student-centred WP'. I critique SCWP for its unwillingness to engage with organisational analysis, but one could argue that, by defining the literature on the basis of its interest in student experiences, I set up SCWP for failure, as it were. In this case, I anticipate this charge by establishing that 1) SCWP falls short of addressing its own ostensible interest in organisational analysis, and 2) that inquiries into organisational analysis and lived experience thereof are not mutually exclusive.

Nonetheless, I am appreciative of the undue hermeneutic power one is afforded in 'defining a literature'. This is partially why I relied on bibliographic branching, as opposed to a more 'systematic' search process; I am interested in how interconnected scholarly communities differentially address common matters of concern. This, of course, limits the explanatory purview of the review, a limitation with which I am content. As I specified at the head of the chapter, the *de facto* bodies of work I included in the review are ones to which this work belongs. In this sense, the conceptual review methodologically resembles a more traditional literature review, just one with a more pronounced argumentative direction.

The second set of limitations relate to scope and exclusion criteria. First, the review predominantly includes peer-reviewed *articles*. This is partially the result of logistical barriers imposed by the pandemic and related constraints on searchability. Moreover, like systematic reviews, conceptual reviews often limit themselves to peer-reviewed journal articles that are searchable via databases. For example, Jeyasingham and Morton (2019) and Amundsen and Wilson (2012) both limit their purview to peer-reviewed journal articles, and the advice of Kennedy herself (2007) is directed at conducting searches for literature in journals. If I may speculate, this might be borne from a perhaps a positivist carry-over from review practices in the sciences (e.g., meta-analyses that synthesise data from experiments published in journals). Although, from wider reading in WP research, I do believe that the body of literature captures theoretical trends extant across WP, I include one digitally available book (Burke 2012) because of its significance to this project and the strand of critical WP under which I classify it. Its significance to social justice-oriented WP literature in particular cannot be fully represented by the sum of Burkes' articles on the matter.

Second, I completed the review in late 2021, which bounds the review's scope from 1998-2021, which definitionally excludes scholarship published in 2022 and the first half of 2023. Finally, given the volume of international scholarly output on WP and time constraints, I limited my analysis to predominately to papers discussing WP in England. I include one study of Welsh widening access efforts (Evans et al. 2019) as it is one of the few examples of policy enactment research that centres policy actors on the ground. However, because of devolution and resulting differences in funding and regulation structures, Scottish, Welsh, and Northern Irish WP warrant their separate analyses, although substantial overlap certainly exists. There are obvious limitations to doing so, as the synergy between Australian WP and English WP is well-documented (Coyle, Sandover, Poobalan, et al. 2021). I did, however, include comparative analyses of WP in the UK and Australia (Lumb and Burke 2019, Singh and Mountford-Zimdars 2016), as

well as England and New Zealand (Bowl 2018). Regardless of these measures, imposing this geographic criterion invariably limits the scope of the review. I am under no illusion that the review is a comprehensive assessment of global, or English, WP scholarship as a whole.

My aim is far more modest: to provide a preliminary, indicative review that identifies key overarching trends among clusters of scholarship that are significant to WP policy and practice in England. The papers I have included were selected purposively for their representativeness of these trends. I will now turn to the review itself, which discusses three interlocking clusters of critical WP literature in the UK: policy discourse WP, student-centred WP, and social justice WP.

The conceptual review

Cluster 1: Policy Discourse WP scholarship

Policies, discourses, and other confusions of tongues

'No one stands outside discourse'
Bacchi (2000:45)

Figure 2.1: Representative PDWP papers

Author(s)	Source	Type
Jones and Thomas (2005)	*Journal of education policy*	Discourse Analysis
Archer (2007)	*Teaching in higher education*	Discourse Analysis
Stevenson, Clegg, and Lefever (2010)	*London review of education*	Empirical
Bowl and Hughes (2013)	*Widening participation and lifelong learning*	Discourse Analysis
Bowl and Hughes (2016)	*Studies in higher education (Dorchester-on-Thames)*	Discourse Analysis
Graham (2013)	*British journal of sociology of education*	Discourse Analysis
Mavelli (2014)	*Teaching in Higher Education*	Theoretical

Cleland, Nicholson, Kelly, and Moffat (2015)	*Medical Education*	Empirical
McCaig (2015a)	*Higher Education Review*	Discourse Analysis
McCaig (2015b)	*Widening participation and lifelong learning*	Discourse Analysis
Wilkins and Burke (2015)	*British Journal of Sociology of Education*	Empirical
Singh and Mountford-Zimdars (2016)	*Widening participation and lifelong learning*	Discourse Analysis
Bowl (2018)	*Studies in higher education (Dorchester-on-Thames)*	Discourse Analysis
Knight (2019)	*Social sciences (Basel)*	Discourse Analysis
Lumb and Burke (2019)	*International studies in sociology of education*	Empirical
Pickering (2019)	*Widening participation and lifelong learning*	Discourse Analysis
Evans, Rees, Taylor, and Wright (2019)	*Journal of education policy*	Empirical
Snee, White, and Cox (2020)	*British journal of sociology of education*	Discourse Analysis
Jones (2021)	*London review of education*	Empirical; Discourse Analysis
Maccabe (2021)	*Widening participation and lifelong learning*	Empirical
Rainford (2021a)	*Power and Education*	Discourse Analysis
Rainford (2021c)	*British Journal of Sociology of Education*	Empirical

Introducing PDWP

The first cluster of critical WP papers is broadly interested in examining, and applying some measure of critique, to WP policy and its 'enactment' in HEIs. Throughout this section, I will refer to this subliterature as the 'policy discourse' group (henceforth, PDWP). In the PDWP conception, policy is not seen as reducible to 'what governments do' (Bacchi 2000:48). Rather, reflecting wider trends in HE research, PDWP scholars conceptualise *policy as discourse*. At the time I am writing, the term 'discourse' acts as a free-floating signifier *par excellence* in scholarly, political, cultural debates alike. The notion occupies an analogous role in scholarly domains. Discourse analysis, and invocations of 'discourse' in general, have come to enjoy massive popularity in HE

research. This has both opened useful veins of inquiry and eroded the term's analytic and methodological precision (Bacchi 2000; Saarinen 2008; Saarinen and Ursen 2012; Ashwin and Smith 2015).

How does PDWP scholarship fare? There are two dominant voices informing PDWP conceptions of policy-as-discourse: that of Stephen J. Ball and Norman Fairclough. While Ball and Fairclough's work on discourse is broadly compatible (coincidentally, they both published their popular articles on policy-as-discourse in 1993), there are some granular distinctions that I will briefly explicate to ground our discussion of theory in the PDWP papers. In critical HE research in the UK, Ball needs no introduction. Indeed, all but three papers I reviewed (Bowl 2013; Bowl & Hughes 2016; Kimura 2014; Maccabe 2021) engage with Ball's work in some capacity. Across his prodigious body of work theorising education policy, Ball underscores the unwieldiness of conceptualising policy-as-discourse. Following Foucault, Ball understands discourses as pre-linguistic, historically contingent social structures that adjudicate 'what can be said and thought, but also about who can speak, when, and with what authority' (Ball 1990:2). Discourses are not objects that can be readily apprehended, but *constitute* social objects (see Foucault 1972). There are empirical implications to a Foucauldian conception of discourse: in an essay reflecting on his seminal '*What is policy?*' paper (Ball 1993), Ball cautions that policy analysis, particularly as it relates to the 'messy' realities of enacting policy on the ground, meanders in the 'ontological hinterland' that separates 'the speaking subject from discourse, agency from subjectification' (Ball 2015:306). For this reason, Ball distinguishes between policy-as-discourse and policy-as-text. He illustrates the distinction thusly:

> [*How Schools do Policy*] considers policy as text, and explores the processes of interpretation and translation of policy through which school actors enact policy – and policy as discourse, the ways in which teacher subjects and subject positions are formed and re-formed by policy and are "'invited (summoned) to speak, listen,

act, read, work, think, feel, behave and value" (Gee, Hull, & Lankshear, 1996, p. 10) in particular and specific ways' (Ball 2015:307).

According to Ball's paradigm, the bulk of PDWP research I reviewed engages with policy-as-text, in that it analyses and assesses various policy documents as accurate reflections of how HEIs 'do' policy. This perhaps explains why most references to Ball draw from his work on school choice, cultural capital, and class-based social reproduction in HE (e.g., Ball and Vincent 1998; Ball et al. 2002; Ball 2003; Reay et al. 2005), as opposed to his work on policy analysis (e.g., Ball 1993; 2015; Ball, Maguire, and Braun 2012). Five papers (Cleland et al. 2015; Singh and Mountford-Zimdars 2016; Evans et al. 2019; Pickering 2019; Rainford 2021c) pick up Ball's 'toolkit' for policy analysis, though one engages with Ball only nominally (Singh and Mountford-Zimdars 2016 only mentions 'policy enactment' in the title). Many papers, however, cite Ball's policy analysis toolkit, but in a more-or-less ornamental fashion, to supplement a different theorisation of discourse. That it is not particularly common for PDWP scholarship (and critical WP literature as a whole) to probe questions of enactment, and how policies (as *texts*) are 'done' on the ground, is the basis of one of my central critiques in this review.

By far, Norman Fairclough's critical discourse analysis (CDA) looms largest in PDWP theory and method. As Figure 2.1 shows, nearly all papers in the sample conduct discourse analysis. A preponderance of these (Bowl 2013; Graham 2013; McCaig 2015a; 2015b; Bowl 2018; Knight 2019) employ CDA. All CDA papers reference Fairclough (1993), in which Fairclough summarises his view of CDA and applies it to the marketisation of discursive practices in UK universities. In this article, Fairclough differentiates between the conception of discourse forwarded by social theorists (e.g., Foucault, Ball) and linguists like himself. Drawing from both conceptions, Fairclough uses 'discourse' to refer to the social practices underlying 'spoken or written language use' as well as 'semiotic practice in other semiotic modalities such as photo and non-verbal (e.g., gestural) communication' (Fairclough 1993:134). Discourses give way to historically

contingent 'modes of action' (like language use) that are constitutive of both social reproduction and social transformation. Insofar as discourse refers to the fact of 'language use conceived as social practice', Fairclough's theory more or less aligns with Ball's (Fairclough 1993:138). As an applied linguist and critical theorist, however, Fairclough is interested in examining texts to gain insight into the social practices that instantiate them, and, crucially, how these practices are mediated by the power relations that shape institutions (Fairclough 2015). CDA as a methodology rests on the assumption that discursive events—instances of language use—can be studied through various lenses: through text, discursive practice (the production and dissemination of texts), and, indeed, as social action. Fairclough, in fact, has critiqued Foucauldian accounts of discourse for their lack of explanatory power in the empirical realm—a charge that itself has been critiqued for its slipping into ontological realism, exiting the invariable 'hinterland' that critical policy analysis occupies (see Curtis 2014). Over the course of the review, we will repeatedly run up against CDA's propensities to presume that discourses are stable social objects.

Ultimately, the distinctions between Ball's and Fairclough's conceptions of discourse are fine-grained. I nonetheless draw attention to their theoretical intricacies to ground the following discussion of how researcher's engagement with theory informs how they characterise WP, and how this, in turn, informs their empirical and other substantive interests. It is important to note up-front that, though I will critique some of PDWP's theoretical misfires and empirical stagnations, such critique does not amount to a condemnation of PDWP scholarship *tout court*. As the discussion below will show, even papers that deploy theory relatively flatly make important substantive contributions to our understanding of WP policy, and no doubt advance the emancipatory agenda that motivates critical WP research.

I now turn to survey PDWP's key features insofar as they inform critical WP's overall conceptualisation of WP and its empirical programme.

PDWP Strand 1: WP as a contradiction in terms

I would argue that the defining feature of the PDWP literature I reviewed is a persistent fascination with contradictions in WP policy–not only in terms of how contradictions materialise into conflicting policy agendas and enactments, but, more fundamentally, how they betray WP's contradictory normative aims to advance both economic prosperity and social justice. Stevenson et al. (2010) evocatively diagnose this problem as WP's 'confusion of tongues', which will serve as a governing motif throughout our discussion. As a 'confusion of tongues' occupies the domain of language, scholars generally attend to how it manifests in discursive events.

Interest in the confusion of tongues can be traced back to two early influential papers: Jones and Thomas' (2005) and Archer (2007). Unlike many of their PDWP descendents, the papers do not strictly rely on one model or method of discourse analysis. Rather, I would contend that both participate in what C. Wright Mills called 'intellectual craftsmanship' (Mills 1959). Both self-consciously acknowledge how their intellectual experiences and allegiances inform how they deploy theory, which leads them to frame their observations as *arguments*, as opposed to the inevitable conclusions of any one theoretical lens. In defence of craftsmanship, Clegg (2012) argues that it is not relativistic, but epistemically 'sophisticated', as it correctly understands theorising as a micro-social, and even micro-political, practice that deserves reflexive attention.

Jones and Thomas (2005) provide a close reading, and critique, of the programmatic 2003 White Paper, *The future of higher education,* and the incoherent policy agenda it prescribes. They identify two tensions in two 'strands' of thinking evident in the White Paper and contemporaneous WP policy discourses, which I will refer to here as the academic and utilitarian arguments. Building on Ball (1990), they suggest that the academic argument, which rears its head most often in 'aspiration-raising' initiatives, foregrounds the attitudinal factors that dissuade the 'best

and the brightest' marginalised students from seeking higher education, especially at selective institutions. While it also credits 'low' aspirations for low participation, the utilitarian argument concedes that certain barriers to access are structural, so they endorse more robust pre-entry and post-entry interventions for WP students. Ultimately, however, Jones and Thomas argue that utilitarians are doomed to understand HE primarily in terms of its economic utility, as they 'slot entrants into a higher education system attuned to the economy' (616). From there, Jones and Thomas proceed to critique both discourses for failing to question whether HE *itself* is a categorical good, and whether its civic role should be changed. They advocate an alternative 'transformative' approach that envisions a radical model of WP wherein 'all of an institution's activities are to be underpinned and informed by valuing and learning from difference and diversity', citing various scholars of lifelong learning and critical pedagogy figurehead Paolo Freire (619). As my review of normative accounts of WP will readily show, Jones and Thomas's typology has had staying power in critical WP work that is interested in assessing normative aspects of WP policies and imagining otherwise.

Archer (2007) offers a critical meditation on reigning 'equity' discourses in New Labour WP policy, turning her attention to incoherences in its normative goals. Like Jones and Thomas, her argument draws on an array of theoretical work (Ball, Beck, Bourdieu, Skeggs, among others). She untangles how policy discourses linking 'institutional diversity' to 'student choice' affirm an untenable neoliberal marriage of market interventions and social change, ultimately arguing that 'equality' and 'diversity' are not compatible pursuits when economic rationales for student diversity trump arguments rooted in social justice. Archer is also interested in how these policy discourses place differential pressures on different HEIs. Building on Ainley (2003), she considers the implications of the 'tertiary tripartism' that New Labour policy imposed on the UK's HEIS:

> Within [the tertiary tripartism] model, the 'gold' level comprises research-intensive institutions, whose remit, according to New Labour, is to undertake 'great research' at an 'international' level. The 'silver' institutions are constructed as delivering 'outstanding teaching' and operating at a 'national' level. 'Bronze' institutions are responsible for 'training' and serving regional economies, adopting a distinctly 'local' outlook and remit (predominantly catering for 'non-traditional' students) (Archer 2007:638).

Archer then proceeds to critique how the 'geographies of power' manifest in this tripartism encode and reproduce social inequalities, especially vis-a-vis im/mobility (Skeggs 2004). The burden of widening participation falls squarely on so-called 'Bronze' institutions, whose remit is 'fixed' to serving their locality, where power and resources are scarce. They–and, ultimately, their students–are rendered 'distinctly immobile' (640). This enables gold–and, to a lesser degree, silver–institutions to focus on enhancing their market value as they bid for more 'exceptional' (read: privileged) students, affording them mobility in national and international arenas.

I have considered Jones and Thomas (2005) and Archer (2007) in detail because, if they did not directly set the agenda of future PDWP work (their citational ubiquity suggests that they had a considerable hand in doing so), certain strands of their analyses are representative of PDWP's characteristic interests and aims, particularly with respect to WP's contradictions. I argue that the two most enduring veins of inquiry respectively attend to the neoliberal *ideology* driving WP and New Labour, and how stratification and marketisation create an unequal, untenable HE landscape in the UK.

Neoliberalism: the culprit behind the contradictions

While it entails other contradictions, the core contradiction of WP is its conflictual investment in both economic growth and equity in HE access. This has been the case since *Dearing:* to widen participation is both to break down barriers for 'disadvantaged' populations as a 'matter of equity' (Dearing 1997 1.7), and to massify education

participation with the aim of maximising economic growth *via* increasing human capital, a goal that policymakers feel no need euphemize (see Leaney and Mwale 2021). As scholars of WP have repeatedly argued (e.g., Archer 2007; Burke 2012; Doyle and Griffin 2012), the conflation of economic and human flourishing is textbook neoliberal logic.

Since I appreciate the fact that neoliberalism is brandished as an epithet more than it is used in reference to anything material about social life (see Flew 2014), I will clarify that I–and, I would argue, the bulk of scholarship in this review–follow the basic definition of neoliberalism found in David Harvey's classic account (Harvey 2005). Neoliberalism is a social and economic doctrine that assumes 'market exchange is an ethic in itself', which implies that 'human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills' (Harvey 2005:1,2). Although it has dominated global politics, it is important to acknowledge that neoliberalism, like any social phenomenon, is historically contingent. Work on WP and neoliberalism, accordingly, concerns itself with the particulars of New Labour neoliberalism. For example, Doyle and Griffin (2012), to whom we will return in more detail in later chapters, consider how New Labour policy is strongly premised on 'performativity' (Lyotard 1984), which has ramifications on what WP policies and interventions are deemed 'successful'.

The PDWP work that expressly critiques neoliberalism in WP, in my view, includes some of critical WP literature's most productive contributions, and I will draw copiously from this work throughout my theorisation of WP in Chapter 3. Mavelli (2014) critiques how WP policy, and the knowledge systems it values and reproduces, are distinctly 'modern' products, ultimately arguing that WP 'widening participation policies have themselves become part and parcel of the neoliberal *episteme*' (Mavelli 2014:861). In a scholarly community in which engagement with Foucault is most indirect, Mavelli produces a Foucauldian reading of WP. In particular, he premises his reading on

Foucault's distinction between knowledge as *savoir*–knowledge that is internal to, and transformative of, the individual—and *connaissance*—knowledge that is external to, and therefore does not constitute, the individual (Foucault 1991 in Mavelli 2014:860). The hallmark of modernity, Foucault suggests, is that knowledge is understood as *connaissance*, which results in knowledge being valued as *instrumental* and thereby commodifiable. Hence the shift from students as learners, or even 'change agents', to consumers in the latter half of the 20th century (Mavelli 2014:862). I will demonstrate in Chapter 3 how Mavelli's critical-theoretical linkage of WP and knowledge systems complements a neoinstitutional reading of WP.

While Mavelli (2014) considers how, at the macro-level, neoliberal WP dispossess subjects of transformational knowledge, Lumb and Burke (2019) reflect on how the 'hegemonic neoliberal ideal of the entrepreneurial competitor-individual' in WP policy is retrojected into WP practitioners' self-conception, leading to misrecognition (*meconnaissance*). Lumb offers an autoethnographic meditation on how he uncritically–nearly subconsciously–absorbed problematic 'discursive frames' of equity while working as a WP practitioner and studying for a PhD in critical social sciences. In particular, Lumb reflects on how the 'discursive framing of particular aspirations as legitimate' warps which kinds of personhood that WP practitioners recognise and value. In studying 'discursive framings', Lumb and Burke are building on Iverson (2012), who draws on Ball, Carol Bacchi, and ultimately Foucault to define discourse as 'practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak' (Iverson 2012:154 in Lumb and Burke 2019:223). Lumb and Burke go on to argue that the hegemony of WP's discursive framings lead to misrecognition among neoliberal subjects. Acknowledging the polysemy of 'misrecognition' in critical thought, they endorse a Bourdieusian conception, in which misrecognition refers to 'everyday and dynamic social process where one thing (say, a situation, process, or action) is not recognised for what it is because it was not previously "cognised" within the range of dispositions and

propensities of the habitus of the person(s) confronting it' (James 2015:100). In concrete terms, the habitus of WP practitioners from privileged backgrounds prevents them from understanding students' aspirations as coherent and valuable. In the next section, we will explore how misrecognition figures into Bourdieusian approaches in WP.

Framing WP as a 'problem'

Lumb and Burke (2019) belong to an ascendant group of WP scholars who engage with Carol Bacchi's poststructuralist work on policy discourses, particularly her strategy for policy analysis, 'What is the problem represented to be?' (WPR). Bacchi, following Foucault, conceptualises discourses as 'socially produced forms of knowledge that set limits upon what it is possible to think, write or speak about' (Bacchi 2009:35). As her aim is to develop operationalisable strategies for analysing policy, Bacchi marries her Foucauldian approach with other paradigms. She conceptualises discourses are the socially produced forms of knowledge in which *problems* are represented. Here, Bacchi lifts from social constructionism, focussing on how social problems take on facticity outside their social construction: they 'exist *in the real*' (Bacchi 2009:33, emphasis hers; see also Weinberg 2014:Ch.6). From these theoretical foundations, Bacchi proposes WPR, a six-pronged strategy that prompts scholars to scrutinise how policies represent, and in so doing construct, social problems. Snee et al. (2020:233) enumerate the six questions with helpful indications of their theoretical bases:

> 1. What's the problem represented to be in a specific policy?
> 2. What presuppositions or assumptions underlie this representation of the problem? [Inspired by Foucauldian archaeology.]
> 3. How has this representation of the problem come about? [Inspired by Foucauldian genealogy.]
> 4. What is left unproblematic in this problem representation?
> 5. What effects are produced by this representation of the problem?
> 6. How/where has this representation of the problem been produced, disseminated and defended? (Bacchi 2009:48)

In light of recent policy measures to recruit and train more RNs in the UK, Snee et al. deploy WPR to consider how WP policy around nursing operates within a 'neoliberal social imaginary', which governs which ways of thinking are deemed thinkable and legitimate in social life (see Taylor 2004). Snee et al. illuminate how neoliberal imaginary uses discourses of 'fairness' to square the fact that the figure of the nurse (who is interpellated as compassionate, feminine, self-effacing) contradicts market logics that value merit and 'masculine'-coded striving. Though rife with contradictions, the neoliberal social imaginary 'assimilates' contradictions into itself, making them appear to us as non-contradictory. As we will discuss in the next three chapters, an institutional approach to WP equips us with apt tools for exploring this sort of effacement.

Jones (2021) tasks himself with using WPR to reconceptualise the 'problem' of WP in England. An impetus of this project for Jones was Stevenson et al. 's (2012) observation that WP is wracked by a confusion of tongues. As Stevenson et al. identified, the fact that practitioners and other WP actors on the ground do not have coherent language to conceptualise their work represents as much as, if not more of, a profound problem as contradictions in WP discourses. To study the problem of WP, Jones first reiterates macro-level contradictions in WP policy and its discourses. Albeit *via* the new language of problems and problematization, he identifies the same culprits flagged through this discussion: neoliberalism's commodification of knowledge and interpellation of subjects, and the various effects of market logic. In a second phase, he interviewed national and institutional actors in WP and probed the narratives they deployed as they reflected on their work. Given our interest in institutions and organisations, I will note that Jones (2021) specifically underscores the need to understand the 'organisational story' of WP through engaging actors within HEIs–which, as we will see, is chronically under-explored in WP research.

Jones found, among other things, that at both national and HE-institutional levels of translation the 'problem' of WP becomes displaced onto the 'non-traditional' student, who is named as the source of problem instead of the problem's structural underpinnings. Not only is this ethically objectionable, but is also commits what Jones sees as an ontological error:

> [T]he condition of *'being'* a 'non-traditional' student embodies practices that objectify, and processes that label, the status and purpose of being 'a student' within 'the student experience' — rather than the formative, complex and shifting process of *'becoming'* a student by participating in higher education. (Jones 2021:3, emphasis mine)

As Snee et al. and Jones' contributions demonstrate, WPR's emphasis on problems and problematisation pushes critical WP to consider novel empirical and conceptual avenues of inquiry. Returning to our guiding question as to how critical WP literature conceptualises WP, moreover, I would argue that WPR makes a productive conceptual move in framing WP as a 'problem'. Low participation in HE, since *Dearing* and the implementation of New Labour's education agenda, has always been treated as a 'problem' to be 'fixed'. While the reality that systemic marginalisation poses disparate barriers to HE access is, to put it lightly, a problem, WPR instructs us that policy problems are not constructed in an abstract fashion; in the absence of meaningful power analysis and consideration of the material conditions that give way to them, problems are dislocated onto subjects.

PDWP Strand 2: HEIs and their discursive positionings

The second strand of PDWP literature under review, in broad strokes, addresses the question: how do HEIs respond to the macro-level pressures imposed by neoliberal WP policies? They are particularly interested in exploring this question *vis-a-vis stratification* among the different types of HEIs. Indeed, many build on Archer (2007) and her critique of the tertiary tripartism that governs the UK's HE landscape. Empirical inquiries into

stratification have shown that it has changed little in the UK since the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act and the introduction of the *Learning Society* agenda (Gallacher 2006; Raffe and Croxford 2015). In their principal components analysis of applicants and entrants across HEIs, Croxford and Raffe (2015) venture to say that institutional differentiation in the UK remains an 'iron law', and significantly contributes to the social reproduction of inequalities in the UK (see also Williams and Filippakou 2010).

To gauge HE-institutional responses to stratification, scholars in this strand of PDWP study how HEIs discursively position themselves in a stratified, competitive HE market. Overwhelmingly, they adopt CDA as their method; the only exceptions are Bowl and Hughes (2013) and Bowl (2018), which both extensively cite Fairclough and his conception of discourse, but do not explicitly claim to be conducting CDA. By highlighting how HEIs' discursive positionings reflect entrenched hierarchies in UK HE, they grant themselves a springboard to levy progressive critiques against neoliberal WP policy as a whole.

Overall, I found a strong degree of consensus among the papers I reviewed. All except two notable outliers (Bowl 2018; Knight 2019) underscore stark differences between the discursive positionings of elite pre-1992s, pre-1992s and post-1992s, modifying the parameters of Ainley's tripartite model. They use two general repositories of evidence: Bowl and Hughes (2013; 2016) and McCaig (2015a; 2015b) analyse access agreements, while Graham (2013) and Knight (2019) look at pre-entry materials like undergraduate prospectus documents. Bowl (2018) incorporates both available HE-institutional documents into her analysis.

Writing in the mid 2010s onwards, all papers except Knight (2019) identify how the tripling of tuition fees in 2012 conflicts with the access agenda the Coalition government ostensibly prioritised. Bowl and Hughes (2013) argue that the wide array of approaches adopted by HEIs that they observed in access agreements reflects OFFA's (now the OfS') investment in 'individual discretion', which they deem as a reinforcement of market

logic. Promisingly, in Bowl and Hughes (2016), they expand this inquiry by testing how well institutional approaches, namely organisational theories of resource dependency (Oliver 1991) explain the ways in which HEIs conform and diverge from market pressures. Their verdict is lukewarm: they argue that Oliver's (1991) model cannot meaningfully predict behaviour without considering the historical and cultural contexts in which HEIs are ensconced. Though I concur, the premise of this critique is faulty, first, because it was Bowl and Hughes' (2016) own purview for data interpretation (publicly available APPs from eight universities) that precluded them from exploring historical and cultural context, not Oliver's model *per se*. Second, and more salient for us, though it is an influential paper, Oliver (1991) is not representative of the current state of analysis of institutional isomorphism (Boxenbaum and Jonasson 2017). More promising, context-sensitive approaches are now available in neoinstitutional scholarship.

Bowl and Hughes (2013), Graham (2013), and McCaig (2015a; 2015b) all flag a discursive reversal among pre-1992s (primarily Russell Groups) and post-1992s from the early aughts to the mid 2010s. Originally, selective pre-1992s stressed that they seek out the 'best and brightest' students, prioritising excellence over inclusion. Post-1992s, alternatively, boasted their WP accomplishments, highlighting their accessibility and dedication to their localities. After the release of the White Paper and a change in OFFA guidelines in 2011, however, the roles reversed. Selective universities began lauding their WP programmes, while post-1992s foregrounded their 'excellence' in terms of academics and alumni job prospects. The pressures motivating the shift for post-1992s, as McCaig (2015a) lays out, are fairly clear: given that the rise in fees and economic downturn depleted their potential applicant pool, there arose a new urgency to 'compete' for students in the HE marketplace.

But why the shift for selective HEIs? McCaig (2015a), though uncertain, supposes that 'interdiscursive mixing' could be credited (Fairclough 1993). In a comparative analysis of HEIs in England and New Zealand, Bowl (2018) argues that, with increased

cultural awareness of social justice issues, HEIs flaunt their 'diversity' as evidence of their 'distinctiveness' in the marketplace. There is, of course, an irony to claiming inclusion as evidence of eliteness. Echoing Archer (2007), Bowl (2018) further argues that the language of 'diversity' is intentional, as it better 'mask[s] the incompatibility of market competition and equality', which terms like 'equality', 'equity', and 'inclusion' do less well. I should note how, despite its relatively recent publication date, Bowl's assessment is already outdated. Although, to my knowledge, there are not any CDAs in this vein focussing on documents written after 2020, one can reasonably surmise that the analysis would show institutions performatively 'upping the ante' on their social-justice language. Doharty, Madriaga, and Salisbury's (2021) vivid title for their recent study of UK HE captures this well: 'The university went to "decolonise" and all they brought back was lousy diversity double-speak! Critical race counter-stories from faculty of colour in "decolonial" times'.

In addition to identifying differences among HE-institutional discursive positionings, the papers that focussed on pre-entry materials (Graham 2013 and Knight 2019) considered what the materials signalled to prospective students. In doing so, they relied heavily on Ball's aforementioned body of work on choice, hot knowledge, and class-taste markers. Pre-entry marketing materials are what Ball classified as 'cold knowledge', which is not nearly as useful (nor socially reproductive) as the 'hot knowledge' gained from informal sources like family and friends with HE experience (Ball and Vincent 1998 in Knight 2019:306). Despite their inferiority as choice-making resources, pre-entry materials like prospectuses play a significant role in HE choice for students who are 'time poor' (Reay et al. 2005) and or who do not have access to hot knowledge.

According to Ball, pre-entry materials also do not convey identical data to prospective students. In choosing to socially appropriate certain discourses (the example Graham 2013 cites is the loaded rhetoric of 'world-class education'), HEIs appeal to taste

markers that 'speak to' certain classed and/or cultured experiences over others. Graham (2013:83) cites the following hypothetical example:

> the visual images of 18-year-old to 21-year-old students playing hockey, moving into halls of residence and spending time in the bar all suggest that the university is offering an experience for school-leavers with money and leisure time.

Both Graham (2013) and Knight (2019) found, however, that selective universities have gotten more subtle, and more ostensibly 'inclusive', over time, making aesthetic choices like ensuring that the students displayed on brochures are noticeably 'diverse'.

This is partially due to the increasing awareness of social justice that Bowl identifies. Another crucial factor, according to Bowl, is what neoinstitutional theorists call isomorphism, a mechanism through which institutional pressures cause organisations to increasingly resemble one another (DiMaggio and Powell 1983). Bowl identifies isomorphism as the mechanism underpinning both HEIs' marketing strategies in the domestic (Bowl and Hughes 2016) and international (Bowl 2018) HE marketplaces. While isomorphism is losing its cache as a 'master hypothesis' of OI (see Ch.3), that Bowl imports neoinstitutional constructs into analysis of WP sets the stage for breaking new analytical ground. Knight (2019), using different terminology, also observes isomorphism in HEI discourses. Indeed, though she flags that taste markers can be found invariably in pre-entry materials, Knight's overall observation from an extensive discursive-historical analysis is that institutional discourses have *homogenised* as HE has massified. Far from signifying a levelled playing field, Knight concludes that homogenisation works to conceal institutions' differential statuses, making it harder for students to parse what the materials are 'saying' to them. It also, I would add, reflects the wholesale watering-down of social justice language which Doharty et al. (2021) critique.

Summing up and PDWP Strand 3: policy enactment

The literature surveyed in Strand 2 undoubtedly lends rich insight into how HEIs discursively 'speak to' the contradictions in WP policy. When supplemented with Strand 1's critical assessment of WP policy's macro-level qualities, it creates a working picture of how HEIs interface with policy. Nonetheless, theoretically speaking, I would argue that it leaves something to be desired. For one, the papers as a whole do fall prey to the ontological slippage I referenced at the top of this section. On some level, this is unavoidable: to subject a social phenomenon to inquiry, one must, at least ephemerally, presume some 'stability to their object' (see Ahmed 2012:20). While documents are 'sedimentations of social practices' (May 2011:191,192), the discourses that instantiate them are volatile and not fully epistemically accessible to us. However, as Ball (2015) reminds, no one studying the messiness of policy can be an ontological purist, and I would not subject PDWP scholars to an unfair standard. Nonetheless, an overarching assumption the Strand 2 papers make is that the documents tell a coherent story of institutional WP activity; in many cases, the conclusions drawn are not limited to the discursive moves institutions make, but the institutions as a whole. Bowl and Hughes (2013:23) rather boldly conclude that their analysis not only reflects trends within, but should be a basis of recommendation for, WP *practice* in English universities (they later backtrack in Bowl and Hughes 2016, calling for work on marketisation and fair access to pay greater attention to HEIs' 'historical and cultural contexts'). While the little work on WP practice that exists does confirm the significance of access agreements to practice (e.g., Rainford 2019; 2021a, 2021b, 2021c), access agreements do not remotely tell the full story of 'doing WP' in complicated, localised contexts.

I argue that this blindspot can be attributed to the fact that critical WP scholars, on the whole, do not engage with the role that institutions and organisations play in social reproduction, and, specifically, where HEIs fit into the complicated interplay

between them. Over the review thus far, we have seen ephemeral flirtations with institutional analysis (e.g., Bowl & Hughes 2016; Bowl 2018), but not deep theoretical engagement. It is not enough to make a base assumption that HEIs contribute to social reproduction, as sound as this assumption may be. We must consider how HEIs do so processually and practically, and consider questions like: when do HEIs act as individual organisations, and when are their activities governed by broader institutional forces? Further, an organisational analysis, among other things, could probe how the discursive positionings instantiated by documents are contested among actors, and how power relations are 'sedimented' within publicly available texts.

While I will propose that neoinstitutional theory provides a helpful corrective to these gaps, it is far from the only solution available to critical WP scholars. In fact, as discussed at the head of the section, Ball's work on 'policy enactment' grapples with the theoretical and practical complexities of 'doing' education policy. There is a small, but growing, body of PDWP work (Cleland et al. 2015; Evans et al. 2019; Rainford 2021c) that makes WP policy enactment its object. Through empirical study, these papers offer glimpses into the realities of engaging with WP policy. Investigating medical school admission practices, Cleland et al. (2015) identify the contextual dimensions that inform how admissions officers translate and interpret admissions policies. Evans et al.'s (2019) object of interest–how HEIs in Wales respond to stratification in the HE market–resonates with much of the analysis in Strand 2. They extensively draw on Ball to probe how HEIs differentially approach practices of WP, such as pre-entry activities and various aspects of the 'HE experience'. While they caution that the scope of their study was 'modest' (n = 8 HEIs), Evans et al. conclude that the ways in which HEIs enact policy is shaped by, and contributes to, the social reproduction of university hierarchies in Welsh HE. Pickering (2019) considers how 'successful' national policy has been at directing FSM policies within selective HEIs. Note the strong top-down directionality of Pickering's analysis. As Ball (2015) openly admits, the practice of studying policy

enactment entails an unavoidable and constant negotiation of how actors' agency and subjectivities interact with wider 'structures' in institutional contexts, which themselves are constituted by power relations. There is no one way to strike a workable balance (Ball concedes that, in some senses, this is ontologically impossible), but, I would argue that it is important to discuss which poles scholars choose to seize on, and to speculate *why*. In the following section, the core of my argument hinges on how one's chosen emphasis has both ethical and empirical implications.

Rainford (2021c) stands out as a study that, *contra* Pickering, spotlights how practitioners conform to, and push against, the pressures of national and institutional policy. Rainford scrutinises how practitioners' experiences and dispositions *shape* policy enactment within HEIs. In addition to Ball, Rainford develops a novel typology for capturing how practitioners position themselves with respect to institutional policies and doxa. In addition to Rainford (2021c), there are a handful of studies that deploy a range of critical tools to foreground WP practice and practitioner experience (Wilkins and Burke 2013; Aylmer 2020; Maccabe 2021). I will reserve my review of them–and my in-depth assessment of Rainford's work–for the closing section of the review.

Cluster 2: Student Centred WP scholarship

You, me, and (habit)us

Figure 2.2: Representative SCWP papers

Author	Source	Type
Reay (1998)	*Journal of education policy*	Empirical
Reay, David, and Ball (2001)	*Sociological research online*	Theoretical
Thomas (2002)	*Journal of education policy*	Empirical
Tett (2004)	*Studies in the education of adults*	Empirical
Reay (2004)	*British journal of sociology of education*	Theoretical
Reay, Crozier, and Clayton (2009)	*Sociology (Oxford)*	Empirical

Reay, Crozier, and Clayton (2010)	*British Educational Research Journal*	Empirical
Crozier and Reay (2011)	*Teaching in higher education*	Empirical
Bathmaker, Ingram, and Waller (2013)	*British journal of sociology of education*	Empirical
Burnell (2015)	*Journal of adult and continuing education*	Empirical
Thomas (2015)	*Widening participation and lifelong learning*	Theoretical
Simpson (2016)	*Widening participation and lifelong learning*	Empirical
Gauntlett et al. (2017)	*Widening participation and lifelong learning*	Empirical
Webb, Burke, Nichols, Roberts, Stahl, Threadgold, and Wilkinson (2017)	*Studies in Continuing Education: Advancing Theory and Research in Widening Participation*	Theoretical
Clark and Hordosy (2018)	*Sociological Research Online*	Empirical
Harrison (2018)	*Social Sciences*	Theoretical
Harrison (2019)	*Journal of youth studies*	Theoretical
Reay (2018)	*European journal of education*	Theoretical
O'Sullivan, Robson, Winters (2019)	*Studies in higher education (Dorchester-on-Thames)*	Empirical
Elliott (2019)	*Widening Participation And Lifelong Learning*	Empirical
Attridge (2021)	*Journal of Further and Higher Education*	Empirical
Wainwright and Watts (2021)	*Educational review (Birmingham)*	Empirical
Fernando and Kenny (2021)	*Academy of Management Learning and Education*	Empirical
Friend (2021)	*Pedagogy, Culture & Society*	Empirical

Introducing SCWP

The second cluster of critical WP scholarship under review attends to the central and quintessential concern of WP: 'the students at the heart of the system' (cf. BIS 2011). I will refer to it as student-centred WP (SCWP) throughout the review. This body of work addresses how marginalised students traverse the HE experience, and accordingly confronts questions of 'choice', 'risk', 'identity', and 'belonging'. SCWP is particularly

sensitive to the fact that successful admission and matriculation to university is the proverbial 'tip of the iceberg' when it comes to understanding how marginalised students navigate HE.

National WP policy has begun to recognise the holistic interventions that WP demands, and has greatly expanded its remit over its lifecourse (see Thompson 2019). This is embodied in the OfS's dominion over not only learner participation, but experience, outcomes, and, of course, value for money.

Figure 2.3: OfS stated objectives

Participation	Experience	Outcomes	Value for Money
All students, from all backgrounds, with the ability and desire to undertake higher education, are supported to access, succeed in, and progress from higher education.	All students, from all backgrounds, receive a high quality academic experience, and their interests are protected while they study or in the event of provider, campus or course closure.	All students, from all backgrounds, can progress into employment, further study, and lead fulfilling lives, in which their qualifications hold their value over time.	All students, from all backgrounds, receive value for money.

While they may acknowledge such nominal progress, SCWP scholars remain unconvinced. Our discussion in this section will bear out that SCWP literature maintains a principled cynicism toward WP. Accounting for this, I would argue, is the literature's overarching theoretical interest is the social reproduction of inequalities, which it explores through the vantage points of WP students. WP, it follows, is conceptualised not as an affront to social reproduction, but a contributor, which defies a common belief among policymakers and some practitioners that it is a net force for social justice.

Given its vested interest in social reproduction, it is not surprising that the dominant theoretical frame SCWP scholarship employs is Bourdieusian. As Reay (2004:431) explains, a Bourdieusian research agenda prioritises structural analysis of social worlds:

> 'For Bourdieu the goal of sociological research is to uncover the most deeply buried structures of the different social worlds that make up the social universe, as well as the `mechanisms' that tend to ensure their reproduction or transformation'.

A defining characteristic of Bourdieu, however, is that he finds dualism utterly distasteful. To Bourdieu, a critical aspect of achieving the conceptual aims enumerated above is immersive, idiographic empirical research: 'one cannot grasp the most profound logic of the social world unless one becomes immersed in the specificity of an empirical reality' (Bourdieu 1993:271 in Reay 2004:439). In whimsically straddling between analysis of social 'formation' (constructions of experience) and 'causation' (structures and mechanisms), as well as agency and structure, Bourdieu's conceptual toolkit intervenes in the 'ontological hinterlands' that other approaches shy away from (see Kettley 2007).

Bourdieusian approaches loom large in critical HE research as a whole (Gale and Lingard 2015; James 2015; Webb et al. 2017). In WP, despite its being a 'field of research in which utility is forefront' as opposed to theorising (Webb et al. 2017:140), the popularity of Bourdieusian work has inspired two summative theoretical reviews (Reay 2004; Webb et al. 2017). However, as both Reay and Webb et al. raise, it is not uncommon for WP and HE research to use Bourdieusian approaches superficially–or, in Hey's (2003) memorable formulation, as 'intellectual hairspray'. Instead of appreciating the inherent interconnectivity between Bourdieu's range of conceptual tools, scholars either 'pick and choose' concepts that fit their particular goals. In some cases, as Webb et al. argue, this amounts to a 'misrecognition' of Bourdieu and his conceptual goals.

For example, in the intervening years between Reay and Webb et al.'s reviews, the study of habitus skyrocketed from a contested, but increasingly popular, concept to one

of the dominant objects of analysis in educational research. This is broadly true of SCWP: habitus, alongside cultural capital, is the operative concept in a plurality of papers. As Reay cautions, however, a study of habitus that does not consider the related concepts of field, capital, and practice is conceptually incomprehensible. Habitus, moreover, is an intentionally confused concept, which only wields explanatory power in iterative, deep encounters with an empirical context (Bourdieu 1993). Or, worse than the problem of picking and choosing, there is a tendency in literature reviews to pepper in citations of complex theoretical concepts to embellish unrelated arguments–a citational practice I called 'ornamental citation' earlier in this chapter. I will critique this practice in detail in the upcoming discussion of 'aspirations'.

While SCWP is certainly liable to commit both errors, and I will identify when it does so, it is not my primary goal in this section to identify lapses in theoretical precision. The bulk of scholarship I review is by Diane Reay, a WP heavyweight whose work on Bourdieu has spanned over two decades. It is outside my scope–and, frankly, my abilities–to critique Reay *vis-a-vis* her facility with Bourdieusian theory. Nor is it my goal, I must stress, to pass judgement on whether Bourdieu's conceptual toolkit holds the key for transcending entrenched dualisms in social analysis, or, as Sullivan (2002:14) concludes, 'utterly fails' in achieving these ends. Instead, building on my arguments concerning empirical and ethical emphasis in the previous section, I will pay attention to what this body of scholarship elects to study and consider why.

On HE choice and aquatic metaphors

Many features of the current Bourdieusian research programme in WP can be attributed to the work of Diane Reay. Reay (1998), the oldest paper included in this conceptual review, was one of the first pieces of scholarship to articulate an argument that is now core to SCWP and PDWP literature alike: 'that social injustices lie not just in continuing exclusions from higher education, but are also to be found in the *unequal patterns of*

choice made by the growing ranks of both young and mature students who take degree courses' (519, emphasis mine). Along with colleagues Stephen J. Ball and Miriam David, Reay worked to develop a rich theorisation of the HE choice process for marginalised students (Reay et al. 2001a; 2001b; 2005). We discussed in Section 1 how the concepts of hot/cold knowledge, cultural capital, and class-taste markers have been productively employed in PDWP literature. Reay, however, was first to introduce another core concern of HE choice theory: how familial and *institutional* (in this case, school) habituses constitute the 'social, economic and psychological resources that individuals have access to' in the HE choice process (Reay 1998:527). Worthy of note here is a corollary body of work developed contemporaneously to Reay et al. 's theory of choice. These studies (Archer and Hutchings 2000; Tett 2004; see also Clayton et al. 2009) examine student decision-making process in relation to 'risk', attempting to marry Bourdieusian approaches with Beck's and Giddens' theories of modernity and the risk society, respectively (see Giddens 1984; Beck 1992). This vein of inquiry has mostly petered out in Bourdieusian circles, since, as Harrison (2019) points out, Bourdesian scholars have begun to critique Beck's and Giddens' overinvestment in the crumbling of social structures and individuals' attendant agency to choose paths for themselves.

Although interest in decision-making remains steadfast (e.g., O'Sullivan, Robson, and Winters 2019), the lionshare of SCWP that I reviewed explores the disjunctures that working-class, and otherwise marginalised, students feel throughout their undergraduate experiences. The operative metaphor in this body of work likens the working-class university student to a 'fish out of water' (*verbatim* in Thomas 2001; Reay et al. 2009; 2011; Burnell 2015). These papers accordingly parse how students' individual habituses clash with institutional habituses, which often engenders to 'disquiet, ambivalence, insecurity, and uncertainty' (Reay et al. 2009:1105). They generate rich insight into how belonging is not merely a matter of 'fitting in' versus 'standing out' for working-class university students, but a complicated tapestry of both. Reay et al. (2010) demonstrate just how

'heterogenous' working-class experiences of HE. In particular, working-class students at elite universities, in certain respects, feel less like 'fish out of water' at their universities than at their schools, whose institutional habituses alienated their dispositions toward learning and academic achievement. Building on Reay's work, moreover, Attridge (2021) recently argued that working-class students at elite universities are subject to a 'double isolation', underscoring how students can feel profoundly alienated from both settings.

Contributing additional nuance to the 'fish out of water' narrative is a body of work that considers 'belonging' *vis-a-vis* space, place, and geography (Clayton et al. 2009; Thomas 2015; Simpson 2016). Clayton et al. (2009) demonstrate how crucial geographical dimensions of HE are to HE experiences across classes, finding that working-class students more strongly value the security and familiarity of their own localities when deciding where, and whether, to attend HE. Thomas (2015), aptly (albeit a touch appropriatively), seeks to intervene in the 'theoretical borderlands' between Bourdieusian approaches to belonging and an array of tools from critical geography to theorise how mature, part-time students negotiate different geographies of power in their pursuit of HE. To torture the metaphor slightly, scholars are increasingly attending to the various bodies of waters through which fish swim. Curiously, the 'fish out of water' analogy riffs on an oft-cited assertion of Bourdieu and Wacquant's (1992:127) that actually speaks to an *inverse* experience: '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'. An emphasis is placed on the difference and/or exclusion that marks the WP student experience, reflecting some troubling tendencies in SCWP that I critique in the final subsection.

How institutional is institutional habitus?

A great deal of the work reviewed above interfaces with the concept of *institutional* habitus. I want to home in on the development and intricacies of the concept, since the

ways in which SCWP scholars engage with the concept are surprising and, in my view, disappointing. In my assessment, I am heavily indebted to byrd's (2019) consummate critical appraisal of the concept's usage in empirical HE research.

Although Bourdieu theorised extensively on various sociocultural dimensions of habitus, and produced 'arguably the most sustained theorisation of higher education' as a supreme site of social reproduction' (Marginson 2008:303), he did not explicitly propose an 'institutional habitus'. Rather, byrd (2019) found that scholarship on institutional habitus usually credits one of two 'conceptual originators': McDonough (1997) or Reay and colleagues (Reay 1998; Reay et al. 2001). McDonough, whom Reay (1998) references, critiques Bourdieu's failure to consider how organisations mediate the relationship between 'individual agency and social structures, especially schools' (107). A scholar of organisation, McDonough accordingly proposed *organisational habitus* as a corrective. Reay et al. (2001) concur with McDonough that schools, in their capacity as organisations, play a critical role in shaping higher education choice. Under the rubric of *institutional* habitus, they contend that institutional habituses, like individual habituses, are historical entities that transmute over time in response to changing cultural–and, indeed, organisational–contexts (1.3). Despite their apparent interest in organisations, they invoke very little organisational theory outside of McDonough (1997). They cite Weick's (1976) classic work on loose coupling to state that '[t]he degree of coupling (Weick 1976) between schools/colleges and universities is a manifestation of educational status and clearly has a bearing on student choice' (5.1). Loose coupling, however, refers to the interrelation of elements within a governing organisational system (Weick 1976:4).

Their theoretical lapses notwithstanding, I concur with byrd that Reay and colleagues' advocacy for an empirical programme focussed on institutions was welcome. I equally agree, however, that the institutional habitus research programme is severely weakened by a 'series of missed opportunities'. byrd's overarching critique of the scholarship she reviewed is its "failure to centre institutional status', which results in an

array of incoherences (186). Without meaningfully theorising what institutions are and what they constitute, the scholarship often classifies institutional phenomena as 'institutional attributes', focussing too heavily on individual habituses 'in isolation' instead of turning to the structural factors–like capital and field–that constitute them. Like Reay (2004), byrd contends that the 'concepts are meaningless without each other'. Overall, she concludes that institutional habitus is trapped in a prolonged 'theoretical infancy' and proposes a stronger theoretical foundation building on both Bourdieu and organisational theory (200). Here, byrd answers Webb et al.'s (2017:148) call for Bourdieusian HE scholars to engage with institutional theory, as it 'calls the higher education sector to its account' for how it misunderstands HEIs as institutions as opposed to organisations in an institutional field. We will return to Webb et al.'s (2017) critique and its implication for this study in the review's conclusion.

In the SCWP scholarship I read and appraised before coming across byrd's review (Thomas 2001; Tett 2004; Clayton et al. 2009; Reay et al. 2009; 2010; Crozier and Reay 2011; Clark and Hordosy 2018; O'Sullivan et al. 2019), I observed similar problems. In spite of the fact that many consider how student habitus interfaces with HEIs, the vast majority of these studies nod to the concept of institutional habitus briefly, in an almost evidentiary manner, as though it is a given (incidentally, byrd noted her exclusion of Tett 2004 from her review as an example of how minimal engagement with the concept can be). For example, in their study of how 'capital accumulation' informs how working-class students 'learn to 'learn' (see also Bathmaker et al. 2011), Crozier and Reay's (2011:147) sole mention of institutional habitus occurs in the following statement:

> Whilst most of the working-class students in our study had limited experience of the culture of HE on arrival at university, the structure and organisation of the university (the institutional habitus: Crozier et al. 2008; Reay, Crozier, and Clayton 2009) and as we will show the learning experiences, supported or constrained their endeavours in these respects.

Institutional habitus, insofar as it refers to the 'structure and organisation of the university', is an operative object of study for Crozier and Reay's analysis of how HEs facilitate learning, yet they refrain from developing–or even defining–the concept in more detail. Only two studies that work with the concept do so non-superficially (Thomas 2001; Reay et al. 2010). I would argue that both commit a version of the error of individual attribution we discussed above. Thomas' paper is titled 'Student retention in higher education: the role of institutional habitus'. Despite the fact the paper is ostensibly an '[attempt] to provide a conceptual and empirical understanding of the ways in which the values and practices of a higher education institution impact on student retention' (423), Thomas ultimately stresses that the goal of her discussion is to 'to explore issues and relationships *that students identified* as being important to their decisions not to withdraw early and to persist in HE' (432). Though Reay et al. (2010) offer descriptions of the four case institutions under study (synthesised from descriptive excerpts of student interviews), their interest in institutional habitus is subordinate to their analysis of how students grapple with their identities as working-class students. In refraining from analytically distinguishing institutional habitus from individual experiences of the institution, Reay et al. (2010) end up treating institutional habitus as interchangeable with the more general concepts of 'institutional culture or climate' (byrd 2019:190).

Why does any of this matter? As I did in my appraisal of PDWP literature, I will clarify that the substantive findings, and critical normative positioning, of the SCWP studies are useful contributions to critical WP's research agenda. Under a critical qualitative paradigm, moreover, it is entirely valid to foreground a community's *lived experience* of social reproduction over direct analysis of the structures and systems responsible, as Reay et al. (2010) did. I would argue, however, that SCWP's clear preference for student experience over organisational analysis–objects of study that are far from mutually exclusive–warrants scrutiny. This is the case not only because it is

indicative of a critical WP's apprehension toward organisational analysis, but because of problems arising from how students are positioned in SCWP analysis. I will close by discussing this problem of emphasis, setting the stage for a 'case-study' discussion of ethics and knowledge production in critical WP.

Troubled waters: transformation and agency

While they intervene in the complicated domain of lived experience, reflection, and biography, the SCWP papers I reviewed fairly uniformly emphasised the constraints students felt in their pursuit of HE, as opposed to the opportunities such a pursuit invariably disclosed. In this regard, SCWP largely privileges structure over agency. I use these terms with a measure of scepticism and hesitation: if 'habitus' is a confused concept, 'agency' and 'structure' are utterly incomprehensible. Even worse: social scientists generally feel familiar with the vocabulary of agency and structure, which puts us at risk of brushing aside how troublingly vague they are, and remain (see Ch.3). I will offer an account of agency as it is used in this study in Chapter 3. Throughout the remainder of this chapter, however, I will use the terms 'agency' and 'structure' widely and provisionally, as springboards for discussions that I will contextualise with more precise vocabulary.

I am not the first to notice the 'oversocialized' view of agency-structure in SCWP. Harrison (2018, 2019), among others, criticises Bourdieusian's scholarship investment in social structures, and the reproduction thereof. In particular, he flags how Bourdieusian scholarship positions HE as 'natural' for advantaged students, but 'risky' for their disadvantaged counterparts, a framing that can be read as connoting condescension. He ultimately endorses a critical realist approach that strikes a better 'conceptual balance between structure and agency' by recognising the 'agentic elements that underpin access to higher education and how these are linked to the young person's wider sociocultural context' (2018:2). While Harrison and I share a similar concern over Bourdieusian WP's

lack of investment in student agency, we follow divergent lines of reasoning. Harrison levies his critique at the level of paradigm–that is, Bourdieusian approaches do not ontologically account for agency in the way that critical realism can. I, on the other hand, see no reason to disagree with Reay (2004) that Bourdieu's conceptual toolkit can capture agentic activity, although it might designate different language for human action out of respect for non-dualism. That habitus can be at odds with itself, and that collective and individual habituses can clash, both seem to me to be substrates for reflexive and transformative action (Reay et al. 2009).

To borrow Munir's (2015) framing, the problem–which I will now refer to as the 'progressive apprehension toward agency'–is not theoretical, but moral and ethical. And, further complicating things, the problem is not *per se* a problem. To illustrate what I mean, I will use Reay as an example, although my assessment applies to critical WP more broadly. Reay, like many critical social scientists, conducts research in concert with activism. In her review of Reay's heavily autobiographical manifesto *Miseducation* (Reay 2017), for example, Hart (2018:447) writes that

> *Miseducation* is a poignant call to action, which passionately challenges dominant discourses of meritocracy, the possibility of social mobility and equal educational opportunities. An implicit aim of the book is to create discomfort and to generate disquiet, kicking back against discourses of the UK as 'world class'.

To her credit, Reay has remained an unflinching advocate for working-class interests both in and beyond the academy (see also my discussion of Reay 2013 in the following section). There are, nonetheless, trade-offs to assuming such a heavily emancipatory stance. While, I adamantly disagree with suggestions such as White's (2013) that research can, much less should, be 'neutral' (see Ch.1), I do think that action research incentivises us to direct our attention to social problems, occasionally at the expense of potential solutions. This is greatly exacerbated by the fact that action research is regularly derided as unrigorous *tout court*, which has provoked some to 'double-down' reactively on their normative and methodological priors (e.g., Denzin and Lincoln 2018, discussed in Ch.1).

In short, I argue that a certain measure of reductionism is required to issue 'calls to action' in an unendingly complex social field like education. The majority of SCWP work I read flattens student agency very subtly: not, *contra* White (2013), at the level of excluding inconvenient findings, but rather in the domain of conceptual and rhetorical emphasis. I found two particularly pertinent examples of this in my review. First is Friend (2021), who, as her title indicates, explores 'the creation of social networks' among WP students at elite universities in the US, England, and Scotland. Friend dedicates a large part of her analysis to the bonds WP students form in environments that are reliably welcoming or hospitable (what one of my participants called a 'bond of understanding'). Nevertheless, Friend concludes by underscoring that minoritised students possess 'fewer social ties both prior to and during their university experience'. To bolster her conclusion, she attempts to de-legitimise a participants' reported experience of meaningful community formation:

> For instance, Brandon reported that he was mixing (or bridging) with others at university because he belonged to an all-black fraternity. Yet, he was, in fact, bonding with individuals from the same cultural heritage. (Friend 2021, 374)

To be clear, I concur with the normative claim that this revisionist interpretation is offered in service of: that universities should not assume that the informal networks formed among students provides them adequate social support. The onus rests on universities to foster an overall environment of inclusion and solidarity. That Friend attempted to efface the nuance of a participant's experience–one that, I believe, could be squared with her normative aims–is the problem I am identifying.

Second is the by-now familiar Reay et al. (2009), which probes the nuances and tensions of working-class experiences at elite universities. As they recount student stories, they gradually deconstruct their title, 'Strangers in Paradise': can we rightfully call working-class students 'strangers' in institutions when some experience equal alienation in familial contexts. Is an elite education really paradise? In interviews, they

found rife evidence of students asking similar questions, in so doing reflexively questioning and re-negotiating their positionalities. However, Reay et al. (2009:1105) assert the following:

> [W]hen habitus encounters a field with which it is not familiar, the resulting disjunctures can generate not only change and transformation, but also disquiet, ambivalence, insecurity and uncertainty (Reay, 2005). Working-class habitus in an elite university is a good example of this latter case.

Why not the former? Given the fact that the study's existence hinges on the students' reflexivity, this observation is strange. With respect to reflexivity, moreover, Reay et al. conclude that, for their participants, reflexivity has become 'habitual'–but "'reflexive capabilities" rarely work as an impetus for hope and mobility for the vast majority of the working classes' (Sweetman 2003:541 in Reay et al. 2009:1115). While their contention here–that access to HE in the UK is demonstrably inequitable–is politically salient, the account of agency we are asked to accept here is problematic. In his critical assessment of agency and structure in neoinstitutional theory, Modell (2022) observes that theorisations of agency-structure that seek to transcend dualism are liable to 'flip-flop' between the two while attempting to collapse them. We encounter a 'flip' toward agency: in positioning their success as exceptional—indeed, 'almost superhuman' (Reay et al. 2009:1115)—Reay et al. afford participants an unreasonable measure of agency. Then a 'flop' toward structure: Reay et al., *verbatim*, suggest that 'hope' is not available to the 'vast majority' of working-class students seeking HE.

As I alluded above, there is a growing awareness surrounding the progressive apprehension toward agency in SCWP literature. The effectiveness of proposed solutions, in my view, is varied. Burnell (2015) and Elliott (2019) attempt to reform the Bourdieusian approach from within, yet, in doing so, mischaracterise the aims of Bourdieusian theory. Burnell posits that Bourdieusian WP could benefit from more 'individualism', which implies an object of analysis–and a wider ethical stance–that is incompatible with Bourdieu's work (see James 2015). In a similar slippage, Elliott

mistakenly attributes the concept of 'human capital' to Bourdieu. Wainwright and Watts (2021), on the other hand, track 'the transmission of learning through students' agentic perspectives and attendant discursive consciousness' to their families and wider communities. They consider how a Bourdieusian approach can be rigorously combined with 'well-rehearsed' accounts of agency such as Giddens' and Bandura's, arguing that a study of *collective* agency merges well with Bourdieusian aims.

Several scholars forward theorisations of the student experience that either engage little with Bourdieu, or are premised on different theoretical models. While they find Bourdieusian approaches are 'insightful' when it comes to questions of student retention and engagement, Clark and Hodosy (2018) critique them for their insufficient attention to the processual nature of how students receiving financial support negotiate their identity while attending universities. They propose that an approach rooted in Richard Jenkins' concept of 'social identification' captures the reflexive processes through which students engage with financial support systems at their universities. Harrison (2018), as discussed, advocates a critical realist paradigm to WP research, which he combines with Markus and Nurius' (1986) 'possible selves'. His aim is practical as well as theoretical: Harrison (2018) intentionally develops an easily navigable typology of various possible selves configurations for ease of use by practitioners and policymakers. Finally, and relevant to this study, Fernando and Kenny (2021) explore the agentive practices of *identity work* that WP students undertake at elite universities, a construct popular in organisational studies. While they concur with Bourdieusian scholars that the identity 'workspace' HEIs provide is socially reproductive, they underscore how students actively 'negotiate' with universities in the identity work process. They forward a fine-grained account of universities as organisations act as 'holding environments' that constrain and enable identity work. I will elaborate further on the promises of identity work in Chapter 5.

Detour: amnesia and the aspirations non-debate

Before proceeding to the final strand of literature under review, I want to give more flesh to the working idea of a progressive apprehension toward agency. Using the non-debate surrounding the issue of 'raising aspirations' as an illustrative case, I briefly postulate as to why certain academic anxieties–and, occasionally, neuroses–have cropped up in WP-centred communities of inquiry. In addition to the ethical implications we discussed above, these patterns and tendencies, I argue, have significantly influenced knowledge production in critical WP. Moreover, the analysis here will serve as a primer for the next section: a great deal of literature in our final strand draws on the capability/capabilities approach (CA), which is one of the most popular 'evaluative spaces' (Hart 2016) for parsing the problem of aspirations.

'Raising aspirations' have been 'inexorably linked to' the WP policy and practice agenda since New Labour took power in 1997 (Harrison and Waller 2018:915). Indeed, in their Foucauldian reading of the aspirations discourses in UK policy, Spohrer et al. (2018:331) identify 10 major policy documents published between 2003 and 2011 in which 'raising aspirations' was a *centrepiece*. After the fall of aspirations-raising bulwark AimHigher, the Coalition government reinvigorated the aspirations-raising agenda by urging the cultivation of an 'aspiration nation' (Reay 2013). Underpinning the aspirations-raising craze is what scholars refer to as 'the poverty of aspirations thesis' (Campbell and McKendrick 2017). The logic of this thesis presumes that low HE participation can be traced to a poverty of disadvantaged students' 'aspirations,' with aspirations denoting some (often unexplained) composite of student goals, expectations, and/or dreams for higher education (see Hart 2016). If marginalised learners could only be nudged to 'aspire higher,' they would work hard enough to successfully earn places at HEIs and, ultimately, reap the economic benefits of doing so. A pronounced methodological individualism drives this thinking: taken to its logical conclusion, the

thesis implies that structural barriers are more or less incidental to HE outcomes, because they can be dwarfed by the individual will.

To be clear, beyond the clear deficit model on which it is premised, there are ostensibly legitimate reasons to continue critiquing aspiration-raising discourses. In addition to its aforementioned staying power in policy discourses, it still enjoys a striking degree of popularity in WP practice (critiqued in Harrison and Waller 2018; Harrison and Rainford 2020; Rainford 2021b). While this is seemingly a cause for concern, Rainford (2021b) recently found that WP practitioners he interviewed generally have a more nuanced understanding of aspirations, one that closely mirrors the conception advanced by 'possible selves' (see also Harrison and Waller 2018). While their persistence in policy discourses is a cause for concern, it seems the deficit model is gradually being neutralised. Yet again, Rainford's empirical findings underscore the need for the critical WP research agenda to consult practitioner perspectives.

Another cause for cautious optimism is that there is essentially a scholarly consensus that the poverty of aspirations thesis is, philosophically and empirically speaking, bunk. It cannot be overstated how swiftly, and how fiercely, WP scholars moved to discredit the poverty of aspirations thesis. Leathwood and O'Connell's (2003) early critique of aspirations discourses deficit thinking remains a standard citation in WP scholarship, and itself bolsters its argument with Skeggs's (1997) critique of deficit models. Both Jones and Thomas (2005) and Archer (2007) castigate the logic of deficit models. Burke (2006), concurring with previous critiques, also establishes how the thesis utterly lacks analytic specificity, as it does not account for the ways that gender, race, class, and other variables constitute one's 'aspirations'. Indeed, Campbell and McKendrick's recent meta-review of aspirations discourses, to which we will return, cites an enormous body of work that inveighs against 'raising aspirations'.

There exists, moreover, a wealth of empirical work that casts doubt on the assumed causal link between aspirations and attainment. Harrison and Waller

(2018:920-923) review various quantitative inquiries into the topic, ultimately concurring with Cumming et al. (2012:4) that 'there were almost no studies that tried to test the hypothesis that attitude change leads to impact on attainment, in spite of its widespread acceptance'. Returning to Reay and colleagues, moreover, their entire body of qualitative work essentially amounts to a condemnation of voluntaristic choice in HE decision-making. For a comprehensive mixed-methods critique, one can refer to Caroline Hart's scholarship (Hart 2009; 2013; 2016; 2019), which marries Bourdieusian and capabilitarian theory to propose an alternative, social-justice-minded account of aspirations.

In spite of all this, while reviewing critical WP literature, I observed an almost amnesiac treatment of aspirations discourses. The aforementioned meta-review, Campbell and McKendrick (2017), stresses the urgency of moving 'beyond aspirations', despite engaging with a far more expansive bibliography of critique than that referenced above. They advance a capabilitarian conception as a corrective. In her study of Bangladeshi women's experiences pursuing HE in the UK, Scandone (2018) suggests we 'rethink' aspirations through a Bourdieusian lens. Unlike Campbell et al., Scandone does not review scholarship that has attended to the aspirations problem, jumping directly into an elaboration of her conceptual framework. In treating 'aspirations discourses' as an unresolved, much less untouched, topic, scholarship like this unintentionally reifies the idea that there is ongoing 'debate' surrounding 'raising aspirations', when the opposite case is demonstrably true. Fruitful knowledge production is, as a result, deferred in favour of rehashing stale debates.

There are some worrying ramifications to this. One is that aspirations continue to enjoy, in my view, unwarranted conceptual importance in critical WP work. Gauntlet et al. (2017), for example, aim to establish the salience of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) as critical methodology for WP research. To state their case, they suggest that IPA is a useful tool for 'contextualising' student aspirations and resilience. After

citing several studies that discredit aspirations-raising, they confusingly conclude: 'Although aspiration-raising is a key concept within WP policy and practice, there is a lack of research within the field that seeks to gain a fuller understanding of not only the aspirations of a key WP target group but how these aspirations are shaped by everyday lived experience' (Gauntlet et al. 2017:66). As O'Sullivan et al. (2019) recently demonstrated, IPA is a useful methodology for rich analytic engagement with WP students' perspectives. In resting their case for IPA on an erroneous reading of aspirations, however, Gauntlet et al. undermine it. That Gauntlet et al. felt compelled to engage with aspirations–which they ultimately refrain from defining–in the first place is indicative of the concept's unearned relevance, and its potentially damaging implications.

More concerning, I would argue, is that there seem to be worrying citational politics at play (Ahmed 2017). In order to portray the aspirations 'debate' as new, Campbell and McKendrick and Scandone efface Caroline Hart's contributions to WP thought and research in particular. Hart, it should be noted, is one of few women of colour in critical WP. While Campbell and McKendrick (2017:125) cite Hart's extensive work on CA and WP, they do so primarily to establish that '[t]here has already been some useful application of the capability approach in the field of education'. They do not specify that Hart's work is specifically oriented toward *aspirations* and *WP*, the precise focus of their study. They also do not engage with Hart's work in their critique of the poverty of aspirations thesis, when her critique is, like theirs, rooted in capabilitarian arguments. Campbell and McKendrick are, of course, at liberty to develop a concurring capabilitarian account of aspirations, but their effacement of Hart's work in the space is, in my view, both unrigorous and unfair. Scandone's erasure of Hart's work, I would argue, is more pronounced. She presents her Bourdieusian 'rethinking' of aspirations as novel, only citing Hart in an evidentiary manner. For example: '[student interests]

undarlay [*sic*] practices of self-exclusion from careers that privilege a different endowment of capitals (Bourdieu, 1984; Hart, 2013)' (Scandone 2018:531).

I would argue that a parallel pattern is operative in WP, and capabilitarian, research's engagement with Arjun Appadurai's (2004) oft-cited account of 'the capacity to aspire'. Appadurai's conception of the 'capacity to aspire' is interwoven with layered theorisations of culture (Appadurai is a cultural anthropologist), recognition (in conversation with the work of social theorist Charles Taylor), and Amartya Sen's articulation of the CA. In discussions of aspirations, however, references to Appadurai are superficial: they primarily sift vocabulary from his essay without unpacking any of the theoretical intricacies the terms imply ('navigational capacities' in Hayton and Bengry-Howell 2016; 'capacity to aspire' in Gauntlet et al. 2017). Appadurai is only afforded ornamental citation, treated as 'intellectual hairspray' (Hey 2003). To be clear, this tendency is less prominent in WP than in capabilitarian scholarship, and notable exceptions in WP do exist (see Bok 2010; Gale and Parker 2015).

The amnesiac, and racist, dimensions of the aspirations non-debate in critical WP have stymied productive work on students' expectations for HE. Not only does the aspirations non-debate distract from more salient lines of inquiry, but it makes it significantly more difficult for critical scholars to recuperate 'aspirations' for emancipatory means–particularly in relation to WP practice. The concept 'aspirations' is now theoretically saturated to the point of unwieldiness. This is not to say that individual theorisations of aspirations, like Hart's, are impotent; far from it. But, rather, as a result of the outsized attention aspirations have received, any invocation of aspirations entails a great deal of conceptual confusion (see Hardgrove et al. 2015). This is especially true in WP practice, where the theoretical specifics of what aspirations represent are subordinate to consideration of whether 'raising aspirations' is a worthy goal. It is unsurprising, then, that practice-oriented accounts of 'aspirations' like Harrison's advocate new vocabulary, turning a new leaf in a highly stagnated domain of WP.

Cluster 3: Social Justice WP scholarship

Toward an ameliorative vision for WP policy and practice

Figure 2.4: Representative SJWP papers

Author	Source	Type
Hart (2009)	*Studies in Philosophy and Education*	Theoretical
Garratt (2011)	*Cambridge journal of education*	Empirical
O'Brien (2013)	*Active learning in higher education*	Theoretical
Wilson-Strydom (2015)	*Higher education*	Theoretical
Hayton and Bengry-Howell (2016)	*London Review of Education*	Empirical
Hannon, Faas, and O'Sullivan (2017)	*British educational research journal*	Empirical
Richardson, Llewellyn, Williams, Nias, and Phillips (2017)	*Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning*	Empirical
Richardson, Llewellyn, Nias, and Phillips (2018)	*Widening participation and lifelong learning*	Empirical
Hart (2019)	*Policy Futures In Education*	Theoretical
MacFarlane (2019)	*Widening participation and lifelong learning*	Empirical
Wainwright, Chappell, and McHugh (2020)	*Population space and place*	Empirical
Lumb, Burke, and Bennett, (2021)	*British educational research journal*	Empirical
Burke (2012)	*The Right to Higher Education (monograph)*	Empirical

Introducing SJWP

While all critical WP literature definitionally engages with the ethical and normative questions surrounding WP, the final group of papers under review expressly propose normative frameworks and agendas for WP research, policy, and/or practice. I will call this subsection of the literature social justice WP (SJWP). Indeed, interest in developing, debating, and championing a 'transformative' agenda has been present in critical WP from its early days (Jones and Thomas 2005). The SJWP papers I reviewed draw from a range of critical traditions, and direct the substance of their claims generally clusters

around issues of pedagogy and HEI cultures (or, institutional habituses). In focussing their commentary on HEIs, the papers aim to attack social reproduction most proximally to where it occurs (Burke 2012; O'Brien 2013).

The capabilit approach*

As I mentioned in the previous section, many papers I grouped in the SJWP category rely on CA to develop normative frameworks for WP. Proposed by Sen (esp. Sen 1999), and further developed by Nussbaum (2000), CA seeks to assess the *real* opportunities, or capabilities, that an individual has to live a life *they have reason to value* (Sen 1999). It distinguishes between capabilities, an individual's freedoms to achieve 'beings' and 'doings' they value, and functionings, the beings and doings one actually achieves (see Hart 2009:392-396 for a more thorough disambiguation). Unlike the Bourdieusian work discussed thus far, CA tends to conceptually prioritise agency, although it seeks to mitigate agency's primacy through considering the structural 'conversion factors' that mediate the extent to which capabilities can become functionings (Wilson-Strydom 2015).

Any review of capabilitarian theory must confront a wrinkle: what CA heavyweight Robeyns (2017) refers to as 'the question of the list'. As Hart (2009:391) argues, the utility of CA is that it 'creates an evaluative space within which individual well-being' can be considered in policy, practice, and advocacy alike. Evaluating wellbeing, however, involves deciding which capabilities should be included into said evaluative space. On this issue, Sen and Nussbaum diverge. Sen prefers to keep the CA 'underspecified' enough so that it can be applied differentially in different contexts; stakeholders in a community should democratically decide which capabilities they prioritise (Sen 2004; see Robeyns 2017:172). Nussbaum, on the other hand, is interested in developing a universalist theory of justice, forwarding a list of ten 'central capabilities' (Nussbaum 2000; 2003; 2011).

The CA work that has become popular in critical education spaces deftly straddles both sides of the 'list' issue. We will, in turn, consider the capabilities they home in on and their relevance to critical WP. When it comes to WP, the two big voices in this domain are Walker and Wilson-Strydom (e.g., Walker 2008; Walker and Unterhalter 2007; Walker and Wilson-Strydom 2015; 2017; Wilson-Strydom 2011; 2015; 2016). While all three ultimately propose capabilities lists, they relegate them to particular contexts and often attempt to empirically validate their relevance to the communities under question. Walker (2006) argues for the centrality of pedagogy to education-related capabilities, a conviction evident in nearly all the SJWP scholarship I reviewed. In relation to WP, she elaborates on how Nussbaum's central capabilities of 'practical reason', 'affiliation', and 'emotions' are particularly relevant in WP contexts. Building on Walker (2006), Wilson-Strydom (2016) proposes a capabilities list specific to the university transition process for WP students in South Africa, which she refined through a 'bottom-up' empirical investigation into the capabilities said students value most: practical reason, knowledge and imagination, learning disposition, social relations and social networks, respect, dignity, and recognition, emotional health, language competence and confidence (151,152). Recently MacFarlane (2019) operationalised Wilson-Strydom's list to assess the effectiveness of pre-entry WP programmes in Scotland.

Hart, theoretically speaking, veers closer to Sen than Nussbaum. In addition to her extensive theorising on aspirations (Hart 2016), her central contribution has been the development of the Sen-Bourdieu Analytical Framework (Hart 2014; 2019) for evaluating policy and social justice initiatives in education. In buttressing Sen's capability theory with Bourdieusian conceptual tools, Hart aims to develop a more structurally sensitive capability theory, theorising field and habitus as dynamic and interrelated conversion factors (Hart 2019:585).

Such a move addresses an aspect of the CA that has given critically-oriented thinkers pause: its roots in liberal thought. As Sen originally conceived it, CA offers a

partial theory of justice, one heavily indebted to the work of liberal political philosopher John Rawls. Sen critiques Rawls on several accounts, but any theoretical account of CA must engage with the two theories' interrelated ancestries (see Robeyns 2005). While it is far outside my remit to enumerate objections to liberal political theory, relevant here is the late Charles Mill's critique of the whiteness implicit in Rawlsian theory and the project of liberalism *tout court* (Mills 1997; most recently, Mills 2017). Mills demonstrates how liberalism–despite its promises of equal rights–has consistently neglected to afford rights to people of colour. Inherent in liberalism is an insidious white gaze that conflates whiteness with neutrality, or the absence of race. Charusheela (2008) levies an analogous charge at Nussbaum, critiquing the colonial *hubris* she displays in positing a universalist theory of justice, which positions Western liberal values as categorically good. To be clear, as Hart's work bring to bear, the CA's liberal roots do not preclude it *per se* from generating to intersectional and radical accounts of justice: in their 'underspecified' form, capabilities, functionings, and conversion factors are useful constructs that can be deployed in service of a range of normative ends, especially when buttressed by concepts from critical theoretical traditions.

SJWP's transformative vision

The bulk of the CA SJWP papers I reviewed forward overtly progressive visions for WP. In developing their accounts, several blended CA with precepts from critical pedagogy. Garratt (2011) explicitly adopts the frame of critical race theory to argue for WP stakeholders to prioritise 'widening the capability for learning' among WP students, which necessitates developing more inclusive pedagogies in schools and universities alike. Richardson et al. (2017; 2018) reflect on their involvement with a mental-health initiative for WP students, which they formulated with the goal of fostering capabilities for mental health among students. They report that premising the programme on a

capabilitarian value system yielded positive outcomes for students, who reported they gained confidence over the course of their involvement.

Hannon et al. (2017), finally, draw on Freire's, among others', work on learner identity formation to posit a 'capability of identity', a meta-capability of sorts. Students with a realised capability of identity are sufficiently equipped to chart their own 'aspirational maps' for HE, regardless of whether their conception of success fits hegemonic conceptions thereof. They conclude by contending that a capabilitarian account of WP works against 'the appropriation of Bourdieu's theory of cultural reproduction in producing adequate "capital" for low SES students to adapt to the higher-education habitus' to instead develop an 'empowering and critical engagement with what each student values and has reason to value and what additional social and cultural capital they may need to freely make an informed choice and build their aspirational map' (Hannon et al. 2017:1241,1241).

There is credibility to Hannon et al.'s charge that Bourdieusian WP can conflate *low cultural capital* with *disinterest in pursuing HE* (see Watts and Bridges 2006). In focussing so strenuously on how HE reproduces social inequalities, Bourdieusian WP overshoots the centrality of HE to living, in capabilitarian terms, a life one has reason to value. Nonetheless, work like Burke's (e.g., Burk 2012; Lumb et al. 2021) cites the social-reproductive power of HE as a basis to argue for the radical transformation of HE systems into sites of social justice. In arguing for a right to higher education, Burke (2012) is not suggesting that marginalised students have a right to HE as such, but a right to a higher education that values their positionalities, experiences, and aspirations, broadly construed (see Burke 2012:Ch.10,11). The remit of this pursuit extends far 'beyond widening participation'. Premising her account on a mix of Freirean, feminist, and poststructuralist approaches, Burke—like her capabilitarian colleagues—underscores the centrality of just pedagogies to the forging of a new model of HE.

From an array of theoretical points of departure, SJWP scholars emphasise that questions of WP, when taken to their logical conclusion, demand engaging questions of—to put it rather bureaucratically—the 'student experience'. Inclusive pedagogies, as our discussion of CA indicates, are understood to core to an inclusive student experience. O'Brien (2013), another scholar drawing on Freire, offers a philosophical sketch of how subject disciplines might take on a posture of *openness* to what non-traditional and marginalised students can bring to them. Such openness, as Wainwright et al. (2020) contend, should be afforded to all the 'materialities' and 'mobilities' of student identifications and experiences. Adopting a Deleuzian frame, they argue that WP must make its ethical object the entire 'student success assemblage', which comprises a student identity, support, and resources. Indeed, work like Wainwright et al.'s, and the SJWP contributions discussed throughout this section, advances a vision of critical WP that cuts to the marrow of what and who HE is *for*.

Possibilities for Critical WP

SJWP rests its case for a radical 'right to higher education' on two interconnected claims: 1) WP can only be understood by scrutinising how it is, in a holistic sense, lived, and 2) in turn, HEIs must radically change how WP is 'done' across a range of axes. Underpinning this argument, I would argue, is a theoretical commitment to, and moral conviction in, the transformative power of practices of social change–or, in critical theoretical terms, *praxis*. In so doing, I would argue that they subscribe to what various critical thinkers have titled a 'sociology of hope' (see Dale 2003; Davis 2010). A disciplined modality of social critique that, in Al Lee's words, seeks 'to reaffirm the intrinsic value of the human being by creating other possibilities for human thought and action, and by keeping alive humanity's habit of continually reshaping its own image, hence its own reality' (Dale 2003:294). SJWP places an intellectual and moral emphasis on the notion that WP can–and should–be changed. And, in turn, WP can–and should–enact change.

Taking SJWP's sociology of hope as a starting point, I will conclude the conceptual review by issuing two injunctions for critical WP, injunctions on which this study hopes to make headway. Not only do they represent valuable lines of inquiry *per se*, they also advance various aims belonging to the three clusters of literature we have discussed.

First, a great deal more attention must be afforded to the experiences of WP practitioners: in particular, staff in university access and outreach offices who deliver and evaluate WP programming. In his doctoral thesis, Rainford (2019) identified WP's gaping lack of empirical research on WP practitioners. At the time of writing, the only study beyond his own he could find was Wilkins and Burke (2015). Wilkins and Burke, attending to a key interest of PDWP's, scrutinise how WP professionals 'negotiate competing demands of social equity and economic incentive', concluding that the hegemony of neoliberal discourses in WP prompts them to unconsciously value the latter (434). Since Rainford (2019), a promising, but still very small, body of work on practitioner experiences has blossomed (Aylmer 2020; Rainford 2021a; 2021b; 2021c; Maccabe 2021). These studies, in my view, demonstrate how it is paramount to incorporate practitioners into the critical WP agenda.

Aylmer's (2020) institutional case study tracks how an HEI sought to adopt a 'transformative' approach to WP, and his findings, in line with SJWP's concerns, underline the importance of inclusive pedagogical practices to an equitable HEI environment. Of interest to many SCWP scholars, Aylmer adopted a Bourdieusian lens to evaluate the extent to which the university's WP overhaul 'enhanced' student habitus and cultural capital, demonstrating that Bourdieusian concepts (on their own) can be applied as a normative yardstick for WP (see also Hayton and Howell 2016). Maccabe (2021) conducts a phenomenographic case study of a 'whole-provider approach' to WP, again stressing the importance of communication among staff, faculty, administration, and students to meaningful WP.

Rainford's work, in particular, demonstrates the salience of practitioner voices to PDWP concerns in particular. His study of how institutional doxa influences how HEIs frame potential (Rainford 2021a) was two-pronged: first, in a PDWP vein, he conducted a CDA into HEIs' various framings of potential. Through interviews with practitioners at case institutions, he then considered whether institutional doxa 'hold up in practice', finding that the 'issue of "potential" can also be seen to influence practices to some extent but there was also significant evidence of resistance to these ideas by practitioners within the study' (180). His findings, in my view, suggest that analysis of HEI WP discourses–while it yields insight into WP at HEIs, especially in aggregate–is not representative of WP practices on the ground. Similarly, Rainford (2021c) focalises WP policy enactment, which Rainford examines vis-a-vis the metaphor of 'policy staircase' (Trowler 2014, building on Reynolds and Saunders). Rainford's analysis suggests that understanding WP policy enactment requires attending not only to institutional translations of policy, but to how individual practitioners, in turn, respond to institutional WP directives.

Despite its clear relevance to all domains of critical WP inquiry, interest in practitioner perspectives remains marginal. My hypothesis as to why relates to critical WP's overall resistance toward the realities of transformative action in WP. In order to study WP practitioners, one must confront the matter of change. WP practitioners, generally speaking, aspire to change lives–and they can be successful in doing so. And, on occasion, the mandate to change students' lives pushes them to transgress against the institutional order (Rainford 2021c; see also Ahmed 2012), posing a direct affront to the reproduction of inequality.

I sympathise with SCWP researchers' hesitation to theorise deliberative and transformative action. Extending too strong a focus on the 'changeability' of social structures can produce pollyannaish accounts of social change that ignore the crushing weight of structural inequities. The need for careful balance leads me to my second

injunction: a meaningful theorisation of HEIs as organisations (or, depending on one's theoretical allegiances, institutions). This injunction is far from original to me (see Cai & Mehari 2015; Cai & Mountford 2022). However insufficient the response has been (byrd 2019), critical education scholars have long recognised the need for rich, fine-grained analysis into the practices through which schools and universities reproduce inequalities (e.g., McDonough 1997; Reay 1998; Reay et al. 2001). Webb et al. (2017:148) put it best:

> In calling the higher education sector to account, institutional theorists shift the focus of the sites of struggle for power in relation to who has access to university education away from fields of practice (the unit of analysis) as understood by Bourdieu, to institutions as organisations…When the institution is treated as the 'field', a site-specific analysis in which the ontological perspective of practices in the site become the focus…[T]he site in all its particularity must be examined.

When sites are examined in all their particularities, we can meaningfully analyse the power struggles that emerge when organisational social reproduction and praxis clash, theorising both. We make headway toward, as Ball put it, 'hav[ing] our ontological cake and eat[ing] it too' (Ball 2015:307).

So, as Hart (2009) asked over a decade ago, *quo vadis*? The conceptual review has demonstrated that there is an appetite for institutional approaches among critical WP scholars (e.g., Bowl and Hughes 2016; Bowl 2018; Rainford 2020; Fernando and Kenny 2021). Chapter 3 tracks what happens when the tensions and promises of critical WP are put in conversation with neoinstitutional theory.

Part 2
Theory and Method

Chapter 3

Enter WP, the institution

> As a basic orientation toward life, institutional thinking understands itself to be in a position primarily of receiving rather than of inventing or creating. The emphasis is not on thinking up things for yourself, but on thoughtfully taking delivery of and using what has been handed down to you.
>
> Hugh Heclo (2008:98)

> [I]n a sense, agents know the social world better than the theoreticians.
>
> Pierre Bourdieu (Krais 1991:252)

This chapter introduces my conceptual framework, and then orients and justifies the thesis's work within it. My overarching contention in this chapter is that interventions in the neoinstitutional sociology of organisations offer compelling and productive answers to stubborn problemata within critical WP inquiry. Although this diffuse research community goes by several more long-winded names (e.g., the neoinstitutional sociology of organisations, neoinstitutional theory, etc.), I will refer to it as organisational institutionalism (henceforth, OI). This is both for the sake of brevity, and to highlight the ineluctable entanglement of institutions and organisations as meaningful 'social-symbolic objects' in organisational life (Oliver et al. 2017; Lawrence and Phillips 2019; Buchanan 2020). Within OI, I situate my inquiry in the institutional work perspective (IWP), which prioritises examination of how actors agentically interface with institutions.

I am not the first to identify the promises of placing WP studies and organisational approaches in conversation. Indeed, in the conceptual review, I established that there is an ascendent, if preliminary, body of work that examines WP using precepts from institutional theory, organisational studies, and related disciplinary

frames (e.g., Bowl & Hughes 2016; Aylmer 2020; Fernando and Kenny 2021). Outside of WP, there is a long precedent of applying organisational approaches to matters of education (e.g., Weick 1976), and institutional approaches are steadily growing popular within HE research (see Cai and Mehari 2015). One shining example close to home is Patricia McDonough's work on organisational habitus (McDonough 1997) and organisational change within HE more broadly, which demonstrates how organisational approaches can gracefully negotiate structural analysis with the messy lived realities of practice. To riff on Webb et al. (2017:148), organisational analysis is apt for uncovering the 'particularities' of how actors and structures interface with one another.

In order to access these particularities, we need to have a coherent conceptual apparatus for locating and contextualising them. Accordingly, in this chapter, I advocate for conceptualising WP as an institution–specifically, an institution that operates on the level of the organisational field. As an HEI, Oxford could be classified as an 'organisation' in neoinstitutional parlance, though I will argue at the close of this chapter, and in the next chapter, that 'Oxbridge' represents a distinctly English institution, and that practitioners working within Oxford the organisation are in turn performing 'institutional work' on Oxbridge. The nature of the conceptual choices I have enumerated requires me to issue a disclaimer. In theorising WP as an institution, I limit myself to making a preliminary and speculative intervention. While I will substantiate my conceptualisation with empirical work in critical WP where possible, some amount of abstraction is unavoidable. As the chapter's discussion will make clear, I would argue that a leap of faith is required to name *any* social phenomenon as an institution. A fair degree of discretion is required, and I will try to make explicit the liberties and conceptual leaps I take in proffering this theoretical framework. Its exploratory nature notwithstanding, my hope in developing this framework is to demonstrate the great purchase OI holds for critical WP research agendas, laying a foundation for future work in this vein.

The promises and dangers of OI

On first blush, OI is a counterintuitive choice of conceptual lens for a study interested in practice, agency, and change. Before outlining my conceptual paradigm, I want to make clear the stakes–the payoffs, as well as the potential dangers–of adopting an OI lens. As we will discuss throughout the chapter, OI has been wracked by its own hesitancy toward embracing agency, presenting what some have critiqued as an 'oversocialized view of action' (Lawrence et al. 2009:4). This conceptual blindspot is symptomatic of a more fundamental conceptual haze surrounding neoinstitutional sociology. OI has self-consciously grappled with fundamental ontological puzzles and, indeed, paradoxes (Seo and Creed 2002) since its inception in the mid 20th century (see Scott 1987). A huge body of work has amassed, yet not only have no satisfactory answers been reached, but the bounds of OI itself remain as contested as the subject matter to which it attends. As Wooten and Hoffman (2017) confirmed in a review of OI literature, DiMaggio and Powell's 'lament' that 'it is often easier to gain agreement about what [OI] is not than about what it is' still holds true (DiMaggio and Powell 1991:1 in Wooten and Hoffman 2017:55).

Tellingly, in the preface to the fourth edition of his seminal *Institutions and Organizations*, Richard Scott bemoans that

> [i]f a naïve scholar strides into the maelstrom of institutional/organization scholarship and research without assistance, he or she will emerge with a migraine if not a concussion and will be hard pressed to ascertain what the central discussion is about, let alone how to productively join the conversation. (Scott 2014:vii)

Even when one is successfully oriented within the maelstrom, however, the incoherence does not seize. Critical WP scholars are not the only ones who have trouble identifying and conceptualising institutions. Buchanan (2020:251) reminds us that, despite decades of theorising and quibbling over theorisations, scholars of OI continue to joke: 'Never Ask an Organizational Institutionalist to Define "Institution"'. And DiMaggio and Powell's

complaint concerning the indeterminacy of institutional theory applies to conceptualisations of institutions themselves. In the same book chapter, they remark that 'sociologists find institutions everywhere, from handshakes to marriages to strategic-planning departments' (DiMaggio and Powell 1991:9). Similar to the problem of the 'habitual use of habitus' with SCWP (Reay 2004), OI occasionally fails to navigate the indeterminacy of its operative concepts.

Finally, the choice to situate one's work–particular work of an emancipatory nature–in organisational studies is not a choice without baggage. I will address this particular charge up front. Organisational studies is rife with what the late Mark Fisher calls 'business ontology', which posits that 'it is simply obvious that everything in society, including healthcare and education, should be run as a business' (Fisher 2009:17). Many critically-minded thinkers in organisation studies have pointed out that OI in particular has done little to question the corporate ideologies on which it premises, and tests, its conceptual frameworks (e.g., Clegg 2010; Modell 2015; 2022; Munir 2015; Willmott 2011; 2015). As Munir (2015) stresses, the neglect is not so much the result of insufficient theoretical tools, but rather a moral and ethical choice. OI, as I hope to show, is brimming with potential for social critique. Sara Ahmed (2012), for example, has demonstrated that there is immense critical potential in focalising the institutional nature of structural inequalities in HEIs, since institutional analysis is concerned with uncovering the 'taken-for-granted' ways that oppressive structures govern work and life in HE. Second, as PDWP research has repeatedly shown, HEIs respond to market forces in manners similar to corporations. If conducted with an eye to critique, an organisational analysis of HEIs can expose the inner workings of their business ontology more directly than perhaps most other theoretical lenses. In its focus on how institutions invade our very thinking, moreover, OI is especially well-equipped to expose the insidious mechanisms of the 'capitalist realism' (Fisher 2009) currently plaguing managerialist HE.

It is precisely because of–not in spite of–the problems outlined above that I am drawn to OI. OI's pitfalls, in my view, resemble those of critical WP. Like critical WP, especially SCWP, neoinstitutional thought has both been served and limited by an entrenched focus on the conservatism of institutions and their near-insurmountable reproductive power. Similar to theorisation around discourse and habitus within critical WP, governing concepts within OI pose seemingly irresolvable 'ontological mysteries' (Jenkins 1992:130) that interact with empirical work in complicated ways. Unlike critical WP, however, scholars have openly confronted these challenges. In the past three decades, there have been lively debates around institutional change, actor agency, and their theoretical and substantive implications for the field, which have prompted compelling and nuanced theoretical interventions. Indeed, this chapter will demonstrate how recent theoretical developments within OI—namely, those following the institutional work perspective (IWP) (Lawrence and Suddaby 2006; Lawrence, Suddaby, and Leca 2009, 2011; Lawrence and Phillips 2019)—offer convincing paths forward within the ontological hinterlands of exploring WP practitioners' action within and against institutional structures. As the Heclo epigraph indicates, embodying an institutional sensibility requires a staunch refusal to abandon ship and start anew, advocating instead what Seo and Creed (2002:231) call an 'artful and active' exploitation of institutional conditions and contradictions. In IWP in particular, we find a scholarly community constantly exploiting its problems and paradoxes in the service of a more sensitive, rigorous, and justice-oriented research programme.

I will lay out the study's conceptual paradigm as follows. I first cover some of the fundamentals of OI: namely, its cultural-cognitive approach to institutional analysis, its focus on the 'field-level' analysis, and the conceptual outgrowths of these focuses. I then turn to the shortcomings of OI as they relate to actor agency and institutional change. I conclude by introducing and critically assessing IWP, which I ultimately adopt as the study's primary conceptual frame.

Institutions and organisations

Institutions as 'conventions that self-police'

As Webb et al. (2017) observed, WP scholars often use the language of institutions in a relatively atheoretical manner. It is therefore crucial that we establish a cogent understanding of what institutions and organisations are according to an OI paradigm. We will begin with the more arcane of the two: institutions.

As I flagged in the introductory matter above, pinning down institutions conceptually is not a straightforward task–even for organisational institutionalists. Adding to the trickiness is that, in defining an institution, one confronts a 'double hermeneutic' (Giddens 1984) between technical and colloquial understandings of the term. Lawrence and Phillips (2019:181) cite the durability of the everyday definition of institutions as 'established organisation[s] or foundation[s], especially one[s] dedicated to education, public service, or culture'. These bodies, in OI parlance, would be more accurately described as 'organisations'. Therefore, in uncritically referring to HEIs as institutions, critical WP does commit something of a category error. Nonetheless, there is an (unintentional) wisdom to the double hermeneutic that scholars of institutions and organisations are beginning to acknowledge. In a moment, in fact, I will make the case that institutions *proper* inhabit the institutions we encounter in brick and mortar (Ahmed 2012; Lok and de Rond 2013).

In terms of technical definitions, I concur with Lawrence and Phillips (2019) that Phillips et al.'s quippy description of institutions as 'conventions that are self-policing' is an economical and rich point of departure (Phillips et al. 2004:647). This conception is consistent with the basic, shared precepts of OI's cultural-cognitive approach, and will provide a touchstone onto which we will anchor our discussion.

OI and the cultural cognitive approach

Among the neoinstitutional approaches, OI is known for its relative 'expansiveness'—or, in less charitable vocabulary, 'vagueness'—in its working definitions of institutions (Buchanan 2020:52). Unlike institutional economists and historical institutionalists, for example, the definitions offered by OI scholars 'include, not just formal rules, procedures or norms, but the symbol systems, cognitive scripts, and moral templates that provide the "frames of meaning" guiding human action' (Hall and Taylor 1996:947). The expansive character of this theoretical model originated in phenomenological sociology, particularly the pioneering work of Berger and Luckmann (1966; see also Hirsch and Boal 2000; Vera 2016). Like their phenomenological contemporaries and forebears, Berger and Luckmann understood culture as an essentially semiotic system, forged and sustained through shared meanings that circulate through social interaction (Dahler-Larsen 2012:57). In such a system, human action is directed by a logic of meaning rather than of functionality or rationality (Schutz 1973; see also Weinberg 2014:7-8). Taking seriously the dictum that '[i]f men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences' (Thomas and Thomas 1928), Berger and Luckmann sought to understand the social factors that shape what we perceive as reality—in other words, the 'taken-for-granted' meaning systems that are operative in everyday life. These meaning systems are forged through institutionalisation, which encompasses 'an ongoing dialectical process composed of the three moments of externalization, objectivation and internalization' (Berger and Luckmann 1966:149; emphasis added).

Figure 3.1: Processes of institutionalisation

	Externalisation	Objectivation	Internalisation
Description from Scott (2014:48)	The production, in social interaction, of symbolic structures whose meaning comes	The process by which this production 'comes to confront him as a facticity outside of	The process by which the objectified world is 'retrojected into consciousness in the

	to be shared by the participants.	himself', as something 'out there' as a reality experienced in common with others; and only then comes.	course of socialisation' (Berger and Luckman 1966:78-9).
Constitutive mechanisms	**Habitualization** Through repetitions of social (inter)actions, patterns begin to form, which humans 'habitualise'. Habitualised actions 'become embedded as routines in the general stock of knowledge' (Schlaudt and Huber 2015). **Typification** Over time, habitualised actions become 'typified' as belonging to certain actors, or certain bodies, and as occurring in certain contexts.	**Signification** Since language is a core component of human interpretative activity, the process of signification is a key constitutive part of objectivation. Through signification, 'signs' are cleaved from 'signifieds' and become integrated into 'common realit[ies]' that humans share (Berger and Luckmann 1966:50).	**Socialisation** An 'ontogenic' process through which *internalisation* occurs within selves. Berger and Luckmann refrain from detailing the social-psychological theory behind socialisation, although they most closely adhere to a Medean conception of the self.

The institutionalisation process described above, and the social and psychological processes that constitute it, comprise the theoretical foundation of what Scott (2014) terms the cultural-cognitive pillar of institutional analysis. The 'distinguishing feature' of OI, is, in fact, its focus on the cultural-cognitive facets of institutions (Scott 2014:67). In addition to its origins in phenomenological sociology (itself no stranger to cognitive theory), OI is majorly indebted to the 'cognitive turn' that reverberated across the social sciences in the mid-20th century (Lindenberg 1998; Glynn and Watkiss 2020). The cognitive emphasis inspires what Lindenberg (1998:718) calls the 'full internalisation' argument, through which 'institutionalization is linked to the establishment of cognitive habits which influence the very experience of reality (as a "taken-for-granted" reality) rather than just the response to reality'.

A small disclaimer: while there are more explicitly social-psychological modalities of exploring how actors interface with institutions, a 'cultural-cognitive' approach is not strictly the sum of its parts. In relation to category work, an important form of institutional work that has bases in cognitive processes like 'prototyping' and 'boundary construction', Lawrence and Phillips (2019) clarify that category work should, first and foremost, be conceptualised as a micro-social strategy of institutional work, whose theoretical roots are informed, but not governed, by theories of cognition. I will discuss the theoretical foundations of inquiry into institutional work in the final section of this chapter.

A cultural-cognitive lens lends itself to both macro- and micro-sociological analysis, as it draws attention to the ways in which institutionalised cultural systems materialise in our individuals' action and thought. Indeed, the hyphenation of 'cultural' and 'cognitive' nods to the mutually-reinforcing relationship the two are theorised as sharing. As discussed above, OI theorists define culture as a semiotic system that enables and constrains human interpretative processes. Through externalisation and objectivation, cultural frames are forged, which actors, in turn, internalise as 'cognitive containers in which social interests are defined and classified, argued, negotiated, and fought out' (Douglas 1982:12). Internalisation, however, is not the telos of institutionalisation, since institutionalisation is an ongoing and unrelenting process. A viral metaphor is apt: through contagious spread, cultural scripts furtively seize hold of our very consciousness and infect our cognitive processes, which, in turn, spreads to others. The cycle continues.

Yet it continues largely beyond our conscious awareness. Since its early days, OI has underscored the 'taken-for-grantedness' of institutions, a term which goes back to Berger and Luckmann (Lindenberg 1998). Institutions hide behind their objectivation (Dahler-Larsen 2012), or, in Sara Ahmed's evocative formulation, 'become background' (Ahmed 2012:23). All patterns of social action—'rituals, myths, language, typologies,

norms, habits, values, and routines' (Dahler-Larsen 2012:57)—are liable to become institutionalised. They appear to us as 'common sense', or the way things have always been. There is, however, no exogenous reason that any given institution exists in the form it takes. Therefore, Berger and Luckmann suggest that the 'logic' through which we tell ourselves institutionalisation occurs, 'does not reside in the institutions and their external functionalities, but in the way these are treated in reflection about them' (Berger and Luckmann 1966:82-83). They accordingly argue that we *legitimate* institutions through 'superimposing' a logic onto their actions. Nodding to Schutz' influence, Berger and Luckmann argue language, as a practice of meaning-making, is

> the fundamental superimposition of logic on the objectivated world. The edifice of legitimation is built upon language and uses language as its principal instrumentality. The logic thus attributed to institutional order is part of the socially available stock of knowledge and taken for granted as such. (Berger and Luckmann 1966:82)

Also paraphrasing Schutz, Dahler-Larsen argues that the processes underlying human legitimation follow a 'logic of meaning' rather than a 'logic of function'; although logics of meaning may appear to us as rational or necessary (Dahler-Larsen 2012:57), but they are ultimately unwieldy constructions that result from collective practices of meaning-making. Although human-initiated, the ultimate products of these practices generally elude us.

Indeed, while human actors contribute to the social reproduction of institutions, our reproductive activities are so intuitive that we are seldom aware of our role. We encounter institutional conventions as self-policing. This feature of institutions will be particularly important in the upcoming discussion of human action and institutional change.

Introducing organisations and levels of institutional analysis

If OI exclusively focussed on institutions *per se*, it would be arcane and rather unuseful. In our case, arguing that WP operates as an objectivated cultural-cognitive system is not particularly illuminating on its own, and is difficult to convey without grounding in observable, and more empirically apprehendable, phenomena. This is where the construct of the 'organisation' comes in. At this brief juncture, a more-or-less intuitive understanding of organisations as assemblies of actors that work toward express common goals (e.g., the University of Oxford, TASO, the OfS), will serve us well. I will flesh out a more nuanced working definition of organisations in the final section.

As we discussed above, OI has been one of the primary theoretical lenses for organisational analysis since the mid 20th century (Lawrence et al. 2011; Buchanan 2020). Organisations have fairly uncontroversially been recognised as the 'preeminent institutional form' over the bulk of OI's life course (Zucker 1983:1). Initially, OI's conviction that organisations are themselves organised (by institutions) distinguished it from other modalities of organisational analysis, which positioned organisations as the main structure that constrains and enables action (see Scott 2014:Ch.8). OI, alternatively, has historically been interested in how, when, and where institutions organise organisations. As Richard Scott has stressed for decades (Scott and Meyer 1983; Scott 1987; Scott and Davis 2007; Scott 2014), answering this question requires understanding the levels of social systems that institutions inhabit and intervene upon. Scott identifies the following levels of institutional analysis: world system, societal, organisational field, organisational population, organisation, and organisational subsystem. Figure 3.2 below reproduces Scott's taxonomy of levels, populated with examples from critical WP.

Figure 3.2: Taxonomy of institutional levels (Scott 2014: 106,107)

Level	Definition	Critical WP example
World system	meant to encompass work at the "global," "international," and "transnational" levels: scholar- ship that examines structures and processes occurring cross-societally and over longer periods of time.	Global neoliberal hegemony (Mavelli 2014)
Societal	focuses on structures and processes pertaining to societies or nation-states.	New Labour performativity (Doyle and Griffin 2012), 'evidence-based practice' (Biesta 2007; 2010)
Organisational field	a level that identifies a collection of diverse, interdependent organizations that participate in a common meaning system.	The totality of HEIs, regulatory bodies, third-sector organisations
Organisational population	collection or aggregate of organizations that are 'alike in some respect', in particular to 'classes of organizations that are relatively homogeneous in terms of environmental vulnerability'.	The Russell Group; Pre- and Post-1992s (Ainley 2003)
Organisation	A group or network of people and resources delineated by generally intelligible boundaries, which often includes a shared mission.	An HEI (Aylmer 2020)
Organisational subsystem	component units of organisations such as departments or teams.	An HEI's internal widening access and participation team

The organisational field

According to the schema above, I would suggest that WP is an institution that operates most noticeably on the level of the organisational field. Indeed, to many OI thinkers, the so-called organisational field is the level at which institutions and organisations interface most meaningfully. Although relatively obscure to other schools of institutional thought, the organisational field has become the 'central unit of analysis' of a great deal of work in OI (Wooten and Hoffman 2017:56). While OI is interested with how world-level and societal institutions (e.g., the market, the state, religion) manage to penetrate the intricacies of organisational life (Friedland and Alford 1991), there has long been an acknowledgement that analytic primacy should be afforded to the meso-level institutional forces that constitute, in DiMaggio and Powell's (1983:148) oft-cited formulation, 'those organizations that, in the aggregate, constitute a recognized area of institutional life'. It is at the meso-level that macro-level institutional logics gain enough specificity to be operationalised as meaning systems around which organisations cohere. As one example, the macro-level market logic of 'free competition' becomes recognisable to us in WP's discourses of 'merit' and, ironically, 'fairness' (Snee et al. 2020; see also Boliver et al. 2021).

Using various vocabularies, pioneering work theorises how meso-level supra-organisational environments dictate rules for the 'formal structures' (Meyer and Rowan 1977) of member organisations, governing not only their activities, but also their architectures of meaning: the myths, rituals, and models of 'collective rationality' to which they subscribe (Meyer and Rowan 1977; DiMaggio and Powell 1983; Scott and Meyer 1983; Zucker 1983; see Wooten and Hoffman 2017 for a disambiguation). I will now introduce the prevailing conceptual models in classic OI that explain the institutional regulation of organisations, and provide examples of how WP governs HEIs at the field-level.

Figure 3.3: WP, the organisational field

Dimension of a field	**Manifestation in WP**
Key suppliers	Since 2012, WP provision at HEIs, primarily in access/outreach teams, but increasingly within academic departments.
Resource and product consumers	Students with educational 'disadvantage', 'disadvantaged' schools and local communities.
Regulatory agencies	OfS, OFFA*, HEFCE.
Organisations that produce similar services and products	NCOP*, AimHigher*, Aiming High*, various regional partnerships between HEIs, nonprofits, and schools.

*now defunct

Isomorphism, legitimacy, the core mechanisms of institutional control

We will begin with a theoretical frame that we glimpsed in Chapter 2. In the same paper that includes the now standard definition of the organisational field, DiMaggio and Powell (1983) introduce their programmatic theory of institutional isomorphism, which has come to occupy the role of 'master hypothesis' across OI theory (Hoffman and Ventresca 2002 in Wooten and Hoffman 2017:59). DiMaggio and Powell forwarded the concept of the organisational field in service to the question: what makes organisations so similar? DiMaggio and Powell argue that, once a field becomes 'well-established', member organisations begin to noticeably homogenise over time. As we saw in Chapter 2, PDWP in particular is interested in where institutional discourses diverge and converge. Bowl (2018) and Knight (2019), for example, observed that discourses in pre-entry materials converge over time–that is, that they became isomorphic. DiMaggio and Powell, and the tranche of work on isomorphism they inspired (see Boxenbaum and Jonsson 2017), provide conceptual tools for exploring how isomorphism takes place. Theorising organisational fields as the site of isomorphic pressure, DiMaggio and Powell

hypothesise that fields regulate organisational activity through a combination of coercive, mimetic, and normative mechanisms (DiMaggio and Powell 1983), each of which we will disambiguate soon.

But first, we must ask: what are the stakes of institutional sameness? A convincing answer lies in the notion of *legitimacy*, a 'pivotal but often confusing concept in management theory' (Suddaby et al. 2017:451). Taking cues from OI heavyweights (Scott 2014; Suddaby et al. 2017), I follow Suchman's (1995) broad definition of legitimacy as a 'generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs and definitions'. Seminal work in OI theory (e.g., Meyer and Rowan 1971; Meyer and Scott 1983; Suchman 1995; Ruef and Scott 1998) positions legitimacy as a resource essential to organisational survival. Suddaby et al. (2017) term this the legitimacy-as-property school of thought.

This conceptual model dictates that, contrary to a cumbersomely rationalist understanding of organisational 'success', an organisation's cache in a given field hinges not on its efficiency or outputs, but its ability to flaunt its conformity to the field's standards of legitimacy. Organisations conform to an institutional order—in other words, become isomorphic—to exhibit fit (DiMaggio and Powell 1983). Though on its own it does not offer much more than 'fragile conceptual moorings' for institutional analysis, I will ultimately argue that understanding how practitioners conceptualise the legitimacy of their WP work is essential to a neoinstitutional theorisation of WP practice. Chapter 5 will furnish a more fleshed out discussion of legitimacy and its role in this study.

Building on DiMaggio and Powell, Scott (1995) proposes three pillars of institutional power—the regulative (coercive), the normative (which encompasses the mimetic), and the cultural-cognitive—and focalises how each construes legitimacy. Scott's three pillars are now standard fare in OI, and will govern the reading of WP I offer below. To Scott (2014), these pillars are better understood as different modalities of

institutional analysis, as opposed to interlocking dimensions of an institutional system. I, however, concur with Dahler-Larsen that an integrative understanding of the three pillars offers a comprehensive picture of institutional power:

> The regulative pillar consists of several sanctions and rewards; there are economic rewards, legal sanctions, and a range of informal sanctions that can be deployed. The cognitive pillar sets down what counts as true, and how truth is to be discovered. The normative pillar defines what it is good and right to do. (Dahler-Larsen 2012:58)

Although this study is rooted in OI and its cultural-cognitive approach, it pays considerable attention to the normative and regulative institutional structures with which WP practitioners interact. For our purposes, therefore, the pillars refer to the regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive mechanisms through which institutions operate, not the study thereof. I will now deploy Scott's terminology to reframe some of WP's core characteristics discussed in Chapter 2 under an OI lens.

WP and the three pillars

Regulative mechanisms are more-or-less direct impositions on organisations, such as mandated conformity to government regulations. When it comes to legitimacy, regulative mechanisms explicitly outline the terms of survival in a given field. The baseline of gaining legitimacy is meeting, or appearing to meet (Meyer and Rowan 1973), these standards. The coercive dimensions of WP are readily visible. WP's development speaks to sanctions and rewards, regulations and constraints. One could convincingly tell the story of WP's policy history since Dearing in terms of incentive structures and regulative constraints. In WP, a fair share of these regulatory apparatuses for WP are embodied in brick-and-mortar regulatory bodies, such as the OfS (and its antecedent, OFFA). While regulative analysis assumes the rigidity of rules, as North (1990:54) reminds, the 'enforcement' of regulative mechanisms is 'undertaken by agents whose own utility functions influence outcomes'. Returning to our discussion of WP

policy analysis, this formulation is consonant with Ball's theories of policy enactment and translation discussed in Chapter 2. Agentic possibilities open up for actors in the 'doing' of policy.

Coercive mechanisms do not operate through brute force. In the essay 'The Virtues of the Old Institutionalism', Al Stinchecomb concludes that:

> [t]he guts of institutions is that somebody somewhere really cares to hold an organization to the standards and is often paid to do that. Sometimes that somebody is inside the organization, maintaining its competence. Sometimes it is an accrediting body, sending out volunteers to see if there is really any algebra in the algebra course. And sometimes that somebody, or his or her commitment is lacking, in which case the center cannot hold, and mere anarchy is loosed upon the world. (Stinchcombe 1997:18)

Indeed, institutions push us to think hyperbolically, to believe that the world, or at least our organisation, will unravel if we do not do things the right way. They also instil in us a strong sense of 'should'. Mimetic and normative isomorphism are more subtle, 'taken-for-granted' mechanisms of institutionalisation that derive their force from the pressure of perceived legitimacy or correctness (see Meyer and Rowan 1977). Mimetic isomorphism refers to the pressures organisations feel to 'model' themselves after organisations with high field-level legitimacy.

Legitimacy is considerably more expansive than mere compliance to explicitly imposed rules. The heart of legitimacy is 'congruence between the organisation and cultural environment' with respect to shared norms and values. This is the province of an institutions' normative regime (Suchman 1995:573). Though it is not the direct focus of this study, I would suggest that a dedicated analysis of the normative mechanisms underpinning WP would be fruitful. The conceptual review clearly established that WP has a pronounced normative core: one that attempts to straddle the lines between valuing economic growth and social justice. This is not a random configuration of values, but, I would argue, an adaptation of the world and societal level hegemony of neoliberal ideology. No organisational field has exclusive creative control over its

normative domain, but it is at the meso/field level that relatively abstract normative pressures take shape as shared organisational norms and values.

One profound way through which normative pressures govern organisational activity is when they instantiate as roles. Scott (2014:64) explains the origin of roles thusly: '[s]ome values and norms are applicable to all members of the collectivity; others apply only to selected types of actors or positions. The latter give rise to roles: conceptions of appropriate goals and activities for particular individuals or specified social positions'. The notion of institutional roles hearkens to Berger and Luckmann (1966) and their concept of the 'typified actor', which we will consider in more detail in our discussion of institutional work . In WP, the typification of roles—*both vis-a-vis* HEIs (organisations) and the actors within them—is palpable. A primary concern for PDWP is the 'iron law' of stratification in the UK HE landscape (Croxford and Raffe 2015), wherein the tertiary tripartism between 'gold', 'silver', and 'bronze' HEIs reproduces iniquitous geographies of power (Ainley 2003). As Archer's analysis (Archer 2007) makes clear, tertiary tripartism amounts to more than a logical division of labour amongst HEIs; universities are acting in the national interest when they fulfil their designated role (golds by gaining international prestige, silver by excellence in teaching UK students, bronze in resourcing local communities). Fulfilling one's role is no less than serving one's country in its initiatives for 'educational excellence'.

The normative pull of 'roles' within WP, I would wager, is even more pronounced in how actors are interpellated. Jones (2021), building on Quinn (2010), flags how the WP agenda manufactures the figure of the 'non-traditional student', a category that is ontologically empty outside of WP discourses. The more broad category of the WP student, similarly, is imbued with normative weight, a phenomenon that occupies a central role in Chapter 8. WP students are only visible when they are 'exceptional', and, crucial to Chapter 8's analysis, when they are 'giving back' to the institution (which they are expected to do as an unstated contractual obligation for their admission). Less

problematic is in the interpellation of the WP practitioner, which we glimpse in Rainford's exploration of WP practitioner's motivations and ideological orientations toward their work (Rainford 2021c). As one of Rainford's participants memorably noted, there is a certain type of person who is drawn to WP work. A normative institutional analysis would use this observation as a springboard to consider how WP constructs configurations of subjects that reproduce its institutional structures.

To DiMaggio and Powell's formulation, Scott (2014) proposes a fourth dimension of institutional activity: the cultural-cognitive pillar. As I explained in the previous section, OI subscribes to a cultural-cognitive model of institutional analysis, and therefore privileges cultural-cognitive mechanisms in its analysis. As Dahler-Larsen (2012:57) describes it, cultural-cognitive mechanisms intervene in the realm of the epistemological, governing 'what counts as true, and what truth can be discovered'. We can now reference Appadurai's (2004) oft-cited idea of structural barriers shrinking the 'horizons of the possible' in our imaginations with some more precision: WP, as an institution, dictates which forms of 'access' in HE are deemed possible. This is salient to our study of WP as a practice of social change. Lumb and Burke (2019) reflect on the cultural-cognitive strictures institutionalised WP places on practitioners, leading to 'misrecognition' and a warped sense of student 'success' in HE. According to a cultural-cognitive frame, the neoliberal construction of subjects is not a discursive phenomenon external to us. Rather, it is, in Berger and Luckmann's words, retrojected into our individual consciousnesses, intruding upon the cognitive processes we use to ascribe meaning, order, and rationality onto the flux of social life. To foreshadow Chapter 5, legitimacy is at its most insidious, and most catalysing of change, when it becomes ingrained in our perception.

Ripping our scaffolding: institutional instability and change

While they provide helpful lenses for understanding the social reproduction of institutions, it should be unsurprising by now, however, that the organisational field, isomorphism, and related concepts are not analytically stable. The question of how to conceptualise a field, for example, remains 'hotly contested' (Wooten and Hoffman 2017; see also Martin 2011:Ch.8). Even if one manages to isolate a field at a given moment, moreover, they will likely be challenged by its 'porous' constitution (Scott 2014), both because fields are highly dynamic, and because the activities of actors and organisations in one field regularly cross-contaminates with those in other fields. WP actors, for example, regularly interface with equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI), both through actual collaborations, and through shared interfield logics, (e.g., how both prioritise 'equity', see Archer 2007). Fields are 'patchworks' of organisations that are liable to reconfigure at any given time (Abdelnour et al. 2017). The unwieldiness of fields leads Martin (2011:269) to argue that fields cannot be proven 'by definition or methodology'. The utility of defining any given field is entirely reliant on its sensitivity to its empirical context, an achievement that is difficult to judge 'objectively'.

Moreover, isomorphism, despite its staying power, does not hold up as a 'master hypothesis' for OI, at least on its own. As Boxenbaum and Jonsson (2017) point out, empirical inquiries into isomorphism yield mixed results. A 'strong' model of isomorphism analytically excludes the demonstrable heterogeneity of organisations within a field. To be fair, classic OI theory attempted to account for this. Since its inception, the notion of 'loose coupling' between 'legitimated external practices and internal organizational behavior' has been integral to neoinstitutional analysis (DiMaggio and Powell 1983:155; see also Meyer and Rowan 1973). Loose coupling alone, however, is insufficient for explaining how externally legitimated practices *themselves* are sometimes unreliable or incoherent.

There is a more fundamental issue with OI lurking behind its dedication to institutional conformity. OI, from its ascendance in the 1970s until the late 1990s, held an entrenched focus on the conservatism of institutions and their near-insurmountable reproductive power, precluding meaningful analyses of institutional creation, change, destruction, and the agentic acts constitutive of such events. This is where OI and critical WP converge. By foregrounding the (very real) inertia surrounding WP, critical WP misses opportunities to theorise coherently how WP effects change and/or can itself change. In particular, I flagged that, despite evidence from empirical research that WP practice raises consciousness (Rainford 2021c), critical WP scholars have neglected to consider where practitioners consciousness-raising translates to praxis. In OI, similar substantive problems stymie its explanatory power. Member organisations within a field observably defy institutional pressures, pushing back on regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive mechanisms of control. Furthermore, and more salient for our analysis, actors exert agency in their institutional activities, and sometimes fundamentally alter the fabric of their institutional environments. We will use the problem of agency as a junction to historically situate the developments in OI to which this thesis is indebted, and ultimately turn to delineating its conceptual paradigm: the institutional work perspective.

Agency, change, and the need for an actor-centric OI

In its earlier iterations, OI was 'able to offer more insights into the processes that explain institutional stability than those that explain institutional change' (Seo and Creed 2002:222). Responsible for this is a persistent feature of neoinstitutional sociology. The first is a deep-rooted theoretical investment in the self-reproduction of institutions. As we discussed, under this model, institutional self-reproduction is achieved *via* human actors, who unwittingly reproduce the social conditions in which they are ensconced. This gave way to what has been criticised as an 'oversocialized view of agency'

(Lawrence et al. 2009:4). In other words, classical neoinstitutional theory privileged structure over agency.

Agency was a key issue on which neoinstitutional theorists distinguished themselves from older forms of institutionalism, which left considerable room for agency in navigating organisational life and the institutions governing it (Selznick 1996; Stinchcombe 1997). Institutions, according to the neoinstitutional model, do not merely impose rules and constraints on actors; they are constitutive of our very cognitive processes, and as a result '[break] down the conceptual divide between "institutions" and "culture"' (Hall and Taylor 1996:947). Early OI, thus, primarily comprised macrosociological analyses of how institutions shape human action, which left little room for organisational actors to exert agency within and on institutions (Lawrence et al. 2009; 2011; Wooten and Hoffman 2017). Such are the roots of OI's shyness toward embracing agency, which is often referred to using the shorthand of 'the embedded agency paradox' (Seo and Creed 2002). The paradox is, in simple terms: if organisational actors—down to the cognitive level—are conditioned by institutional forces, how can they possibly change the institutions that condition them? Despite bustling conversation around it, the paradox continues to irk theorists to this day.

The plain and observable fact that actors change institutions, therefore, has presented a persistent theoretical puzzle to OI theorists, one that scholars still feel the need to redress (e.g., Colombero, Duymedjian, and Boutinot 2021; Staggs, Wright, and Lee 2022; Thompson and Byrne 2022). By the 1990s, it was fair to say that OI was 'creaking under the weight of its own theoretical apparatus' (Lawrence et al. 2011:52). The neglect of institutional change and human agency imposed severe constraints on the scope of OI research. Despite OI's inherent interest in the cognitive activities of organisational actors, there was insufficient theoretical scaffolding for micro-level inquiry into how actors and organisations interface with institutions on the ground. Little theoretical ground had been made on theorising 'endogenous' institutional change:

that is, institutional change brought about by actors working within institutions. Scholars determined that correcting this required reformulating the 'oversocialized' orientation of classical OI; in short, it demanded that, to paraphrase Lawrence et al. (2009), we bring agency back in.

Agency was re-infused into OI quickly and thoroughly, leading Abdelnour et al. (2017) to declare 'an agentic turn' in 21st OI century OI. The agentic turn is still alive today, with actor-centred approaches dominating the OI theoretical terrain (see Hwang and Colyvas 2011; Modell 2022). In many ways, the so-called problem of institutional change and in OI mirrors the 'aspirations-raising non-debate' in WP that I dissected in Chapter 2. OI scholars have developed a sizable repertoire of theories of institutional change from which researchers can draw: from a dialectical perspective (Seo and Creed 2002), to structuration-based approaches (Barley and Tolbert 1997), to more theoretically adventurous Deleuzian models (Colombero et al. 2022). Indeed, it is far outside the thesis' scope to catalogue the myriad of theories surrounding institutional change and actor agency. We will, instead, briefly track one major strand of actor-centric accounts of endogenous change, to which we now turn.

The pendulum swings too far: exceptional actors

The early days of the agentic turn saw the proliferation of the 'institutional entrepreneurship' literature (Maguire, Hardy and Lawrence 2004), a concept that has a strong pedigree in earlier OI theory (e.g., DiMaggio 1988; DiMaggio and Powell 1991). Institutional entrepreneurs are 'individual actors or collectives who are able to extract themselves from their institutional field' (Colombero et al. 2021:1). Earlier formulations of institutional entrepreneurship focussed on the triumphs of exceptional individuals or collectives over their institutional conditioning, obscuring the diffuse and collective activities through which change is enacted (see Lounsbury and Crumley 2007). As Colombero et al. (2021) raise, the investment in entrepreneur's heroism can run quite

deep, such as Levy and Scully's (2007) proposition that institutional entrepreneurs function as Gramscian 'modern princes' that challenge the hegemony of organisational fields.

A focus on entrepreneurship-*qua*-exceptionality, moreover, has entrenched itself in other corners of organisational studies. Indeed, according to the idea of 'sensegiving' (Gioia and Chittipeddi 1991; Maitlis and Lawrence 2007) found in the highly popular sensemaking approaches (Weick 1995), managers and organisational leaders shape other actors' sensemaking affords excessive influence to leaders in organisational settings. There have been worthy efforts to tamper down the 'great-man' sensibility of institutional entrepreneurship (e.g., Lounsbury and Crumley 2007; Battilina, Leca, and Boxenbaum 2009; Colombero et al. 2021), but its conceptual baggage invariably weighs it down. As Munir (2015) argues with regard to organisational studies *tout court*, the business ontology baked into its operative concepts—in this case, the idea of 'entrepreneurship'—uncritically takes the power hierarchies that inform organisational hierarchies as givens, which precludes radical critique.

As far as the embedded agency paradox goes, the institutional entrepreneurship approach refuses to engage meaningfully with the notion of embeddedness. Through feats of essentially voluntaristic agency, institutional entrepreneurs are able to overcome their embeddedness, and therefore stand outside institutions, imposing change externally (e.g., Garud et al. 2007). Confusingly, then, so-called endogenous actors come to invoke 'exogenous' change (Scott 2008).

Making Institutional Work work

The institutional work perspective (IWP), originally posited by Lawrence and Suddaby (2006), has grown into a dominant perspective in OI, especially in critical corners of the community (see Hampel et al. 2017; Modell 2022). Institutional work refers to any 'purposive action of individuals and organizations aimed at creating, maintaining and

disrupting institutions' (Lawrence and Suddaby 2006:215). According to IWP, action—however small, mundane, and to whatever end it is directed—is inherently agentive, insofar as even small feats of institutional work contribute to the propping up, or tearing down, of institutions. Actor agency is IWP's analytic priority, which shifts the OI research agenda from the macro and meso-level analysis to focalise the micro-processes through which actors exert agency in institutional contexts. IWP, moreover, boasts ambitious normative aims: Lawrence et al. (2011:70) aspire for the perspective to bridge the 'unnecessary and unhelpful gulf between research in institutional and critical traditions of organization studies'. Its method for doing so is to, in Lawrence et al.'s (2011) words, 'bring individuals back into institutional theory', in order to illuminate how ordinary, and especially marginalised actors, achieve disembeddedness, or emancipation, from the institutional order (e.g., Creed et al. 2010; Giorgi et al. 2017).

As we will elaborate in fairly granular detail, IWP's roots in the sociology of practice (which draws extensively on Bourdieu), its ethical orientation toward agency, and its expressly critical axiology make it a productive addition to the critical WP canon, which led me to adopt it as the conceptual paradigm for this study. We will expound the core conceptual facets of IWP as they relate to the ontology of institutions, actor agency and practice, and the processes through which institutional change is achieved.

Ontology: Institutional logics and OI's 'maintenance phase'

One of IWP's most significant contributions to IWP's research programme is that it has had a great hand in facilitating the reworking of OI's ontology of institutions. At the heart of the institutional work perspective is a bold proposition: that institutions require maintenance. This directly challenges OI's longstanding investment in the self-reproduction and resulting stability of institutions. Indeed, as IWP researchers Bjerregaard and Jonasson (2014) propose, an 'alternative ontology' for institutions is in

order, one that foregrounds the continuous fact of institutional 'becoming' (e.g., Tsoukas and Chia 2002). An ontology of becoming posits that institutions form, dissolve, and evolve in what Tsoukas and Chia (2002:570) call 'the intrinsic flux of human action'. Lawrence and Phillips's recent rubric of 'social symbolic work' similarly foregrounds flux. They conceptualise institutions as social-symbolic objects—that is, 'as a combination of discursive, relational, and material elements that constitute a meaningful pattern in a social system' (2019:24). These objects are constituted and continuously renegotiated by the constant flow of human interventions that social-symbolic work encompasses.

According to an IWP ontology of institutions, moreover, institutions are not only dynamic, but fractious. As alluded in our discussion of organisational fields, the fragmentary nature of institutions—particularly *vis-a-vis* fields—has been long acknowledged in OI. It is in the crucible of fractious and fluid fields that another ascendant conceptual apparatus in OI becomes operative: the notion of institutional logics. Returning briefly to OI's roots in Berger and Luckmann's phenomenological sociology, institutions do not achieve taken-for-grantedness through silence. As we discussed, we sustain institutions through 'machineries of universe-maintenance' that Berger and Luckmann call legitimations (Berger and Luckmann 1966:123).

The legitimation process, like that of institutionalisation, is initially achieved through collective and repeated human interpretative action, ultimately placing 'fundamental superimposition of logic on the objectivated world' (Berger and Luckmann 1966:82). These logics, like institutions themselves, confront us as external objects, as common-sense facets of everyday and organisational life. A growing body of inquiry within OI explores the role of 'institutional logics' in cohering, legitimating, and perpetuating institutional structures (Friedland and Alford 1991; Thornton et al. 2012). Thornton et al. (2012:2) define institutional logics broadly 'as the socially constructed, historical patterns of cultural symbols and material practices, including assumptions,

values, and beliefs, by which individuals and organizations provide meaning to their daily activity'. We will elaborate further on institutional logics in Chapter 4, as they provide a strong frame for examining the contradictory character of Oxford WP.

According to a cultural-cognitive frame, institutional logics are constructed and sustained through meaning-making practices. Regardless of how 'rational' they may appear to us, they appeal to and exploit a human affinity for symbolic representations of meaning (Dahler-Larsen 2012:57-58). At the same time that this affinity is occluded, that is, 'rationalised' (Meyer and Rowan 1977). From its earliest days, scholarship in OI has acknowledged the centrality of myth, ritual, and symbol to the maintenance of institutions in organisational life (Meyer and Rowan 1977; March and Olsen 1983; Meyer and Scott 1983; Friendland and Alford 1991). This means, crucially, that institutional logics are not logical, but plural and fractious. In a given institutional environment, logics compete and—in fact, contradict—one another.

Indeed, the occurrence of contradiction within and among institutional structures has been a central object of study within IWP. A growing body of empirical work seeks to examine how actors navigate contradictory logics in a range of organisational settings. To reiterate a caveat from Section 1, at this juncture, we are defining organisations intuitively as recognisable collectives of actors nominally united by a common mission. Creed et al. (2010) use the rubric of identity work to explore how LGBT ministers in mainline Protestant denominations negotiate the institutional contradictions that contribute to their identity-based marginalisation. As suggested by Creed et al.'s title, 'Being the Change', the onus to resolve institutional contradictions—and, in effect, to change institutions—falls on the actors most acutely marginalised by them (Seo and Creed 2002; Ahmed 2012). We will return to the question of how power differentials influence the construction of the actor in later sections. Moreover, Giorgi et al. (2017) note that actors feel institutional contradictions particularly profoundly in change-centric organisations, an observation that resonates

with this study's focus on WP practitioners. Creed et al. (2010) and Giorgi et al. (2017) demonstrate that power analysis is essential to understanding how institutional orders are maintained and challenged.

When institutionalised practices are no longer self-sustaining, actors are pressured to uphold them, however self-contradictory they may be. This is demonstrated by two studies that will receive greater attention in subsequent sections: Lok and de Rond's ethnography of the Cambridge University Boat Club and Bjerregaard and Jonasson's exploration of how a South Korean credit card company maintained a semblance of institutional stability while weathering the 1997 Asian economic crisis (Lok and de Rond 2013; Bjerregaard and Jonasson 2014). Both find that actors find innovative ways to justify and maintain the tenuous institutions to which they belong. Hargrave and Van de Ven (2009) evocatively position institutional work as the 'creative embrace of contradiction'. Given its nuanced working ontology of institutions, IWP is particularly well-equipped among OI approaches to examine how actors navigate a sea of fragmented fields and contradictory logics, a strength that will be fruitful in this thesis' study of WP practitioners.

IWP and agentic action

In addition to modulating the strong determinism of OI ontology, IWP offers a sophisticated conceptualisation of how actors 'work on' institutions—that is, on how they act agentically in institutional contexts. Actor agency, therefore, is IWP's express analytic and ethical priority. Though its roots were in the agentic turn (Abdelnour et al. 2017), which arguably afforded too much analytic primacy to agency, IWP promises an actor-centric approach that evades the traps into which strong accounts of agency—namely, institutional entrepreneurship—falls. Where institutional entrepreneurship has tended to focus on 'hyper-muscular', near-voluntaristic feats of agency, IWP shifts attention to the everyday practical work at the centre of

organisational life (Lawrence et al. 2009:Ch.1). IWP achieves this delicate balance by developing a theorisation of action based on relational agency (Emirbayer and Mische 1998; Battilana and D'Auno 2009; Lawrence and Phillips 2019), which itself has roots in the sociology of practice (Bourdieu 1977, 1990; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992; Giddens 1979, 1984).

Emirbayer and Mische's account of relational agency (Emirbayer and Mische 1998) has achieved something of a canonical status within OI and related fields (Lawrence and Phillips 2019:Ch.1). Their popularity, I would contend, is justified, because relational agency gives us the conceptual latitude to move beyond the infamous 'paradox of embedded agency' (Seo and Creed 2002) at the micro-levels of analysis. Recalling our earlier discussion, the embedded agency paradox is how the larger structure-versus-agency debate instantiates itself in cultural-cognitive inquiry. As Holm (1995) puts it, 'How can actors change institutions if their actions, intentions, and rationality are all conditioned by the very institution they wish to change?' The escape route for the paradox, as Battilana and D'Auno (2009) convincingly argue, is identifying the 'enabling conditions' for reflexivity and action at various levels of analysis. Here, institutional contradictions are yet again operative. As Seo and Creed (2002:229) propose in their dialectical account of institutional change, contradictions are the 'fundamental driving forces of institutional change'. When actors notice cracks in institutional edifices, their reflexivity can galvanise agentic activity, '[giving] rise to a form of political action capable of challenging and transcending institutional constraints'.

Emirbayer and Mische's relational agency provides robust tools for conceptualising how actors develop, and wield, reflexive awareness of institutional contradictions in their contingent individual contexts. Agency, according to their definition, is:

> the temporally constructed engagement by actors of different structural environments—the temporal-relational contexts of action—which, through the

> interplay of habit, imagination, and judgment, both reproduces and transforms those structures in interactive response to the problems posed by changing historical situations. (Emirbayer and Mische 1998:970)

The strength of relational agency is its sensitivity to the fact that agency is not a 'constant' or 'linear' attribute of an individual actor (Battilana and D'Auno 2009:46), but its manifestation is contingent on relational and, crucially, temporal contexts. Drawing on Bourdieu and Giddens, they underscore how actors can develop a 'practical consciousness' by drawing from past routinized habits of action.

Habit, imagination, and judgement are shorthand for the three respective temporal dimensions of agency: the iterative, the projective, and the practical-evaluative. I disambiguate each in Figure 3.4 below. Rather than representing mutually exclusive categories, the dimensions form a 'chordal triad'. According to this (albeit musically incorrect) metaphor, 'like notes in a chord' the dimensions 'are found to varying degrees in any social action, but one or another note will define the key in which action occurs' (Seo and Creed 2002:231).

Figure 3.4: The chordal triad of agency (from Emirbayer and Mische 1998:971)

Element	**Form**	**Temporal Orientation**	**Definition**
Iterational	Habit	Past	the selective reactivation by actors of past patterns of thought and action, as routinely incorporated in practical activity, thereby giving stability and order to social universes and helping to sustain identities, interactions, and institutions over time.
Projective	Imagination	Future	the imaginative generation by actors of possible future trajectories of action, in which received structures of thought and

			action may be creatively reconfigured in relation to actors' hopes, fears, and desires for the future.
Practical-evaluative	Judgment	Present	the capacity of actors to make practical and normative judgments among alternative possible trajectories of action, in response to the emerging demands, dilemmas, and ambiguities of presently evolving situations.

Practice and the centrality of intention

Although it is seemingly the most 'passive' form of action, it is the iterative dimension of agency—whose purview is habit and routinized action—'shade[s] over' into projective and practical-evaluative activity (Emirbayer and Mische 1998:979). Emirbayer and Mische remind, that according to practice theorists, 'habitual and routinized activities are not devoid of agency', but form the practical repertoires from actors select their responses across temporal dimensions. Practice theory's prioritisation of routine and habit has had a profound effect on IWP.

The notion of intentionality is central to IWP. Recounting their development of IWP theory, Lawrence et al. (2009) found that there were two potential paradigms for IWP. The first, and 'more conservative', was an IWP that prioritises 'effects': that is, a research agenda that tracks how action results in creation, maintenance, and disruption of institutions, regardless of its intended consequences. They offer the example of scientists who, through their curiosity-driven, basic research, establish the processes or materials which later innovators use to develop commercial products that go on to topple existing institutionalized designs, and establish new market leaders' (Lawrence et al. 2009:13). While an effects-based IWP would yield productive empirical insights, Lawrence et al. opted for the latter, an IWP based on intentionality. That is, while any

number of actions may have institutional effects, an action only constitutes institutional work if it is purposively aimed at creating, maintaining, or disrupting an institution. Whether or not the action achieves its intended aim is immaterial; it is intention that distinguishes institutional work from other forms of action. IWP's focalisation of intentionality is apt for this study. In this study, the question of whether practitioners are successful in changing institutions is subordinate to what it is that practitioners intend to do—that is, the social change that they work toward, and the motivations that underlay it.

A focus on intentionality, I must underscore, casts a wider net than deliberate planning. According to practice theory, even habitual action is intentionally selected from an actors' available repertoire of actions. Indeed, Bourdieu famously floated the paradox of 'intentionless intentions' (see Emirbayer and Mische 1998:980). Intentionality is constitutive of all forms of human agency. In this view, intentional action is ubiquitous yet constrained, imbuing everything from everyday habits to deliberative and disruptive action. This assumption about agency is embedded into the fundamental constructs of IWP theory, to which I will now turn.

Nuts and bolts: the forms of institutional work

How does one analytically distinguish and empirically capture intentional action? Emirbayer and Mische take pains to develop a comprehensive schema that documents the 'interrelated components' that constitute each dimension. In IWP theory, admittedly, I have yet to locate a piece of work that strictly operationalises Emirbayer and Mische's vocabulary. Generally, IWP theorists graft aspects of Emirbayer and Mische's schema onto the more streamlined conceptual frame of institutional work. As I alluded above, institutional work takes on three major forms: purposive action aimed at either creating, maintaining, or disrupting institutions. From reviewing extant OI literature, Lawrence

and Suddaby (2006) inductively generated the following categories of creating, maintaining, and disrupting institutions.

Figure 3.5 Original categories of institutional work (reproduced from Lawrence and Suddaby 2006).

Creating

Category	Description
Advocacy	The mobilisation of political and regulatory support through deliberate techniques of social suasion.
Defining	The construction of rule systems that confer status or identity, define boundaries of membership or create status hierarchies within a field.
Vesting	The creation of rule structures that confer property rights.
Constructing Identities	Defining the relationship between an actor and the field in which that actor operates.
Changing normative associations	Re-making the connections between sets of practices and the moral and cultural foundations for those practices.
Constructing normative networks	Constructing interorganizational connections through which practices become normatively sanctioned and which form the relevant peer group with respect to compliance, monitoring and evaluation.
Mimicry	Associating new practices with existing sets of taken-for-granted practices, technologies and rules in order to ease adoption.
Theorising	The development and specification of abstract categories and the elaboration of chains of cause and effect.
Educating	The educating of actors in skills and knowledge necessary to support the new institution.

Maintaining

Category	Description
Enabling work	The creation of rules that facilitate, supplement and support institutions, such as the creation of authorising agents or diverting.
Policing	Ensuring compliance through enforcement, auditing, and monitoring.
Deterring	Establishing coercive barriers to institutional change.

Valourising and demonising	Providing for public consumption positive and negative examples that illustrate the normative foundations of an institution.
Mythologising	Preserving the normative underpinnings of an institution by creating and sustaining myths regarding its history.
Embedding and routinizing	Actively infusing the normative foundations of an institution into the participants' day to day routines and organisational practices.

Disrupting

Category	Description
Disconnecting sanctions	Working through state apparatus to disconnect rewards and sanctions from some set of practices, technologies or rules.
Disassociating moral foundations	Disassociating the practice, rule or technology from its moral foundation as appropriate within a specific cultural context.
Undermining assumptions and beliefs	Decreasing the perceived risks of innovation and differentiation by undermining core assumptions and beliefs.

While the above forms of institutional work may appear primarily projective and practical-evaluative, they can each take on all temporal dimensions. Battilana and D'Auno (2009), in turn, map Emirbayer and Mische's schema onto Lawrence and Suddaby's broader categories. While recent empirical and theoretical work raises the complexity and slipperiness of the above categories (especially *vis-a-vis* their temporal complexity), Lawrence and Suddaby's original scheme remains useful, as I hope to demonstrate throughout the findings chapters. Instead of rehearsing those debates here, I will turn to them in the next chapter, whose guiding question ('What kind of institutional work is Oxford WP?') is dedicated to questioning and refining these categories.

Addressing criticisms of IWP

In a recent review of IWP scholarship in critical accounting literature, Modell (2022) levied several significant criticisms for IWP, synthesising various criticisms of IWP that have accumulated over the past two decades. The critiques Modell raises are particularly salient to conducting critical scholarship within an IWP conceptual framework, so I will spend a fair amount of space on them in this section. As Modell (2022) concludes, none of these problems is irresolvable; they amount to misplaced priorities more than they do holes in its conceptual apparati. As I enumerate the problems Modell and others have identified, I will briefly elucidate how one I plan to address them within an IWP framework. I will reserve, however, full discussion of the tensions inherent to IWP's shortcomings for the following chapters, which consider how conceptual *problemata* emerge when concepts are applied to empirical realities.

The first criticism I will address is IWP's failure to offer a coherent account of how roles are scripted within institutions, given in its interest in actors diverging from said institutional scripts. Until now, I have used the term 'actor' essentially synonymously with 'human'. Hwang and Colyvas (2011) and Willmott (2011), however, prompt us to take a critical eye to the category of actor. They both criticise IWP for its uncritical reliance on the stability of the individual 'actor', which positions the rational, self-determining individual human as the atomic unit of society. As both point out, the category of 'actor' is socially constructed, and is not reducible to the activities of one human being (a fact that has been acknowledged since Berger and Luckmann's discussion of the typified actor). 'Actor identities' are thus better understood as '"scripts" that define roles and link actors with a legitimate repertoire of actions, interests, and purposes in particular social domains… That is, actor identities emerge and develop in particular institutional and historical contexts' (Hwang and Colyvas 2011).

The contradictions between institutional scripts and one's deeper sense of identity is, in fact, an important occasion for consciousness-raising (Creed et al. 2010). As Rainford (2021b) has found, WP practitioner identity plays a profound role in how they understand the ethical aims of their work, and their relationship to institutional doxa. Without factoring in the contingency and instability of the category 'actor', IWP often misses opportunities to seize on its purported interest in (dis)embeddedness. In this study, I attend to disembeddedness by examining how the roles of 'WP student' and 'WP practitioner' are constructed in the study's empirical context: Oxford WP. In addition to exploring how immediate temporal-relational context forms actor roles, In line with Lumb and Burke (2019), I consider how structural forces like neoliberalism influence the construction of subjects within WP. In answering the question 'What are the contradictions of Oxford WP?', the findings chapters invariably run up against the identity work on which practitioners rely to negotiate them. Chapter 8, in particular, foregrounds the perspectives of WP students—namely, those who elect to work on Oxford's WP programmes—and how these students square their role as actors with thornier questions of identity and owing their institution.

IWP's emphasis on 'bringing individuals back in', Modell further argues, has distracted it from meaningfully integrating power and collective action into its analysis. I should note first that this is an overarching and deep-seated issue in OI for which IWP is not exclusively responsible (Munir 2015; Willmott 2015). As I flagged earlier, institutional theory has historically eschewed power analysis, despite the latter's centrality to critical branches of organisational studies. Among critically minded OI scholars, Lawrence included (see Lawrence and Buchanan 2008), there is a growing consensus that OI theory must adopt a relational view of power, in which power relations are understood as dynamic and shared, rather than as the property of individuals (Modell 2022). In the WP context, it is a relational view of power that underpins SJWP's advocacy for 'transformational approaches' to WP and HE as a whole. Drawing on critical pedagogy

in particular (Freire 2000[1972]; Giroux 2011), SJWP generally positions praxis—a collective act of solidarity—as the mechanism for enacting transformational change (e.g., Freire 2000[1972]). As I share SJWP's axiological leanings (see Ch.1), I regard a relational view of power as an important consideration for analysis of WP practice.

While a relational view of power is theoretically compatible with IWP, in practice, empirical analysis in IWP generally centres on actors individually exercising deliberative agency, as opposed to considering how power determines, and is built by, collective forms of action. In an extensive review of IWP in critically-oriented accounting literature, Modell (2022) found that the vast majority of papers fail to reference the role of power in institutional work more than superficially. I would argue that, while broadly true, Modell's criticism does not fully generalise to IWP as a whole. Creed et al. (2010) and Giorgi et al. (2017), which I canvassed in earlier sections, consider how power, identity, and marginalisation inform institutional work, although, I concede, they do so through probing individuals' experience of power differentials. While I will draw on critical-theoretical (Ahmed 2012, 2017; see Ch.5) approaches to conceptualise how relational power informs WP, my empirical focus is similar to Creed et al. (2010) and Giorgi et al. (2017), foregrounding individual actors' experiences of WP (though in a shared context). It is outside the remit of this thesis to conduct a broader-scale, field-level study of power and WP practice, which is vital future work.

Finally, perhaps due to its Bourdieusian roots, IWP is vulnerable to what Margaret Archer calls 'central conflation' (Archer 1995, 2007). Modell (2022) argues that IWP's focus on the individual actor actually causes it to collapse agency and structure, rendering them analytically indistinguishable. I would argue that Modell's assessment is not correct in this case. The most famous alleged culprit of the central conflation is none other than Bourdieu, whose commitment to transcending dualism has been critiqued for being analytically incoherent (see Sullivan 2002). I concur with Reay (2004) and Webb et al. (2017) that 'thinking with' Bourdieu requires engagement with not only his full

conceptual toolkit, but the governing orientation toward research that Bourdieu advocates. Indeed, when one deploys Bourdieu's concepts *a la carte*, theoretical problems invariably emerge.

The same is true with IWP, in my view. For example, if one were to cite the Lawrence and Phillip's treatment of the embedded agency paradox on its face, they would be uncritically committing central conflation:

> That agency exists and that it is embedded does not, however, seem to us to present a paradox, or even a problem. Agency is not complete, in the sense of being unbounded, unconstrained, and inevitable. But neither is it absent. And the situatedness of agency in social contexts challenges neither of these statements. (Lawrence and Phillips 2019:42)

Alternatively, if one interprets the above in relation to relational agency and practice theory, a more nuanced picture emerges. The 'situatedness of agency in social contexts', as we have learned, is mediated by different mechanisms on different levels of analysis (field-level, organisational-level, etc.). Agency is no ontological Schrödinger's cat, occupying an indeterminate middle ground because existence and non-existence. Instead, agency contingently manifests in response to the particulars of its relational-temporal contexts. In general, without meaningfully considering how practice theory, relational agency, and, indeed, institutional conceptions of the actor and levels of analysis (Scott 2014) might inform their IWP analysis, scholars run the risk of producing theoretically reductionist inquiry. I attempt to avoid this by very clearly delineating what forms of agency I am tracking, and which levels of analysis they occupy, in Chapter 5.

An institution by any other name

Until now, I have artfully avoided addressing a primary *raison d'etre* for selecting OI as my governing conceptual frame: to import organisational analysis into an analysis of WP practice at Oxford. I have thus far declined to define what organisations are, and how they factor into this study's analysis. This choice is intentional, because the exact

role organisations play *vis-a-vis* institutional work, I argue, remains an 'ontological mystery' (Jenkins 1992). Institutional work is generally performed in organisational contexts, since, more often than not, we interface with institutions (WP, 'management by objectives') by way of organisations (universities, credit unions).

Lawrence and Phillips recently attempted to solve this ontological mystery by distinguishing between 'organisation work' and 'institutional work' thusly:

> For us, organization work involves efforts to shape specific organizations (e.g., Nike, the UN, the US Treasury Department, Bob's Barbershop), whereas work focused on changing the way we understand "organization" as a concept, how we understand a kind of organization (what, for example, constitutes a bank), or to introduce a new form of organization (a "B corporation"), is institutional work. (Lawrence and Philips 2019:119)

This distinction, while it holds on a superficial level, crumbles upon further investigation. Take the most localised example: Bob's Barbershop. Even mundane choices Bob's Barbershop can take as an organisation—for example, offering a discount on boys' haircuts in the autumn before school resumes—has bearing, however tangential, on deeper institutional questions and concerns (Who counts as a child? What is a boy? What is presentable?). While Bob's Barbershop may not have the cultural sway to impact upon any of these field or societal level questions on its own (though who is to say it could not plant the seed for transformative action among barbershops?), it is the ethical mandate of IWP to honour the agency, and transformative potentials, of micro-instances of institutional work.

Some organisations, moreover, present particularly thorny cases in distinguishing organisation work from institutional work. Consider the case of the University of Oxford, the subject under study in this thesis. The University of Oxford is definitionally an organisation; we can, with reasonable accuracy and precision, delineate whether a person or sub-organisation is a member of the wider group 'University of Oxford'. But referring to Oxford as an organisation, even colloquially, is a category error. As I detail at

length in Chapter 4, the role that Oxford (and Cambridge) occupy in the U.K.'s educational landscape is incomparable, acting as two of the most profound sources of social reproduction of class, race, gender, religion, and state-power in social life. If students protest Oxford for its colonial legacy, they are not simply advocating organisational change. They are commenting on far broader structural phenomena that Oxford, through regulative (merit-based admissions policy), normative (how to be proper), and cultural-cognitive mechanisms (creating doubt about what is racism and what is a misunderstanding; epistemic injustice in curricular choices), reproduces. Indeed, we have theoretical precedence in IWP for referring not only to Oxford and Cambridge as institutions. The aforementioned Lok and de Rond (2013) treat Cambridge University Boat Club as an institution, while Di Domenico and Phillip (2009) and Dacin, Munir, and Tracey (2010) examine the institutional ritual of formal dining at Cambridge.

Oxford is an extreme case, and part of my rationale for studying it is to show how fragile any analytic boundary between institutions and the organisations they shape is. In my view, distinguishing between organisations and institutions is an invariably fraught matter. Even in Lawrence and Phillips' own definition of organisations, we find porousness between organisations and their wider (institutional) contexts:

> Rather than a group of people, we argue that organizations exist as meaningful patterns arising from the interactions of such a group. As social-symbolic objects, much of what is important about organizations lies in the shared understandings held by members and interested external actors, and in the heterogeneous relationships among and between this network of actors… Organizations as social-symbolic objects represent patterns that lie in the social-symbolic realm—the realm of relations and meaning rather than the realm of physical bodies. (Lawrence and Philips 2019:117)

Our discussion of organisational fields has taught us that we can only understand a 'realm of relations and meaning' when we properly situate it in the wider institutionalised contexts that shape it. Given the slippage between organisations and institutions, I opt, as many IWP and other OI scholars implicitly, to conduct an

institutional analysis of Oxford WP. I ultimately define Oxford WP as a collective, ongoing act of institutional work, whose directive is to resolve the contradictions of merging two seemingly incompatible institutions: Oxbridge and WP. Moreover, I am convinced that all WP work, regardless of where it takes place, amounts not only to institutional work, but a specific form of *invited* institutional work that deserves special consideration. In defining the work of an organisation as invited and designated institutional work, I am treading new theoretical ground in IWP. Chapters 4 and 5 considers the implications of this in full.

Throughout my analysis, therefore, I pay attention to how aspects of Oxford WP we might deem 'organisational' (e.g., the structure of the UNIQ programme), bear on the Oxford WP, the institution, and the wider institutions from which it gains its logics. Returning to the caveats I issued about OI at the head of the chapter, the hinterlands between organisation and institutions offer us opportunities for rich theorising if we approach these concepts how Bourdieusian scholars aim to approach 'habitus'. As Reay (2004) suggests, habitus' principle strength is in its indeterminacy, which requires us to place habitus in conversation with empirical realities. Bourdieu himself made it clear that

> [i]deas like those of habitus, practice, and so on, were intended, among other things, to point out that there is a practical knowledge that has its own logic, which cannot be reduced to that of theoretical knowledge; that in a sense, agents know the social world better than the theoreticians. (Krais 1991:252)

Indeed, as Bourdieu further clarified, one cannot 'grasp the most profound logic of the social world unless one becomes immersed in the specificity of an empirical reality. (Bourdieu 1993). Reay reflects on how she initially failed to 'put habitus into practice' in earlier work. In particular, she critiques one example of prior data analysis in which she introduced habitus as a conceptual frame before introducing the data (Reay 2004:439). This was a failure, she explains, on two accounts. First, it prevented her from using habitus as a means of interrogating the data, as Bourdieu intended. Second, as a result, 'habitus [became] an explanation of the data rather than a way of working with it' (Reay

2004:440). If I called on OI to explain data in a top-down fashion, I could produce a coherent account of WP practice in theory, but it would not be one that centres the fundamental tensions of working 'with/in institutions' and organisations (Rainford 2021b). As I will elaborate more fully in the chapters that follow, when put in conversation with Oxford's complicated empirical context, OI yields productive and rich insight into the realities of practice in an organisation, and institution, like Oxford.

The promises and pitfalls of Bourdieusian analysis, as Reay found, are 'the ontological mysteries of the habitus' (Jenkins 1992:130 in Reay 2004:439). Institutional theory is likewise brimming with ontological mysteries. Given the myriad of roles they can occupy in social life, the nature of institutions is elusive, and can only be apprehended in rich dialogue with an empirical context. This is the essence of Webb et al.'s (2017:148) admonition that we must examine sites of social reproduction 'in all their particularity'. The next chapter, accordingly, breaks from convention and continues its theorisation of IWP by tracing Oxford, WP's, and ultimately UNIQ's history, which requires disclosing snippets of my empirical data.

Chapter 4

The institutional work of WP, and the invited disruption of 'Oxford WP'

If WP can convincingly be conceived of as an organisational field, and IWP represents the purposive action aimed at creating, maintaining, or disrupting institutions, we might say that WP practice, definitionally, falls under the province of institutional work. However, upon further inspection, this framing is inexact. WP practitioners do not necessarily 'work on' WP *per se* (although this is certainly possible, as practitioners are regularly involved in advocating for, and instantiating, field-level changes within the WP sector). WP workers work on their HEIs by suffusing the normative project of WP into their organisations. Remember: this study hinges on the conviction that WP practice acts within and on 'organisations' (HEIs), but exerts institutional force. When WP workers work to make their HEIs more accessible, this work bleeds out into the wider HE landscape.

Here, we find that the fractiousness and blurriness of fields are particularly operative. Over its life course, WP has become an organisational field in its own right (with its own regulatory bodies, suppliers, etc.), but its overlap with HE has only grown stronger as WP has been buttressed by political and cultural forces. Moreover, both WP and the HE landscape adopt, and give form to, wider societal institutional logics: neoliberal ideology (Lumb and Burke 2019), policy performativity (Doyle and Griffin 2012), and an increased awareness and prioritisation of social justice, to name a few. To study WP practice as a form of institutional work, we therefore need to disentangle where, and on what levels, it primarily intervenes.

In this chapter, I argue that WP practice, at its core, is an exercise of merging two broad sets of institutional logics that surround the enterprise of HE: the self-contradictory logics of increasing both human capital and social equity embodied in

WP, and the formerly hegemonic logics of exclusivity and civic education that marked HE in England until the past half century or so. The reason I find Oxford compelling as a testing ground for theorising WP as institutional work is because it so emphatically embodies the institutionalised form of HE that WP seeks to transform. Until fewer than 200 years ago, Oxbridge *was* HE in England, and it has remained synonymous with it ever since. The values that hold Oxbridge together—the cultivation of the mind, merit, exclusivity, an elite model of education—are the taken-for-granted dimensions of HE that the massification agenda expressly counters. 'Oxford WP', it follows, is a contradiction in terms, the product of a marriage between two clashing institutions: Oxbridge and WP. WP practice at Oxford therefore involves multilayered, and sometimes incoherent, forms of institutional work (a conclusion that I will empirically substantiate in Chapters 7 and 8). While I do believe that my theorisation of WP as institutional work can generalise to WP practice at other HEIs, Oxford, and Cambridge by extension, stand out as localities in which wider institutions intersect, clash, and merge.

I make good on these large conceptual claims by tracing the UNIQ programme's prehistory and history, and the wider institutional forces that shape it. To do so, I first extend and deepen Chapter 3's claim Oxbridge is best understood as an institution. This necessitates something of an historical survey, following UNIQ's organisational story *vis-a-vis* its institutional contexts. It tracks the development of WP at Oxford by first providing a short 'institutional biography' of Oxford (see Lawrence et al. 2011), and then considers how the advent of massification and the birth of WP in the 20th century dramatically shifted the UK HE landscape and its underlying institutional configurations. I then use the frame of institutional logics (Thornton and Ocasio 2008; 2012; esp., Bjerregaard and Jonasson 2014) to parse the uncomfortable marriage of massified HE and Oxford. It is in the tangle of institutional contradictions that result that WP workers are asked to intervene, and I conclude by considering how

understanding this gives us a baseline to probe the intricacies of the micro-processes of institutional work we examine in the findings chapters.

Two caveats are in order: First, we will traverse vast swathes of history, and recount them in very broad strokes. In the first section, I seek to make a conceptual and thematic argument, not (exclusively) an historical one. Second, while my empirical findings do inform this chapter, this chapter is not a typical findings chapter insofar as its focal point is the broader institutional context in which the findings are ensconced.

Oxbridge, a distinctly English institution

The stuttering dream

Time (Lawrence et al. 2009; Lawrence and Phillips 2019) and place (Lawrence and Dover 2015) are essential to the localised and contingent act of institutional work. Accordingly, we will begin this chapter by situating UNIQ and the wider project of 'Oxford WP', in their institutional contexts, so that we may understand the site of our study in 'all its particularity' (Webb et al. 2017:148). To recap, UNIQ is a week-long, residential outreach programme founded in 2010.

The beginning of UNIQ's story can be traced to approximately 1334 CE, about 80 miles north of Oxford, in Stamford, Lincolnshire. It is about midway through Edward III's long reign, less than a decade shy of the Hundred Years War and the Black Death's onslaught. England is on the brink of mass social disorder and, indeed, broad-scale institutional change and dissolution. In 1333, a small band of predominantly Northern Oxford students and tutors, ostensibly attempting to escape conflict ensuing between Northern and Southern members, flees to Stamford and founds a rival university. The community of scholars grows modestly, and, by 1334, Oxford is feverishly petitioning the sheriff of Lincoln, the lord chancellor, and the king himself to shutter Stamford's doors. Oxford prevails. Edward III himself mandates that, during each graduation ceremony,

Oxford and Cambridge masters of arts graduates must swear the following oath, which became known as the Stamford Oath:

> You also swear that in the Faculty to which you are now admitted Graduate, you shall not solemnly perform your readings as in a University anywhere in this Kingdom but here in Oxford or in Cambridge; not shall you take degrees, as in a University, in any Faculty whatsoever, nor shall you consent that any person who hath taken his degree elsewhere shall be admitted as a master here in the said faculty, to which he shall be elsewhere admitted… You shall also swear that you will not read lectures, or hear them read, at Stamford, as in a University study, or college general (text in Parker 1914:66).

The 'stuttering dream' of Stamford University, as Sheehan (2012) refers to it, is not well-known.[2] Its impact on the landscape of English HE, however, cannot be overstated. The Oath was sworn annually until 1827, securing Oxford's and Cambridge's tight duopoly on HE for nearly 500 years (Whyte 2018). The Oath was instrumental in the configuration and maintenance of Oxbridge, which, I will argue, remains one of England's most distinct and consequential institutions. Oxbridge vastly exceeds the sum of its parts, representing one of the most powerful machines of social reproduction in the UK and, indeed, the world.

Defining Oxbridge

We can fruitfully conceptualise both the Stamford Oath, and the wider state and university activity it symbolised, as institutional work. Through *defining* the parameters of Oxbridge's exclusionary power and reinforcing said power yearly via *ritual* (Lawrence and Suddaby 2006), the Oath originated as a feat of institutional creation, and continued to ensure institutional maintenance over its existence. The institutional conditions to which the oath contributed, Oxbridge's duopoly on English HE, persisted by way of a

[2] In fact, the only available copy of Sheehan (2012) I could locate was in Brasenose College's library. No mainstream new or used booksellers carry it.

mutually beneficial pact between Oxbridge and the state (Whyte 2018). Through its regulatory powers, namely its gradually consolidating a monopoly on violence, the Crown ensured that the duopoly held for nearly five centuries. In doing so, it benefited immensely. Power was comfortably, and predictably, concentrated in the same institutions. With only two universities, moreover, the Crown could manage the inevitable onset of religious and political dissent by leveraging the two against one another. Whyte (2018) offers the example of the reformation, during which traditionalists could not fully manage seepage of Protestant ideas from the Continent. As radical evangelical thought fomented in Cambridge, the Marian state ensured that the more traditional Oxford provided a firm, even fatal, counterpoint. 'It is no coincidence', Whyte (2018) recounts, 'that the Cambridge-educated bishops Hugh Latimer and Nicholas Ridley, together with the Cambridge-educated archbishop Thomas Cranmer, were sent to loyalist, Catholic Oxford to be tried and burnt in the 1550s'.

Through their duopoly on HE, Oxbridge retained control of the character of English HE, which stubbornly resisted reforms that swept the continent. Indeed, until the mid 19th century, Oxbridge stood as a beacon of the vision for HE articulated in John Henry Newman's *The Idea of the University*: a haven in which the student's mind is cultivated through attentive teaching and a common arts curriculum (Brockliss 2016:323-330). Although Oxbridge would invariably adopt aspects of the Humboldtian model, it has never fully shed its Newmanian disposition, a priority that the famous tutorial system embodies. Though regarded as an end in itself (for the wealthy), it is important to note that mind cultivation was also envisioned as a means of preparing elites for civic participation (Allouch 2017), which feeds back into the state's motivations to reinforce the duopoly. Oxbridge and the state represented a 'tightly coupled' system: the societal-level priority on information control and strong social reproduction aligned with the field-level desire to wield control over the nature of English education. In turn,

activities on the organisational level—such as the swearing of the Stamford oath—reinforce and maintain field-level and societal-level goals.

To conclude our whirlwind historical overture, in the early 19th century, the Stamford Oath was abolished. It is outside my remit here to account for the confluence of factors that ultimately broke the duopoly, which include mass movements for civil liberties and the severing of the tight link between the Church and state. Before moving forward, however, it behoves us to remember that Oxford's and Cambridge's duopoly on education was thoroughly unique. Across Europe, and in neighbouring Scotland, new universities regularly cropped up over the mediaeval through the modern period. That Oxbridge retained exclusive power until 1827 is an unparalleled feat of institutional impermeability, whose effects still reverberate across English HE today.

The leadup to an uncomfortable marriage

We will now flash forward to the 20th and 21st centuries. Though it was slow to start (Brockliss 2016:541-556), England eventually assented to the tide of massification that swept world education systems throughout the 20th century (see Trow 1973; Morley, Marginson, and Blackmore 2014; Marginson 2016). While I acknowledge that 'access' concerns far predated WP policy (see Thompson 2012), I concur with Burke (2012) that WP as a national policy priority is inextricable from the massification agenda, and the global move toward liberalisation it came to reflect from the late 1970s onward. WP, as we discussed at length in Chapter 2, embodies the contradictions of neoliberal social initiatives, juggling the incompatible priorities of the liberal economic agenda and social justice. WP, as a result, aims to massify participation with a special emphasis on the participation of historically underrepresented, 'diverse' populations.

As WP grew from a societal-level policy vision to a sector in its own right, these contradictions fomented into identifiable institutional logics, which ultimately integrated themselves into HEI-driven WP and thus remain operative today. We will now briefly

recount how swiftly WP liberalised and devolved over the first phase of its existence: from the publication of *Dearing* in 1997 to 2012, when WP became atomised to individual HEIs, and the prospect of an 'Oxford WP' became a reality. Anticipating our discussion of Oxford WP's origins, we will pay particular attention to how the atomisation of WP, as I am calling it, impacted how elite universities position themselves in the HE market more broadly, and how the advent of WP at Oxford represented a messy merging of institutional logics (Bjerregaard and Jonasson 2014).

WP from the outside in

As Chapter 3 argues, WP is helpfully conceptualised as an organisational field. From 1997 to the mid 2010s, WP evolved into a heterogeneous network of state and private organisations that 'in the aggregate, constitute a recognized area of institutional life' (DiMaggio and Powell 1983:148). The figure below provides an institutional reading of major developments in WP from its inception through the late 2010s, encompassing the birth of WP through my empirical range of study (see Ch.6).

Figure 4.1: Development of WP the organisational field from 1997 to mid 2010s

Event	Year	Institutional effect
Publication of *Dearing* report	1997	Inculcated societal-level prioritisation of massification
Tuition fees introduced at £1,000, and raised £3,000, and raised again £9,000	1998, 2006, 2012	Incremental growth of mechanism for regulative control
HEFCE requires statements of WP activity from HEIs	1999	WP's presence at organisational level strengthened
The Future of Higher	2003	Recommitment to

Education White Paper is published		*Dearing*'s goals; issue of 'aspirations-raising' positioned as defining problem of WP field
Higher Education Act creates the 'Director of Fair Access to Higher Education', and the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) is formed	2004	Regulative policy measure that HE access as a field with its own accountability structures
Higher Education Act allocates funding to *AimHigher,* whose constituent programmes are merged into a national programme	2004	The field's 'key-supplier becomes a national programme, consolidating field power
Browne Review of Higher Education Funding and Student Finance	2010	Funding for HE shifted from state to students; HE marketised
Coalition government takes power	2010	Ushers in approach to policy dictated by austerity; imposes preference for market incentives to govern WP
AimHigher funding cut; rise of institutional WP	2011	Responsibility for WP devolves from field-level parties to organisations
Students at the Heart of the System published (DBIS 2011)	2011	Reinforced increasing focus on student choice as fundamental driver of HE market. Loosened caps on enrolment (which were fully done away in the 2013-14 academic year)

National Strategy for Access and Student Success published (HEFCE and OFFA 2014)	2014	Introduces notion of whole student life-style, signalling shift from field prioritising 'participation' to wider concerns of 'access' across stages of HE
Collaborative outreach schemes developed.	National Networks for Collaborative Outreach (NNCO) scheme: 2014-2016 UniConnect, formerly known as National Collaborative Outreach Programme (NCOP), established: 2017	Though organisations remain the predominant providers, the injection of £22 million for interuniversity outreach partnerships created new configurations of organisational populations. Many of these partnerships still exist in some form under the auspices of Uni Connect, formerly NCOP.
Higher Education Act of 2017	2017	The OfS is established, replacing HEFCE and OFFA. Marketisation is firmly marketised; the OfS encourages competition among providers and asks them to render measurable evidence of access interventions, enforcing terms of legitimacy for practice (see Ch.9).

As the figure illustrates, the evolution of WP has followed a liberalising trajectory. In an ironic move, the state sought to achieve tighter regulation of education policies by deregulating HE, hoping that subjecting the sector to market incentives would increase competition, efficiency, and thereby success (see McCaig 2015a; 2015; McCaig et al. 2018).

The constitution of the organisational field, in turn, devolved and privatised, concentrating itself on the organisational level as it grew. WP was steadily encroaching onto HEIs, and Oxford was no exception. Allouch (2017) demonstrates that we can track Oxford WP's prehistory through, as it were, following the money. In 2003, Oxford created a WP budget, which was allocated £1,000,0000 by 2006 for the 2006-2007 academic year (as a means of comparison, the budget stood at £6,500,000 by 2015-2016, but was reduced to ~£4,600,000 for the 2021-22 academic cycle) (Allouch 2017; Oxford APP 2020-21 to 2024-25).

Atomisation

By 2012, the fabric of WP the organisational field had fundamentally reconfigured in response to several interrelated developments. Two years prior, in 2010, the controversial Browne Report recommended that funding for HE be shifted entirely from the state to students. In the 2012-2013 academic year, moreover, fees were raised to an historic high of £9000 per annum. The neoliberal interpellation of the student as a 'consumer', and the accompanying instrumentalisation of knowledge, was complete (Mavelli 2014). Education, as John McDonell MP memorably tweeted, 'became no longer a right but a commodity to be bought and sold' (in Rainford 2019:25). The intention of this move was to cultivate an HE marketplace where quality was segmented by fees (McCaig 2015a, 2015b). Unpredictably, however, most universities adopted the £9000 cap, which invigorated a wave of protests at an unanticipated scale (Lewis, Vasagar, and Taylor 2010).

In 2011, the Coalition Government slashed funding for the already-moribund AimHigher, citing its inability to demonstrate measurable impact (Gorard et al. 2006; see also Doyle and Griffin 2012; Harrison 2012). As an aside, the unravelling of AimHigher looms large in the WP practitioner memory. It is often referred to as a 'death', with Doyle and Griffin (2012) placing its dates of birth and death ceremoniously next to its

name. AimHigher represented a model of outreach that boasted a national scope, but with a regionally-directed focus. Though outreach practice under its auspices was mostly atheoretical (Thompson 2019) and ostensibly less 'successful' (Harrison 2012) in comparison to later developments, there was a coherence to AimHigher. Stratification invariably influenced HEIs' engagements with the programme; post-1992s relied more heavily on the programme than pre-1992s for resourcing outreach, and overall reported finding the programme more beneficial (see Bowers-Brown et al. 2016). Nonetheless, under AimHigher, outreach was a set of activities with more-or-less straightforward aims: to encourage HE participation among historically under-represented youths.

With the atomisation of WP, the incentives surrounding outreach became noticeably perverse. With tuition funds on the line, HEIs conduct outreach as a means of attracting and matriculating more students, giving it a competitive edge (McCaig 2015a; 2015b). In the case of elite universities, the blurring of recruitment and outreach renders them nearly indistinguishable. Although they boast commitments to 'equity', 'diversity' and 'access' (see Bowl 2018; McCaig et al. 2018), elite universities' selling point in the HE marketplace is ultimately their prestige—or, to adapt Warikoo and Fuhr's vaguely neoinstitutional terminology, their 'legitimating status' (Warikoo and Fuhr 2014). That the aforementioned £9,000 tuition cap had failed to establish price as a means of differentiation arguably exacerbated matters. As a result, elite universities are incentivised *not* to materially change their admissions policies to accommodate access (Boliver 2013; 2017; Boliver et al. 2021; Mountford-Zimdars et al. 2019). Outreach activities at elite universities, therefore, are straitjacketed by the notion of merit: courting the highest attaining 'disadvantaged' students, who conceivably would have been admitted without WP interventions (Rainford 2016; Waller et al. 2015). In response, some have even arrived at the question: why even bother with the 'intractable' enterprise of widening participation to prestigious universities (Mclellan, Pettigrew, and Fehrlinger

2016:54)? In Chapter 7, we will consider the existential implications of the outreach-*qua*-merit for practitioners seeking to widen *access*.

With atomisation, we see the apotheosis of a business ontology in WP. Students become consumers, institutions providers of services, and WP programme salespeople and brokers competing for business. I reproduce Figure 3.3 from Chapter 3 to demonstrate how flawlessly the various aspects of WP correspond to a business structure:

Field components	WP provision
Key suppliers	Since 2012, WP provision at HEIs, primarily in access/outreach teams, but increasingly within academic departments
Resource and product consumers	Students with educational 'disadvantage', 'disadvantaged' schools and local communities
Regulatory agencies	OfS, OFFA*, HEFCE*
Organisations that produce similar services and products	NCOP, AimHigher*, Aiming High*, various regional partnerships between HEIs, nonprofits, and schools

*now defunct

In sum, by the mid 2010s, WP predominantly had become an institutional (in OI terms, organisational) responsibility that entailed both moral and financial directives. It was no longer a field-level intrusion, but became absorbed into the marrow of HEIs. It was indeed the early 2010s, I argue, that Oxford WP started to take form. UNIQ, founded in 2010, was an integral component of early Oxford WP.

Merging logics

Before turning to UNIQ's particulars, however, I am going to translate our preceding analysis of 'Oxford' and 'WP' into an institutional logics schema. To do so, I will follow

Bjerregaard and Jonasson's model for tracking where actors confront the novel institutional contradictions that arise from merging institutional logics (Bjerregaard and Jonasson 2014). The substantive context of Bjerregaard and Jonasson's ethnography is a South Korean credit card company's response to the 1997 ASEAN economic crisis. The IMF intervened to mitigate the crisis, trafficking in Western business logics. Bjerregaard and Jonasson (2014) first consider how management at the credit card company managed to absorb these logics by merging them with Korean values, creating, in effect, a hybrid institutional logic configuration. Then, crucially, they examine how actors manage and maintain the contradictions entailed by the merging of internally contradictory, but also mutually incompatible, logics.

From this chapter's discussion thus far, I propose that Oxford and WP hold diverging logics along the following axes:

Figure 4.2: Oxbridge and WP's institutional logics

Oxbridge	Widening Participation
Model of HE	
Elite	Mass
Purpose of HE	
Cultivation of the mind; preparing elites for civic participation	'A learning society': increasing human capital and thereby social mobility
Savoir	*Connaissance*
Interpellation of the student	

Future civic leader Consumer

Ethos toward participation

Exclusion Inclusion

Admissions priority

Merit Access

Social (re)production

Conserving tradition Changing HE landscape

I should note that the above schema risks generalisation, as is inevitable with any abstraction. I began this chapter by underscoring the slipperiness between fields and their logics, and here we find no exception. Oxford is, of course, innovative, and it would be reductionist—and demonstrably incorrect—to say that actors and organisations engaging with WP do not prioritise the cultivation of the mind. Institutional logics, as we have discussed, are inherently pluralistic and unstable, and thereby materialise heterogeneously in their local temporal-relational contexts. However, speaking broadly, as our historical overture has shown, Oxford's logics were forged over nearly a millennium of repetition and reification. Though it does not have the same historical weight behind it, through the state's regulatory mechanisms and a wider societal push toward massification, WP's logics, too, are relatively sturdy.

'The other side of the square': Oxford WP and UNIQ's origins

The task of 'Oxford WP' is to make sense of and actualise the whirlwind marriage between the above sets of logics. While Oxford WP is the product of Oxford and WP's merging, like all institutional pursuits, it did not arise from nothing. There is, as

Thompson (2012) shows, a long and rich tradition of dissent to Oxbridge's duopoly, both outside of and within the institutions. Indeed, the project of WP does not have a monopoly on the far more transhistorical pursuit of education access and equity.

Moreover, as we alluded to above, there was also burgeoning *widening participation* activity at Oxford before the early 2010s. It was from this decentralised network of small outreach initiatives that Oxford WP was born in the early 2010s. In 2006, the Oxford Undergraduate Admissions and Outreach office (UAO) was formed. UAO's work is divided into two broad strands: recruitment and outreach (to whose interrelation we will return). As Allouch (2017) documents, the founding of UAO coincided with the bureaucratisation of WP within Oxford's individual colleges, which all gradually created dedicated 'access and outreach officer' roles. In addition to hosting college specific outreach events, the colleges would facilitate Oxford-wide outreach campus visit initiatives. One such initiative was Oxford's branch of the Sutton Trust summer schools, out of which UNIQ ultimately grew. The national summer school programme, which is still extant, provides weeklong taster sessions of university courses at thirteen of the UK's top universities (Cambridge, in fact, is still a Sutton Trust partner and puts on the programme annually).

The year 2010 saw, to borrow one of UNIQ lead practitioners' terminology, a 'sea change' in WP activity at Oxford. The practitioners working on the Sutton Trust summer schools secured a grant to develop a novel programme: UNIQ. The impetus to form UNIQ was, as one lead practitioner explained, to create something Oxford-specific, in which Oxford WP practitioners could have the 'autonomy' to 'upscale massively'. The introduction of UNIQ, therefore, coincided with the growth of a self-aware 'Oxford WP'. By 2012, UNIQ was named—and still remains—the university's flagship outreach programme (Oxford APP 2012-2013). In this small but potent act of defining, Oxford had granted UNIQ status as an organisational fixture as opposed to an *ad hoc* outreach programme.

For practitioners working on UNIQ, the shift from doing WP at Oxford to doing Oxford WP was palpable. I interviewed three of the practitioners who spearheaded the development of UNIQ. Two worked directly on managing and delivering the Sutton Trust programme, and one was recruited from another role within UAO. When I asked about the nature of their roles prior to UNIQ, responses were indicative of the nascent institutional environment in which they were attempting to find their place. None could recall their exact positions; one shrugged, 'I haven't the faintest idea'. Ephemerality was a constant in the early phases, stemming from the fact that WP activity was ongoing at the university, but uncoordinated, and without a governing strategy.

In the space of only a few years, however, everything changed. Outreach and access was rapidly systemised, and subjected to evaluation and research and development processes. Roles, though their names continued to shift around, became firmer. One practitioner, whom I call Freya, offered a particularly rich recollection on her experience working in access and outreach at Oxford in the early 2010s. She begins:

> It was a really interesting time to work in that area. And it was really interesting to see the growth of the university in terms of not just taking [WP] seriously, *but recognizing it as strategically important*. So I started my career in Oxford, just after I graduated, and at that point, the widening participation work had just been put together with student funding. This was in recognition of the new fee regime that linked bursaries and access together, so access was taken out of Undergraduate Admissions and put together with student funding.

She then offers a caveat:

> But at that point, *our work was pretty reactive*. We had money coming in from the Sutton Trust, to run a Sutton Trust semester. So we did that. We had money that came in for AimHigher to run a series of AimHigher programs. But, you know, even physically, we were sat in a little basement office on the other side of the square, so we were opposite. We were very much removed from the university, from the establishment. We saw ourselves—even the kind of the culture was that we saw ourselves as *little renegades* [we both laugh], you know, trying to try to change the university from within, and rather than being a kind of a core part of the establishment of the university.

In addition to adding depth to our discussion of the transformation of WP at Oxford, Freya's reflection is an apt springboard for the form(s) of institutional work Oxford constitutes.

We will start with the former. Freya, I would argue, is describing the formation of a convoluted configuration of institutional work. Recalling the Heclo (2008:98) epigraph at the head of the previous chapter, institutions are not created *ex nihilo*. Oxford WP was scaffolded by the work of practitioners who were doing WP before it was institutionally prioritised. The early WP practitioners at Oxford, however, were not necessarily working toward the creation of Oxford WP. In fact, as Freya's characterisation plainly indicates, the impetus of their work was institutional *disruption*. They were 'little renegades' agitating against the institutional order, whose work swiftly and unexpectedly became sanctioned by field-level regulatory mechanisms (the new fee regime, the empowerment of OFFA by HEFCE) which were, in turn, motivated by global and societal-level shifts in society's conception of what HE is for.

All of a sudden, the university had a vested interest in maintaining the disruption that they had initiated on the periphery. The university was now *asking* practitioners to work toward the dismantlement of Oxford's historic exclusive status, encouraging a certain measure of institutional disruption as Oxford increasingly prioritised access and inclusivity. However, as the findings chapters will show repeatedly, the institution only authorises tapered, softer forms of disruption, as it has vested interests in retaining and reproducing its elite status.

A core element of maintaining disruption, therefore, is balancing when and where to disrupt, and when and where to maintain. This involves determining how to manage the merging of Oxford and WP's clashing logics (Bjerregaard and Jonasson 2014). Oxford WP, I argue, operates from the constellation of logics displayed in the

figure below. We will regularly revisit various dimensions of this diagram throughout the findings chapters.

Figure 4.3: The uncomfortable marriage of Oxbridge and WP's merging logics

Oxbridge	**Widening Participation**	**Oxford WP**
	Model of HE	
Elite	Mass	Elite school attempting to maintain its status in a massified system
	Purpose of HE	
Cultivation of the mind; preparing elites for civic participation	'A learning society': increasing human capital and thereby social mobility	Allowing more populations to cultivate their mind, and thereby contribute to capitalist society
Savoir	*Connaissance*	Knowledge is intrinsically valuable, but deployed for instrumental gains
	Interpellation of the student	
Future civic leader	Consumer	Future civic leader
	Ethos toward participation	
Exclusion	Inclusion	Prioritising inclusion of the 'diverse' *and* 'deserving'
	Admissions priority	
Merit	Access	Merit with conviction that 'cream rises to the top', and that eligible disadvantaged

		candidates will exhibit potential through attainment
	Social (re)production	
Conserving tradition	Changing HE landscape	Allowing more to partake in a tradition worth conserving
	Method	
None	Access and outreach	Outreach

My argument that WP workers are asked both to maintain and disrupt accords with developments in IWP scholarship. As I alluded in Chapter 3, Lawrence and Suddaby's (2006) original categories of institutional work—purposive action directed toward either the creation, maintenance, or disrupting of institutions—are far less discreet than initially proposed. In the intervening decade, IWP proponents have acknowledged the fluidity of, and overlap between, different forms of institutional work. Lawrence and Thompson (2019:Ch.7) recently acknowledged that disrupting and creating institutions often goes hand in hand (see also Lok 2010). Other studies show one can even perform institutional work aimed at no particular end (Giorgi and Palermo 2017), or as a precursor to more decisive forms of institutional work (Creed et al. 2010). My analysis of Oxford WP will present a similarly nuanced conceptualisation of institutional work.

To maintain disruption is an explicit directive from both the institutions that constitute the enterprise of Oxford WP. The heart of IWP is the exploration of actors moving in institutions, and how they prop up and push against institutional orders. This is the driving inquiry of the chapters that follow. The core questions underpinning this thesis' inquiry, therefore, are how WP practitioners understand the directive of

maintaining disruption, how they translate into practice, and, more fundamentally, how they understand their place in the institutions they find themselves working for and against. The next chapter details how I tailored the conceptual and empirical foci of the study to accomplish precisely this.

Chapter 5

Theory meets practice

> The institution becomes that which you come up against.
> Ahmed (2012:26)

Chapter 4's analysis has brought us to something of a theoretical no-man's land. In its express focus on intentionality, IWP scholarship does acknowledge the many ways in which institutional actors set the course of institutional work in a given context; by, for example, outlining the strategies by which a newfangled institution maintains itself (Bjerregaard and Jonasson 2014). However, the specific configuration of mandated work under study—the project of 'maintaining disruption' that Oxford WP entails—broaches new territory in IWP. To my knowledge, at the time of my writing, there does not exist an IWP study that explicitly explores institutions that invite their own undermining. Institutional actors must cope with the dissonance and contradictions that arise from the necessity in such institutions of 'maintaining disruption'. Indeed, to maintain disruption is to confront contradiction.

Another reason I chose to study WP at Oxford is because, at an institution like that one, the dissonances of maintaining disruption can be even more stark: although Oxford has more socially reproductive power than other institutions may, its contradictions are even more plain, and it is the recognition of contradiction that sparks consciousness-raising (Seo and Creed 2002). Our point of departure for shaping our empirical inquiry, accordingly, is as follows: *what contradictions do practitioners face as they go about 'maintaining disruption', and how do they go about facing them?* While the first part of the question is mostly descriptive, the latter half requires elaboration, as its analytic purview extends far beyond Lawrence and Suddaby's original categories. This chapter, accordingly, details the specific conceptual frames through which I examine how WP practitioners at Oxford confront the contradictions of their work: namely,

identity work and category work, two micro-processes of institutional work that, as I will show, are deeply entwined with institutional legitimacy. By the close of the chapter, we will land on a complete set of operationalizable research questions that launch our empirical analysis.

WP work and its walls

To aid us in conceptualising how actors interface with institutions inviting their own undermining, we will turn to the work of feminist writer and philosopher Sara Ahmed. Ahmed first came to prominence for her theoretical work drawing from the everyday life of feminist subjects, such as *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Ahmed 2014[2004]), which theorises the interrelation between emotions, language, and bodies; and *Queer Phenomenology* (Ahmed 2006), which proposes that queerness disrupts how social relations are arranged, and oriented toward one another, in space. Ahmed's more recent work closely studies the experiences of institutional actors attempting to make institutional change in HEIs: namely, those who dare to complain about harassment, bullying, and other abuses in university settings (Ahmed 2021a), and diversity workers working in HEIs in the UK and Australia (Ahmed 2007; 2012; 2017). In these works, citing the likes of Durkheim, Berger and Luckmann, Douglas, and March and Olsen, Ahmed concurs that institutions are the bedrock of sociological thought, the preeminent object of sociological inquiry. Ahmed, however, does not subscribe to the reigning distinction between organisations and institutions, showing that a 'phenomenology of institutions' is a worthwhile modality of examining how HEIs operate. She instead approaches institutional analysis using a synthesis of OI, feminist philosophies, affect theory, phenomenology, and a variety of critical theoretical perspectives: a fusion that allows sufficient analytic breadth and axiological grounding for examining the embodied experiences of diversity *workers*, the priority of Ahmed's analysis.

In this chapter, I use Ahmed's analysis of diversity work (predominantly Ahmed 2012, but also Ahmed 2007; 2017) as a scaffold for rationalising and adding flesh to the core questions under study. Ahmed uses the term 'diversity work' to refer to two interlocking dimensions of institutional life: 'the work we do when we aim to transform the norms of an institution, and the work we do when we do not quite inhabit those norms' (Ahmed 2017:135). The notion of maintaining disruption that we have developed thus far is consonant with diversity work in the first sense. Indeed, Ahmed highlights how diversity work is a unique occupation in that 'diversity practitioners do not simply work at institutions, they also work on them, given that their explicit remit is to redress existing institutional goals or priorities' (Ahmed 2012:22).

The word 'redress', here, is operative. While, on paper, diversity workers are asked to fulfil institutional goals, Ahmed shows how, in practice, diversity workers often find that diversity is *not* an institutional priority, and that the recruitment of diversity workers is a manifestation of perverse incentives. Instead of opening themselves to the fundamental transformation that inclusion demands, institutions flaunt their commitment to diversity to look good, to 'paper over' or 'polish' their outward perception (Ahmed 2023), while they preserve the *status quo* of their actual workings at all costs. As we have discussed in the WP context, the veneer and rhetoric of diversity is becoming integral to legitimacy in the neoliberal HE landscape, especially among selective institutions (Bowl and Hughes 2018). The institutional impetus to perform a commitment to diversity is propelled by a variety of institutional mechanisms, from regulative mandates (the 2010 Equality Act) to normative ones ('DEI is who we are').

Thus, a pronounced disconnect emerges between institutions' ostensible commitments to diversity and their willingness to make good on said commitments. Ahmed diagnoses institutional commitments to disruption as performative speech. In the nomenclature of speech act theory, a performative utterance is a class of speech that, as Ahmed describes, 'does what it says' (Ahmed 2012:116). The classic example of a speech

act is 'I pronounce you husband and wife!' (Austin 1975). Ahmed, in turn, develops the concept of a 'non-performative': a class of speech acts that do not do what they say. As she elaborates, 'the failure of the speech act to do what it says is not a failure of intent or even circumstance but is actually what the speech act is doing' (Ahmed 2012:116). The quintessential example of non-performativity in action is institutional diversity statements. Institutional commitment to diversity, as Ahmed's analysis shows, often amounts to little more than a commitment to stating commitments. As put by one participant in an earlier stage of her ethnographic study, 'you end up doing the document rather than doing the diversity' (Ahmed 2007). Promisingly, scholars have operationalised non-performativity in the WP context. Chapman, Mangion, and Buchanan (2015) suggest that non-performativity is structurally embedded in WP in Australia, demonstrating that statements of commitment to WP constitute non-performatives. While it will not be a central concern of my findings *per se*, I explore non-performativity and its curious interconnections to the aforementioned policy ethic performativity in the thesis' final chapter.

What happens when actors tasked with disrupting institutions run up against institutional non-performance? Although diversity workers are technically encouraged to disrupt their respective institutions, the institution interpellates them as 'problems', 'killjoys', 'troublemakers', even when they are simply attempting to execute their designated roles. Ahmed, therefore, likens the job description of diversity work to 'banging your head against a brick wall', since '[t]he feeling of doing diversity work is the feeling of coming up against something that does not move, something solid and tangible' (Ahmed 2012:26). The figure of brick wall is a motif across her theorisation around diversity work. Its force as a metaphor is felt by anyone who has attempted to push against institutional orders; it evocatively captures the frustrations that several of my participants expressed. However, in light of Ahmed's phenomenological work on the

materiality of relations between bodies, affects, and social structures (e.g., Ahmed 2004; 2006), the wall is *tangible* in a material sense.

> But the metaphor (something is like something) of the wall seems to matter to convey how these institutional processes become something that can be touched. A wall is what you come up against. It is a physical contact; a visceral encounter. (Ahmed 2017:136)

It is through a diversity worker's encounter with the brick wall that we understand the relation between the two senses of diversity work. The wall is *viscerally* felt by the bodies that come up against it. Diversity workers encounter the wall not only when they are expressly attempting to push against the turgidity of racist institutions, but they also come up against it unwittingly, by the very fact of their bodily presence. Ahmed demonstrates that, for women of colour doing diversity work, coming up against the institution one inhabits is often not a choice. Drawing on Puwar (2004), she demonstrates the very physical fact of one's presence renders them a 'space invader' (Ahmed 2012:13), eliciting institutional exceptionalisation, ostracisation, and often hostility.

The brick wall, it follows, is not equally apparent to all institutional actors. The extent to which one encounters the wall is mediated by the extent to which they actively resist it, or it resists them. For those who readily inhabit institutional norms, the wall is encountered merely as background, comprising the bounds of an unopposing, even friendly, environment. Indeed, there is a fruitful alignment between the figure of the brick wall and the notion of taken-for-grantedness in OI. The default perception of the wall is no perception of it at all, and the more successfully something is institutionalised, the less it stands out as anything other than a facet of ordinary life (Berger and Luckmann 1966).

In that diversity workers can see, and confront, that which is background, Ahmed concludes that diversity work amounts to a phenomenological practice *and* an act of praxis. It is phenomenological in that it lays bare the structures of oppression that are

operative, but unacknowledged, in HEIs, and it is praxis in that the act of 'doing diversity' raises consciousness and generates knowledge with transformative potentials (Ahmed 2012:173). Note the directionality of the second statement: while a typical Freirean view of praxis is premised on a recurrent cycle of reflection, dialogue, and action, Ahmed intentionally proposes the inverse. Her study of diversity workers brings to bear that 'transformation, as a form of practical labour, leads to knowledge' (Ahmed 2012:173). This accords strongly with IWP's analytic linkage of intentionality and practice, as well as with Seo and Creed's neoinstitutional definition of praxis: 'praxis is the selective adoption and deployment of available institutional logics that legitimize and mobilize political action against incommensurate institutional logics' (Seo and Creed 2002:237). While IWP is dedicated to questions of practice, as a community inclined toward cultural-cognitive inquiry, it understands that practical action is constituted by intentional and reflexive engagement with institutions in a given temporal-relational context. It is to this body of research, with its formulation of actor reflexivity as a predictor of change-oriented agency, that this study contributes.

Yet this is also where our inquiry diverges from Ahmed's. Diversity workers and WP workers, I would argue, do not have commensurate experiences of coming up against institutions. Indeed, a shared experience of coming up against their institutions bound together Ahmed's participants; all women of colour performing diversity work, they encountered the brick wall wittingly through their work and unwittingly through their mere being. WP practitioners, I would argue, are not necessarily exposed to the same degree of institutional resistance and alienation. While WP, EDI, and other social-justice related pursuits are often lumped together, they differ with respect to their lineages, and their legitimacy within wider society. EDI, in its more corporate manifestations, originated in the struggle for racial justice. Due to structural racism, its basic premise has been refuted, and ridiculed, by the state and the public (e.g., the current mass hysteria around 'critical race theory', particularly in UK and US secondary

education). There is mass denial that the work of racial justice is even necessary, as the recent publication of the condemned Commision on Race and Ethnic Disparities (2021) report bears out. Diversity work, as a result, faces a profound battle for legitimacy in a structurally racist society.

WP, in comparison, enjoys a veneer of political neutrality. Few would contest the goal of making places like Oxford more accessible for (deserving) 'disadvantaged' students, especially if they happen to be white working class boys. In fact, on the matter of white working class boys, right-wing commentators regularly wield WP as a cudgel against EDI: because of universities' alleged emphasis on recruiting BAME students, white working class boys are said to be 'left behind', even when universities are ostensibly interested in including 'everybody'; therefore, WP is called upon to bridge this gap. This is not to say that WP efforts, especially those that threaten institutionalised values like 'merit', do not experience pushback; this study's findings suggest the opposite. But it is my contention that, in a racist society, WP enjoys more neutrality because it is more closely synonymous with whiteness. In the case of my data, this was reflected in practitioner identity. All the career UNIQ practitioners I interviewed, as well as all but five members of the wider practitioner community (n=22), were white.

Because of these differences, WP and EDI practice entail different phenomenological projects. If one's access to transformative knowledge is mediated by the degree of 'coming up against' they experience in their practice and in their being, white WP workers are less likely to experience institutions as anything other than 'being open, committed, and diverse'. WP work is not guaranteed to amount to praxis; it can range from draping window-dressing over the *status quo* to a dedicated, disruptive act of transgression. Indeed, how a practitioner understands the political valences of their work, therefore, is determined subjectively, by their own lived experience and ethical commitments. Rainford (2021b) recently empirically validated this phenomenon: WP workers vary wildly in their propensities toward institutional compliance and

transgression, which is mediated by their lived experiences, understanding of their politics, experience-level, institution type (pre or post-1992), and other contingent factors.

We must adjust our analytic purview accordingly. Instead of tracking the implications of how practitioners come up against their institutions when they are asked to maintain disruption, we should explore what 'maintaining disruption' means to those who put it into practice, and whether it registers as a defiant act or a day's work. The driving question underpinning this thesis' inquiry, therefore, is how WP practitioners understand how their work relates to their institution and, more broadly, the nature of the social change they wish to work toward. I will now discuss how we can draw on extant concepts in IWP to explore this question.

Identity work as a precondition of transformational knowledge

Above, I drew parallels between Ahmed's analysis of diversity and the scholarship of W.E. Douglas Creed. In his empirical work, Creed also stresses that the journey from practical labour to transformative knowledge is not a given. Consciousness-raising, or, as Creed et al. (2010) put it, the 'preconditions for endogenous change-oriented agency', are mediated by actors' identities, and the ways in which they align or clash with their institutional environment. Creed et al. (2010) instigated a growing body of idiographic, qualitative work in IWP that concerns how institutional actors navigate contradictions (e.g., Creed et al. 2010; Leung, Zietsma, and Peredo 2014; Giorgi and Palmisano 2017). The thrust of this inquiry is that contradiction resolution is often filtered through micro-practices of *identity work* (Snow and Anderson 1987; Sveningson and Alvesson 2003; Watson 2008).

Creed et al.'s (2010) case study examines how openly queer LGBTQ ministers '[live] at the nexus of an increasingly salient institutional contradiction': that is, mainline Protestant denominations' handling of sexual and gender identity (Creed et al. 2010:1336).

They find that participants draw on cultural identity-formation resources to perform 'identity reconciliation work' to make sense of their place within their institutions. In focalising identity work, Creed et al. (2010) are 'theorizing microprocesses that form the *necessary preconditions* for endogenous change-oriented agency on the part of marginalized insiders responding to institutional contradictions' (1337; emphasis original). Creed et al. are not cataloguing the external practices through which change is achieved, but the internal, reflexive *processes* through which actors negotiate their public and private identities.

'Processes' is indeed the operative word. When consulting standard definitions of identity work in OI, we immediately find that it is an expansive form of human activity. The 'identity' in identity work relates most closely to what we call 'social identity'. It is far outside my remit to wade into the multifarious theories surrounding identity and the self across the social sciences. I will only note that, across a wide range of inquiries, there is a broad acknowledgment that the 'self' is not a static property, but the product of ongoing, interactional negotiation (see Brown 2022). Brown (2015) shows that the study of identity work merges the sociological question of how identity acts as 'kind of interface or conceptual bridge' between society and individuals (Snow and Anderson 1987), and the socio-psychological concern of how individuals seek validation and allay dissonance between self-concept and the world surrounding them (Weick 1995; Gergen 1991). Identity construction, therefore, is less of an internal, psychologistic process than a constant interactional, contingent, and ethical act. As Creed et al. (2010:1341) put it, "'Who am I?" is synonymous with "How should I act?"" Identity, practical labour, and knowledge formation are therefore closely interwoven.

Identity work, therefore, refers to the processes through which actors agentically engage in identity construction *within institutional contexts*. Moreover, I concur with IWP theorists that institutional identity work is best theorised as an exercise of diffusing dissonance. In their oft-cited definition, Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003:1165) highlight

the processual, omnipresent nature of identity work: identity work involves 'forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising the constructions that are productive of a sense of coherence and distinctiveness'. Another popular definition from Watson (2008:129) describes identity work as

> the mutually constitutive processes whereby people strive to shape a relatively coherent and distinctive notion of personal self identity and struggle to come to terms with and, within limits, to influence the various social identities which pertain to them in the various milieu in which they live their lives.

Note the emphasis on *coherence* in both popular definitions. To take the inverse, identity work is a practice of minimising incoherence, dissonance, and contradiction, an ongoing imposition of order and meaning onto the flux of social life (see Weick 1995; Tsoukas and Chia 2002).

Exploring the identity work of WP practitioners, therefore, is an apt vessel for illuminating how practitioners make sense of their relationship to the institution and its goals. In light of this, in the early stages of data interpretation, I took a direction of analysis captured by the following question:

How does identity work inform the ways in which practitioners navigate institutional contradictions?

As I attempted to answer this question, I found that, in the context of WP practice at Oxford, exclusively exploring processes of 'identity work' (that is, 'forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising the constructions' of internal and/or social identity') was insufficient for capturing how practitioners handled contradiction. This was true even in the case of participants for whom identity was an animating feature of their engagement with WP—namely, student ambassadors, who were overwhelmingly WP students themselves.

More often, WP workers made sense of their practice, and its contradictions, through a head-on engagement with the axiological configuration of WP itself. Matters

of identity and positionality, of course, profoundly influence the value systems through which we read the world (see Ch.1), but I found that, as practitioners interested in social justice (see Rainford 2021c), WP workers seldom interfaced with their identity and experiences without using them as a rubric against which to assess their practice, and its legitimacy as an enterprise of social change. My observations, here, align with those of Fernando and Kenny (2021), who found that the identity work conducted by WP student advocates at elite universities amounted to (de)legitimising work; building on work on the relationship between identity work and legitimacy (Brown and Toyoki 2013; Toyoki and Brown 2014; Brown 2015; Gray et al. 2018), they show that identity work invariably reinforces, or defy, their university's legitimacy as an 'inclusive' space. My interest in identity work, therefore, is limited to the ways in which practitioners engage with identity as a means of navigating contradiction and assessing institutional legitimacy.

Indeed, for social justice-oriented institutional actors, the question of 'who am I in, or to, this institution?' bleeds into the normative question of 'is this institution *good*, and should I align myself with it?' The first inkling of doubt a practitioner feels about WP's ability to effect meaningful social change, or, conversely, the rush of affirmation a practitioner feels when they succeed in influencing a student's educational path, all bear on WP's legitimacy. My findings chapters will show, in fact, that all strategies of confronting contradiction are done in service of either legitimising or delegitimizing the institution.

Legitimacy and category work

Legitimacy, as I have hinted in previous chapters, is a broad and polysemous construct in OI (Suddaby et al. 2017). Suchmann, being deliberately non-specific, defines it as a 'generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs and definitions' (Suchmann 1995:574). We can examine the ways in which actors form and

assess perceptions and assumptions of legitimacy through parsing the relationship between what are known as 'internal' and 'field-level' legitimacy.

Our discussions of legitimacy thus far have been in reference to field-level legitimacy, which refers to the pressures placed on organisations to conform to field-level standards. In my view, however, understanding how actors perceive their institution's internal legitimacy is central to understanding WP practice. Internal legitimacy is judged by the extent to which organisations are regarded as legitimate by member actors. Recent work illuminates how central members' perception of their institution's (or organisation's) legitimacy is to an institution's survival. In their study of inmates at a Helsinki prison, Brown and Toyoki (2013:875) illustrate that 'how people's talk about their selves affirms and contests the internally ascribed legitimacy of organisations'. In the WP context, in fact, Fernando and Kenny (2021) affirm Brown and Toyoki's positioning of identity work as (de)legitimising work. Namely, they show how the ways in which participants negotiate their identities as WP students at elite universities invariably reinforce, or defy, their university's sense of itself as an 'inclusive' and 'accessible' space. In Chapter 8, my data demonstrate how identity work and legitimacy's interrelation materialises on the ground.

Internal legitimacy is closely linked to what Suddaby et al. (2017) term the 'legitimacy-as-perception' school of thought. Whereas explorations of field-level legitimacy typically treat legitimacy as a property or asset that organisations can gain, the legitimacy-as-perception locates legitimacy as the product of the sociocognitive evaluation process through which social actors individually, and collectively, evaluate an institutional enterprise. In its emphasis on the perceptions of individuals, the legitimacy-as-perception model is ideal for a micro-level qualitative analysis of actors' perspectives. The findings chapters will demonstrate how focusing on a practitioner's perception of their organisation's internal legitimacy—and the cluster of micro-processes

that inform and direct this perception—is an effective way of exploring what they understand maintaining disruption to be.

Legitimacy scholarship demonstrates that identity work is constitutive of how actors understand legitimacy, but exploring identity work alone is insufficient for examining the frames by which actors assess internal legitimacy. When it comes to evaluating internal legitimacy, category work—another increasingly popular construct within IWP—offers an especially apt modality of analysis. In the case of ideas, objects, or groups of people, categories result from a negotiation of the 'symbolic boundaries' we construct around the information surrounding us (see Lamont and Molnar 2002). As Lawrence and Thompson (2019:228) stress, the act of categorising is 'explicitly evaluative'. Since they are social constructions, we justify, or *legitimate* categories, in reference to institutionalised paradigms of legitimacy. This is definitionally not a neutral act. In the social fields in particular, we are not innocuously drawing boundaries around apples and oranges, but groups of people, political projects, and definitions of what society is and should be. We are constructing the very 'categories we live by', and the power structures that we vest in them (Ásta 2019).

One pertinent example is the category shift surrounding 'access' and 'participation'. Nowadays, the two have essentially become fused (e.g., 'access and participation plans'); however, they technically denote different pursuits, with participation referring to admission and entry into HE and access referring to one's 'ability to participate within a fair and open admissions system', which is mediated by structural factors (Harrison and Waller 2017a:141). Rooted in massification, the goal of 'widening participation' was quite literal: to increase the number of underrepresented students entering HE (see Burke 2012). Over time, at the field-level, legitimacy gradually became synonymous with prioritising equity in all phases of the student life-cycle. The compound category, access and participation, has been transformed into a categorical container into which policy actors like the OfS could capture more systemic aims.

Thinking back to their original denotations, which both relate to the point of admission, the boundaries of access and participation have been radically expanded.

The work of field-level regulatory bodies to widen the purview of what was known as 'widening participation' fits squarely into Lawrence and Phillips' (2019) definition of category work: 'purposeful, reflexive work to *shape* categories' (emphasis mine). This definition reflects the current state of category work scholarship, which explores how powerful actors and intermediaries in fields construct, defend, and challenge categories (e.g., Lounsbury and Rao 2004; Demelstri and Greenwood 2016). We cannot gain a full picture of category work in a given field without paying mind to field-level and societal-level efforts to produce and refine categories. This is why I devote the final findings chapter to exploring how practitioners interface with evaluation, which, as I will argue, largely sets the terms of legitimacy in the WP field.

However, as my analysis will show, restricting one's analysis to the actors and bodies who wield the power to shape categories constrictive, falling prey to a similar fixation on 'hypermuscularity' as institutional entrepreneurship. Adopting an IWP sensibility toward category work would honour the everyday ways in which institutional actors interface with categories— by judging them, protecting them, defying them, or even misunderstanding them. While analysis of how, and with what frames, practitioners engage with categories might not lend us definitive insight into how categories are shaped, it allows us to glimpse the purchase, or legitimacy, that categories carry on the ground. Moreover, when legitimated categories in a field—access, outreach, equity, social justice, evidence-based research, 'widening access'—embody institutional contradictions, on-the-ground category work can be the stuff of consciousness-raising.

Therefore, a well-rounded analysis of legitimacy and category work in practice prioritises individual actors' perspectives while also acknowledging the profound reach of field-level activities around categories on actors' perception of legitimacy. Indeed, though its analytic focus is individual actors, the legitimacy-as-perception view is

inherently multi-level. As allied work on sensemaking and institutions brings to bear (Weber and Glynn 2006; Khan 2018), the cognitive frames that actors use to evaluate whether their institution is 'desirable, proper or appropriate' are defined and constrained by wider institutional forces. Institutions, in short, *legitimise the very terms of legitimacy*. This is why cleaving 'external' (field-level) and internal legitimacies, to my mind, is analytically unhelpful. One cannot understand the ways in which actors evaluate themselves, or the categories they live by, without considering the frames of legitimacy they are using to do so. In a given context, which frames of legitimacy a community will draw on remains an open question, dependent on the contingencies of the field(s) at play.

Throughout my analysis, when I describe both the identity work and category work that practitioners engage in, I track the frames, whether field-level, social, individual, or otherwise, by which they contextualise their institutional work. My analysis of this so-called 'level-jumping' bears out how institutional work blurs the bounds between micro, meso, and macro-levels of social life. I place my priority on exploring the individuated, contingent factors governing why X actor thinks Y about their institution, which is achieved by identifying the wider institutional logics that set the terms of legitimacy–namely, the 'socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs and definitions' that actors draw on to evaluate legitimacy (Suchmann 1995:574). In the findings chapters, I seek to explore how practitioners perform institutional work–namely, identity work and category work–to assess the legitimacy of WP practise at Oxford.

Research questions

RQ1: What contradictions do practitioners face as they go about 'maintaining disruption'?

RQ2: What strategies of institutional work do practitioners draw on to navigate these contradictions and assess the legitimacy of their work?

RQ2a: What frames of legitimacy do WP practitioners draw on to assess their work? How do internal and field-level legitimacies interface in this context?

RQ2b: What is the relationship between identity work and category work and legitimacy?

Chapter 6

Research Design: A UNIQ case study

The previous chapter made my theoretical and empirical goals clear, and the work of this chapter is to set out how I achieved them. While it is prudent to distinguish between a research design's 'methods' and 'methodology', with the former referring to the practical strategies for collecting data and the latter constituting 'the logic linking the data to the propositions' and 'criteria for interpreting the findings' (Yin 2018:69), I found that the two overlapped significantly, iteratively informing one another.

For example, the simplest description of this thesis is that it is a single case study of a WP programme (UNIQ) at Oxford and the practitioners who work on it. Within this broad designation exists a fair amount of nuance, which has bearing on the more conceptual aspects of the study. Since UNIQ is one of Oxford's flagship access programmes, many more actors interface with the programme than the practitioners whose express job description is to manage and deliver it. This prompts the fundamental question of *who counts as a practitioner*. I therefore hope this chapter works to concretise the various conceptual choices I made, in addition to outlining the more logistical aspects of the study. Research design, according to Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2011), concerns the overarching questions of the study that inform both the methods and methodology. This chapter justifies and details how the research design of this study took shape.

This chapter is broken into four broad sections. I begin with an in-depth discussion of how I 'defined the case' of this study, addressing the quandaries I outlined above (Yin 2018). In this section, I explain my processes for iteratively defining who counts as a practitioner and for determining which communities of practitioners to

include in the study. From there, I break with methodological tradition to justify my approach to data analysis, drawn from Braun and Clarke's extensive work on reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) (e.g., Braun and Clarke 2006, 2013, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c, 2021; Braun et al. 2019). With sufficient analytic grounding, I then proceed to offer a detailed account of my data collection, which entails document analysis, a survey, and semi-structured interviews. This chapter concludes with a reflection on the study's ethical considerations, paying particular attention to problems of anonymity.

Defining the case: prioritising the human

Why Oxford?

In designing the infrastructure of my case study, I relied heavily on Robert Yin's work on case study development and will adopt his vocabulary in describing the development of the case (Yin 2018). According to Yin, a researcher must first 'decide' on a case. While I already outlined my rationale for selecting Oxford throughout Part 2, I would add that Oxford is also a good choice for this study, methodologically speaking. Yin advises that 1) sufficient data access, and 2) the case's representability of all available cases are key factors for deciding on a case (Yin 2018:59). My prior work with Oxford's office of Undergraduate Admissions and Outreach (UAO) allowed me to satisfy the first criterion comprehensively. As I will discuss in section 3, I was graciously granted latitude in accessing documentary data and ambassador contact information, and I had had prior professional contact with the majority of participants. Securing data access, as a result, was straightforward.

The second criterion is less straightforward, at least at first glance. As I have clarified throughout the previous three chapters, I selected Oxford not for its representativeness, but for its exceptionality among other potential cases for a study of WP practice–that is, the wider UK HE landscape. Exceptionality is a valid criterion: Oxford could therefore be classified as what Stake calls an 'intrinsic case study', whose

analytic value derives from its singularity—that is, its differences from other potential cases (Stake 1995:3). While this is true of Oxford *vis-a-vis* the UK HE landscape, Oxford is consummately representative of the precise object of study I hope to pursue: namely, a contradictory, changing, and deeply consequential institution in UK HE and public life more broadly.

Why UNIQ?

Once a case is decided upon, the next steps are 'defining' and 'bounding' the case, to which I ultimately took an iterative approach. Defining and bounding the case together determines the basic parameters of the object of analysis and where these parameters start and stop. Due to both logistical constraints and my desire to develop as rich and thick an analysis of practice as was feasible, I decided early on that I wanted to explore Oxford WP practice by focussing on a single programme managed by the *university*.

An immediate caveat: what constitutes a 'university-wide' effort at Oxford is not necessarily obvious. The college system renders Oxford WP highly decentralised (see Allouch 2017), and formal and informal collaborations between colleges complicate a simple binary between small, idiosyncratic 'college' outreach events and bigger university access programmes. Moreover, flagship university access programmes, like the Opportunity Oxford scheme and the newly minted Foundation Year programme (now called 'Astrophoria'), had origins in the colleges (University College and Lady Margaret Hall, respectively), and still, to some degree, have 'homes' in their colleges of origin. In fact it is arguably, a category error to even refer to the 'University of Oxford' (much less 'Oxford WP') as such.

Acknowledging the instability of the category of 'university-wide', I landed on UNIQ as my case relatively quickly. For one, UNIQ is the longest-standing and largest WP programme put on by Oxford. UNIQ was formally founded in 2010, having grown out of the nationwide Sutton Trust Summer School programmes. Since then, it has seen

near exponential growth. In 2019, UNIQ offered 1,350 spots on its 2019 residential. Due to its sheer size, the majority of Oxford colleges are involved in UNIQ, hosting residential students at the very least. Second, UNIQ has been Oxford's flagship access programme since then, and has been a central aspect of Oxford's APPs since they were first mandated (Oxford APP 2020-21 to 2024-2025). UNIQ's designation as an 'access' programme, however, is complicated—a problem addressed throughout the findings chapters.

Although definitions are ever-fluid, I regard outreach and access as conceptually distinct when it comes to practice; the latter intervenes at the level of the structural, while the former constitutes supplemental support to structural changes. Widening access, therefore, involves intervening on 'the structural barriers and constraints that may impede progression, for example, through educational disadvantage or the operation of the higher education sector' (Harrison and Waller 2017a:21). 'Outreach' refers to a wide range of activities—summer schools, school visits, mentorship schemes, and the like–that aim to encourage disadvantaged students to make applications to university. UNIQ, as it does not intervene in admissions processes or make other structural changes to how students interface with the university, is best described as an outreach programme. UNIQ's designation as an access programme is fruitful in that it underscores the slipperiness of the operative categories surrounding WP, a phenomenon I explore at length in the findings.

Before proceeding, it is important to gain a sense of how UNIQ runs. A full-time team of Oxford WP practitioners lead the team, governing research and design, delivery, and aspects of evaluation. UNIQ itself is a weeklong residential programme offered in both the spring and summer to high-achieving state-educated students in their first year of further education. It seeks to provide these students a 'realistic glimpse' of the undergraduate experience at Oxford, both academically and socially. Just as in the Oxford admissions process, students make applications to a particular subject, for which

they will attend lectures, do assignments, and attend tutorials and/or lab practicums, depending on discipline. UNIQ's academic programme is designed and delivered by Oxford faculty. At this point, due to UNIQ's growth, the majority of Oxford faculties now offer a UNIQ course, meaning that UNIQ interfaces with a large number of academics across Oxford. Throughout the week, students are exposed to Oxford social life, attending formal dinners, a variety of informal get-togethers, and even a bop ('Big Open Party'). In all of this, they receive the guidance and encouragement of UNIQ ambassadors: current Oxford students who are charged with managing UNIQ's on-the-ground operations.

Another core dimension of UNIQ is that it has, in one practitioner's words, always been 'hot on evaluation'. It was, in fact, a comprehensive 2016 evaluation of UNIQ that inspired the creation of a university-wide evaluation strategy for WP (Oxford APP 2020; 3.3,112). Since then, Oxford has recruited a dedicated evaluation team to monitor and evaluate programmes across its WP apparatus. The evaluation team, moreover, regularly assists with programme development to ensure that interventions are evaluable. We will explore UNIQ's relationship to evaluation at length in Chapter 9.

Who is a practitioner?

Our discussion of UNIQ's many moving parts brings us to the question of who counts as a practitioner in the UNIQ context. UNIQ is profoundly embedded across different facets of Oxford. Indeed, from the description of UNIQ above, we learn that career WP practitioners, student ambassadors, evaluators, and Oxford faculty members are all crucial actors in UNIQ's operations. Here, organisational language is helpful. Recalling Lawrence and Phillip's (2019:119) definition of organisations, organisations are not defined and bounded *a priori*, but 'exist as meaningful patterns arising from the interactions' between 'members and interested external actors, and in the heterogeneous relationships among and between this network of actors'. I opted to conceptualise UNIQ,

therefore, as a common space in which an array of diverse actors meet and work toward the stated common project of Oxford WP.

Though in different capacities, and with differing levels of commitment, all the actors involved in UNIQ were engaging in WP practice. My original plan, accordingly, was to dedicate a chapter to each sub-community involved in WP: career practitioners, student ambassadors, evaluators, and faculty. Recruitment-related barriers, however, prevented me from obtaining sufficient data on faculty members. Since questions of access invariably bear on questions of pedagogy and disciplinary configurations (O'Brien 2013), I wanted to limit my sample to one department so I could examine the interrelation of WP and academic disciplines in more depth. Given my undergraduate training in Classics, the Classics faculty was a natural choice. The question of access, moreover, is a central one in the field. Classics, as a discipline, is mired in a crisis of self-definition: who should Classics, previously the exclusive province of elites, be for? I conducted an expert interview with a classicist (Dr Arlene Holmes-Henderson) who underscored the existential nature of these questions. I therefore thought, and still think, that exploring how classicists conceptualise the legitimacy of 'Classics access work' would be a fruitful endeavour. Unfortunately, I was not able to reach a critical mass of participants to fully explore these questions: I interviewed three classicists engaged in outreach work, but only one had worked on UNIQ. I was able to use faculty data to contextualise programme delivery (see Ch.7), but I ultimately did not interrogate faculty perspectives in their own right. My case therefore centres on parties whose primary remit is to work on WP: practitioners, student ambassadors, and evaluators.

In short, I increasingly began conceptualising the case in human, as opposed to strictly programmatic, terms. Initially, I thought I was conducting a straightforward 'single' case study, as I was focussing on a single programme at a single institution, but I readily found that the realities of WP work at Oxford were more complicated. As Yin concedes, cases 'are not readily bounded but may have blurry definitions' (Yin 2018:111).

Though it does not fit neatly into any one model for a case, the case study is best described as an 'embedded case study', as it has several units of analysis (programme development, delivery, and evaluation) embedded within a governing single case, UNIQ.

What about when?

I conducted interviews from January to April 2021 and asked practitioners to reflect on their experience working on UNIQ over time. About half the practitioners I interviewed had been working on the programme since its inception in 2010, and the other half had joined in the late 2010s (see Fig.6.7). Since most conversations that took place between 2020 and 2022 involved some mention of the pandemic, I did ask a question on WP and COVID-19, but I ultimately did not include the data it yielded in the findings. I am interested in practitioners' experience with delivery, and the 2020 UNIQ cycle was certainly not representative of how delivery typically materialises (the 2021 cycle was not yet complete at the time of interviews). I therefore consider my temporal purview to be between approximately 2010-2019.

In my findings, I discuss major developments in the programme, and practitioners' relationship to various changes within Oxford WP (e.g., the initial evaluation that created 'Oxford realism' in 2012, and the creation of the evaluation department in 2018), and I pay attention to how the experiences of veteran practitioners compare and contrast with those of less experienced colleagues throughout my analysis. However, my predominant theoretical interests are in how, in the interview encounter, practitioners make sense of their work through category work, identity work, and field-jumping. As the basis of my data is semi-structured interviews, as opposed to participant observations and/or other ethnographic methods, I invariably accessed these perspectives through retrospection. I do not see this as a limitation *per se*: sensemaking is an inherently retrospective act (Weick 1995). In fact, in asking practitioners to loop back and reflect on their work in early 2021, I seized on a moment in which collective

awareness of social justice in HE is unusually high. Early 2021 was a time of social upheaval: from the rage of a global pandemic, to renewed global organising to fight anti-Black racism after George Floyd's murder, to the fallout of highly significant geopolitical events (e.g.,the US 2020 election). In HE, there was increased conversation about the implications of these events; universities were scrambling to demonstrate—or, in more cynical terms, perform—that they were taking action on these concerns (Doharty, Madriaga, and Salisbury 2021). Regardless of the ways in which institutions responded, social change was discussed more openly and with more critical terms in HE contexts. In my view, the timing enabled myself and practitioners to be more frank about what their work amounted to as a project of social justice, and how they assessed it.

Interpreting the case: reflexive thematic analysis

In this section, I will break from the convention of relating research design chronologically (e.g., methodology, methods, analysis) and front my discussion of my analytic approach, drawn from Braun and Clarke's method for reflexive thematic analysis (RTA). I applied RTA to all empirical data: namely, to survey results and interviews. RTA, as I will show, is particularly well-suited for a broadly interpretivist study with strong deductive theoretical aims. I will lead with a discussion of RTA to clarify the philosophical approach I took to the procedural elements of qualitative research, which will ground my discussion of methods in the next section (Braun and Clarke 2019b:591).

RTA as a distinct approach to thematic analysis

Since 2006, Braun and Clarke have developed an extensive body of work on qualitative inquiry and method. The impetus behind their seminal 2006 article was to address the fact that thematic analysis (TA) was a 'poorly demarcated and rarely acknowledged, yet widely used qualitative analytic method' (Braun and Clarke 2006:77). As a corrective,

they proposed an iterative and 'theoretically flexible' framework to performing methodologically sound TA in psychological research. Their approach proliferated across the social sciences over the following decade, gaining unanticipated popularity (Braun and Clarke 2019b).

Braun and Clarke were surprised by the diversity of adaptations, particularly given that many relied on paradigmatic assumptions that were incompatible with their own methodological sensibilities. In response, they have come to conceptualise TA as a theoretically flexible umbrella approach, but they now clarify that 'specific iterations of TA encode particular paradigmatic and epistemological assumptions about meaningful knowledge production and thus their theoretical flexibility is more or less constrained' (Braun and Clarke 2019b:592). Across their body of work, they identify and critically assess three primary schools of TA: coding reliability, codebook, and their own approach, reflexive thematic analysis (RTA).

Coding reliability prioritises reliability and replicability in theme generation; it is concerned with identifying 'accurate' codes and themes. Accuracy is gauged by the level of agreement, or consensus, among multiple researchers, which is usually measured by Cohen's kappa. It, in brief, imports quantitative (and positivist) sensibilities into (small Q) qualitative projects. Codebook analysis, in Braun and Clarke's conception, is an umbrella term for TA approaches that bridge the coding reliability and RTA. While coding reliability and codebook TA to varying degrees reflect (post)positivist leanings, RTA is 'fully qualitative', which means that it is qualitative 'with regard to both philosophy and procedure' (Braun and Clarke 2019b:591). This study, as I addressed in Chapter 1, would count as big-Q qualitative, and thereby accords well with an RTA approach.

The defining procedure of RTA is theme construction, which operationalizes the epistemic and reflexive commitments of qualitative research into an analytic method. In RTA, themes reflect a 'pattern of shared meaning, organized around a core concept or

idea, a central organizing concept' (Braun et al. 2019b:845). In its emphasis on uncovering patterns of meaning 'behind' or 'underneath' data, this definition strongly resonates with a constructionist orientation to knowledge production. The meaning-making central to RTA contrasts strongly with what Braun and Clarke call 'domain summary' approaches to theme development. Domain summary, which is the characteristic procedure of coding reliability and some (more positivist) codebook approaches, sits at the surface or semantic level of meaning, rarely venturing beyond summarizing what participants said in interviews on a topical basis (Braun et al. 2019b). Braun and Clarke refer to themes that apprehend semantic and/or latent features of data as 'bucket themes'. There is, of course, analytic usefulness to generating bucket themes, although Braun et al. warn that domain summary can flatten TA to 'simply a data reduction activity, where the purpose of analysis is to succinctly summarize the diversity of responses across the scope of a project' (Braun et al. 2019b:846).

In order for domain summary to work, themes must in some way be treated as inputs that determine the 'buckets' of topics and concepts that organise and appraise the data. If themes are correctly identified, i.e., if domains of data are usefully summarised, they will capture realities of the data relevant to the research questions at hand and will therefore be drawn out in the coding process. Themes, then, act as both analytic inputs and outputs in domain summary. RTA, conversely, treats themes as outputs of the analytic process. The 'organizing concepts' that string patterns of meaning together are not latent in the data. They are stories that the researcher constructs, which often involves considerable interpretative work on the part of the researcher to explore and develop an understanding of patterned meaning across the dataset. This is where theme development in RTA derives its analytic affordance; it '[unites] data that might otherwise appear disparate, or meaning that occurs in multiple and varied contexts' and is therefore successful when it '[explains] large portions of a dataset' (Braun et al. 2019:846). A small vocabulary note: given the focus on the co-construction of meaning, it is

incorrect to say that themes 'emerge' from data in the context of RTA, since 'emergence' implies that they were latent in the data.

In my analysis process, I closely followed the conceptualisation of theme development outlined by adhering to the following stages. After briefly discussing the relationship between RTA and common analytical goals in IWP, I will expand on how I approached each step, providing a representative example from my dataset.

Figure 6.1: RTA stages (adapted from Braun and Clarke 2019a)

Familiarisation with the data	Reading and re-reading data to the point of immersing oneself in data
Coding	Developing short labels capturing important features of the data that could be relevant to answer RQs
Generating initial themes	Critically examining codes to identify broader patterns of meaning that might be significant to answering RQs
Reviewing themes	Judging 'candidate themes' against the dataset to see if they tell a convincing story of the data that answers RQs
Defining and naming themes	Naming and developing an in-depth analysis of each theme and the story it tells
Writing up	Weaving an analytic narrative of data according to themes and placing it in conversation with existing literature

RTA and IWP

There is a rich body of IWP that possesses what Braun and Clarke would classify as big-Q sensibilities (see especially Creed et al. 2010; Dacin et al. 2010; Lok 2010; Lok and de Rond 2013; Bjerregaard and Jonasson 2014; Giorgi and Palmisano 2017). These studies deploy a range of approaches to data analysis depending on their analytic goals. Several

rely on grounded theory and other heavily inductive approaches to achieve theory development (Dacin et al. 2010; Lok and de Rond 2013; Giorgi and Palmisano 2017); others took a more deductive tack, by coding for processes of institutional work and, in Bjerregaard and Jonasson's wording, 'reflexively triangulating' data with theory to develop thick descriptions of how institutional work processes materialise on the ground (Creed et al. 2010; Lok 2010; Bjerregaard and Jonasson 2014).

My approach is closer to the latter. As Braun and Clarke clarify on their website, RTA does not aim for theory development, but rather to 'produce conceptually informed interpretations of data' (Braun and Clarke nd.). RTA can generate and refine concepts and categories and explore their interrelation, but it does not develop a proper process model *per se*. RTA's focus on yielding strong conceptual interpretations of data accords with my goals: I am interested in exploring, describing, and comparing the micro-strategies of institutional work conducted by practitioners: identity work, category work, and field-jumping. To do so, I ultimately adopted a deductive, latent, and constructionist approach to RTA (see Fig.6.2).

Figure 6.2: Analytic goals within RTA (adapted from Braun and Clarke nd.)

Approach	*Description*
Inductive	coding and theme development are directed by the content of the data
Deductive	coding and theme development are directed by existing concepts or ideas
Semantic	coding and theme development reflect the explicit content of the data
Latent	coding and theme development report concepts and assumptions underpinning the data
(Critical) realist/essentialist	focuses on reporting an assumed reality evident in the data
Constructionist	focuses on looking at how a certain reality is created by the data

*Braun and Clarke note that deductive, latent, and constructionist approaches tend to work in tandem, likewise with inductive, semantic, and realist/essentialist categories. This was true in my inquiry.

However, in his detailed 'worked example' of RTA analysis, Byrne (2022) stresses that it is rare, if not impossible, for any data analysis project to be purely inductive or deductive, or purely latent or semantic. Integral to RTA is an acknowledgment that qualitative inquiry is a non-linear journey. As I discussed in the introduction, I arrived at my theoretical framework iteratively, through challenging the conceptual tools at play with my data and *vice versa*. During certain stages, this demanded that I honour a 'data-led' approach, and at other times, I allowed theoretical precepts to guide my thinking. I will illustrate how my process unfolded by recounting the development of my final theme, 'The contradiction of outreach', since it is representative of how themes are developed by reflexive engagement with both data and literature.

Familiarisation with data

Data familiarisation is accomplished through sheer perseverance: reading and re-reading data until one feels they are fully immersed. Though it is at its most intense during the early stages of RTA, data familiarisation ideally occurs throughout the entirety of a project. For me, it reprised noticeably at the start of each phase of the study. For example, I re-read documentary data gathered in Phase 1 in light of data collected during Phase 2, and I revisited data from both phases regularly during Phase 3.

During data familiarisation, it is prudent to take impressionistic notes to capture anything that stands out as relevant to the study's aims. Even when I was attempting to develop a ToC for UNIQ, I knew from critical WP literature and my own experience conducting evaluations of WP programmes that the pursuit of WP involves both structural and supplemental interventions, and that universities like Oxford are not particularly amenable to the former. As a result, the tensions between UNIQ's positioning as an access programme (however polysemous these terms can be, see Ch.7)

and its propensity to select students who arguably would have applied anyway, stood out to me.

Box 1: Familiarisation Example

Ephemerality of roles (WP coordinator, access officer, etc.)
Recruitment → access oriented

- Students with 'a little bit of support anyway' are selected → heavy focus on disadvantage
- But there is a recursion into recruitment (Matt)
- Still very different ballgame from WP elsewhere: Linda's experience at other universities
- Expansion
- Seriously = 'strategically important'
- Recruitment and access became less dichotomous
- Julien: wouldn't have gotten in

General WP → completely Oxford focussed (Jemima)
More representative of Oxford over time

- Selection standards
- Personal statement (actually less true)
- Flags aligning with university admissions standards (controversy)
- Difficulty of academic material
- Ambassadors to represent Oxford
- The free lunch (Freya)

Companion goal is to 'make Oxford more representative'

- Seeing themselves here
- Student confidence
- Ambassadors to represent students

While it might not be immediately apparent from this jumbled collection of impressions, it was from excerpts like this that I recognised the centrality of contradiction to Oxford WP. I shifted my focus from correcting practitioners' understandings of access and outreach to focusing on how the terms themselves are contradictory, since they seek to delineate dimensions of a contradictory enterprise. From my reading of Ahmed (2012) and Berger and Luckmann (1966), I discovered neoinstitutional theory and its emphasis on institutional contradictions, which analytically captured precisely what I was seeing in the data.

Coding

Codes are the building blocks of themes (Braun and Clarke 2013). Themes, however, are not reducible to the codes that comprise them. Indeed, many codes end up not factoring into themes at all, or informing themes that one does not expect them to correspond to. Ideally, all relevant snippets of data are coded with 'succinct, shorthand descriptive or interpretive labels' that can 'stand alone and inform of the underlying commonality among constituent data items in relation to the subject of the research' (Byrne 2022:1399). My coding of this excerpt from Matt demonstrates the granularity of this coding process.

Box 2: Coding example

> And so I feel very uncomfortable using outreach because actually [**C1: participants acknowledge contradictions in outreach**], I think it's just the way of the university or the department capturing all of our activity under one word [**C2: terms in WP have multiple meanings**] when I think we should, there should be a recruitment team [**C3: terms in WP *should* have multiple meanings**]. I think there should be a marketing and recruitment team [**C4: recruitment is distinct from outreach**]. There should be a separate international team [**C5: international separate concern than domestic in WP**]. But all there's an international team that has now merged into outreach. The recruitment work that we do is merged into outreach… [**C6: there should be a distinction between outreach and recruitment**]
>
> …But it taints, maybe I shouldn't say that, [**C7: practitioners feel apprehension to call out contradiction**] but it does—I think it does taint the perspective of what WP and access actually is [**C8: practitioner calls out contradiction in spite of apprehension**]. And it does interfere slightly with some of the purpose of that work [**C9: the purpose of practitioner's work is not captured by operative terms].** But that's because I'm a purist and maybe I come from a charity background and I only care about access and outreach, access and widening participation [**C10: practitioner categorises outreach, access, and WP as similar**]. I don't care to work in recruitment [**C11: practitioner regards recruitment as normatively inferior to outreach, access, and WP**].

Generating initial themes & reviewing them

After coding the data and examining the relationship between codes, one turns their attention to the aggregate meaning they can glean from the dataset. As aforementioned, themes constitute a 'pattern of shared meaning, organized around a core concept or idea, a central organizing concept' in RTA. Themes, moreover, can be fruitfully divided

into subthemes, which 'capture and develop notable specific aspects of the central organising concept of one theme' (Braun and Clarke 2013:231). We will turn to the complexity of delineating themes and subthemes shortly. My initial theme, 'Contradiction of outreach at Oxford', was schematised in the following way:

Box 3: Initial theme example

Proposed Theme: Contradiction of Outreach at Oxford

- *Sub-theme 1:* Admissions has competing pressures
- *Sub-theme 2*: Space as an inevitable contradiction of an outreach programme
- *Sub-theme 3*: Potential presents contradiction
- *Sub-theme 4*: Categories are confused in WP practice at Oxford

If we return briefly to my impressionistic notes around access and outreach, we notice how much they shifted and reconfigured during the theme-building process. 'Free lunch' became subsumed under another theme I developed: 'The Contradiction of Demystification and Myth', which relates to the phenomenon I term 'Oxford realism'. The ephemerality of roles, something that I do find intrinsically interesting about the WP sector, ultimately did not become captured under this theme, or any theme.

Once a researcher constructs an initial theme, they must subject it to rigorous review. Braun and Clarke (2012:65) suggest that one judge their prospective theme against the following questions:

Figure 6:3: Questions for interrogating potential themes

(Q1) *Is this a theme (it could be just a code)?*

(Q2) *If it is a theme, what is the quality of this theme (does it tell me something useful about the data set and my research question)?*

(Q3) *What are the boundaries of this theme (what does it include and exclude)?*

(Q4) *Are there enough (meaningful) data to support this theme (is the theme thin or thick)?*

(Q5) *Are the data too diverse and wide ranging (does the theme lack coherence)?*

In the case of this particular theme, Q3 and Q5 posed challenges. Readers will now know that category work is an operative construct in this study. In fact, I realised the centrality of category work to navigating contradiction when I attempted to nest Sub-Theme 4 under this proposed theme. There was so much richness to 'categories being confused' that I necessitated that I return to IWP literature and data to find strategies for better capturing it in my themes. With the conceptual and empirical justification to highlight category work as its own recurring theme in the data, I determined that the proposed theme's boundaries (Q3) were too inclusive.

In light of my shift to foregrounding category work in the final themes, moreover, other sub-themes became subsumed under my analysis of category work, identity work, and legitimacy, as Box 4 will illustrate.

Defining and naming themes & writing up

After iteratively consulting both IWP theory and the data, I decided to track two overarching categories of themes: 'descriptive' themes that capture what the operative conditions of, and contradictions in, Oxford WP are, and 'conceptual themes' that pertain to the strategies of institutional work through which practitioners navigate them. The study's dominant conceptual themes—identity work, category work, and field-jumping (represented by 'zooming in' and 'zooming out')—are the core theoretical concerns of the study. I distinguish between the two categories because they correspond to the study's two research questions, which have different analytic priorities (see Ch.5). The two categories often interlock in my presentation, which I will describe momentarily.

Therefore, what I once conceptualised as the over-saturated theme of 'The contradiction of outreach' is best disentangled into two questions, which correspond to two themes belonging to each category:

Box 4: Final theme(s) examples

Category: Descriptive	*Category: Conceptual*
• **Relevant theme:** Contradiction 1: Coping with what 'outreach means'	• **Relevant theme**: Coping [with the contradiction of outreach] through category work

When it comes to naming themes and presenting them in a write-up, there is no pre-ordained strategy for doing so in RTA. The patent difference between the presentation of themes in two studies of Braun and Clarke's on male body hair depilation—Jennings et al. (2018) and Clarke and Braun (2019)—is illustrative. Jennings et al. (2018) clearly demarcate themes in their findings with indicative names (e.g., Theme 1: 'Secrecy and shame'). Clarke and Braun (2019), alternatively, opt to present themes using a story mapping technique (Braun and Clarke 2013), interspersing narratives of body-hair depilation as told by the participants with relevant theoretical constructs. Nowhere are themes named explicitly.

Byrne (2022) acknowledges that best practices for theme presentation are something of an open question in RTA, endorsing any approach that 'build[s] a cogent narrative of the data'. The strategy I ultimately adopted essentially splits the differences between Jennings et al.'s (2018) and Clarke and Braun's (2019) approach. Every heading and subheading throughout the findings—with exception of chapter discussions and their subheadings—represents a theme or subtheme. The way that headings have been named, moreover, should make it self-evident whether their corresponding themes and sub-themes are descriptive or conceptual. Conceptual themes make some mention of identity work, category work, or field-jumping, and descriptive themes do not. However,

I do not attempt to explicitly classify every theme or subtheme as such. This is because 1) some conceptual themes are nested under descriptive themes for the sake of argumentative cohesion (e.g., the example above is organised that way in the findings), and 2) it is my conviction that one should not overdetermine the relationship between themes. My two operative categories of themes, while useful, are not entirely mutually exclusive: the substantive context surrounding one's institutional work is constitutive of said work.

RTA, moreover, is premised on the assumption that themes have multiple meanings and can overlap and contradict. The substance of the write-up underneath each theme, and the aggregate discussion of themes in discussion sections, should do the work of synthesising and critiquing the content of themes and their overlap.

A related note on naming. Like Jennings et al. (2018), the names I give themes do not fully capture the essence of the theme. Just as the theme 'Secrecy and shame' tells one little about how they materialise in the data and their interrelationship, the multiple instances of the theme 'Category work' imply far more than my mere noticing category work was at play.

Studying the case: methods

I conducted data collection following the timeline below.

Figure 6.4: Research timeline

Phase 1	
September 2020	Gained access to documents
September 2020-December 2020	Began dedicated document analysis phase
Phase 2	
January 2021 -May 2021	Conducted interviews

January 15, 2021	Survey goes live
March 15, 2021	Survey closes
Phase 3	
May 2021	Began analysis phase, which involved narrowing down documents, data cleaning, transcribing, and interpretation
June 2021 – April 2023	Continued data interpretation and write-up

Phase 1: Document analysis

Approach to documents

The first phase of the study was dedicated to documentary analysis. Documents did not factor into my final dataset on which I performed RTA, although they did provide vital substantive context for interviews and the analysis thereof. In this respect, my treatment of documents closely mirrors bucket coding. I sifted through documents, broke them into categories according to their contents, and decided which had valuable information for me to glean. Though Braun and Clarke stress its limitations as a mechanism for the final interpretation of a dataset, bucket coding is not incongruent with RTA. Braun et al. agree that nodes of 'explicit and concrete meaning' are important building blocks for theme development, provided that they are not the endpoints of analysis (Braun et al. 2019:845). I conceptualise domain summary as a necessary, if rudimentary, steppingstone to performing RTA, as opposed to a violation of RTA's precepts.

Though it deals with semantic (as opposed to latent) aspects of data, the documentary analysis I performed was not neutral. Documentary analysis is an agentive process. It is data-driven, but also involves decision-making: in the case of my study, the sheer number of documents at my disposal (n = ~10,000) required that I decide which

trails of documents to follow and what directions I might take in following them. The documents themselves, moreover, were not neutral. Documents do not constitute 'neutral, transparent reflections of organizational or occupational life' (Atkinson and Coffey 2004:77). They are, rather, constructed representations of social realities. Every quality of a document—its motivation, function, textual conventions, author, and audience—is mediated by, and inseparable from, the social world in which the document was produced. While it was not the aim of my analysis to deconstruct the social realities in documents in depth, I did read documents with a critical eye to assumptions latent in them, and noted any relevance these assumptions may have to the questions I would ask during interviews.

My substantive aim for document analysis, accordingly, was to gain a bird's-eye sense of UNIQ's activities given the organisational structures and strictures in which it operates. I wanted to probe how, in a general, public way, the UNIQ team situated their agenda and activity within Oxford's WP landscape. Through establishing familiarity with the programme, I learned about both its staff and the communities with which it interfaces. This gave me requisite program knowledge to design my survey and begin recruitment for the interviews.

Document analysis logistics

All of UNIQ's documents, from its founding in the early 2010s to the present, are located in a single folder on a larger shared server. The evaluation team houses its files across several folders on the same drive, but all evaluation materials for UNIQ are kept in the UNIQ folder. The only relevant evaluation document outside of UNIQ evaluations was UAO's monitoring and evaluation guide, a publicly accessible text that I discussed with evaluators in their interviews.

I began negotiating access to the UNIQ folder with programme leads in July 2020. We settled on the terms of data access in September 2020. The agreement stipulated the

exclusion criteria below. As I discuss in the ethics section of this chapter, I was trusted to avoid the excluded documents on a good faith basis; I technically could access them on the server.

Figure 6.5: Document exclusion criteria

Document category	Rationale
Student medical release forms	Personal sensitive data
Financial documents (e.g., grant applications, budgets)	Privacy
Any password-protected documents	Sensitivity of material

The UNIQ folder contains approximately 10,000 files (they are updated and deleted regularly) that are divided into several dozen subfolders. I started analysis by inspecting each of the subfolders in detail and making impressionistic notes about the documents they contained. As mentioned, this exercise was largely exploratory, aligning with Step 1 of Braun and Clarke's RTA approach. I refrained from conducting any formal coding or theme development (that is, Steps 2-6 of the RTA approach), although I did flag documents of organisational significance (such as UNIQ's programmatic theory of change) to explore in interviews with programme leads.

Annulla Linders advises that document analysis should prioritise documents specifying 1) 'who the participating actors are, 2) how they go about constructing or contesting the aspect of reality of interest, and 3) what the interpretive content of their

activities and claims are' (Linders 2008:469). I broadly followed her criteria in collecting and familiarising myself with a subset of documents of the following types:

Figure 6.6: Important documents used to inform programme knowledge

Document type	Rationale
Documents containing a programme 'mission statement'	UNIQ's self-concept, and the image it puts forth to the public, have changed considerably over time. Give a strong sense of 'who' and 'how'.
Documents referencing selection criteria	A critical facet of the program and a point of contention during interviews. Springboard for discussing 'what' during interviews.
Steering committee and governance meeting minutes	Insight into UNIQ's wider institutional position. Give a strong sense of 'who' and 'how'.
Internal and external evaluations of UNIQ	Evaluation is a prime concern of the study. Evaluation is also a primary 'what'—that is, interpretive practice—under study.
UAO Monitoring and Evaluation Guide	Same as above.
Relevant institutional documents*	'Relevant institutional documents' refer to university statements and plans that concern Oxford's work to widen access and participation (all of which are publicly accessible). As I discussed in the previous section, 'doing documents' is a key facet of institutional life, and UNIQ's work was influenced by, or implicated in, several university-wide documents. UNIQ is Oxford's flagship access program and is therefore the primary intervention proposed by Oxford's current APP. UNIQ's work, however, interfaces with commitments found in the university's Athena Oxford and race equality charter, both of which I studied during documentary analysis.

Phase 2: empirical data collection

Ambassador survey

I began Phase 2 by disseminating a survey (Appendix 2) to ambassadors. The survey served two purposes: to recruit ambassadors to participate in semi-structured interviews and to gain a top-level sense of how they perceive UNIQ's work and navigate their own

work with UNIQ. While interview recruitment took precedence over the analysis of survey data *per se*, I did include a small amount of particularly rich survey data in thematic analysis. I explore ambassador perspectives in Chapter 8.

I drew my sample from an internal database of prior ambassadors that I was granted access to during Phase I. Although the database contains information from UNIQ's founding to the present, the nature of the database limited the kind of intern I could recruit. Interns were asked to submit their contact details directly after they completed their most recent stint interning, usually in the summer following their 2nd year at university. Most ambassadors listed their university email addresses, which expire the summer after their 3rd year unless they pursue graduate study at Oxford. As a result, the sample was skewed heavily toward participants who interned between the years of 2016-2020. This, in my case, was not a limitation, as my analysis considers how UNIQ has recently operated as a fixture of Oxford WP.

On 15 January 2021, I sent an email invitation containing a secure link to the survey (Appendix 2) to 342 email addresses from the database. Due to the issue of email expiry, 148 of the addresses were invalid. From the 194 potential respondents I contacted, I received 50 completed surveys, with 20 interns indicating that they would be willing to interview. After I followed up, 10 ambassadors ultimately agreed to interview.

Figure 6.8: Ambassador survey response rate breakdown

Stage	N	Stage success rate	Form of success
Recruited	342		
Valid	194	56.7%	
Responded	**50**	**25.8%**	**Response rate**

Invited to interview	20	40%	
Interviewed	**10**	**20%**	**% interviewed**

Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were the core of this study; it is from them that the bulk of my results were generated. As aforementioned, participants fell into four categories: UNIQ practitioners, UNIQ student ambassadors, UAO evaluators, Classics faculty who had worked on UNIQ/other Oxford access projects, and expert interviews. I recruited my expert interview participants through prior connections: Dr Neil Harrison connected me with Richard Shiner, then head of evaluation at the OfS, to speak to me about the landscape of evaluation in WP. As aforementioned, I reached out to Dr Arlene Holmes-Henderson to speak with me about the relationship between Classics and WP. I recruited ambassadors through the survey, as I explained above. For practitioners, evaluators, and Classics faculty, my recruitment approach was purposive. I started with participants with whom I either had a prior connection via my work with UAO, or whom I had learned of through document analysis in Phase I. From there, I snowballed the remainder of the participants.

Figure 6.8: Interview participants

Pseudonym	Category	Years Active	How participant was recruited
Lance	Practitioner: Career	Lead from inception, active in delivery until late 2010s	Prior connection
Jemima	Practitioner: Career	Lead from inception until mid 2010s	Prior connection
Lisa	Practitioner: Career	Practitioner mid 2010s	Prior connection
Linda	Practitioner: Career	Practitioner since mid 2010s	Snowballed from another participant
Freya	Practitioner: Career	Lead from inception through mid 2010s	Snowballed from another participant

Matt	Practitioner: Career	Lead since late 2010s	Prior connection
Julien	Practitioner: Ambassador	Early 2010s; worked in Oxford WP in late 2010s	Snowballed from another participant
Conor	Practitioner: Ambassador	Late 2010s	Survey
Alex	Practitioner: Ambassador	Late 2010s	Survey
Sophia	Practitioner: Ambassador	Late 2010s	Survey
Phoebe	Practitioner: Ambassador	Late 2010s	Survey
Joe	Practitioner: Ambassador	Late 2010s	Survey
Mo	Practitioner: Ambassador	Early 2010s	Survey
Lucy	Practitioner: Ambassador	Late 2010s	Survey
Angie	Practitioner: Ambassador	Mid 2010s	Survey
Richard Shiner	Expert – Evaluation	n/a	Prior connection
Dr Arlene Holmes-Henderson	Expert – Classicist	n/a	Prior connection
Wren	Practitioner: Evaluator	Late 2010s, early 2020s	Prior connection
Raven	Practitioner: Evaluator	Late 2010s, early 2020s	Prior connection
Bran	Practitioner: Evaluator	Late 2010s, early 2020s	Prior connection
Jae	Practitioner: Evaluator	Late 2010s, early 2020s	Prior connection
Charlotte	Faculty	Unspecified	Prior connection
Marcus	Faculty	Unspecified	Snowballed from another participant
Jude	Faculty	Unspecified	Prior connection

Interviews were conducted over Microsoft Teams video call. They ranged from 20-45 minutes long and were semi-structured (see Appendix 3 for all interview

schedules). Open-ended interviews are ubiquitous in qualitative inquiry, and their utility is often treated as self-evident (see Silverman 2017). Semi-structured interviews appear to offer the ideal 'middle-path' for the qualitative researcher: in its structured components, it can attend to the deductive theoretical questions on which a qualitative study hinges, while its 'openness' allows the interview to become an active site of co-creation between the interviewer and interviewee. In 1997, qualitative heavyweights Paul Atkinson and David Silverman critiqued the open-ended interview for its 'stubbornly Romantic impulse' to enshrine interview data as an authentic reflection of a participant's 'experiences' (Atkinson and Silverman 1997:305). In 2015, Atkinson doubled down on his critique, suggesting that interviews

> [p]rovide little or no opportunity to investigate the multiple forms of social organisation and action that are the stuff of everyday life. They yield information (of sorts) in a vacuum, bereft of the sensory and material means of mundane reality. They furnish no opportunity to study the techniques and skills that social actors deploy in the course of their daily lives, or in accomplishing specialised tasks. (Atkinson 2015:92)

In his own 2017 reflection, David Silverman concurs that the semi-structured interview, in its current formulation, does not facilitate access to the participants' 'experiences' or 'perceptions' of their lived realities (see also Hammersley 2017). Contra Atkinson, however, he locates the problem in the *analysis* of interview data, not interviewing *per se*. Silverman argues that 'experience' has incorrectly become the preoccupation of qualitative data analysis of the interview. To probe a participant's 'experience' inappropriately privileges an individual's state of mind over the interactional social processes that surround and shape meaning-making (Silverman 2017:146; see Ch.1). Thinking back to Chapter 1, my epistemological position is rooted in transactional subjectivism: meaning-making, in the research context, derives from a contingent and gestalt interchange between the interviewer and interviewees. Interviewers, however

successful the interview may be, do not have untarnished access to the interviewees' psychological processes.

Acknowledging similar epistemic limitations, Silverman recommends a 'constructionist' formulation of the interview and the analysis thereof. To ensure the theoretical consistency of my approach to interviewing, I followed the following protocols, adapted from both Silverman and Mirka Koro-Ljunberg's advice for framing a constructionist interview:

1. Throughout the interview, I acknowledged the interview as a site of interactional meaning-making.

The constructionist interview does not facilitate the interviewer unidirectionally probing the interviewee's experiences or perspectives. In light of this, Koro-Ljunberg (2008:432) recommends that 'the analytic and interpretive focus of the interview shifts from individual responses to shared knowledge and meaning-making that occurs during the interaction'. The constructionist interview, and its analysis, is concerned with the polyvocality of the knowledge created within it. I made this fact explicit to participant: at the top of every interview, I read some iteration of the following:

> My dissertation research focuses broadly on UNIQ's theory of change—that is, how people working on UNIQ conceptualise the programme's aims and activities, and how they're linked to its outcomes. I'm specifically interested in how practitioners bring different perspectives and experiences to the table, and how this diversity makes for a more nuanced programme.

As I discussed in the introduction, my original intention was to construct a ToC for UNIQ. Even after my conceptual framework changed, I used the recognisable language of 'theory of change' more or less metaphorically to foreground that I am interested in practitioner's subjective experience of their institutional work on UNIQ. Another strategy I deployed to foreground the interview's interactional nature was acknowledging the strangeness of the interview. Inasmuch as the interview is a social interaction, moreover, it is a highly manufactured one. In nearly every interview, I made

the point of breaking the fourth wall, as it were, at some point during the interaction. The most common form this took was in participants' reaction to one of the concluding questions, 'What does good outreach and access look like to you?' Many participants reacted to the question with nervous laughter, or a similarly affective reaction. I made a point to break the formality of the question, and answer process and to sit their reaction. I would laugh with them and sarcastically quip 'No pressure at all!', or even explicitly acknowledge the interpretative question behind the question by adding 'I'm asking it to learn more about you, so whatever you say is what I'm looking for.' In taking on approaches like this, I ensured participants, and I myself, remained aware of the fact we were participating in a contrived and joint process of knowledge production.

2. After the interviews, I employed a 'constructionist', rather than psychologistic, approach to analysis.

After co-creating knowledge with the participant during the interview, the researcher then imposes a secondary layer of meaning on the interview interaction through interpretation and analysis. Throughout the data analysis process, Silverman urges that the interviewer should treat meaning as 'an interactional accomplishment', remaining sensitive to the variety of ways meaning evinces throughout the interview interaction (Silverman 2017:149) I adopted two of his recommended strategies for doing so.

First, I worked with exact transcripts throughout the analysis. In their inclusion of 'response tokens', pauses, and other features of speech, exact transcripts gave me insight into how the participant responded to the question holistically, as opposed to merely semantically. As I had access to video recordings of the interviews, I also noted gesticulation, facial expression, and other relevant participant reactions that might inform how I interpret their responses. In my presentation of findings, although I cleaned up some 'ums' and 'uhs', I tried to capture where participants paused or laughed,

and when participants offered a particularly emotive response, I did my best to describe (my interpretation of) the affects and emotions they displayed.

Silverman's second recommendation follows from his practical advice in the first. He suggests that, overall, the researcher's interpretation of the interview conversation should centre the outcome of the talk as opposed to the talk itself. The outcome may in fact be manifest in the talk but is at times more difficult to place. A pause before an answer, for example, can indicate more about a participant's sense of a question than the verbiage that follows. In a similar vein, moreover, I endeavour to recreate as best I can my experience of each participant's 'persona', recounting each's unique styles of talk and gesticulation.

3. At each stage, I reflected on how the interview process was influencing me.

The researcher experiences the interview formulation process, moreover, as 'semi-structured'; it, too, is sensitive to the pulls of the interview interaction. Although my schedule itself remained the same, I employed it differently as I gained more experience with interviewing. Some items on my master schedule for UNIQ practitioners, for example, were heavily 'domain summary' oriented. I had a battery of detailed questions about UNIQ's selection process and how it accounts for the fact marginalisation impacts attainment (see Appendix 3). During the two interviews (with Lance and Jemima), a focus on selection seemed sensible, as both were instrumental in formulating UNIQ's selection criteria. Their answers, in a more 'semantic' capacity, lent insight into how the program handles selection.

Over the course of the interviews, I continued to ask practitioners content-focussed questions about UNIQ but asked them differently. The selection criterion question, for example, elicited an array of notable responses: some practitioners evaded the question, some over-explained it (as though to justify it), some entirely misinterpreted it. Instead of following up to clarify their stance on the factual

dimensions of the question, I noted the qualities of responses and devised follow-ups. Moreover, as my conceptual frame continued to develop, I asked the same broad questions about what practitioners hoped to achieve through their work with UNIQ, but my follow-ups shifted, focussing on the institutional and legitimacy-related dimensions of the answers they offered.

All this being said, acknowledging the epistemic limitations of the interview encounter, I endeavour to show that knowledge produced throughout interviews is valuable to the communities at the heart of this study: WP practitioners. While I remain agnostic about the existence of a pre-social reality and our ability to apprehend it (see Ch.1), I concur with the social constructionist sociologist Darin Weinberg (2014) that productive, and mutually intelligible, knowledge production is possible when it is sensitised by the epistemic standards of ongoing academic dialogues. I seek to demonstrate that, to the best of my ability, I elicit and interpret data in a manner that is compatible with the interpretivist and emancipatory aims of critical WP research.

Reflecting on the case: ethics

The study adhered to the standards of Oxford's Central University Research Ethics Committee (CUREC), and listed the study's ethical considerations in my application for approval, which is included in the ToS document in my CoS dossier. These cover the basics of data security, participant consent, and a small elaboration on positionality.

As the study developed, however, several ethical quandaries cropped up that warrant further ethical reflection. The first is a product of my positionality as an employee for UAO, where I worked as a casual research assistant for the evaluation team from May 2018 to April 2021. The ethical questions at hand hinge on where I sit on the continuum between 'insider' and 'outsider' in conducting research on SOAR. Mercer illuminates how the dichotomy traditionally drawn between 'insiders' and 'outsiders' is

insufficient, as it rests on the assumption that individuals retain a single status in a given context. As Mercer demonstrates, researchers possess a 'status set' (Merton 1972:22 in Mercer 2007:3) that instantiates differently in response to differing institutional contexts and power relations. Facets of one's status set, moreover, do not remain fixed—even inside a single context.

This is true in my case; while I, until recently, was an insider in UAO as a whole, I occupy differing points along the insider-outsider continuum in relation to different groups within UAO. With regard to UNIQ, I have insider status to the extent that I worked with one practitioner on several evaluation projects for the programme: I edited the 2018 UNIQ digital internal evaluation, assisted in data analysis for the 2019 evaluation, and aided in the development of the post-UNIQ questionnaire for the 2019 cohort. I was not involved in the development of the aims, activities, or programme assumptions detailed in the reports, and I am not personally acquainted with most of the practitioners who designed them. Broadly, my activities in UAO can be described as *ad hoc*: I conducted evaluations on a project basis that was siloed from programme development and implementation. Nonetheless, my work history also renders me a definite insider in UAO evaluation in particular, which unavoidably influenced how I conceptualised the chapter. I will attempt to address my insiderness in evaluation with an 'active voice' throughout the chapter, flagging where my positionality and experiences shaped my interpretation of data.

More generally, I have a layered 'status set' in relation to widening participation. As an American researching in the UK, I have no experiential knowledge of national widening participation initiatives, but I have an experience analogous to UNIQ participants as someone who benefited from access schemes when applying to university in the United States. My 'status set' in relation to widening access and participation, therefore, is also comprised of elements of 'insider' and 'outsider' orientations. My

insider statuses, however, necessitate further ethical discussion, as they implicate me in insider research and its benefits and drawbacks.

The challenges and advantages of insider research are two sides of the same coin. While closeness, and often more comprehensive access, to the research setting can open more productive lines of inquiry for generating richer data, a researcher's intimacy with a context makes her prone to 'myopia', obscuring larger phenomena that an outsider without 'stakes' in the organisation might identify more easily (Mercer 2007:6). It must be noted, however, that contrary to the positivist assumption that outsiders develop more 'objective' accounts of a phenomenon, it is my view that neither insiders nor outsiders can possibly remain neutral throughout research (see Chapter 1). Regardless of insiderness, researchers inevitably introduce their own epistemological, ontological, and ethical baggage to the research process, and must maintain a reflexive attitude to their role in all aspects of the data process.

Nevertheless, insiders and outsiders must be reflexive in different ways. As an insider, reflexivity involves thinking about how my investment in UAO's success and in keeping good relationships with former co-workers can influence my, and my respondents', participation in the research process. That means I am responsible for rigorously interrogating how my positionality is driving my data collection and analysis, my approach to which I hope to have made clear not only in this chapter, but also the introduction and Chapter 1.

While I grappled with insiderness throughout the research process, by far, the most glaring ethical consideration to address is anonymity–namely, my choice not to anonymise Oxford or UNIQ. In different iterations of the thesis, I tried different approaches to anonymising the case: during the prospectus and, crucially, data collection, phases I opted not to anonymise the case, but to pseudonymise participants. This means that participants consented to the study under these terms. However, after reading empirical WP research more extensively, I found no examples of

non-anonymised cases. In response to this, I wrote a draft chapter for Oxford's Confirmation of Status (CoS) exam that anonymised Oxford and UNIQ.

Immediately, two problems became apparent. First, data from participant interviews rendered the veneer of anonymity wafer-thin. One example that stood out was Matt's recollection of the reaction on campus to MP David Lammy's condemnation of Oxford's structural racism, which I clumsily tried to reference the event in general terms. My examiners caught on, rightfully pointing out that it was, in their words, 'obvious' that my case is Oxford, even if I were to remove the Matt anecdote. Indeed, although the anecdote was not directly excerpted in my findings (its content still greatly informed analysis), my references to Oxford's age, formidable architecture, and other core features, and my own positioning as an Oxford student and employee still rendered the case's identity obvious. My examiners accordingly recommended that I opt for non-anonymity, citing the second problem inherent in anonymising Oxford. The power of this thesis' analysis derives from its confrontation of Oxford's exceptionality as a longstanding institution in UK higher education. Anonymising Oxford as 'a highly selective university' precludes meaningful analysis of the singular role Oxford (alongside Cambridge) has played in the social reproduction of inequality for nearly a millennium. This is an analytic sacrifice I am not willing to make.

As Walford (2018) candidly argues in the context of ethnographic research, retaining anonymity of research sites has always been an impossibility given the 'interconnectedness' brought about by social media and the internet. He demonstrates how the widespread availability of information about research sites renders anonymity essentially aspirational. In several of the studies I read that concern WP practices at HEIs, researchers furnished pseudonyms for universities, but quoted excerpts of APPs verbatim. Like Walford, I was able to, to put it euphemistically as he does, make 'a very good guess' at the identities of the universities under study by simply Googling the text of the APP excerpts. Even in studies that spoke of their cases in general terms,

generalised descriptions like 'X university is a selective university in the northeast of England with Y enrolment' provided enough information that readers could make an educated guess about the identity of said university. In addition to the near-universal accessibility of public data on HEIs, the highly stratified nature of the UK HE landscape renders anonymity shaky for any case study hoping to provide substantive detail about the case at hand.

As Walford indicates in his conclusion, the researcher's ethical onus is to protect participants. While Walford sees benefits to 'openness' (non-anonymity) in ethnographic research, I believe that de-identifying participants is ethically necessary in the context of this study, given how trusting and generous my participants were in offering substantive, honest, and often critical reflections on working within and against their institution. In my view, therefore, it is my duty to ensure the anonymity of participants as much as is feasible. Initially, I tried to anonymise UNIQ to provide an additional cover of anonymity. However, the choice to anonymise UNIQ as a 'university-wide outreach programme' would be an aspirational one. As I discussed in this chapter's first section, UNIQ is Oxford's *flagship* access/outreach programme. Providing any more detail beyond the fact the programme exists would blow the cover of anonymity. As an aside, this would be of any outreach or access initiative at Oxford, as there are relatively few, and information about them is widely available to the public.

There are, however, effective ways of shoring up anonymity for participants beyond pseudonymisation. One measure was in place from the beginning; Oxford does not publicly list administrative employee names or details. Second, I carefully curated the information I provide about each practitioner. Beyond specifying whether a practitioner is a lead, I omit any more details about their role and how long they have occupied it. In some cases, this meant omitting any data from interviews that spoke to specifics about their role. In earlier iterations of the thesis, I linked certain practitioners to the development of UNIQ's various programmes and projects, and I omitted these

from the final presentations of findings. This was not only to protect anonymity from my readership, but also to mitigate against participants being identifiable to other members of the UNIQ community within the university. To reiterate, these were the terms under which participants consented to the study.

Finally, a quick elaboration on participant anonymity *vis-a-vis* data security. While online delivery is the most anonymous form of survey dissemination, anonymity can never fully be reached since survey engines often retain IP addresses. Despite this, online delivery is 'effectively anonymised, and certainly "felt anonymity" is high' (Terry and Braun 2017; see also Braun et al. 2020). I redressed the potential breach of anonymity by downloading IP-free plain text of survey results to an encrypted drive. Further details of my data storage are discussed in the CUREC application.

Part 3
Findings

Chapter 7

Practitioners: contradictions & the labour of legitimacy

> It thus appears that it is extremely difficult to vanquish myth from the inside: for the very effort one makes in order to escape its stranglehold becomes in its turn the prey of myth… Truth to tell, the best weapon against myth is perhaps to mythify it in its turn.
> Roland Barthes (1972:134)

This chapter is devoted to UNIQ practitioners, career WP workers for whom 'doing WP' is a vocation and institutional duty. While its focal point is practitioners who work for UNIQ, it also canvasses the perspectives of allied WP workers at Oxford. We will acquaint ourselves with the perspectives and experiences of the WP workers named in Figure 7.1.

Figure 7.1: Oxford WP practitioners

Name	**Self-Reported Demographic Details**	**Role**
Lance	White man	Lead from UNIQ's inception in 2010 until 2018.
Jemima	White woman	Lead from UNIQ's inception
Lisa	White woman	Former operational administrator
Linda	White woman	Administrative assistant
Freya	White woman	Lead from UNIQ's inception until 2015.
Matt	White man	Lead since 2019.

Julien	White woman	UNIQ alumna and WP worker for Oxford
Jude	White man	Faculty member affiliated with UNIQ

Our analytical goals here are twofold. The first is to track and describe the contradictions of maintaining disruption as they manifest on the ground in the temporal-relational context of delivering WP at Oxford. I found that practitioners confronted two core contradictions: the contradiction of outreach, which relates to which students practitioners recruit and for what reasons, and the contradiction of 'Oxford realism'--that is, of giving WP students a realistic glimpse of undergraduate life at Oxford.

Core to our inquiry into maintaining disruption on the ground, our second objective is to probe the strategies that practitioners respond to contradiction. The practitioners confronted the contradictions of outreach and Oxford realism head-on, candidly naming the problems and how they justified working in and around the contradictions they pose. In doing so, I found that they brushed across thorny issues of myth and ritual, which bear a complicated relationship to the stated programmatic aim of 'demystifying' Oxford. Regardless of the strategies they deployed, my primary finding in this chapter is that practitioners' institutional work always revolves around the worth and utility of their WP work at Oxford work—in other words, its internal legitimacy as a project of education equity. This chapter's analysis, therefore, focuses on the interrelationship between internal legitimacy and navigating institutional contradictions.

Contradiction 1: coping with what 'outreach' means

Context: the morass of selection and outreach

In many instances, institutional contradictions initially escape our notice; they lurk behind layers of abstraction and procedure, becoming 'background' to those moving through institutional spaces (Seo and Creed 2002; Ahmed 2012). However, what I am calling the contradiction of outreach in Oxford WP stands baldly in the open. Implicit in the project of outreach is a question: to whom do I reach out? The answer may seem obvious for a WP programme: students who are educationally disadvantaged in some way. However, at Oxford, Cambridge, and other selective universities, the matter is not so straightforward. As we have seen in previous chapters, the difficulty of doing outreach at selective HEIs is well-worn territory for academics and practitioners (see Boliver 2013; McClellan et al. 2016; Rainford 2016; Sperlinger et al. 2018). Given that selective HEIs are generally hesitant to change their admissions policies, it is futile to direct outreach efforts at students whose attainment would bar them from making an application. Outreach then becomes a project of convincing highly qualified students to attend *their* university, as opposed to considering HE as a general possibility. Outreach and recruitment, in turn, become blurred.

The blurring of outreach and recruitment is manifest in UNIQ's selection criteria. Lance explained the programme's approach to selection this way:

> So academic criteria is obviously quite high, high up. At the time of applying, the students would have just finished their GCSEs or equivalent qualifications. So that's really the only, like, official criteria that we have available to us to look at. So that's how that does become quite a key focus…*I think, generally, the motto is that any student that gets accepted to UNIQ, should they apply to Oxford, or even say somewhere like Cambridge, they should have a good chance of making significant progress through the application process.*

UNIQ therefore recruits students who have a 'realistic chance' of getting into Oxbridge based on quantitative metrics of 'potential' such as GCSE scores. According to

information publicly available on UNIQ's website, this has traditionally translated to 9 A/A* scores at GCSE level (although, since 2020 and the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, there is slightly more leniency).

The contradiction of this strategy is plain: that students who are admitted to UNIQ are students who could make a competitive application to Oxford without the intervention of UNIQ. It is manifest in the cohort of high-achieving, motivated students attending the programme each year. Indeed, throughout interviews, practitioners who work on UNIQ in a range of capacities used the vocabulary 'self-selection'. In particular, the faculty liaisons I spoke to all referenced self-selection, some praising it, others remaining sceptical. Ambassadors, many of whom had themselves been UNIQ students, also attested to the phenomenon, with one pondering

> whether UNIQ and the summer school actually convinced people to apply to Oxford and Cambridge who weren't thinking of doing that before. Because I sort of already knew that I was going to, if I hadn't gotten on the program, I would have still applied. So I don't know how to measure that.

When the whole thrust of UNIQ is to convince and prepare promising 'disadvantaged' students to apply to Oxford, this problem cuts to the core of UNIQ's goals as Oxford's flagship access programme.

Coping through category work

In this short discussion thus far, I have described UNIQ's work as outreach, recruitment, and access. The haze here, I would argue, is metonymic of a more existential category problem that plagues the WP field, but one that is particularly poignant in practice. As I have previously alluded, although there are no set definitions of the operative vocabulary within WP, it is generally understood that access, outreach, and recruitment refer to different things, at least definitionally. As I have flagged in previous chapters, access is concerned with addressing structural barriers that influence students' 'ability to participate within a fair and open admissions system'. An example of access work would

be implementing a contextualised admissions policy. Outreach and recruitment work, alternatively, intervene in the realm of *participation*, which more narrowly 'denote[s] admission and entry into higher education' (Harrison and Waller 2017a:141). To widen participation, in a literal sense, is to reach out to 'groups that were historically under-represented in higher education in order to incentivise them to apply' (142). In short, outreach work encompasses more *ad hoc* interventions to encourage disadvantaged students to *participate* in HE.

In their introduction, Harrison and Waller concede that more expansive definitions of participation are possible, as participation does not end at the point of matriculation. Five years later, at the field level, the operative categories within WP are becoming more expansive and more difficult to parse. In February 2021, former head of evidence at the OfS, Richard Shiner, told me that 'access and participation' is becoming the term of art. This renders widening participation (as a literal aim) obsolete, as its scope is too limited:

> [Our work has] migrated now to access and participation, that's the term that the OFS uses: they're called access and participation plans. And that should cover the whole lifecycle from getting in, staying on, and then progressing out of higher education into a graduate job or into further study…We don't talk about WP at all in any of our documents anymore. You'll find it a bit in the sector, but access and participation is what we talk about now.

As a result, access and participation are no longer separate referents. They have become something of a collocation; in OfS documentation, they almost always appear together as an umbrella term. Moreover, in rare instances when they are referenced separately, they have switched definitions. The OfS's 2022-2025 Strategic Plan names participation as one of its four regulatory objectives, defining it as:

Participation
All students, from all backgrounds, with the ability and desire to undertake higher education, are supported to ***access***, succeed in, and progress from higher education.

Participation therefore encompasses the whole-student lifecycle, denoting what Harrison and Waller referred to as 'access'. Access now, as defined by the OfS' Regulatory Advice No.6,

> relates to outreach with schools, prior attainment activities, work with employers, other education providers and regional skills associations. Strategic relationships and collaboration are important considerations for this lifecycle stage (31).

As Taylor (2021) critiques, access has, in effect, 'become outreach'. While these shifts are technically coherent (though confusing) at the field-level, on the ground, there is now something of a categorical free-for-all (see Harrison and Waller 2017a; Rainford 2021b on aspirations for discussion of a parallel phenomenon). A university WP programme, such as UNIQ, can definitionally be called an access programme, which is precisely how Oxford has billed it since its founding in 2009. Indeed, at both Oxford and Cambridge, the preferred term for WP activities is access; 'access officers' have existed in colleges since the 1990s (Allouch 2017). The practitioners I spoke to used the terms access, outreach, and related terms variously, and sometimes, self-contradictorily.

In fact, when I initially coded practitioners' bewildering deployment of categories, I chalked it up to 'conceptual haze' on their part: that is, Oxford WP's contradictions are so disorienting that practitioners cannot conceptually place the work they are performing. Now I interpret the phenomenon entirely differently. I understand WP workers as 'active and artful exploiters of institutional contradictions' (Seo and Creed 2002:2002), creatively wielding the incoherence of WP as a tool to make a broader assessment of the legitimacy of Oxford WP. I found that practitioners explore the alignment and tensions between different strands of so-called access and participation work largely through focusing on what 'outreach' is and, crucially, what it *should be*. To do so, they engaged in two complementary strategies, which I am calling category protection and category rejection.

Category protection

Category protection refers to enshrining a category as good and, in so doing, using it as an 'evaluative yardstick', to borrow Robeyns' (2017) term, to assess legitimacy. The most bald manifestation of category protection I encountered was in Matt's interview. When describing the particulars of UNIQ's delivery cycle, he quipped, almost as a parenthetical, 'I'll give you inverted commas for outreach'. Later on, I probed why he was suspicious of Oxford's apparent 'outreach' work, to which he replied:

> When I first came to this job, it was described as a widening participation coordinator. Why I struggle with outreach is…my difficulty with outreach is that actually, my delivery team now takes on some of what is recruitment, not actually what I would call outreach, you know, I wouldn't call going to a UCAS fair, actually access or widening participation. I wouldn't call some of our student conferences with Cambridge, although they are just at state schools, I would call them–I mean, maybe they are sort of broadly outreach, but they feel a lot more recruitment-y.

Matt is using 'outreach' here in contradistinction to recruitment with the aim of critiquing recruitment. The boundaries he places around outreach are substantive: outreach does not merely refer to delivering programmes catered to state-school students: intention is salient. That is, outreach programmes are designed and delivered with the intent of, in his words, 'trying to change a social situation', a systemic task. According to Matt, the work he currently performs does not constitute outreach. To call it outreach, in effect, 'taints what WP and access actually is', threatening to defang those pursuits and their aims to bring about social justice.

> In the same portion of the interview, he continued:
>
> And so I feel very uncomfortable using outreach because actually, I think it's just the way of the university or the department capturing all of our activity under one word when I think we should, there should be a recruitment team. I think there should be a marketing and recruitment team. There should be a separate international team. But all there's an international team that has now merged into outreach. The recruitment work that we do is merged into outreach…

> ...But it taints, maybe I shouldn't say that, but it does–I think it does taint the perspective of what WP and access actually is. And it does interfere slightly with some of the purpose of that work. But that's because I'm a purist and maybe I come from a charity background and I only care about access and outreach, access and widening participation. I don't care to work in recruitment.

Matt is deploying category protection to call the legitimacy of Oxford WP into question. In a similar manner, Marcus, a faculty member who has worked extensively with UNIQ, used the (highly contestable, see Jones 2021) category of 'non-traditional student' to proffer his critique about Oxford WP *writ large*.

> [I've worked on some programmes] which potentially sort of collected sort of, you know, some some some very non traditional people again, very much at the edges, because everything gets colonised by the, by the middle class, basically...seriously non-traditional sort of potential candidates.

Other participants, however, engaged in category protection to affirm UNIQ's legitimacy. Note that these participants are both ambassadors; that is, they are not career practitioners. I include them here, however, to demonstrate the flexibility of category protection as an evaluative tool. I will consider ambassador perspectives on Oxford WP in full detail in the next chapter. Using the rubric of outreach, Conor distinguishes between meaningful outreach (UNIQ) and what he call 'roadshow' outreach:

> It also does outreach work in kind of usual typical roadshow kind of things. So I ran two roadshows, one in my first year, one in my second year.

UNIQ, to Conor, is exceptional as an access programme precisely because it is sustainable and non-redundant:

> Where you've got a light touch program that doesn't engage long term is a problem. For me. You also need a program ideally, that covers, ah, how can I put this? Okay, so a lot of access programs are really piecemeal, and a lot of other programs repeat the same thing. So there's often an issue with access programs that a lot of people do the same things. So I suppose another thing would be a program that is unique, pardon the pun, in the respect of providing something that is different, and it's genuinely not provided by anybody else.

Similarly, Angie related to me that she wanted to work for UNIQ because it was the only true widening participation summer school at Oxford:

> A: UNIQ seems to be the only sort of really, truly widening participation sort of summer school that was run at Oxford. So that was what I was quite keen to get involved in.
>
> J: But you're saying the other ones are more I guess, recruitment oriented?
>
> A: Yeah. And a lot of them are sort of very much for profit, and they're just not, not my vibe, I think.

Category rejection

If category protection enshrines a category as good or legitimate, category rejection does precisely the opposite. Category rejection involves critiquing the core premise of a category in order to delegitimize it. The difference between category protection and category rejection is a matter of emphasis; while rejecting a category, one often protects another category to buttress their criticism. Interestingly, it was Matt once again who furnished the strongest example of category rejection, but did so in service of criticising *outreach*, which he went on to protect at the close of the interview.

> The positives [of Oxford WP] are that there are amazing people across the university, who are passionate about outreach. And I really hate that—this is one of my frustrations. Why do we use outreach? This should be access work. But my department kind of structures it around the phrasing of outreach, which I find very frustrating.

If we contextualise Matt's statement with the rest of his response, we find that he sees access as a structural directive that cannot be performed unless it is institutionally authorised.

> I think the university is progressing currently in the right direction. But I sometimes do feel that it's more about external PR, than internal—again, there are many great people working on outreach or that are passionate about it. But I think at a very senior level, there isn't an understanding of access, and there's more a concern about how we look and the certain targets that we have.

Matt, here, shares the cynicism Taylor (2021), a WP worker, conveys in a piece for *WonkHE*. She warns of a 'winter coming for widening access', arguing that outreach alone cannot confront ballooning structural issues, which she, adhering to an older definition, sees as the province of 'access' (Harrison and Waller 2017). The overextension of outreach into access is unsustainable, as 'increasingly it appears that outreach teams are expected to do some pretty heavy lifting when it comes to equal higher education access for those from disadvantage or experiencing additional barriers' (Taylor 2021).

Like Matt, several other WP workers above grappled with this shoehorning of outreach, which collapses the demands of structural change onto incremental interventions. Julien, for example, lamented Oxford's prioritisation of outreach initiatives over changing its admissions policies:

> But actually, if you do [outreach] on its own without educating your academics to use context appropriately to look at a student in the context of the background in which they achieved their qualifications. If you don't work at the level of admissions, it's quite hard to change to make massive change in admissions statistics…But regardless of all the good things about outreach, like UNIQ and some of the other programs, we run as access officers, and it needs to really be paired with a commitment to assessing students' potential in the context of their background. Otherwise, all the outreach is kind of wasted. Because if you do all that work to encourage people to apply, but then they don't get through the application process. You're almost building them up, you're building them to fail, because you're encouraging them to apply for something where the criteria for admission doesn't match up with them.

Freya also acutely felt the weight of shoehorning during her tenure as a UNIQ lead. She had a similar criticism for the project of Oxford WP, but bucked the category of access to highlight how it is not synonymous with real systemic change. If Matt was focussing on what access *should* be, Freya drilled down on what access *is*, which is, in her eyes, an insufficiently transformative enterprise:

> [Working in outreach] also made me realise that access work was somewhat limited in how effective it could be without real systemic change.

For Freya, this realisation spelled the end of her career in WP, which she attributes to burn-out and access' inability to effect transformative change. Burn-out is a common occurrence in occupations premised on labour of love, and there is much that can be said, empirically and conceptually, about this experience (e.g., Jaffe 2021). However, in my inquiry here, I am compelled by practitioners who remain committed to WP, whether because they have more faith in institutional incrementalist change, or because they are like Matt and Julien who, despite having very low regard for Oxford WP's legitimacy as a social justice enterprise, continue to see value in maintaining disruption at Oxford.

To open this line of inquiry, I will introduce a strategy of legitimacy evaluation I witnessed across all three communities under study, which I call 'level-jumping'. I found that, in the face of outreach's contradictions, practitioners assessed, and often justified, the legitimacy of their work in Oxford WP by calling on different levels of analysis (Scott 2014)–zooming out and assessing Oxford WP's legitimacy at the field and societal level, and/or zooming in and probing the internal legitimacy (Brown and Toyoki 2013) of WP based on its utility to students.

Zooming out

Some practitioners sought to recuperate the legitimacy of their work by calling on wider lenses: both the field-level of the WP sector, and the societal enterprise of WP more broadly. Jemima, for example, defended UNIQ's imperfect selection process by framing it as an intractable, sector-wide issue:

> So the ones that we tended to reach I think were probably the ones with a little bit of support anyway, and or who were so determined that they had done so much themselves. In any case, there's a big band of disadvantaged students that I don't think we ever managed to reach with potential. And I don't know, I don't think that has ever been achieved. Anyway, I think we've made inroads into that. But I think that's still a massive challenge for the whole sector, actually.

In a commentary on social change to which we will return, Lance put it more pithily:

> But it can be difficult, because they're only obviously with us for well, five days, four days…. We can't solve all the world's problems, unfortunately, in that short space of time [he laughs].

In both the cases above, Jemima and Lance zoom out and determine that their work is legitimate when viewed in a wider context, whether at the sector level or the wider enterprise of working to 'solve the world's problems'.

Like category protection and category rejection, zooming out can lend itself to the opposite conclusion. Freya's explanation of how Oxford WP structurally precludes itself from achieving anything but 'glacial' change assesses WP *vis-a-vis* other enterprises of social change:

> Students were getting into the university, but the overall progress for the university was still glacial. The overall progress [was] at particularly digging beyond the the top line of state school participation rate into the more underrepresented groups and, and I just sort of thought I had a bit of a despair of like, well, are we are we displacing one group of diverse students with another, you know, ultimately, until these kids are pushing out the kids who went to Eton or some other, you know, some of the private schools and the particularly, and the particularly privileged kids until they're taken their spots, nothing's really going to change dramatically.

Similarly, directing his critique toward the organisational population, Matt repeatedly critiqued Oxford failing to prioritise WP as other Russell Groups do. Continuing his criticism of outreach blurring into recruitment, he flagged that

> you wouldn't see that in most other Russell Group universities, you would see a very distinct and large widening participation or access team, and a separate marketing and recruitment team, and they might be part of the same department.

In these scenarios, we see level-jumping applied at levels ranging from larger commentaries on the possibilities for change at the societal and, arguably, world level, to the more narrow comparative work around the standards of practice in the sector (field) and organisational population levels.

Zooming in

While zooming out yields mixed results, I found that zooming in almost categorically led to practitioners affirming the value of doing Oxford WP. As we will explore in the next section and in Chapter 8, there is a tight bond among students in the UNIQ community.

For Julien, who was a UNIQ student herself, the experience was so invigorating that she knew she wanted to pursue WP as a career path, not out of

> a sense of obligation to give something back. But I was really passionate that other students who were in a similar situation to me when they were at school, maybe didn't know anybody that didn't have the chance to, like go on a day trip to Oxford, or have the support of their school to apply. I really wanted those students to feel able to apply if they wanted to. So I was really passionate about the cause behind UNIQ.

This rationale accords with Rainford's (2021b) finding that WP workers who are more 'transgressive' toward their institutions identified their work strongly with WP students. This is true of Julien, and of Matt who, in the midst of criticising Oxford's WP apparatus, advocated centering UNIQ's work exclusively on benefiting students:

> The kind of language that they were using in a lot of the discussions that we have was almost like [UNIQ] was about [creating an academic programme]. From my perspective on UNIQ, I want to bring students, you know, I want to bring disadvantaged students to the university. And that learning about an academic program is one aspect of, you know, improving a student's perspective of the university.

A student-centric approach informs not only UNIQ's work with students it admits, but also those it rejects. Exacerbating the contradiction of selection is the fact that the UNIQ residential is now wildly popular; it receives far more applications annually than it can accommodate. I directly asked lead practitioners in particular how they handled the implications of denying students from a programme that is geared toward improving student confidence. In response, Freya emphasised that

> [w]e also felt quite a weight of responsibility for all of the students who didn't get a place on the programme. Because the programme was aimed very specifically at

> doing a certain thing, and so there were lots of students who were absolutely qualified to apply to Oxford. And in some cases…they were both really well qualified, and probably have, you know, some level of an access background and in need of some additional support. But there were just other students who tick the boxes, and more more wholly.

Here, Freya zooms in to land on an approach to selection that is motivated by equity: directing the most resources at those who need it most. Freya flips concerns about equity on their head, suggesting that it is less equitable to do no good than to maximise good while constrained.

> Lance expressed a similar orientation in terms of care:
>
> I think most people, if not all, the people that work on UNIQ *do actually care about the students that come through*. And just, you know, to a certain extent, obviously, with the limited time we have, you know, we also do care very much about the students that don't get places on UNIQ, and that's how the formation of projects like UNIQ digital were founded.

In Lance's statement, we find a measure of identity work actively at play. Hearkening back to Rainford (2021c), a WP practitioner is a 'particular kind of person'. Indeed, one characteristic that is common, though by no means exclusive, to WP practitioners is a sense of identification with the communities of students they support. This can derive from one's own experience with WP (as is the case for Lance), or, as Rainford (2021c) found, a strong identification with social justice. Regardless of their level of scepticism or allegiance toward the institution, when practitioners zoom in and identify their work with student experiences, they strongly resonate with the idea of working for the good of WP students. And, among the practitioners I spoke to, all unilaterally saw the benefits of doing so as outweighing the drawbacks of participating in an imperfect system.

Contradiction 2: demystification and myth

Context: the centrality of Oxford realism

While practitioners unilaterally regarded working for students as a primary motivation, and justification for their work, they interpreted what it means to 'work for' students in divergent ways. To honour these nuances in our analysis, we must examine how UNIQ operates on the ground. I would argue that, in the case of UNIQ, the problems of outreach and selection discussed above are part-and-parcel of a deeper programmatic tension. Selection criteria pose a problem for practitioners because selection criteria are expected to be reflective of Oxford's admissions criteria. I found that the drive to make UNIQ resemble Oxford—prioritising what I will call 'Oxford realism'—is an operative principle that governs and constrains all aspects of the programme, especially delivery. As delivery involves direct engagement with students, practitioners display more intense, complicated, and emotive reactions toward the contradictions of delivering a true-to-life Oxford experience to UNIQ students. Therefore, instead of turning directly to the diverging approaches practitioners took toward confronting the contradictions of Oxford realism, we will first examine why Oxford realism is such an integral facet of Oxford WP in the first place.

When it came to delivery, there was essential unanimity among practitioners on the necessity on one thing: 'demystifying' Oxford. The impetus for demystification is as follows: an air of mystery permeates Oxford, which renders the institution intimidating, and, in the words of one practitioner, 'completely and utterly alien' to those outside of it. This is true from the standpoint of making an application to Oxford: if one does not have the requisite know-how, and 'know-who', the Oxford admissions process is daunting. Practitioners are acutely aware, moreover, of the more visceral ways in which Oxford is intimidating. During a recent training presentation, ambassadors were warned of how the physical facts of Oxford's age and architecture present an 'aesthetic challenge'

to students from WP backgrounds. And this to say nothing of the formal dinners, secret societies, spoken Latin—those traditions and rituals through which Oxford's identity and status are kept alive (Di Domenico and Phillips 2009; Dacin et al. 2010). Indeed, Oxford is inscrutable to the uninitiated. As one ambassador put it: 'because this university is so old and is so prestigious, it has this air around it until you arrive.'

In response, a core programmatic aim of UNIQ is to demystify Oxford—from its admissions processes down to its aesthetics. Crucial to the project of demystification, I found, is an emphasis on providing a 'realistic' simulation of life at Oxford. The only way to diffuse the air of mystery surrounding Oxford is to show students Oxford for what it is. An ambassador summed up the necessity of demystification succinctly:

> No matter how much you tell someone, "Oh, this myth about Oxford is incorrect, or it's not like that," unless you're physically there, and you get to talk to people and see the environment, *like it [outreach] kind of is meaningless to some extent*.

I learned from lead practitioners that UNIQ's commitment to realism was borne out of an early programmatic 'sea change'. As Freya recounts, in the first iteration of UNIQ in 2010, 'the academics spent a long time putting together a really thoughtful, really interesting programme, but it [didn't] actually reflect undergraduate life at Oxford'. The results of a qualitative review revealed that this was an ineffective choice, as students were not coming away from the programme with operationalizable knowledge about Oxford to take into their application process. Germane to the upcoming discussion of evaluation and Oxford WP in Chapter 9, here we find a very early example of evaluation being central to the programme's aims and delivery.

In response to the evaluation's findings, practitioners worked meticulously to make the UNIQ experience a close facsimile of undergraduate life in Oxford. Freya recalls that the choice was a 'really big sea change' that 'filtered through into all of the decisions that we were making about the program'—down to the minute details. She

jokingly explains how the delivery team restructured the student lunch policy. Recalling that students previously had group lunches organised for them, she asks:

> Are we trying to create a representative undergraduate experience? Nobody gets their lunch delivered to them. And so even that concept–-we changed the way we did that, so instead, students all got a voucher for lunch…So they had to go get their lunch [we both laugh], so kind of little things like that affected the social programme and even how we organised the travel and things as well.

Across interviews, I found that practitioners with starkly different orientations cited two broad reasons for the importance of realism in UNIQ delivery: 1) addressing gaps in students' cultural capital by giving them 'hot knowledge' about Oxford, and 2) encouraging students to see themselves into Oxford's access community.

Hot knowledge: or, no such thing as a free lunch

When I asked ambassadors (the majority of whom had themselves been UNIQ students) about the most helpful aspects of UNIQ, many centred on how UNIQ is a true-to-life reflection of being an Oxford undergraduate. The answer below is particularly representative. To Angie, the most effective aspect of UNIQ as an outreach programme was:

> I think staying in the college, to be honest. It's such a small thing, but it's really big, I think for a lot of students…I think that actually is a really strong experience that they can take forth with them to interviews. Because even though no component of the actual interview is about staying in college, it makes them feel very comfortable in the college environment….But I think a lot of state school kids might feel really anxious about being in that environment for the first time, whereas a lot of boarding school kids are very comfortable with it, obviously.

We can straightforwardly reformulate the above observation into terms borrowed from Ball and Reay's body of work on student choice (e.g., Ball and Vincent 1998; Reay et al. 2005). Angie is naming that UNIQ students, as a result of structural disparities in resources, do not have access to 'hot knowledge' about Oxford and the Oxford application and interview process. 'Hot knowledge' refers to immediate, personal,

informal knowledge about universities, which often takes the form of insider knowledge from alums in a student's immediate network (Ball and Vincent 1998). Hot knowledge about Oxford gives one a sense of what Oxford is *really like*, and how one should *actually* navigate the application process. Most WP students are consigned to relying on 'cold knowledge' in the university choice process: that is, information found in formal pre-entry materials produced by the university. Moreover, pre-entry materials, as we saw in Chapter 2, are rife with class-taste markers directed at students who are likely to possess hot knowledge anyway (see Graham 2013; Knight 2019).

UNIQ, although it is hosted by the university itself, seeks to approximate hot knowledge in two ways. First, by affording students a realistic glimpse of life at Oxford, it aims to give students experiential knowledge about the university, offering insight into what Oxford is *really* like. Second, it provides a comprehensive overview of the Oxford admissions process through tailored admissions advice sessions it has developed in recent years. Oxford students play a crucial role in these sessions, relaying insider knowledge about the experience of navigating the Oxford admissions process.

Invariably, contrary to the hot knowledge dispensed by friends and family, there is an agenda to Oxford's extension of hot knowledge. UNIQ, as an outreach programme for Oxford, aims to increase competitive applications *to Oxford*. That is, as we discussed with regard to selection, UNIQ is no exception to the thorny entanglement of recruitment and outreach that wracks all university outreach programmes. Therefore, practitioners are acutely aware that the image of Oxford they project will be instrumental in a student's choice to apply. Lance relays the anxieties of ensuring students have the best experience of Oxford possible, which involves worrying about details like the vicissitudes of weather:

> So it didn't seem very nice, you know, if it rains all the time, when you're walking about, you're not going to be happy, right. But if it's sunny all the time, and you know, then the vibe is instantly different.

Indeed, the tensions of showcasing an idealised version of Oxford versus representing how Oxford really is are operative in the contradictions of demystification and myth, which we will continue to explore and untangle throughout the remainder of this chapter.

'As if they were part of the university': the access community

The second, and arguably more significant, motivation behind 'Oxford realism' is introducing UNIQ students to the Oxford student body–specifically, Oxford students who themselves are 'WP students'. Jemima summarised the mission of UNIQ as follows:

> Yeah, so it was more of an experience that we wanted them to go away, and effectively, [feel] as if they were part of the university, and they were welcome here. And they were part of it. And, and they could be who they are without having to conform to any sort of, like, stereotype of what they thought an Oxford student was. And that was very much our mission.

The only way to buck the stereotype of the posh, intimidating, unrelatable Oxford student is to introduce students to communities within the student body who do not embody said stereotype. To the ambassadors who were themselves UNIQ alums, the opportunity to meet students with similar backgrounds and experiences was pivotal in their decision to apply to Oxford. Ambassadors reflected on the stereotypes that intimated them most, and how their UNIQ experiences diffused their fears. Anxieties ranged from worry about workload to concerns about their ability to 'fit in' Oxford.

We get a rich sense of this complicated matrix of emotions by dialling into ambassadors' experiences of coming to Oxford on UNIQ. Some representative observations include:

> A big part of like…why I was against Oxford when I was younger was because I just thought it was like work, like everyone just wanted to do work. And so when I came and found that actually, like there were fun things that happened, like that was quite a big part of why it changed my opinion.

> For me, a part of it [UNIQ] was also the ability to make friends, because that was something I was worried about. But now I had…five days to make friends with people when I came up to UNIQ as a student. So putting myself through that almost and seeing that, yeah, I can make friends… So I think the social side is a real benefit.

According to Joe, an ambassador, it was the ability to see themselves as Oxford students that encouraged UNIQ students to apply:

> I remember in the introduction session, the programme leader asked the ambassadors, you know, how many of you were on UNIQ themselves, and most of us put our hand up. So for everyone sitting in that room, they're like, 'Okay, I can literally do this, because look at all the people who literally did this'. And so yeah, I think that seeing that makes a difference. And just our whole thing in the week was keeping on telling them how great they were, because they really were. That's why they got into the programme.

Representation, however insufficient it is as a proxy for equity, can be powerful. Writing about the whiteness of HEIs in the UK and Australia, Ahmed speaks of the power of encountering other people of colour in institutional spaces: 'Numbers can be affective. It can be surprising and energizing not to feel so singular' (Ahmed 2012:36). The ambassador experiences recounted above demonstrate the affective power of seeing themselves represented in a space that makes a spectacle of their singularity. Demystification facilitates the process of seeing oneself represented, affording students the hot knowledge, the know-how, and the know-who not only to make competitive applications to Oxford–but to want to be there. To Lance, the outcomes of demystification may be small and stochastic, but it harnesses the potential to transform students' HE trajectories:

> [T]he whole point [of UNIQ] is to try and make students that don't necessarily see themselves at Oxford, to sort of at least apply to UNIQ. That's the starting point, right? And get those to apply to UNIQ. Maybe a certain percentage of them would then get a place and come to Oxford, and maybe see Oxford a little bit differently.

Myth and doses of reality

Although its merits are widely acknowledged, demystification carries risk. To put it facetiously, the problem with showing students how Oxford really is is that it requires that one must show students how Oxford really is. Although they differed significantly in how critical they were toward Oxford, even the most 'institutionally compliant' (Rainford 2021c) practitioners acknowledged that there is some measure of truth to the negative stories about Oxford that circulate in the cultural ether: the strange customs, the terrifying workload, the intimidation and elitism, the structural racism and classism.

In reference to the Oxford workload, Lance, who is generally supportive of the Oxford WP agenda, put it like this:

> So yeah, definitely, like half the battle is demystifying Oxford. The other half of the battle is like, yeah, Oxford is tough, guys. But, you know, you shouldn't let that stop you from applying kind of thing? Ha, yeah, it's a weird–it is a very odd dynamic.

The core of the demystification contradiction is this: it is problematic to demystify Oxford, but it is simultaneously problematic not to. In theorising how practitioners confront this contradiction, we must turn to the matter of myth, which I distinguish from mystification.

As alluded in Chapter 3, myth, ritual, ceremony, and symbol have been central to neoinstitutional inquiry from its inception (e.g., Meyer and Rowan 1977; see also March and Olsen 1983; Meyer and Scott 1983; Friendland and Alford 1991). Dahler-Larsen (2012) argues, moreover, that a fundamental assumption of OI's is that institutions are subservient to *logics of meaning* rather than logics of function or rationality. That OI happens to have a rich repository of theory around architectures of meaning was a happy coincidence. My interest in myth and ritual was largely data-led; the vocabulary of mystification and myth has remained a fixture of UNIQ, and is indeed an issue on which practitioners differ significantly. Oxford's rituals—particularly formal

dinners—were flagged as a particularly imposing barrier to dismantling the myths surrounding Oxford.

In the UNIQ imaginary, demystification and 'myth-busting' (another explicit programmatic aim) have a mutually-reinforcing relationship. Oxford, as we have discussed, is mystical to the uninitiated. Oxford's mystification, in turn, gives way to myth (in the colloquial sense of 'falsehood'). In the absence of accessible information about Oxford, myths proliferate around the institution. Young people, and their communities, begin to develop incorrect perceptions of the university, which ultimately discourages them from applying. Communities retain their distance from Oxford, which, in turn, becomes further mystified. In demystifying Oxford, therefore, one must engage in myth-busting.

The quote below from an ambassador (that I also referenced in the previous section) captures the relationship between demystification and myth-busting, and its utmost important to WP, succinctly:

> No matter how much you tell someone, 'Oh, this myth about Oxford is incorrect, or it's not like that', unless you're physically there, and you get to talk to people and see the environment, like it [outreach] kind of is meaningless to some extent.

All practitioners with whom I discussed 'demystification' and 'myth-busting' acknowledged that myth-busting is necessary for outreach to Oxford specifically. However, there were two distinct—though not wholly incompatible—approaches for conceptualising the *source* of myths concerning Oxford, their legitimacy, and what role they should play in outreach work. I refer to the approaches as 'displacing myth' and 'embracing myth'. Though the distinction between the two is fairly simple, the reasons why practitioners elect for one of these strategies are more convoluted than meets the eye. Moreover, while expanding on their rationales for their outlook on myth, they, once-again, deploy level-jumping to further engage with how the contradictions of myth bear on the legitimacy of myth-busting on multiple levels.

Myth displacement

We will first consider myth displacement. Among practitioners, it was Lance who aligned with this approach most strongly. Those who espoused myth displacement were generally institutionally-compliant in orientation, although there is complexity to this statement. The approach not only assumes that there is legitimacy to the idea that Oxford's alienness leads to false perceptions, but also that these perceptions are largely incorrect. The following statement from Lance captures the essence of myth displacement well:

> UNIQ is continuing the efforts to eliminate the Oxford–well, I say Oxford messaging *but external Oxford messaging*–that Oxford is for rich elite individuals who have gone to upper class or private schools across the UK. And yeah, it's more of a focus towards looking at areas that are important to Oxford, but also may have been neglected by Oxford, you know, I wouldn't say recently, but certainly, you know, in the past.

In this view, the myths that circulate about Oxford are largely external to Oxford as it stands today. As the above quote makes clear, however, blame is not ascribed to the students and communities who have incorrect perceptions of Oxford. Rather, underpinning myth displacement are concerns about how social reproduction reifies the myths surrounding Oxford.

Multiple practitioners underscored how schools are sites of myth perpetuation. Lance again:

> There's still a lot of playground sort of banter about top unis. And that's not just about Oxford, you know, just top unis in general. That does just put a lot of students off. And if that's then reinforced via their home environment, or just maybe just sometimes their school teachers who just might be against Oxford in a in one way or another.

It must be emphasised that the reinforcement of false perceptions is not attributed to individual teachers or family members, but a structural gap in knowledge that warrants demystification in its own right.

Those who displace myth acknowledge that Oxford's peculiarities—in particular, the ritual of formal dinners—can be alienating for students. Julien who, despite harbouring strong doubts about Oxford WP's ability to bring about systemic change, firmly believed that WP students can find a 'home' at Oxford, its intimidations notwithstanding. She concedes that her experience was not necessarily universal but, from her own experience, she believes that WP students have agency in how they handle Oxford's strangeness. We will reprise this discussion in the next chapter.

> When you come to make an application in October, if UNIQ has been a really positive experience for you, it just gives you that confidence that actually you want to go there and you would feel able to call Oxford home when you get there.
>
> I guess that is from my perspective, from somebody who did slop very easily into it all. And I didn't get put off by maybe some of the weird traditions or some of the other more negative stuff that I know that I can imagine other students would find harder. But yeah, I think that's my lasting impression.

From debunking stereotypes to vindicating formal rites of passage, the goal of myth displacement is to diffuse the contradictions of demystification by attempting to cleave Oxford from the myths surrounding it. Though Oxford is no doubt old and odd, the source of Oxford's foreboding is a socially-reproduced ignorance, one that can be extinguished by dispensing knowledge and empowering students through outreach work. In effect, they resolved the contradiction by either rejecting or defanging it. Oxford, they believe, is in the process of moving past its exclusionary past, however slow or imperfect this process may be. It is therefore up to Oxford WP practitioners to maintain the momentum of this sorely-needed change. They therefore strongly align themselves with the mission of Oxford WP as a means of effecting change both for Oxford and for students.

Confronting myth

A second group of practitioners was not straightforwardly optimistic toward Oxford's growing commitment to education access and inclusivity. These practitioners retained a posture of scepticism toward Oxford's stated aspirations for access, diversity, and inclusion. One of the most vocal of this group, Linda, was tasked with organising none other than a mock formal dinner for UNIQ students. She acknowledged the value of the experiential knowledge the opportunity offered, but was simultaneously shaken by the unwieldiness of attempting to prove Oxford is not 'alien' to WP students:

> If we are able to give them an experience like that [Oxford formal dinners] on UNIQ, that kind of frees them up to be able to engage in those more fully when they become a student, hopefully, at Oxford… It was more to do with giving young people a kind of option to sort of see where Oxford could take them, but also to see that people that graduated from Oxford aren't kind of alien. But some of them were a little bit alien [laughs]. It's really, it was quite a hard thing to manage.

When one demystifies Oxford, one invariably exposes its flaws. Whereas myth displacement frames these flaws as surmountable or mythical, myth confrontation focalises the realities of inequality, exclusion, and toxicity that underpin the myths circulating about Oxford. In this conception, WP students are correct in feeling hesitancy toward applying to Oxford, because Oxford is far from a perfectly inclusive environment for marginalised students. Returning to the pervasiveness of level-jumping, I found that myth confronters both zoomed in and zoomed out to address contradiction. The most vocal myth-confronters, Linda and Matt, drew on both strategies to confront myth and Oxford.

Essential to myth confrontation is focalising Oxford's deep failings. The myth confronters I spoke to regarded Oxford's failings not as mistakes relegated to Oxford, but as systemic and structural in nature. Matt answered to my question about his feelings toward outreach and access at Oxford by zooming out and condemning Oxford's

structural racism, which greatly undermines its legitimacy as a self-proclaimed 'inclusive' space:

> It's so easy for Oxford not to be in the news during the middle of a pandemic, during the middle of a Black Lives Matter protest. But somehow it still managed to make headlines [laughs] by, you know, just messing up quite a lot with that. And I think that's, yeah, that's frustrating.

He immediately zoomed in, however, and expressed distress over the ethics of specifically targeting marginalised students and encouraging them to apply to Oxford.

> There is a real moral dilemma. It's like, I don't know if I want to bring students here, sometimes. Because there's some, you know, like, because they, you know, I, on my walk to work, before the pandemic, I will pass Cecil Rhodes every day looking down at me, like, I walk past All Souls. And I can, you know, and I see that library that is funded by slavery and the colleges have hidden a sign around the corner to mark that, like, you know, I see this institution has racism within it. It has colonial ideas stuck into it. And that will change, I hope. But I feel sometimes it's really unfair to ask students to come in and be pioneers, or come in and protest this institution.

The interpellation of the marginalised student as a changemaker is a central aspect of Oxford WP that we will touch on in the next chapter. At this juncture, however, I want to underscore how, while Oxford's failings are systemic in origin, practitioners could not confront them without zooming in to think about how they impact WP students. Recalling our discussion of zooming in and zooming out *vis-a-vis* selection, we found that, when one zooms in, they find the promises of conceptualising their work as a labour of love for students ineluctable, which softens the blow of contradiction. To some extent, this was true in the case of myth confrontation.

Linda and Matt, by virtue of being WP workers, saw good in encouraging students to apply to Oxford given the massive opportunity that an Oxford education represents, and equally saw deep fulfilment in supporting these students. Matt concluded his interview by reiterating his personal dedication to the project of access, and to bring more disadvantaged students to Oxford. Though she herself saw Oxford making

progress in meeting WP students 'halfway', and thereby becoming more inclusive, Linda did not quite conclude on a note of optimism. She closed her interview by ruminating on the inescapability of Oxford, and how its failings so easily become background for students and practitioners alike. It is on her honest, confused, and rich reflection on how Oxford's conventions 'self-police' that we will close this chapter's presentation of findings:

> Once you're in Oxford, you don't think about it, you don't kind of challenge it, you don't really look at it anymore. It's like it's once you're in the gang, you sort of forget how intimidating and kind of weird and just bizarre some of these things are. And for anybody external, for anybody who is not from that world at all…On a little scale, the alumni evening, so kind of going into a kind of wood panelled wall full of dead white guys on the walls, and you know, somebody's giving you parfait and I was like, 'What the hell is parfait? And there's all these forks everywhere'. And just sort of the expectation that people can kind of deal with that. And that'd be okay. You know, and some of these kids don't have a dining table at home. They don't, they don't actually have a dining table, they have a sofa they eat, they don't have a dining table, you know. So let's kind of just understand that these people have a very, very different life. And I think fundamentally, I think there is a general difficulty with getting people's heads around that.

Chapter Discussion

To close this chapter's inquiry, I would like to briefly discuss this chapter's findings vis-a-vis the two central theoretical concerns to which they are linked: the significance of myth and ritual to maintaining disruption, and, more crucially, the entanglement of identity work, category work, and legitimacy.

Diving deeper into myth and ritual

In OI, myth and ritual feature regularly in OI analysis. Dahler-Larsen (2012) offers succinct theorisation of the relationship the two hold. Ritual and myth, together, afford us insight into how logics of meaning operate. Rituals impose symbolic meaning on collective human action, and, in so doing, generate an interpretative framework for

making sense of the world. Through their repetition, rituals '[maintain] and [confirm] a specific kind of understanding of the world' (Dahler-Larsen 2012:57). This is a sociological truism that has been validated by IWP scholarship in a variety of empirical contexts, including Oxbridge formal dinners (Di Domenico and Phillips 2009; Dacin, Munir, and Tracey 2010; see also Kulkarni 2020). Both Di Domenico and Phillips (2009) and Dacin et al (2010) find that the formal dinner ritual is a potent form of institutional maintenance, influencing students' 'participants' perceived place, present and future, in society' (Dacin et al 2010:1394). Through ritual, students from 'non-elite' backgrounds are socialised into the institutional order, which positions them to reproduce it, regardless of their original relationship to it (Warikoo and Fuhr 2014). As Linda said, 'Once you're in Oxford, you don't think about it, you don't kind of challenge it, you don't really look at it anymore'. Rituals do, indeed, generate interpretative frameworks for making sense and meaning, but often this framework takes the form of a negative, a blankness in which the contradictions of the social world become absorbed.

When the interpretative framework meets us in a positive form, it is in the form of myth. Myth gives narrative coherence and spiritual significance to the interpretative frameworks birthed by ritual. In doing this, myth imposes boundaries on our cultural-cognitive horizons: '[a] myth is a narrative presenting the socially constructed as given by nature and unavoidable. It naturalises the social' (Barthes 1972). The myth therefore illustrates 'what is socially defined as necessary and possible' (Dahler-Larsen 2012:57). For example, the myth of Oxford, being for, in Lance's words, 'rich, elite individuals' systematically discourages non-rich, non-'elite' individuals from applying, which is instrumental to the social reproduction of inequality.

In their original schematisation of institutional work, Lawrence and Suddaby (2006) acknowledge the myth's centrality to the social construction of reality. Mythologisation is a potent strategy of institutional maintenance, working to '[preserve] the normative underpinnings of an institution by creating and sustaining myths

regarding its history'. Based on the data presented in this chapter, I would argue that mythologisation is critical to sustaining the project of Oxford WP. Contrary to how it presents itself, myth displacing is not solely a matter of debunking or 'myth-busting': as Roland Barthes put it, 'the best weapon against myth is perhaps to mythify it in its turn'. The project of myth displacement requires mythologising Oxford, which amounts to an act of mythologising in itself. Myth displacing tells a story of an imperfect, but increasingly inclusive Oxford, an Oxford that is gradually shedding its historic commitment to reproducing inequality. This myth is institutionally endorsed: Oxford's commitments to WP and EDI are plastered on most public-facing documents it produces.

While demonstrable in some respects (e.g., the growing proportion of state students in each matriculating class), the myth of a changing Oxford both obscures and reveals. Compared to peer institutions, Oxford's pace of growth is indeed 'glacial', and this is to say nothing of the continuing disparities in degree completion, attainment, and post-graduate career outcomes between private and state educated students. To be clear, I am not suggesting that those who engage in myth displacement are lying about Oxford. Myth (from the Ancient Greek *mythos*, 'story') in a theoretical sense is not synonymous with falsehood. The antidote to myth is not to debunk, but to mythify; myth is, to some degree, inescapable. Nonetheless, there are moments in which mythologisation on the part of myth displacers veers closer to occlusion. Consider the following from an ambassador, which underscores how liable we are to be caught up in myth to the point of not seeing mythification at all:

> It's so weird, especially now that I've been here for so long…, but when I go home, all my friends are like, "Oh, my God, haha, I still can't believe, like, you go to Oxford." And I'm just like, it's so normal. Like, I don't know how it's got this reputation. It's so weird.

The above affirms Linda's point about how easily Oxford's strangeness becomes background. If myth displacers are participating in mythologisation work, Linda, and

fellow myth confronter, Matt, are invested in the inverse task of *demythologisation*. In their critiques of Oxford's structural problems, they are actively casting doubt on the normative underpinnings of Oxford the institution and the institutional work of Oxford WP. For myth confronters, however, mythification is also unavoidable, which gives them noticeable discomfort. This is apparent in the tensions between 'zooming in' and 'zooming out' while confronting myth: practitioners struggled with squaring their desire to call Oxford to account for its perpetuation of racism and classicism with their firm belief in the power of working for the students who deserve equal opportunities to partake in a flawed system. As a result, there is an affective dimension to demythologisation: a palpable aporia pervaded Linda's and Matt's answers as they wrestled with the contradiction of showing students the 'real' Oxford.

Practitioners and legitimacy

The findings presented here speak to the centrality of internal legitimacy to how practitioners maintain disruption, and navigate the inevitable contradictions of doing so. In addition to contributing substantively to ongoing work on maintenance work and contradictions (Lok and de Rond 2013; Bjerregaard and Jonasson 2014; Thrane and Balslev 2017), it lays down an additional layer of nuance to inquiry examining institutional work and legitimacy (Creed et al. 2010; Brown and Toyoki 2013; Toyoki and Brown 2014; Fernando and Kenny 2021). While I concur with Brown and Toyoki (2013) that internal legitimacy has historically been neglected in OI inquiry in favour of external legitimacy (see also Johnson 2004), our examination of 'level-jumping' here bears out that the binary between the two is not particularly stable. To assess the legitimacy of their designated institutional work, practitioners probed the external legitimacy of Oxford WP through contextualising it via the societal, organisation population, and most, commonly, the field level, and its internal legitimacy through the ways it achieves its stated goal of supporting and empowering students.

For some practitioners, like Lance, zooming in ('everyone cares about students') and out ('we can't solve all the world's problems') were mutually reinforcing; in their confluence, Lance forged a coherent understanding of the change he was working toward through his WP work. For others, zooming and zooming out were in tension. Matt, for example, found deep meaning in working for disadvantaged students and potential students at Oxford, but, upon field-level and societal-level analysis of Oxford's lacking WP apparatus and perpetuation of structural racism, he felt considerable dissonance. His experience of maintaining disruption, therefore, was as contradictory as the enterprise itself. These findings demonstrate how intertwined micro-level acts of legitimacy perception are to macro-level legitimacy structures governing fields (Suddaby et al. 2017; see also Weber and Glynn 2006; Khan 2018), and how complicated and surprising this relationship can be.

At risk of presuming the stability of the three communities under study, I would wager that, for practitioners, the governing tension of 'doing WP' is whether or not their work aligns with the social justice projects in which they believe. This accords with Rainford's (2021c) recent contention that practitioners can be grouped by whether they are compliant or transgressive toward WP and their institution's WP agenda. The findings in this chapter reinforce Rainford's assertion that WP practitioners are a 'particular kind of person': the practitioners under study here were highly committed to social justice, however they conceptualise it, and generally regard their WP work as a vocation. However, they differ on how they understand the relationship between their commitment to social justice and their designated institutional work. Turning back to Ahmed (2012), these findings suggest that, for WP practitioners, transformative knowledge and embodied experience are not bound, but in a less direct, and less potent, manner than they are for diversity workers. This chapter bears out that practitioners' most reliable strategies for navigating contradiction are category work, and the related project of level-jumping, which are both knowledge-based projects of legitimacy

evaluation. While category work, like all institutional work, is deeply situated and can draw on lived experience (Lawrence and Phillips 2019), one can ostensibly conduct category work from the vantage point of an observer. In fact the actors whose category work has the most cache are often 'intermediaries' who operate at some distance from the categories themselves (see Khaire and Wadhwani 2010).

Take Freya, for example. Her own relationship to WP notwithstanding, Freya came to the conclusion that WP cannot achieve systemic change by way of a principled analysis of how access operates as a structural intervention. Her embodied experience as a practitioner (and one who regularly disrupted the institutional order, at that) no doubt informed her assessment, but she herself did not feel the weight of institutional failure collapse onto her person as a BAME diversity worker combatting an institution's racism would. Her assessment interfaced with her identity, but in a distant, plausibly deniable fashion. However, Freya–and, in my view, every practitioner I interviewed–were invariably engaging in identity work. Their identity work was implicit but powerful, bubbling beneath the surface as they perform and process their duties. As our discussion of zooming in and the contradictions of outreach showed, practitioners aligned themselves strongly with the experiences of WP students. The practitioners had a sense of themselves as advocates for WP students and, more broadly, as *changemakers* committed to realising a more inclusive and equitable Oxford, and society.

Identity work is inescapably conducted in relation to institutions (Creed et al. 2010; Brown & Toyoki 2013; Fernando & Kenny 2021), and the identity of changemaker is no exception. This chapter, above all, illuminated that practitioners tasked with the same roles and responsibilities perceive changemaking within and against institutions profoundly differently. Practitioners like Jemima and Lance were WP veterans who had dedicated their careers to reliably effecting incremental changes to Oxford admissions and outreach. From the beginning, they believed in the project of steady maintained disruption. They regard themselves as institutional changemakers insofar as they work

with the institution to bring about change—not always smoothly, and not without contradiction, but generally with a posture of custodianship toward the enterprise they had helped forge. Practitioners like Freya and Matt, too, were deeply invested in the programme, but had a fundamentally different understanding of their role vis-a-vis Oxford. They felt that, as institutional changemakers, their duty was to push against the institution in order to change it: in other words, to make trouble. Yet troublemakers, however much they wish to assist the institution in achieving its stated aim for equity, retain an oppositional posture. They would likely resonate with Ahmed's image of an EDI job description as a brick wall (Ahmed 2012). At some point, Freya, at least, grew tired of the futility and severed their dedication to structural change from their institutional work.

This chapter, in many ways, acts as a scaffold for our wider analysis, heralding our continuing exploration of category work, identity work, and legitimacy, as well as our discussion of myth and ritual. In the next chapter, we will deepen and problematise this inquiry further by focalising the experience of ambassadors.

Chapter 8

Ambassadors: institutions, identity, and the spaces between

> What I claim is to live the full contradiction of my time,
> which may well make sarcasm the condition of truth.
> Barthes (1972:11)

> Am I the asshole for being ungrateful after winning a scholarship?
> Reddit post by user 'ConfusedUKStudent'

In this chapter, we delve headlong into the visceral lived realities of WP: not only when it is circumscribed as a form of institutional work, but especially when it becomes a source of identification, community, existential distress, and discomfort. This chapter centres on the perspectives of UNIQ ambassadors, the student WP workers who bring UNIQ to life.

Figure 8.1: UNIQ student Ambassadors

Pseudonym	Self-Reported Demographic Details	Years participated
Julien	White British woman*	2011-2013, currently a WP worker for Oxford
Conor	White British man	2016-2018 (head intern)
Alex	White British man	2019
Sophia	White British woman	2019, 2020
Phoebe	White British woman	2018
Joe	BAME British man	2019
Mo	White British nonbinary person	2009 (for Sutton Trust), 2010, 2011
Lucy	White British woman	2018, 2019

Angie	BAME British woman	2016

*same Julien as previous chapter

If practitioners enjoyed some measure of distance in judging Oxford WP's internal legitimacy, ambassadors do not have the same luxury. For students who themselves are 'WP students', their identification with WP cannot be neatly compartmentalised into their day job or an extracurricular activity. On a campus like Oxford in particular, in which one's race or class status is rendered highly visible, one is constantly aware of one's WP status—in the classroom, career centre, college hall, and around town (Attridge 2021). Indeed, however unfairly, the legitimacy of Oxford WP bears directly on their legitimacy as members of Oxford's academic and student communities. The ineluctable pull between a student's relationship to WP and relationship to the institution is the central tension we will explore.

This chapter, therefore, attends more directly to matters of identity work. The student WP worker inhabits the space between two questions. *Who am I as a working-class student at Oxford? What am I to the institution at which I work, to which I am expected to 'give back'?* The experience of student WP workers therefore presents abundant substantive and theoretical opportunity, merging questions of belonging central to SCWP, and concerns about the interrelation between identity work, category work, and legitimacy that are core to this thesis' inquiry. This chapter also, to my knowledge at the time of writing, is the first empirical examination of student WP practitioners' experiences and perspectives. In attending to these questions, this chapter is the most theoretically adventurous of the findings chapters, exploring how identity work interfaces with anthropological theories, like communities of practice (Lave and Wenger 1991) and Mauss' theory of the gift (Mauss 1990[1925]), and cultural discourses around privilege and marginalisation. I hope for the chapter to achieve a rigorous, yet creative, craftiness in these pursuits (Mills 1959).

The chapter is divided into two parts. The first investigates how the 'access community' surrounding student WP work at Oxford is constituted, while the second turns to the practices of institutional work ambassadors employ as they contribute to the work of maintaining disruption at Oxford.

Bounding the access community at Oxford

In the previous chapter, I made reference to what I call Oxford's 'access community' and demonstrated that it is regarded as one of UNIQ's strongest selling points. I briefly related how ambassadors themselves named exposure to the access community as their primary inspiration for applying to Oxford. Our first order of business is to do some category work of our own, bounding what we mean by the access community. I define the access community as a socially conscious, heavily engaged group of students who hold a deep personal stake in realising a more inclusive Oxford.

Though a helpful anchor for our discussion, this definition only scratches the surface of how the community comports itself. The access community, as this chapter's findings will show, is buttressed by collective identity work directed in multiple directions. Regardless of the form this identity work takes, however, it invariably is connected—in alliance with, in defiance to, or ambivalently—to the institution.

The access community as a 'sentient community'

The access community's most defining feature is that its members overwhelmingly identify as being 'WP students' themselves, which generally accounts for their deep personal stake in the project of WP. Of the nine ambassadors I interviewed, eight were either UNIQ alumni themselves, or identified as having a WP background. It is their experiences that we will prioritise in this chapter's analysis (although we will certainly draw from the other ambassador, Alex's, perspective throughout the chapter, and I will flag where this occurs).

We will jumpstart our analysis of the access community by posing a question that seems almost tautological: why do WP students disproportionately invest themselves in WP? While the instinctual answers—'because they understand each other', 'to give back', and the like—are helpful, the findings show that there is richness, complexity, and even contradiction to the explanations that are manifest.

In my interview with Lucy, she pinpointed the strong 'bond of understanding' at the core of the access community at Oxford:

> [WP students] all kind of instantly have that bond of understanding in that they've all come from quite–they will have to overcome quite a few challenges… I think it does form that community so fast.

According to Lucy's framing, it is not merely similar life experiences, but a common experience of challenge, that shores up the bond of understanding for WP students. From Bourdieusian work in SCWP, we learn that these challenges are multidimensional. In the HE environment, these challenges revolve around belonging, a central object of inquiry in SCWP. Belonging is fraught for WP students in several interlocking respects. First, in matriculating to a prestigious university (especially to Oxford or Cambridge), WP students enter a field that is both alien, and alienating, to them. In a tangible way, the differential between their academic experiences and those of their more privileged peers is stark, which influences degree outcomes (Budd 2017) and their felt sense of 'know-how' (Crozier and Reay 2011). More atmospherically, WP students often feel at odds with their institutional environment (Reay et al. 2009; 2010; Gray et al. 2018). Studying Oxford specifically, Attridge (2021) recently affirmed the SCWP finding that the academic and social challenges of being a WP student at an elite university derive from differentials in cultural capital and mismatches in habitus. Attridge, like forebears Reay et al. (2009; 2010), observes that WP students are wracked with a sense of 'double isolation' (Attridge 2021:1441): while their WP status renders them outsiders in so-called elite spaces like Oxford, their academic dispositions and educational goals sometimes

alienate them from their home communities. To riff again on Bourdieu's metaphor, they felt like perpetual fish out of water.

Recalling Chapter 7's discussion of the access community, I suggested that the double isolation WP students feel renders the access community a vital space of safety and mutual understanding. Indeed, several ambassadors regard the experience of finding this space as a thoroughly transformative experience, as though certain aspects of their identities were seen and understood for the first time. I will quote Julien and Lucy's experiences of transformation at length. When reflecting on her UNIQ experience, Julien recounts that

> Nobody I knew, in my kind of immediate surroundings, like family or friends, had been to Oxford or Cambridge. So it just wasn't a place that I'd known, like had experience of people doing. And particularly, my dad was like, "No, you shouldn't like don't apply to Oxford. It's not for people like us," and was quite *anti* it. He just felt like it was just full of lots of posh people. And it wasn't quite for us... [At UNIQ], like I really, really enjoyed being around students who loved their subjects as much as me and that was kind of a really weird because at school I've just been around people that didn't really want to be at school, they weren't really engaged apart from a couple of people within school, whereas actually on UNIQ I was there with people that just wanted to talk about English literature [we both laugh] and, and wanted to learn and that was like really refreshing.

Lucy, similarly, remembers being 'anti-Oxford' before UNIQ:

> I had a teacher, my maths teacher was the one who recognized that the grades that I was getting could lead on to applying to Oxford. And so she suggested to me that I should apply [to UNIQ]. And I would have had no idea about it if she hadn't suggested it. It wasn't on my radar, too. And at that point, I was quite anti Oxford, I just didn't think I'd like it. I thought it might look good on my personal statement. So I was like, okay, I'll apply. And then I applied for the oncology one, so like cancer. And then when I came to do it, I actually really liked the whole, like Oxford thing...

When I followed up asking what about UNIQ sticks with participants the most, Lucy continued:

> I think it's meeting people who currently go to Oxford. I'm realising that they're kind of, like, normal, like, because I remember thinking I kind of had two views where I kind of held people who went to Oxford on this, like, pedestal, I was like, they're just so smart. And like, I could never be like that. And like they're just geniuses that I could never even, like, bother applying for. I just thought that they were the kind of people who only ever worked and I just stayed in their rooms and didn't have any fun... Like, they come from places where being smart is a bit like people disclosing they're really nerdy and they can't and like everyone's really similar to them. And they really like that. And so they think that maybe like, actually, Oxford is somewhere that they might quite enjoy.

Julien and Lucien are expressing relief and enthusiasm at finding 'fellow fish', fellow academically-minded WP who feel misrecognised by both elite institutions and, in some respects, their home communities (Reay et al. 2009). In the access community, they find what Petriglieri and Petriglieri (2010) call a 'sentient community'. Sentient communities are 'are groups that individuals can rely on for feedback, support, and encouragement, enabling people to address questions such as "How do I belong within this context?"' (Fernando and Kenny 2021:137). Because they provide a supportive space for hashing out questions of belonging, Petriglieri and Petriglieri (2010) contend that sentient communities are a constitutive aspect of identity workspaces, 'holding spaces' that support and enable identity work. Both Petriglieri and Petriglieri (2010) and Fernando and Kenny (2021) regard HEIs as identity workspaces, spaces that actively foster identity work among their inhabitants.

Petriglieri and Petriglieri (2010) adapt the term 'sentient' from psychodynamic theory, which distinguishes task-oriented and sentient systems of relations. A sentient organisation rallies less around meeting the emotional needs of its members and demands, in turn, loyalty from them. The pull of sentient communities is so strong that '[t]he process of relating between individual and sentient community often begins when an individual is not yet a full member' (Petriglieri and Petriglieri 2010:48), which prompts potential members to aspire to, and fantasise about, membership. This dynamic was evident in Lucy and Julien's stories; exposure to Oxford's access community as UNIQ

students stoked their desire to apply to Oxford and deepen their communion with fellow WP students. According to Fernando and Kenny's study of WP students at an elite business school (2021), sentient communities furnish the foundation from which marginalised students carve out alternative spaces for belonging, rejection the current consensus in studies of belonging that WP students tend to 'withdraw to the margins' of their institutions, as they feel pressure to downplay or erase their working-class identity (Fernando and Kenny:134).

Petriglieri and Petriglieri (2010:47,48) take pains to differentiate sentient communities from communities of practice (Lave and Wenger 1991): while the former 'brings belonging and identification to the foreground', the later is premised on 'joint enterprise, mutuality, and a shared repertoire of communal resources'. The experiences of UNIQ ambassadors, however, indicate that there is not such a rigid dichotomy between 'being' and 'doing' in the Oxford WP context. My findings bear out that, in the eyes of UNIQ ambassadors, membership in the access community is largely indistinguishable from participation in Oxford's WP efforts. Of course, one could argue that my logic is circular here: I deliberately interviewed student WP workers who are not representative of all WP students at Oxford. That is irrefutable, and I am not suggesting that the access community is the primary or sole sentient community for WP students at Oxford. Nonetheless, my data do point to a relationship between being a WP student and doing WP work. Only about half of my interviewees were themselves UNIQ participants; the others, while they were from working-class backgrounds, did not participate in access and outreach schemes as sixth-form students. Their personal identification with WP impelled them to work in WP, with many experiencing this pull as a sense of duty. As Conor, who was not himself a UNIQ alumnus, put it,

> I just wanted to get involved in as many outreach projects as I possibly could, because I came from a background that didn't have the support. I didn't really want to make sure that kids had that same experience. So [to] get involved… I think was ideal, really.

To probe the relationship between being and doing WP more deeply, we will turn to consider the ways in which the access community might be conceptualised as a community of practice.

The access community as a 'community of practice'

Lave and Wenger (Lave and Wenger 1991; Wenger 1998) developed the construct of community of practice while attempting to theorise learning as a collective process. The body of conceptual and theoretical work that adds flesh to the construct is rich and manifold, and I am not attempting here to intervene in that space. Here, I am using the term 'community of practice' more superficially, as a springboard for considering how students mutually engage in the joint enterprise of WP practice with a shared repertoire of identifications and cultural resources. More or less, this deployment of community of practice accords with Lawrence and Phillips' (2019) definition of an organisation as 'meaningful patterns' arising from 'the shared understandings held by members and interested external actors, and in the heterogeneous relationships among and between this network of actors'. In short, I am interested in how engaging in WP practice is a shared source of meaning and identity for student WP workers. I found that the access community is bound together by several communally shared features.

Maximalism

The mark of the access community was maximalist involvement with outreach and access efforts at Oxford, which is true in two respects. The first is the quantity of engagements with Oxford WP initiatives. For most ambassadors, UNIQ was not, in Conor's words, their first 'roadshow'. Recalling Conor's quote I excerpted above, he felt a compulsion to 'get involved in as many outreach projects as I possibly could', which initially took the form of leading two large annual university visits. Similarly, Julien felt an immediate pull to participate in WP work:

> I got to university, and once I'd managed to settle in and find my feet, I really wanted to get involved.

For Julien, this ignited a lifelong passion for access to Oxford that is the basis of both her career and academic work. Other older former ambassadors, like Mo and Conor, also reflected on how their work with UNIQ and other WP initiatives at Oxford influenced their choice of career: whether inspiring a career in education (Mo), or carrying the sensibility of WP work into other sectors, like law (Conor).

The second, and far more palpable, maximalism related to ambassadors' work on UNIQ itself. UNIQ is intentionally designed such that ambassadors are the lifeblood of UNIQ's programming on the ground. They are tasked with ensuring students are safe and comfortable at all times throughout the five-day residential. Using militaristic imagery, Mo describes ambassadors as the 'frontline' of UNIQ's work, while practitioners on the delivery team were the 'backstop'. They are required to be on-call for students from before breakfast time to after social programming concludes in the evening. Because of the sheer physical toll of these responsibilities, Joe laughed telling me that 'it is at the end of the week that you sleep'.

Equally as daunting as ambassadorship's physical demands are its pastoral responsibilities. Nearly universally, when asked about the most challenging dimension of their work for UNIQ, ambassadors cited their pastoral duties. The quote below, from Julien, is representative of the frequency and diversity of crises one encounters in ambassadorship:

> You've got [to] deal with the crises like somebody's ill, or somebody who's having a really hard time and wants to go home, or someone's wandered off. And you have to find them, like you deal with those crises.

Pastoral duties extend far beyond crisis management, however. True to its name, ambassadorship requires that students represent Oxford well through exhibiting high emotional intelligence and extroversion. Lisa, who works on training ambassadors,

ensures that ambassador are prepared for this emotional work through a range of strategies:

> Where we usually do some kind of strange team building activities, trying to get them to think kind of very practically about giving instructions and how you might interpret those instructions differently depending on the tone of voice or the language you used, and how, you know, when you're talking to a 16 or 17 year old, you need to be really clear.

'Emotional labour' is therefore essential to the enterprise of ambassadorship (in the sociological sense; see Hochschild 1983), not only taking the form of counselling and emotional support, but effacing one's own emotional complexity in the process. Sophia recalls the challenge that, in a maelstrom of sleep deprivation and ongoing bouts of crisis, one has to keep up positivity and enthusiasm, since '[y]ou're the one who has to lead all of the conversations, all of the interactions'. Returning to Ahmed's observation that seeing oneself represented is 'affective' and 'energising', the flipside of this is that representing a community, and an institution, to others is an affective process that requires an investment of energy. We will revisit the relationship between the pressures of representing Oxford and being represented later in the chapter's discussion.

The exhaustion and high demands of ambassadorship notwithstanding, the ambassadors I interviewed were unanimous that the intensity of the ambassadorship was matched by an overwhelming sense of reward, a visceral testament to their dedication to WP. The intensity of UNIQ is precisely what makes it both rewarding and effective. Maximalist investment of energy reaps maximal benefits for UNIQ students. Contrasting brevity and sustainability in WP work, Julien remarked that UNIQ manages to skirt the insufficiencies of short outreach programmes by overloading UNIQ with as much interaction, challenge, and excitement as possible.

> By the end of the week, students, participants in the program are like crying, but they're never going to see that their friends again, that literally in five, six days, they have made friends for life, which I think is I think that's part of its charm, in that you have a really fun time, you're stretched academically as well.

To return to Petriglieri and Petriglieri (2010), the emotion and loyalty surrounding a sentient community is cultivated, not a given. My findings suggest that practice cements this loyalty rapidly and deeply. Indeed, the labour, emotional and otherwise, that ambassadors invest in UNIQ is what enables it to be so effective. High risk, high rewards. As Conor, now a very busy solicitor, put it, 'Bloody hard job, I must say. It'll be the most rewarding thing I'll ever do'.

Category work and distancing: toward true WP

Perhaps due to the sheer breadth and depth of outreach work they perform, ambassadors exhibited a keen sense of what constitutes 'true' WP work. In fact, ambassadors often defined their WP work with UNIQ in opposition to other outreach efforts at Oxford, engaging in category protection. When explaining her motivation to become an ambassador, Angie told me that

> UNIQ seems to be the only sort of really, truly widening participation sort of summer school that was run at Oxford. So that was what I was quite keen to get involved in… A lot of them are sort of very much for profit, and they're just not, not my vibe, I think.

Indeed, most summer schools are run by private companies simply using the Oxford buildings. In a similar vein, Conor remembers his distaste for 'roadshow' type of outreach (university taster days with little-to-no follow-up with students). His involvement in several of these prompted him to seek out more serious opportunities in WP, which led him to UNIQ.

The act of delineating what is 'true WP' from other initiatives can be described both as category protection and an act of collective identity work, which, once again, highlights the interrelation between the two practices. In their review of self work research in organisational literature, Lawrence and Phillips (2019) identify 'distancing' as a key aspect of collective identity construction within institutional spaces. They cite Alvesson's classic study of how advertising executives construct 'professionalism' by

emphasising their clients' lack of professionalism (Alvesson 1994). In a later article, Alvesson and Willmott (2002:629) argue that a common modality of identity regulation is 'defining a person by defining others'. The same is true of communities: after all, to carve out an alternative space is to bound where the space begins and ends.

Fernando and Kenny (2021) find that WP students rely on notions of intersectionality and social justice to define the bounds of their sentient community. For ambassadors, the lines of distancing were similarly drawn by a shared moral conception of what constitutes true WP work. At the close of each ambassador interview, I asked ambassadors what effective WP work looks like to them. Their vision of 'true WP', I found, accords with larger shared commitments to precepts of social justice. According to ambassadors, initiatives that are truly widening participation are not for profit, but motivated by a desire to invest in marginalised students. As Conor explained, effective WP programmes have sustained contact with students, seeking to bring about transformational—not incidental—change in their educational trajectories, pointing to the distinction between the structural and incremental modalities of WP (e.g., Harrison and Waller 2017a; Taylor 2021). Julien, moreover, raised the necessity of intersectionality in WP, joking that we should not be in the business of 'whitening participation', contending that WP is an inherently intersectional enterprise, since marginalisation occurs along axes of race, disability, and other facets of identity beyond class. She is alluding to a burgeoning awareness of how different axes of disadvantage inform HE participation (see Thompson 2019). Collectively, these observations and convictions reflect currents in critical WP policy discourses and research. Ambassadors drew their repertoire of resources for defining true WP by zooming out to wider cultural discourses surrounding social justice.

Moreover, given the ubiquity of universities' willingness to exploit student labour, it should be noted that UNIQ, unlike many volunteer-based access and outreach

initiatives at HEIs, compensates ambassadors. Smirking as he spoke, Conor put it this way:

> The bonus of getting paid for it for once [we both laugh] instead of you many, many hours of time voluntarily [spent] did appeal, I must admit.

Nearly every ambassador I spoke to referenced pay as one of UNIQ's distinguishing factors. For many, this was more than just a perk, but a redressal of how Oxford policies perpetuate socioeconomic inequalities within the student body. Oxford does not allow students to hold jobs during term time, which presents a significant barrier to low-income students. Although a summer job certainly cannot not make up for this, UNIQ pays a high enough wage for a short enough stint of work that ambassadors are able to make money while pursuing other career-related opportunities throughout the summer long vacation. For ambassadors, WP work was a labour of love, but one that adequately paid them back.

The access community as a gift

The discussion in the last two sections bears out that it is the combination of 'being' and 'doing' WP that accounts for the tight bonds uniting the access community. Julien captures this relationship succinctly:

> I think the thing I really enjoyed the most about being an ambassador for UNIQ was the friendships I made with the other ambassadors. So getting to know other undergraduate students who were as passionate about access and outreach as me was really exciting. So being part of that kind of community of people that really cared about opening up at Oxford, to underrepresented groups, so I guess that's my main highlight.

While the sentient community and community of practice lenses offer helpful tools for richly describing this being and doing, in an IWP analysis, we would be remiss not to consider head-on how these identifications and actions interrelate with their institutional context. Indeed, the core constituent of a community working within/against an institution is the dynamic set of relations between the actors and their institution. The

access community, I would argue, is bound together not only by shared identity and enterprise, but a communal onus of reciprocity. When asked what motivated them to work for UNIQ, every ambassador who identified as a WP student made reference to giving back, even if they rejected the idea that being a WP student entails an obligation to contribute to the enterprise of WP.

To give back logically implies that a gift has been received. We can productively use the notion of the gift (Mauss 1990[1925]) to untangle the set of communal and institutional relations that are central to the access community. For ambassadors who were UNIQ alumni, the most common motivation they cited for becoming ambassadors was to give the same experience to students with similar backgrounds to them. Lucy gave a particularly evocative response, deploying the explicit vocabulary of giving back a rewarding experience.

> I think the main motivation was just like, because I was already looking at working on it, even from, like, Michaelmas of when I started because it was such a rewarding experience for me when I was a sixth-form student that I kind of wanted to be a part of it from the other side. And, like, to give that experience to other people.

Some ambassadors characterised UNIQ as a gift using counterfactual terms, describing it as something they would have benefited from if it were available to them. Conor, who did not learn about UNIQ in time to apply as a sixth-former, framed his onus to future UNIQ students in almost preventative terms: 'I really wanted to make sure that kids didn't have the same experience. So get involved… I think was ideal'. Regardless of framing, what unites these two motivations is 1) framing the UNIQ experience as something rewarding and powerful, and 2) desiring to give the experience to imagined future UNIQ students with similar backgrounds to the ambassadors. There is an intergenerationality to the enterprise of the WP community.

If we draw on French sociologist Marcel Mauss' foundational theorisation of The Gift (Mauss 1990[1925]), we understand the drive that ambassadors feel to pass UNIQ

down to future students as a 'gift cycle' linking generations of WP students at Oxford. According to Mauss, gift cycles are at the core of structuring society. Synthesising ethnological studies of archaic societies, Mauss theorises 'sociality in terms of obligations voluntarily incurred and reciprocated' by actors and groups of actors, which is an active refutation of dominant utilitarian understandings of economic exchange (Pelletier et al. 2018:390). Gift cycles, however, are not neatly circumscribed by the parties giving and receiving. In the forward to the 1990 edition of *The Gift,* the famed institutional theorist Mary Douglas argues that gift cycles are an unavoidable driver of institutionalisation: 'there are no free gifts; gift cycles engage persons in permanent commitments that articulate the dominant institutions' (xii). While I am not suggesting that the gift cycles buoying UNIQ are solely constitutive of an institution like Oxford or WP, it does become clear on the micro-level, how relations between successive cohorts of WP students are integral to the project of Oxford WP. It is through the mutual obligations of reciprocity between WP students that the transformative, confidence-building, and affective power of Oxford's flagship WP programme is kept alive.

Although ambassadors direct their reciprocity toward younger WP students, the gift itself has an institutional benefactor, Oxford, and thus the passing and receiving of the gift carry institutional weight. Take the reception of the gift. For ambassadors who are UNIQ alumni, the reason the gift of UNIQ was so formative was because it disclosed the possibility of attending Oxford, making the gift of an Oxford education—and all the privileges it entails—a reality.

For working-class members of elite academic spaces, it is common to feel as though their entry into these spaces was sympathetically granted by the institution, as though it was not earned by 'merit' alone. Indeed, from the perspective of being working-class feminist academics, Wilson et al. (2021:36) write that

> Our place here feels like a gift. As though benevolent institutions have generously allowed us entry. Mauss argues that in the process of gift-giving a bond is formed between giver and receiver which grants the former power over the latter.

This power is constitutive of what Dettmar (2022) calls a 'dynamic of asymmetrical reciprocity' or, in simpler terms, debt. No matter what WP students do, they can not, in material terms, fully 'repay' the institution for affording them entry into it. Nonetheless, they feel an unshakeable sense of indebtedness, that they *should* give back to the institution, although what constitutes sufficient giving back is unclear. The 'very fact that we don't know what debt is, the very flexibility of the concept, is the basis of its power' (Graeber 2014:5). Paying back debt could take the form of maximalist involvement in WP activities, or–at the very least–retaining a posture of gratitude, even when the university mistreats or exploits you. Wilson et al. (2021:36) again: 'This has taught us that our participation is conditional. We are expected to learn the game of academia, not to challenge it. We should be grateful for this "gift"'.

Debt's most pervasive stranglehold is that one's supposed indebtedness follows them around, policing their terms of engagement with institutions. From the blowback the Oxford African and Caribbean society received for refusing to participate in outreach (Weale 2020) to the poisonous reception of Rhodes Must Fall protests, it becomes permissible to police the 'ingratitude' of marginalised students pushing back against institutional injustice. In my interviews with student WP workers, ambassadors also expressed feeling the inverse: that when they want to, of their own volition, 'give back', their actions become refracted through the lens of debt.

Despite feeling as though her motivation to work in WP was her own, Julien felt the need to clarify that her motivation was her own, for herself and her community:

> So I think the motivation had been that UNIQ had been such an important part of getting me to apply to university. Once I got to university, and once I'd managed to settle in and find my feet, I really wanted to get involved. I don't think it was a sense of obligation to give something back. But I was really passionate

> that other students who were in a similar situation to me when they were at school, maybe didn't know anybody that didn't have the chance to, like go on a day trip to Oxford, or have the support of their school to apply.

Indeed, while the choice to partake in the institutional work of WP is agentive and should be recognised as such, it is problematized by the asymmetrical reciprocity inherent to the gift of WP. This is the core contradiction of being a student WP worker; want and onus can become indistinguishable, regardless of one's orientation toward the institution or WP *writ large*.

As I have reiterated throughout the thesis thus far, however, I do not intend to furnish an 'overly socialised' account of WP practice and social change. The spectre of the power structures at play in WP work influence and constrain, but do not negate, the agency and passion that ambassadors invest in the access community. Though it is an institutional community insofar as its *raison d'être* and host is the institution, the access community is simultaneously its own, an alternative space through which WP students find communion and belonging (Fernando and Kenny 2021). Just like any other form of institutional work, participating in the access community takes the institutional order as its building blocks, re-shaping them into something that serves the community better.

Our discussion here has broken ground for turning to the question of how student WP workers navigate their institutional positioning and its contradictions and complications. The next section explores the identity work through which ambassadors make sense of and legitimise their WP practice.

To be a mirror: the identity work of WP practice

If, as Reay argues, WP students at elite universities are 'familiar strangers' in their institutions, when they become WP workers, they take on the role of insider. Indeed, as Julien put it, the value of ambassadorship is that ambassadors '[t]alk to [students] about what Oxford was like from a kind of insider's point of view and pass on that'. As

ambassadors, become representative of Oxford, taking on its authority. The following sections explore how ambassadors navigate their relationship to their newfound insiderness.

Negotiating privilege: vocabulary sensitisation and subversion

Given Oxford's singular social status, attending Oxford not only confers gifts, but also privilege. For students from wealthy backgrounds, the privilege of attending Oxford is experienced (if it is perceived at all) as continuation, another stretch on a smooth, predictable path. For WP students, alternatively, the conferral of insider status (albeit not 'complete' insider status) at one of the world's most prestigious institutions is tantamount to an identity shift (Dacin et al. 2010; Allouch 2021; Fernando and Kenny 2021). I found that, in light of their insider status at Oxford, ambassadors (re)negotiated their relationship to 'privilege' and associated vocabulary, engaging in a blend of identity work and category work.

The notion of privilege has become ubiquitous in academic and cultural social justice discourses. Privilege refers to social power afforded to those who are perceived as belonging to dominant social groups: white, male, wealthy, able-bodied, heterosexual, *et cetera*. While there are observable nuances to one's lived reality of their privilege (e.g., the experience of 'passing' as a member of a dominant group while having a marginalised identity), mainstream 'privilege theory', as Choonara and Prasad (2014) call it, generally understands experiences of privilege (or the lack thereof) as arithmetic: one can tally their privileges and non-privileges to arrive at an index of the oppression they experience. In my view, this betrays a methodological individualism that runs counter to the goals of solidarity, as the end-game of categorising every single facet of one's social identity is arriving at an *n* of 1. Choonara and Prasad find privilege theory unhelpful because it

> confuses symptoms with problems. Inequalities and prejudices around body size are not factors that exist independently; they are a direct consequence of sexism and concepts of gender. Similarly the vast inequalities in the likelihood of being in prison or of being able to access education are the consequence of racism and social inequality. Reeling off a list of 'privileges' in this way simply states the existence of an unequal society—it does not help us to understand it or to challenge it. In fact the recognition of inequalities becomes an end in itself (Choonara and Prasad 2014).

They also lambast privilege theory for its overreliance on superficiality and accompanying unwillingness to look upstream to the socioeconomic structures responsible for oppression; they cite the Marxist quip that '[a]ll science would be superfluous if the outward appearance and the essence of things directly coincided' (Marx 1972[1894]).

I found that, in their identity work and category work around privilege and related vocabulary (disadvantage, marginalisation, minority status, *et cetera*), ambassadors cut more directly to the 'essence of things', both adding weight to and playfully subverting dominant vocabulary around marginalisation in order to better capture how marginalisation manifests for them and their community in their temporal-relational context.

Three miniature case studies illustrate this point. The first two are from Conor and Julien, who both come from working-class backgrounds. When explaining how he came to work for UNIQ, Conor framed his experience through negation: 'I came from a background that didn't have the support'. As the interview progressed, he continued to circumlocute around terms like 'disadvantage', 'deprivation', 'mental illness', and similar terms denoting marginalisation or stigma. He eventually explicitly expressed his discomfort around this sort of terminology, telling me he 'hated' using negatively-coded terms to describe himself and others in this context. Reminiscent of Chapter 2's discussion of interpellating marginalised students as 'problems', Conor displayed a reluctance to displace social problems onto students and their identities.

We could call this strategy of category work 'vocabulary sensitization'. Vocabulary sensitisation involves reintroducing weightiness and care into vocabulary that has become ubiquitous and casual. Calling on her academic training, Julien exhibited sensitisation around dominant language in WP. When I asked her about her dislike for the term 'barriers', she replied:

> I think that over time, when I did my masters, I learned a lot about different things and thought quite critically about the language that we use… I think it's slightly connected to an idea that if we conceive of students in a slight, you know, in a deficit way, if we associate them with lacking or not being good enough to get over these barriers, then we somehow make it their problem. And I think the problem is, is in Oxford, it's not the students–or it's in the wider society that has bad schooling for certain areas… The student isn't the problem, the kind of environment that they're coming into, and all the structures around them are the thing that have created the problem.

In addition to critiquing the language of 'barriers' and 'disadvantage', Julien did the opposite to the term 'privilege', participating in what we might call 'vocabulary subversion'. She engaged creatively with the language of privilege, using it to describe what others might call merit or grit. While she acknowledged she could be considered 'underprivileged' on account of her working-class upbringing, when she zoomed in on her embodied experience of her upbringing, she arrives at the opposite takeaway:

> Having said that, I feel like I've had a very privileged upbringing. I've been brought up by parents who read with me and encouraged me to read a lot. I really thrived at school and really enjoyed school. So in many, many ways, I've been really privileged. I achieved, like, incredible grades in comparison with the people at my school.

Julien's equating of her individual qualities resonates with an observation from Joe that we will return to in the next section. Joe attributes his attributes that eased his transition to insiderness—an easy-going disposition and frugality—to 'luck':

> And then once you get here [at Oxford]. I sat down, I didn't know how to use the right fork. And I was able to knock that off. But for a lot of people, yeah, that makes them feel like they don't fit in. And so and also financially there. I got lucky

> with my finances, because I don't spend any money on anything [we both laugh]. But for a lot of people to enjoy university, they would be in financial trouble.

In the reflections above, privilege is characterised not as a disembodied social fact, but a state of being whose qualities are local and relational. From Julien and Joe's perspectives in particular, one's privilege is related to the ease with which they gained proximity to 'insiderness' at Oxford.

The final brief case study I want to highlight is from Alex, who does not identify as a WP student. I include his insights because his reflection on privilege reinforces that, at Oxford, insiderness cannot be algorithmically determined by how 'privileged' one is on paper. Alex began his rationale for becoming ambassador with the statement, 'I don't come from an unprivileged background'. While it is outside my remit to conduct a linguistic content analysis in this research, I will flag that the double-negative, underhanded nature of this description does accord with a broader complexity evident in the rest of Alex's interview.

Alex, who is from Yorkshire, spent the bulk of his interview highlighting the tensions he noticed between Northern and Southern students' experiences of UNIQ. He raised the fact that UNIQ disproportionately recruits students from the greater London area, and that those students, despite being marginalised, felt like they fit in with one another. For Northern students, certain 'social' aspects of fitting in at Oxford—from matters of dialect to cultural interest—were 'where the stigma manifests'. Indeed, in the English context, geography is a highly relevant axis of social identity (and is often elided with class) (see Baker and Billinge 2004). In its elision of geolocal context and its tendency toward superficiality, mainstream privilege theory does not sufficiently account for the material and localised forms of structural disadvantage. Alex's response sensitises us to the trickiness of flatly classifying an individual as 'not unprivileged' or unprivileged.

Demystification, revisited

Now that we have a working understanding of the subtleties of identity work around insiderness, we can consider how student WP workers, as insiders, confront the central contradictions of Oxford WP practice. While they do not have much say in the programmatic decisions around whom to select and why, student WP workers have considerably more latitude than practitioners in showing UNIQ students the 'real Oxford'. Student WP workers, therefore, offered more detailed commentaries on the work of showing Oxford for what it is, and the contradictions of Oxford realism as it relates to myth and ritual.

Becoming WP

Ambassadors broadly agreed with practitioners on the utmost importance of demystifying undergraduate life at Oxford for UNIQ participants. It was Phoebe who said that 'outreach is meaningless to some extent' without students experiencing Oxford first-hand. In particular, ambassadors valued the incomparable potency of seeing oneself represented for increasing student confidence.

> Joe had the following to say about student confidence and representation:
>
> Jonah: What do you think it was about the program that inspired [student] confidence?
>
> Joe: I'm imagining the ambassadors play a pretty big role in that. Yeah, I think it was letting the students realise that ambassadors are just like them… They often have this myth of Oxford and like Oxford students as these crazy genius people who like never work—never stop working. And like their standard that's impossible to get to, and then they see us… And so yeah, I think that seeing that makes a difference. And just our whole thing in the week was keeping on telling them how great they weren't, because they really were. That's why they got into the programme.

For ambassadors, however, showing Oxford, and Oxford students, for what they really are is not a matter of pulling back a curtain, or letting a carefully designed outreach

programme run. Ambassadors are tasked with showing students Oxford as a literal action. This action not only requires an immense investment of energy, but involves curating an image of themselves as representations of Oxford. As Julien put it, as an ambassador, '[I'm] just being really fun, I'm creating this kind of friendly impression of Oxford'. Ambassadors are asked to become someone that students can see themselves in: fun and exuberant, but also normal, relatable, approachable. This is not to say that ambassadors may not embody these qualities outside of UNIQ. Nonetheless, in playing the role of Oxford ambassador, student WP workers are asked to 'become WP'. Becoming WP in this conception demands that they both identify with, and distinguish themselves, from WP students. This involved calling on several strategies of identity work.

Particularising

In general, ambassadors spoke of WP students—both themselves and UNIQ students—in fairly collective terms, reifying the existence of a distinct community of WP students. When the discussion turned to the struggles of navigating 'insiderness' at Oxford, however, some ambassadors intentionally disaggregated their experiences from other WP students, especially the UNIQ students under discussion, in an act of distancing work that I term 'particularising'. One example, from Joe, was referenced in the last section. In addition to his frugality and ability to knock things off, at another point in his interview, Joe cited his unique disposition toward formal dinners to distance his own navigation process from that of other students.

> It's absolutely ridiculous wearing a suit and a gown to a dinner. It's crazy. But it's hilarious. So like, if there was a vote again, I'm sure I'd keep it. I do it ironically because it's funny. And I think that's the approach I have taken to it… But for a lot of people, yeah, that makes them feel like they don't fit in.

Julien, similarly, felt the need to particularise her transition to student life at Oxford. After conveying how quickly she felt at home at Oxford, she qualified that she

didn't 'get put off by maybe some of the weird traditions or some of the other more negative stuff that I know that I can imagine other students would find harder'.

We will return to both of these examples in the final section, as they speak volumes about the problems of myth and ritual in demystification. Here, I will flag that, in both cases, Julien and Joe are particularising their own relatively straightforward experiences of adjusting to life at Oxford. Their acts of distancing, therefore, can be read as attempts to prophylactically snuff out any suggestion that working-class students can, and should be expected to, adjust easily to Oxford. As a reminder, both have generally critical dispositions toward Oxford WP. They would therefore likely concur with Reay et al.'s (2009:1115) conclusion that working-class university students whose habituses comfortably inhabit the institution are 'the exception that proves the rule', and particularise their own successes in acclimating to preserve their own critiques of Oxford's exclusivity. After all, as Sophia put it, the work of ambassadorship is 'just being there pastorally showing that it's not that you're worse than that person, it's just that everyone shows what they struggle differently'.

The shyness to confidence pipeline: mirroring back

We have already discussed how ambassadors are asked to partially efface themselves as individuals by putting across an enthusiastic, extroverted energy. I found, however, that ambassadors judged the success of their interventions in students' lives by how much students embodied a similar energy. Across interviews, ambassadors cited a common trajectory of students transforming from being 'shy' to being 'confident', often using those terms verbatim. In framing shyness as the antithesis of confidence, ambassadors valued students displaying a similar exuberance as them. A response from Joe is representative of this phenomenon:

> I remember a student who was really shy at the start, and we sort of got worried that they weren't settling in and making friends. And then at the end of the week, in our final session we have, and we asked for a volunteer who wanted to talk

> about their experience, and his hand shot up like, immediately, and just seeing that in those five days we had made that difference was, I still remember it, it was so nice. *And just, yeah, the fact that you could see yourself making that difference to people's confidence is what I went into the program to do. And it was really positive to see that.*

In being mirrors through which students can see themselves represented, ambassadors ask that students mirror back. Note how Joe concludes with celebrating the experience of seeing oneself making a difference. Like practitioners, ambassadors also had a keen sense of themselves as changemakers. One's success of being a changemaker is reliant on seeing change in the communities they work for. As an inherently social and relational process, the identity work surrounding WP practice is a transitive act, relying as much on the other as the self to negotiate social identity.

Adding flesh to myth and ritual

We will conclude this chapter by briefly revisiting the contradictions of Oxford realism as they relate to myth and ritual. To my initial surprise, more ambassadors proportionally subscribed to the myth displacement model than practitioners. Given that they live in the realities of Oxford's failings, I had suspected that more ambassadors would engage in myth confrontation. However, as I found that, precisely because of their more embodied experience of Oxford, ambassadors engaged in a more nuanced form of myth displacement than practitioners did.

Myth displacement

Ambassadors who engaged in myth displacement broadly agreed with practitioners that there are obsolete narratives surrounding Oxford, and that they are products of the social reproduction of inequality and disparities in communities' access to 'hot knowledge'. In light of this, Joe came to the conclusion that demystification requires far more than exposing a relatively small number of sixth-form students to life at Oxford:

> Yeah, it's about getting people information, and also, maybe helping them ask the right questions. And also the teachers. Often it's the myths perpetuated by teachers, teachers have a view… and then they tell their students, you know, you shouldn't apply to Oxford or Oxford isn't for you… We need to demystify things for teachers as well. So they know what an interview looks like. So that they know that things like how you dress and whether you make eye contact are just completely irrelevant.

Lucy pointed to the role of the media in perpetuating stereotypes about Oxford:

> Because Oxford is so like, in the media, like, you know, there's the whole, films about, like, The Riot Club, whatever. And it's in the newspapers about, like, Oxford students doing this. And like, there are so many myths about Oxford that people have very strong views about what it's like. And I think when you come here and realise that it's just literally nothing like it's portrayed, I think that would change your views quite quickly, because it's just so different. I think especially like, obviously, if you come from a proper, like, private school, and you know, people who have been to Oxford, you already know, that's not true. But for a lot of the kids that come on UNIQ, they've, like, never met anyone that's been to Oxford. So all they have to base their opinion on is, like, the films and stuff about it. So I think actually coming is like they're always just learning from scratch what it's like.

According to ambassadors, as they learn 'from scratch' what Oxford is like, students have agency in how they handle its strangeness. In the last chapter, I referenced how Julien recalls not being bothered by Oxford's 'weird traditions', although she did particularise her own experience. Joe also drew on his own experience to counter that intimidation is not an inevitable reaction to the ritual. Irony, he suggests, is a powerful tool for diffusion:

> It's absolutely ridiculous wearing a suit and a gown to dinner. It's crazy. But it's hilarious. So like, if there was a vote again, I'm sure I'd keep it. I do it, ironically, because it's funny. And then once you get here, you know, there aren't any problems, because there are, you know, formal for lots of people, I sat down, I didn't know how to use the right fork. And I was able to knock that off. But for a lot of people, yeah, that makes them feel like they don't fit in.

In their versions of myth displacement, ambassadors, on the whole, tended to emphasise student agency in handling the mysticised aspect of Oxford. Even if Oxford's rituals

reproduce Oxford's elite status, WP students are not constitutionally bound to be intimidated by them. In defanging the myth in this way, ambassadors demonstrate one of the core facets of myth: that myths, like all other consumable information, are texts that can be deconstructed. In partaking in ritual dinners ironically, Joe takes on a Barthesian sensibility toward myth and contradiction, in which 'sarcasm' becomes the 'condition of truth' (Barthes 1972:11).

Myth confrontation

Among ambassadors, it was Joe alone who engaged meaningfully in myth confrontation. We will close by briefly recounting how he handled the aporia of confronting Oxford's systemic failings. Though he advocated the work of myth displacement, Joe recounted feeling lost as to how to manage students' expectations about the workload at Oxford:

> Oxford has a problem with, like, mental health and workload. And it's probably worse for tutors, because I think that they are even more under pressure than undergraduates. That's a systemic problem with the university…
>
> …We had to think about, as ambassadors, the balance we struck between telling people that it is manageable, but also that every single one of my friends has had a breakdown at some point because of the workload. And that, and I don't think you will find anyone in Oxford who will say that that's not true. So we can't hide that. We shouldn't hide that. But also, how do we deal with that? How do we tell people that?

Similar to how he diffused the intimidation of Oxford rituals, Joe remained confident about students' ability to assess the balance of Oxford's failings and promises themselves, underscoring student agency in judging whether or not Oxford was the right opportunity for them.

> And how do we deal with [workload], as a person who's sort of job for a week was to convince people that this is a good place for them?... Personally, I felt like I was trying to encourage people to take an opportunity. One thing we did repeat to them was that getting into Oxford or not, wasn't the be all and end all of

> anything. The fact that they got into the summer school itself meant that they were doing really well, and were going to be successful.

Whereas fellow myth-confronters Matt and Linda could only speculate as to whether it was acceptable to recruit students to Oxford in light of its realities, Joe called on his experience as a WP student to frame showing Oxford for what it is not necessarily as a contradiction, but as a thorny set of problems that WP students are equipped to make sense of themselves.

Chapter discussion

This chapter has tracked the manifold ways in which WP practice invokes identity work on the part of student WP workers: from collectively bounding a community in which they belong, to rehashing their relationship to privilege and potential. Its findings demonstrate how interwoven identity work and category work are, which I would attribute to the 'othering' at the heart of both acts. In their review of category work as institutional work, Lawrence and Phillips (2019:228) how category work and boundary work are irresistibly linked: to define a category is to create 'symbolic boundaries' that distinguish between groups of people, objects, time, space, and symbols themselves (Lamont and Monar 2002). As the body of scholarship on identity work in IWP bears out (Alvesson and Sveningsson 2003; Sveningsson and Larsson 2006; Watson 2008; Brown 2015), how one conceptualises and shapes their social identities is invariably wound up in the other and how others will interface with their identities. The ways in which we define ourselves, and define our world, are simultaneously relational and oppositional.

A pivotal question this chapter leaves hanging in the balance is the extent to which ambassadors legitimise, and/or delegitimise Oxford WP through their identity work and category work. If anything, it appears that ambassadors on the whole affirmed the internal legitimacy of Oxford WP more than practitioners did, with only one ambassador, Joe, engaging in myth confrontation. This conclusion would be compatible

with Fernando and Kenny's (2021) finding that the identity work of WP students at an elite business both legitimised and delegitimised the institution's sense of inclusivity, but the legitimacy work was far stronger. With the resources for forming sentient communities that the institution provides them, Fernando and Kenny (2021) find that WP students do experience a meaningful sense of belonging at their HEI, which legitimises the university's image of itself as inclusive. In turn, Fernando and Kenny (2021:150) come to a somewhat startling conclusion that the existence of these spaces is so poignant that they become self-sustaining hubs of inclusivity which, if one takes a cynical reading, require no further intervention from the institution:

> As WP candidates negotiate a sense of belonging with reference to the support they receive from the institution, the institution has no need to make substantial changes to its services or its underlying value system. Students from marginalized communities can find a way of existing and succeeding in elite academic environments by carving out a distinct space. As individuals pass through an institution, they may not be aware that, while they engage with the institution and remain at the margins, the organisation is under no pressure to change and become more fully inclusive..

To be clear, they immediately clarify that they do not endorse institutional complacency toward inclusivity:

> Institutions must continue to take account of the extent to which increased diversity in terms of student background actually results in increased inclusivity. (Fernando and Kenny 150)

While I do not endorse the common SCWP conclusion that WP students are structurally precluded from finding real belonging in elite spaces, Fernando and Kenny's offer a reparative interpretation that, in my view, misjudges the extent of students' agency in actualising their own belonging and, by extension, their judgement of their institution's internal legitimacy.

I am not making an argument to moderation and suggesting that the answer, as it were, lies in the middle; this study both empirically and ethically prioritises the agentive

ways in which actors live within, and act upon, institutions. In fact, my findings suggest that, in some instances, Fernando and Kenny may under-emphasise WP students' agency, especially *vis-a-vis* their ability to identify institutional shortcomings in various inclusion efforts, as demonstrated by the category work they performed around what constituted 'true WP'. On the other hand, the asymmetrical structures of reciprocity created by WP make the institution's incentives (some perverse, some not) in fostering sentient communities among marginalised students unignorable. Ambassadors, like Julien, were acutely aware that participation in WP work is inexorably linked to their indebtedness. In short, I did not find a clear one-to-one relationship between the identity work of belonging and internal legitimacy; their entanglement in a particular context can only be parsed through a thick description of said context, a task I hope I performed well in this chapter.

Overall, this chapter shows that identity work and category work seldom yield clean or definitive answers. Like the institutional settings in which it takes place, institutional work is contingent, fragile, and sometimes contradictory. It is unstable, in fact, precisely because it is situated in institutions (Lawrence and Phillips 2019:91). The ambivalence that marks identity work can be usefully abstracted and categorised by theory, but I would argue that its essence is better captured by poetry. We will close with the words of the Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa, who is acclaimed for his fragmented meditations on the 'heteronymic' and 'fugitive' nature of the self, which, together, open space for apprehending the self's nuances (Ganeri 2021). A untitled poem of his on the self reads:

> I don't know who my soul is.
> Nor does it know who I am.
> Understand it? It would take time.
> Explain it? Don't know if I can.
> And in this misunderstanding
> Between who I am and what am I
> There's a whole other meaning

Lying between earth and sky.

Chapter 9

Evaluators: what we make work

> We ourselves are part of a society that is haunted by evaluation.
> Dahler-Larsen (2012:12)

> All… mass demands for social change uttered from the impasse of the present extend from this, cruel optimism's double bind: even with an image of a better good life available to sustain your optimism, it is awkward and it is threatening to detach from what is already not working.
> Lauren Berlant (2011:263)

In Chapter 5, I stressed how actors' perceptions of internal legitimacy are inextricable from the wider frames of legitimacy that exist at the field-level and beyond. My investigation thus far into category work and level-jumping, in particular, has borne out that practitioners regularly draw on an array of frames to answer the burning question: 'Is what I'm doing good?', or, phrased more specifically, 'Is my work contributing toward the social change I want to see in HE?' As these questions demonstrate, legitimacy in WP has deep axiological underpinnings, and we will confront them in this chapter head-on. This chapter lays out the terms of the metaphorical 'theory of change' that WP practice is required to follow, which, in turn, determines how the social change effected by access and outreach interventions is apprehended in the WP field. It reaches the crescendo of our inquiry into WP practice and legitimacy by focalising the field-level formulation of legitimacy that has become hegemonic in WP, and how practitioners interact with it.

This chapter, however, is not about WP practice, at least ostensibly. In fact, the subject of this chapter is a process through which practice is abstracted and subjected to the cold, flattening treatment of measurement. I am speaking about evaluation, a social practice and institution (Dahler-Larsen 2012), that has been at the core of WP since its

institutionalisation. It is my contention in this chapter that evaluation is the overriding force that sets the terms of legitimacy in the WP field.

Recounting WP's history in the broadest strokes, we can readily see evaluation's centrality to WP policy and practice's development. It was lacklustre evaluation results that spelled the demise of AimHigher (Doyle and Griffin 2012; Harrison 2012), and with it, the national WP apparatus that epitomised New Labour educational policy. With the introduction of atomised WP at HEIs, evaluation became simultaneously more diffuse and consequential for WP practice. Since the early 2010s, the government (through the OfS, and formerly through OFFA) has required that universities render sufficient evidence of their WP initiatives' impact in order to receive tuition funds. For WP practitioners, evaluation is now an unavoidable aspect of programme design and delivery. Programmes need to be formulated with an eye to their evaluability; on some level, their university's survival in the HE market relies on it. While the task of evaluating WP has been outsourced to WP teams at universities, the field-level standards for evaluation have been articulated more forcefully. As we will discuss in more detail, the OfS meticulously produces standards—or 'types'—of evidence that rank evidence according to the causality it can establish. Practitioners must not only pay mind to evaluation, but also to sanctioned ways of understanding how change is created. It is my position, therefore, that we cannot understand any given enterprise of WP practice without understanding the ways in which it interprets these directives for assessing change, and, in turn, how it evaluates the success of its work.

Accordingly, my main theoretical proposition is that evaluation plays a pivotal role in furnishing the terms of legitimacy in the WP field. I will spend the first section of this chapter drawing on work in OI, critical WP, and critical policy studies to justify this claim, and its particular relevance to social policy in England. Nonetheless, the goal of this chapter is to examine how practitioners respond to the hegemony of evaluation on

the ground. My findings suggest that merely theorising evaluation as an apparatus of legitimacy is not nearly sufficient for capturing the complexities of evaluation interacting with the institutional work of practice. Exploring the perspectives of both practitioners and in-house evaluators (who themselves identify as WP practitioners), I find that the ways of knowing that evaluation authorises are translated differentially—and, indeed, transformed—in practice.

Evaluation as the architecture of legitimacy in WP

Evaluation sits at the core not only of WP, but, as sociologist Peter Dahler-Larsen argues, of modern western societies. In his masterful analysis that characterises contemporary organisational life as an 'evaluation society', Dahler-Larsen (2012:12) proclaims that 'we ourselves are part of a society that is haunted by evaluation'. What is referred to as 'evaluation' encapsulates similar notions like auditing, quality assurance, and inspection. Hence Dahler-Larsen begins his analysis by walking us through how evaluation is a central institution in contemporary social life. Any social actor who lives in public interfaces with evaluation nearly constantly; from departmental audits, to performance reviews, to opportunities to partake in a survey from which we promptly avail our inboxes, evaluation has become ubiquitous.

Evaluation is not only ubiquitous, but also unquestionable. Referencing OI theorist James March, Dahler-Larsen (2012:3) suggests that evaluation has become a 'protected discourse': that is, 'something virtually sacred, about which the dominant forces in society do not pose questions'. In OI terms, its taken-for-grantedness is high. It is rare to encounter meaningful questioning of evaluation; rather, debates surrounding evaluation typically take the form of which method, or approach, to evaluation is appropriate, not whether evaluation should be conducted in the first place.

From an OI lens, how does one make sense of evaluation and its hallowed status? Dahler-Larsen himself theorises evaluation as an institution, but concedes that

evaluation can be read as an organisational social practice that has become 'a generally accepted *ritual* legitimized by expectations in organizational environments' (Dahler-Larsen 2012:65, emphasis mine). While there is analytic purchase in exploring how evaluation operates as a feature of institutionalised organisations, this conceptualisation confuses forests for trees. Dahler-Larsen dedicates the second half of his monograph to exploring how evaluation is an institution that embodies distinctly modern societal logics. He goes so far as to call evaluation an institution borne of a 'modern cosmology':

> At its base, evaluation carries the idea that the quality of human activities, projects, and institutions can be measured on abstract scales. Evaluation carries with it the idea that the evaluand (the object of evaluation)—whatever it might be—can be divided and decomposed into inputs, activities, programs, criteria, and outcomes so that it can be managed and reorganised. Without this specifically modern cosmology, evaluation could not have been invented. (Dahler-Larsen 2012:101)

I would submit, then, that evaluation is best understood as an institution that intervenes on the societal level. Due to its societal-level positioning, evaluation's regulatory, normative, and cultural-cognitive regulatory mechanisms are more insidious, and less tangible, than that of an organisational field. According to an OI reading of institutions, all institutions, on some level, dictate the cultural-cognitive terms of what we can know, and what we should care to know. In Chapter 3, I argued showed WP organisational field constrains and dictates how we conceive the category of 'student success' (see Lumb & Burke 2019). Fields, however, do not exist in vacuums; they are subject of higher-level institutional orders. If it is true that we live in an evaluation society, evaluation provides an essentially universal scaffold among fields for determining what knowledge is deemed legitimate.

Indeed, Dahler-Larsen draws on Berger and Luckmann's (1966) foundational work linking institutional analysis and the sociology of knowledge, to argue that evaluation authorises 'certain ways of knowing', governing the 'ontology (what is real),

epistemology (what the conditions for knowledge are), and methodology (how we can know in practice)' that we deem legitimate (Dahler-Larsen 2012:66). The question then becomes: which forms of knowledge does evaluation authorise, and what are the implications of this for WP? In order to understand how evaluation interacts with WP in its contingent temporal context, I will now briefly canvass the role evaluation has come to play in the UK policy landscape.

What works?

To understand the extent to which WP, and all UK social policy, operates in an evaluation society, we need not look further than the origins and reaches of 'what works'? In other words, what practices and policies *successfully* widen participation in HE among underrepresented communities?

For better (Hulme 2019), or for worse (Crockford 2021; Gordon et al. 2021; Clements and Short 2020), WP has pledged fealty to this question essentially since its birth (Biesta 2010; Harrison and Waller 2017). While WP practitioners and advocates might be most familiar with 'what works?' in the context of WP evaluation, 'what works?' is shorthand for a far larger movement within social policy *writ large*. The most recent, and powerful, manifestation of this approach is the creation of the What Works Network, for which HM Evaluation Task Force is the secretariat. The What Works Network was founded in 2013 with the express purpose of importing the precepts and strategies of evidence-based clinical medicine to social interventions, from education to policing to ageing (see What Works Network 2018). At the time of writing, the Network comprises nine independent What Works Centres, three affiliate members, and one associate member, including the Center for Transforming Access Outcomes (TASO), which is financed by the OfS.

Underpinning the What Works Network, and the staying power of 'what works?' more broadly, is an ethic toward social policy that has been hegemonic for decades. This

ethic is most commonly referred to as 'evidence-based' policy and practice. Indeed, the notion that policy should be evidence-based is its own protected discourse, so ubiquitous and so hallowed that it feels odd to denaturalize. According to the evidence-based policy paradigm, it is treated as self-evident that the best social interventions are those that can be 'backed up' by empirical evidence. The quest for evidence-based solutions, as Gert Biesta (2007; 2012) forcefully argues, presupposes that evidence can, in theory, definitively answer social questions, a proposition that commits a variety of epistemological errors. Biesta stakes his argument for "Why What Works Won't Work" on these critiques of the supremacy of evidence in social policy.

While I agree with Biesta's critiques, I would suggest that an alternate, though compatible, reading of 'what works?' lends us insight into how evaluation interfaces with social policy during and after New Labour in particular. In their post-mortem of AimHigher, Doyle and Griffin (2012:77) suggest that the thrust of all New Labour policy was its 'pragmatic, but possibly reductive preoccupation with "what works"', which was 'continued and indeed "ratcheted up"... under the Coalition government with its drive to cut public spending'. Drawing on the work of theorist Jean François Lyotard (1984), they argue that New Labour (and the subsequent administrations') fixation on demonstrating 'impact' is premised on performativity, 'whereby knowledge, practice and resources are legitimated through the delivery of outputs' (77). Their critique of policy performativity is coherent, yet Doyle and Griffin's engagement with Lyotard is tantalisingly brief. If we acquaint ourselves with the broader thrust of Lyotard's *Postmodern Condition*, we find that the core impulse underpinning performativity is seizing hold of a way to legitimate knowledge, highlighting the tight connection between evaluation and legitimacy.

Performativity, according to Lyotard, is an adaptation to the crisis of what he calls the 'postmodern condition'. Until the last half century, there were reliable paradigms of knowledge legitimation, paradigms Lyotard calls 'metanarratives: like "the dialectics of Spirit" or "the emancipation of the rational or working subject"' (1984: xxiii). After

industrialisation and the unprecedented digital technologies that developed in its wake, knowledge became simultaneously 'computerised' and commodified, increasingly externalised from knowing subjects, created en masse to be packaged and sold. This instrumentalisation of knowledge has eroded the metanarratives that have given knowledge its shape and purpose. 'Where', Lyotard (1984: xxv) asks, 'after the metanarratives, can legitimacy reside?' What metrics do we use for deeming knowledge legitimate? Wrested from these scaffolds, knowledge production is caught in epistemic free-for-all. To find relief from this, we are compelled to trade the pursuit of truth for 'another language game, in which the goal is no longer truth, but performativity–that is, the best possible input/output equation' (Lyotard 1984:46).

While one could take or leave Lyotard's larger diagnosis of the postmodern condition, his description of performativity aptly describes the conditions of knowledge in UK social policy. Legitimacy, without a communally shared notion of truth propping it up, becomes an end in and of itself, and is achieved through demonstrating—or manufacturing—outputs that justify inputs. The What Works Network's official webpage makes a fairly bald endorsement of performativity, boasting that every What Works affiliate is 'committed to increasing both the supply of and demand for evidence in their policy area, and their output is tailored to the needs of decision-makers'. Focussing one's critique of the current state of 'evidence-based' policy alone prevents us from diagnosing why we are motivated to produce the evidence in the first place.

In the policy context, performativity devises an epistemology of change in which social change is legitimate insofar as it is apprehendable, and flauntable, through demonstrating outputs (see Harrison and McCaig 2017). The best social interventions, therefore, are those that can be convincingly linked to outcomes through evaluation. Evaluation, in short, furnishes the paradigm through which we assess the legitimacy of any organisational action.

The OfS and what it thinks works

In the case of WP, the OfS openly explicates what this paradigm is. The OfS' equation for legitimacy is embodied in its constant stream of regulatory advice surrounding how to design and evaluate evidence-based WP programmes (e.g., Regulatory Advice Number 6). At the core of OfS' advice is their standards of evidence, which are broken into three types. I reproduce an abridged version of the standards below.

Figure 9.1: OfS types of evidence

Type 1: Narrative	The impact evaluation provides a narrative or a coherent theory of change to motivate its selection of activities in the context of a coherent strategy.
Type 2: Empirical Enquiry	The impact evaluation collects data on impact and reports evidence that those receiving an intervention have better outcomes, though does not establish any direct causal effect.
Type 3: Causality	The impact evaluation methodology provides evidence of a causal effect of an intervention.

Although the language of 'type' is intended to be non-hierarchical, the same 'types' listed above were formerly called 'levels'. As Richard Shiner, former head of evaluation at the OfS, explains,

> So you had these levels, they were called rather than types. Level one, two, and level three, level three, definitely seen as being the best, RCTs being the gold standard. And that did ruffle the feathers a little bit in the sector because of its research methods. And people have different thoughts about which are most appropriate, particularly when it comes to social sciences.

While Shiner himself intentionally 'sat on the fence' of this debate, he did note that, in financially supporting the Transforming Access and Student Outcomes consortium (TASO), the OfS does endorse their model. TASO, as mentioned, is an affiliate What Works Centre for the national What Works Network, and subscribes to a more 'medical' model of evaluation, aspiring to build a rigorous, and, ideally, causal evidence base around access and outreach interventions (see Hume 2019). TASO takes the same three types of evidence as the OfS and uses them to explicitly rank the 'strength' of 'hard' evidence that evaluations, in aggregate, generate:

Figure 9.2: TASO's 'strength of evidence' scheme

Level	Strength of evidence	What this means
4	Strong evidence	5 or more pieces of OfS Type 3 evidence from the UK
3	Medium evidence	3 or more pieces of OfS Type 3 evidence from the UK
2	Emerging evidence	3 or more OfS Type 2 evidence sources from the UK and/or 3 or more Type 3 evidence sources from outside the UK
1	Weak evidence	Any other number or combination of studies

It is important to flag that there is nuance as to what TASO and the OfS deem 'strong'. In addition to more 'medical' methodologies like quasi-experiments and RCTs, TASO is a strong proponent of theory-based approaches (Chen 1990; Weiss 1997), namely the 'theory of change' approach (ToC) to evaluation. ToCs outline and logically

link a programme's assumptions, aims, inputs, and outputs through the creation of a model. Though their express purpose is to produce a logic model, the process of creating ToC can be prioritised over the product, as ToCs provide a tool for eliciting active, participatory reflection on why a given programme is doing what it is doing (Mason and Barnes 2007; Arensman et al. 2018; Reinholz and Andrews 2020). Nonetheless, per its namesake, TASO is predominantly interested in ToCs insofar as they can outline the causal mechanisms that link a programme's inputs to outputs.

In short, the OfS and its collaborators expressly—if not explicitly—create a hierarchy for the knowledge one can generate about the effectiveness of practice. At the field-level, therefore, there exists an explicit yardstick for measuring a given university's external legitimacy *vis-a-vis* the robustness of evidence it can produce. The pressure to establish this legitimacy, moreover, is not one that is subliminally felt, but reinforced through regulatory mechanisms. In order to accept tuition funds, universities must submit APPs that show evidence of success, or clear plans for proving success, in their WP initiatives. Once again we witness legitimacy, as Meyer and Rowan (1977) theorised nearly a half-century ago, determining organisational survival.

Confrontation

Now that I have established evaluation's primacy in establishing the terms of legitimacy in the WP field, I will turn to explore how WP workers on the ground interface with the terms it sets. In the preceding two chapters, I tracked how practitioners draw on a wide array of logics to (de)legitimise Oxford WP: from cultural discourses surrounding privilege and social justice, to their lived experience and internal identification with WP students. Now it is time to address directly the extent to which practitioners subscribe to, or push against, the model of legitimacy prescribed to them by their field.

In the case of Oxford WP, and many other WP departments in UK universities, practitioners confront evaluation not only in APPs and atmospheric pressures to

demonstrate success, but in the form of an in-house evaluation team. Since 2012, when WP became an institutional responsibility, the university has steadily been investing more in monitoring and evaluation each year. The year 2016 marked a sea change for WP evaluation at Oxford: the university commissioned an external evaluation of UNIQ that recommended stronger targeting strategies and programmatic structure to make it maximally effective (and evaluable) (Oxford APP 2016-2017). This marked a shift toward systemising monitoring and evaluation for the flagship WP programmes. By 2018, the university formally created an evaluation and analysis team to work with practitioners designing and delivering all university-wide WP programmes. Over the team's life course, they have quickly systemised WP evaluation at Oxford: creating a plethora of internal guidelines, and best practices, for designing programmes with an eye to their evaluability.

Like WP practitioners, in-house evaluators are invited institutional actors. Instead of being asked to 'work on' the institution directly, however, they are asked to assess the legitimacy of change work. The role of the evaluator, at least on paper, is thus to facilitate tight-coupling between field expectations and their organisation, thereby maximising their organisation's external legitimacy. As one could imagine given the findings thus far, however, the work of evaluation does not straightforwardly manifest as such in practice. Indeed, I found that, just as practitioners' institutional work is invariably informed by evaluation, evaluators, too, find the precepts of practice seeping into their evaluation work. We will consider their perspectives in turn to form a multilayered picture of how legitimacy structures materialise in practice.

Figure 9.3: Oxford in-house evaluators

Pseudonym	Self-Reported Demographic Details
Wren	South Asian woman

Raven	South Asian woman
Bran	White European man
Jae	Black British woman

Friction and alignment

It would be easy to organise my analysis of findings around the strain between evaluators and practitioners. In the majority of interviews, evaluators and practitioners alike made some reference to tension between WP practice and evaluation, or in Jae's words, a 'friction'. Both communities cited how the advent of evaluation has not been accompanied by an increase in resources or time for integrating evaluation into practice. Among evaluators and practitioners, an affective picture of exhaustion, frustration, and burnout emerged. Julien was particularly frank:

> So, to run the events, to plan them, to evaluate them is a lot of work. And the evaluation was often the thing that fell off the end, because you were busy with the day-to-day running of the events, and actually taking some time to step back and say, 'Oh, so how should we evaluate this event?' was never my priority.

Bran sympathised with this sentiment:

> So if you say, 'Well, actually, at the end, I want to have one hour for evaluation', and you have a three hour activity, then suddenly, you're taking up a lot of their time, right?

Evaluators equally felt under-resourced and over-burdened. Given the dual uphill battles of convincing practitioners to lend more time to evaluation and managing their own time, evaluators expressed that implementing WP evaluation is an exercise of triaging and stretching time. Bran again:

> There are a ton of issues in the sector as a whole, in any sector, really, in the world, really [laughs]. And so it's just about knowing the shortcomings of the system and trying to do the best you can within that system. And that's the same with evaluation: you have constraints, you have time constraints, resource constraints, and you try to do the best you can.

Wren, laughing profusely, simply stated that 'we do the best we can, right? We do the best we can'.

The tension between evaluation and practice does not only stem from the cruel calculus of divvying finite resources. More existentially, and more relevant to our ongoing exploration of legitimacy, members of both communities located a source of the friction in practitioners' reactions toward the introduction, or intrusion, of a new paradigm for evaluating success in practice. Wren mourned that, in her experience, the growth of evaluation has had a mixed reception among practitioners. In particular, she felt that evaluation was dismissed by seasoned practitioners who feel condescended to when they are asked to reimagine their practice.

> I think one of the biggest areas of resistance was when people did not know, and they had to learn new things… Some were like, you know, I've been doing this for 20 years, I don't think I need to do this, to read more about it.

Lance, a veteran practitioner, exhibited this exact defensiveness when we were discussing the growing popularity of ToC frameworks at Oxford:

> Yeah, I don't, like, personally speaking, obviously, I felt like we were doing a lot of that stuff. You know, we're, like I said, right from the get go, really hot on evaluation. Like, you know. So yeah, I don't. I don't know if that necessarily applied to, like our team, having that kind of framework, because we were just doing it already.

The above betray that both parties are engaged in a battle for internal legitimacy; evaluators feel the reverberations of low internal legitimacy, and practitioners interpret formal evaluation as an encroachment on the legitimacy of their own established modalities for evaluating their work. Moreover, Wren feels frustration that practitioners refuse to engage in evaluation, while Lance firmly states that they are already performing evaluation. Bubbling beneath the battle for legitimacy is a category contestation: what exactly is evaluation, and what is its relationship to practise?

The next sections will address these questions, but before proceeding, however, I want to clarify an assumption embedded in them. Practitioners and evaluators are engaged in the act of parsing what evaluation is and should be, not whether they should perform it. Whether a body like the OfS would define a given act of assessing programme success as evaluation is immaterial. As previously discussed, in a social landscape rife with evaluation, not performing some form of evaluation is essentially unimaginable. Equally unimaginable for practitioners invested in an enterprise of social change is delivering a programme without keeping an eye to programme improvement, which, in turn, enables them to effect more change. There is an irony, ultimately, in that, evaluators and practitioners share this goal. Lance deliberately links evaluation and improvement:

> I say [evaluation] is something we take very, very seriously. Every year, we are looking at what we've done previously, and always looking for ways of improving that. And that comes in many forms.

Freya, who had a cynical take toward other practitioners' unwillingness to embrace formal evaluation, still was proud that, in UNIQ, there was

> a culture of self-evaluation and kind of self-reflection… that's not really evaluation as such, but it kind of demonstrates the continual improvements.

Or, as Bran succinctly phrased it, the essential aim of an evaluator is 'to understand the why behind it so that we can improve'.

In the sections that follow, I will therefore refrain from designating X or Y activity as evaluation, opting instead to explore how evaluators and practitioners engage in differential—and sometimes starkly similar—acts of category work around evaluation, and how this category work bears on questions of legitimacy.

Practitioners: negotiating internal and field-level legitimacy

The evidence that works

We will begin with practitioners, who were nearly unanimous in their assessment of what forms of evaluation serve practice. Linda provided a granular description of the evaluation she engaged in while working on UNIQ delivery:

> We did a kind of not formal, but we did a kind of pretty constant evaluation. We would do a thing called 'red book', which was really handy. Sounds really basic, but basically, anything that didn't work or could have worked better or if we'd have done it like this, it would have been quicker. Anything like that. As we went on per year, we would write down in the red book, which then would get all written up at the end of the process and shared amongst everybody at the wash-up meeting we do at the end of every UNIQ cycle. And we would write, okay, that didn't work. Anybody got any ideas about how it could work? Or if you know, this is the idea that somebody has written down, does everybody agree with that? Should we put that through for next year's plan? And then that would change the process is every time…, even stupid things like 'Don't staple this form together, because it's really annoying to separate it' or 'staple it together, because it's really handy to keep it together', you know, that kind of level of stuff, all the way through to something really kind of major.

Linda's description here underlines the centrality of improvement to practitioner evaluation. The red book allowed practitioners to keep a constant tab on potential programmatic improvements, from the mundane to the major. Improvement, in this description, takes on a flat ontology of sorts, resisting the urge to assign differential levels of being-ness to different objects. Whereas what Linda calls 'formal' evaluation privileges the measurement of 'major,' or high-level, dimensions of the programme, such as its aims, assumptions, inputs, and outputs, the red book provided a space in which the question of whether to use staples held the same epistemic weight of major programmatic questions.

After tracking feedback in the red book over the delivery cycle, team members also hold an annual 'wash-up' meeting to reflect on each year's iteration of UNIQ. To Lance, this meeting embodies the team's dedication to evaluation:

> You know, we're, like I said, right from the get go, really hot on evaluation… And yeah, and then even like addressing our own performance, you know, we would, well, yeah, we often spent two days just sat in a hotel, like what you call it, going to say a lobby room, but conference room, just away from away from everybody locked in, and just talking about everything that happened in the year, like in fine detail. And just, you know, saying, Okay, this was good. This was like, terrible, how are we going to change this? What are we going to do? What processes do we need to put in place to make sure, you know, this is improved for next year? So yeah, we've, I would say, yeah, evaluation, we've always held ourselves, like, highly accountable.

There is a fine, but nonetheless notable, distinction between the ways in which Linda and Lance interface with the concept of evaluation. Linda acknowledges a distinction between 'formal' evaluation and the evaluation that the team engages in. She is joined by other colleagues: Lisa remarked that

> I think evaluation has played up until 2016 a quite small part. In UNIQ, I would say, in that it was a very insular evaluation process… it was a very kind of inward looking evaluation process

Freya, as I mentioned earlier, praised UNIQ for its 'culture of self reflection', but was sure to clarify that 'that's not really evaluation as such'. Finally, Matt took a harder line in honouring the distinction, suggesting that UNIQ as a programme is still 'not very good at' evaluation. He believes this is the case because practitioners, on the whole, misunderstand evaluation as something only conducted at the end of a programme cycle.

> I think that a lot of people don't understand evaluation, kind of from a basic point of view, they don't know, what should I be doing to evaluate this program? What questions should I be asking? But it's not always looped in right at the beginning, there's a delay and therefore the programme doesn't meet the aims, because you haven't looped them in the beginning. I think that's, that's a kind of a concept that a lot of people misunderstand is that evaluation needs to start at the

> beginning, not just don't just bring them in at the end, right? Because you need to make sure that you're forming your questions around what you're actually developing, as opposed to your own product.

In distinguishing their internal improvement and accountability assessments from evaluation, these practitioners are engaging in a form of category protection around evaluation, reserving the designation of evaluation for the more formal processes that the evaluation team endorses and enforces. With the exception of Matt, however, practitioners protected the distinction not necessarily to enshrine the superiority of the category, but, rather, merely acknowledged the reigning field-level conceptualisation of evaluation.

Lance, alternatively, deployed category rejection, rejecting stricter, more formal definitions of evaluation in favour of more expansive designations. In Lance's view, evaluation 'comes in many forms', from formal monitoring and evaluation work to informal, constant checking-in among team members. In this case, Lance is staking the claim that the kind of evaluation his team engages in is equally valid, and equally, if not more, useful as the field-level conceptualisation of evaluation for improving programme's work and holding the team accountable.

Accountable to whom? Senior team members saw their evaluation processes as a means of holding the team accountable to one another. As Freya described it, the meetings (and the end-of-year reports they informed) gave 'everybody individually a sense of ownership' over the programme, ensuring the team was approaching delivery as a united front. Ultimately, as the next section will bear out, it became apparent that team members invested their time most highly in being accountable to students. The forms of assessment that the team engaged in on its own represented more than just ticking a box, or even stochastic programme optimisation. The red book, wash-up meeting, and other forms of evaluation provide a vital space for accountability to the students at the heart of the programme, a space for exercising and amplifying care for students. It is

through these evaluations that the team sought to maximise the programme's utility for students. As Lance put it,

> So we always will, we always used to refer to it as, like a family, the UNIQ family is kind of—it is very cliched… You know, in many ways, we did mean that, you know, I think most people, if not all, the people that work on UNIQ do actually care about the students that come through.

In terms of legitimacy, the evaluation that practitioners valued consisted of practices that strengthened the team's internal legitimacy, among members and, most importantly, to the students the programme serves.

Negotiating use-value and legitimacy

The team's priority on internal legitimacy to students manifests most directly in the evidence the team sought to glean from evaluations. In addition to assessing and optimising internal workflows, the team was deeply interested in students' perceptions of the programme. Jemima was blunt, stating that data capturing qualitative data on student experience had far more use-value to the team than quantitative data capturing outcomes:

> Actually, we did statistical analysis on applicants, and applications and offers and all of that sort of thing. So there's plenty of that. And but actually, our questionnaires were more, it was less on impact and more on what do you find interesting or good? And what do you know all that so the evaluation played quite a big part on how we how the programme itself was evolved from the students perspective.

Evidence with the highest use-value is evidence that can inform programme development, which, in turn, enhances the programme's internal legitimacy to the communities it serves. It was, in fact, an initial qualitative review of the programme that inspired the programme's signature emphasis on Oxford realism discussed in Chapter 7. Freya remembers that the fundamental overhaul came from a

> a kind of a qualitative review of what was actually going on, and which was not something we'd ever done before we'd only ever analysed outcomes, not experience.

At the end of her interview, Jemima reiterated the difference in utility in even stronger terms, bemoaning the tendency in WP practice to privilege quantitative over qualitative data.

> And in terms of quantitative, and I think we miss opportunities so much, if we are led to a great extent, in terms of, like, chasing the quantitative data, I think we cramp ourselves by doing that… So you are always target-driven on numbers. And so rather than paying attention to sort of, like more of the practical sides of it, and the qualitative side of things, and I think we missed an awful lot.

When it comes to comparing the utility of different forms of evidence, the distinction Jemima and Freya draw between outcomes and experiences are metonymic of a hierarchy of evidence manifest in WP evaluation. The OfS standards of evidence, although they are now presented in a less obviously hierarchical format, make it clear that the more convincingly evidence can link an intervention to improved outcomes, the stronger the evidence. While we cannot cleanly map the hierarchy onto the qualitative-quantitative spectrum, there is a reason practitioners felt pressure to 'chase the quantitative data'. Type 3 evidence, the reigning 'gold standard', uses methodologies like experimental or quasi-experimental designs to establish that interventions caused *quantifiably* better outcomes for students. Quantitative evidence that demonstrates improved outcomes—or, thinking back to performativity, increased outputs—unsurprisingly enjoys more legitimacy at the field level than qualitative evidence reflecting students' experience of the programme's benefits to them. In later sections, we will explore the institutional work practitioners conduct to negotiate the competing pressures for performing field-level legitimacy, while retaining their commitment to internal legitimacy.

In short, practitioners are identifying a tension between evaluation's use-value for increasing internal legitimacy and its field-level legitimacy. Practitioners conduct category work around evaluation to honour the distinction between internally legitimate (informal, qualitative) evaluation and field-level legitimate (formal, causal) evaluation, generally affording supremacy to the former. When we turn our attention to the centrality of legitimacy to how practitioners understand evaluation, we can better contextualise practitioners' apprehension toward formal evaluation. The introduction of a new paradigm for programme legitimacy becomes a threat to the legitimacy of the definitions of success, improvement, and accountability valued by the team, and, indeed, which the team stakes its collective identity upon. Lance concluded his description of the forms of evaluation the team has historically deployed with the following assurance:

> I would say that there hasn't been a single person that's ever worked on UNIQ that hasn't wanted to do the best, you know, possible.

In suggesting there may be better ways of evaluating UNIQ, evaluators imply that the team may not be doing the best it can for the students whose educational trajectories it hopes to change.

Field meets world: evaluators and ever-expanding category of evaluation

A consumptive culture of evidence

Before parsing further the presumed tension between evaluation and practice, we need to consider how evaluators themselves categorise evaluation, and the extent to which this concords with field-level standards for effective, rigorous WP evaluation. I will begin with a concession: the four evaluators I interviewed did not speak as a bloc. Each individually subscribed to a different model of evaluation: from Bran's firm commitment to realist evaluation in the tradition of Ray Pawson (Pawson and Tilley 1997; Pawson 2006, 2023), to Jae's conviction that evaluation should be emancipatory (Stake 2004; Gordon, Lumb, Bunn et al. 2021). Nevertheless, each emphatically advocated integrating

evaluation into practice, as something that is essential to all aspects of a programme's lifecycle. All, in one way or another, expressed that evaluation should be integrated from the beginning of a programme's development, each using slightly different strategies to make the point. Raven stated the commitment most succinctly:

> I think that it's absolutely essential to have the evaluation at the core of all of these activities and to have the culture of evaluation embedded in, you know, in our kinds of offices.

Raven's endorsement of a 'culture of evaluation' reflects a growing field-level standard. In the Detailed Provider Outcomes for its Strategy for Evidence and Evaluation in Access and Participation, the OfS pledges that both providers and the Office 'commit to and prioritise a culture of evidence to support their work to eliminate inequality in higher education' (OfS 2023a). In our interview, Richard Shiner expanded on what a culture of evaluation, or culture of evidence, looks like:

> But a culture of evaluation is thinking about evaluation right at the start, and building into the intervention, actually. The design of your intervention is influenced by your evaluation design, that I mean, that's the kind of 'gold standard' [laughs] for me. And just the way that you design your projects in your programs and your processes you are thinking about, you're doing a theory of change, and you're thinking about your ultimate outcomes and how you're going to measure them and your intermediate outcomes. And it's that kind of thing, it's committing resources to it. It's not seeing it as an afterthought. It's having feedback loops and a learning culture.

Implementing a culture of evidence is not merely a matter of reconfiguring operational workflows; true to its name, it involves fundamentally shifting how a community of practice thinks and learns. Wren and Jae expanded on what it means to embed evaluation widely across WP departments, stressing how critical normalising and democratising academic theory and research are to achieving a culture of evidence. Jae evocatively likens a culture of evidence to conducting an ethnographic study:

> I suppose, is being evaluation, something that we do from the beginning, and definitely kind of as integrated within the way that we plan and also kind of

> seeing the importance of research and theory around education and the implementation of education, kind of a study and a discipline, I'm definitely thinking about inclusion, as well beyond just seeing evaluation as something that you do at the end...
>
> ...I suppose what comes to mind is thinking of this might be a poor example, but thinking of ethnographic research or kind of collecting field notes. And, and not being part of their additional kind of observations and just kind of noting down everything they do, I kind of say that would be what I would kind of envisage as a culture of evidence where everybody felt that that was something that they could do.

In line with the precepts of participatory ethnographic research, Jae underscores the centrality not only of theory and research to an evaluation culture, but the importance of a felt, collective sense of ownership of the evaluation process. Wren elaborates on how practitioners have to take on a posture of scholarly scepticism, but also have to trust evidence as a reliable guide for dictating programme development.

> Yeah, just on a sort of day to day level, it would mean questioning things more... And, and I think, crucially, and this is extremely crucial, trusting the advice, and the evidence that is put forward.

Indeed, Wren goes so far as to suggest that the namesake 'evaluation' is insufficient for capturing all that evaluation processes entail:

> I fear that evaluation is more of an add on in lots of cases. I don't think anyone would really disagree. Because I think by even the nature of the name of what we do evaluation, I don't think it really communicates what we are able to inform in terms of programme development and things.
>
> Jonah: What would you call it?
>
> Wren: That's the thing I really, because it starts from the beginning. I see it more as sort of part of programme development, almost sort of research and development, you know, R&D, I guess.

According to the 'culture of evidence' paradigm, evaluation should be constitutive of a programme's conceptualisation, inputs, desired outputs, monitoring, delivery, and summative assessment. In interacting with each of these dimensions of a programme's

life, evaluation takes on, among other things, academic, practical, and strategic-planning valances. Field-level standards for evaluation compel it to become a 'consumptive category', absorbing that which it interfaces into itself. If one takes the 'culture of evidence' mandate to its natural conclusion, the province of practice essentially becomes the province of evaluation. Category work, which is premised on the drawing of boundaries, comes to destroy the boundaries it touches. Bran cheekily acknowledged the control that effective evaluation demands:

> From an evaluation perspective, you want to control as much as you can about the project, right [laughs]? And you want to ask as many questions as possible to make sure that all your bases are covered.

In its quest for control, however, we will find that evaluation paradoxically defies its own boundaries, taking on the qualities of that which it consumes.

Unwitting legitimacy seepage in the 'third-space'

Evaluators tended to endorse the creation of a culture of evidence, but found themselves surprised by how unwieldy evaluation becomes when applied to the multifarious aspects of practice. In adopting an ever-expanding jurisdiction, evaluation invariably takes on the characteristics of the practices it absorbs into its reach. While, given the power differentials between field-level and internal legitimacy structures, one can easily comprehend how evaluation shapes and changes practice, I found that the inverse is not only occurring in Oxford WP, but the hold that practice's demands have over evaluation is deeper and more consequential than it is *vice versa*. Asked to work in service of a consumptive category with fluid boundaries, evaluators found grounding by identifying themselves with practitioners, which reformulated the terms of legitimacy with which they interacted.

Raven recounted a particularly representative experience of how practice reconfigures the work of evaluation, spending reflecting on the relationship between

academic work to evaluation. All four evaluators I interviewed have advanced academic training in social scientific research, and transitioned to evaluation from conducting more conventional research jobs. Raven was struck by how engaging with matters of WP practice demands a fundamentally different epistemic posture toward evidence than traditional research. While writing evaluations for various programmes, she

> found that it, it was, it would have been harder for me to justify, or I would be showing more confirmation bias to say that, 'Oh, I'm only including these papers that support what I'm trying to say, without discussing all these other papers, which were sort of supporting, but we're also like, had a slightly different argument'. And I think that that gets harder, because once you start doing that, then it gets harder for people to accept it. And there's, they're just like, I enjoy a good debate. And I think that's really, really important. But sometimes it's also important to reach conclusions. And I think that that sort of hampers the whole process. So I think the idea was that, you know, maybe just argue in a logical manner, without using a lot of evidence, either for or against it. And keeping that option open, if you think that this is not a good idea, then let's argue about that.

She concludes by firmly stating that her identity as a practitioner overrides her reflexes as a researcher:

> Since starting as a practitioner, compared to a researcher where I think in when you're writing a scientific paper, you can be more blunt about some things. Whereas in practice, you have to be a lot more careful about what you're saying.

We will address the substance of Raven's comments and the strategies of institutional work motivating them in reverse order. Given the slipperiness of boundaries surrounding evaluation, Raven and other in-house evaluators have latitude to negotiate which dimensions of their multifarious work they identify with. In-house evaluators occupy what Whitchurch (2008, 2013) terms a 'third space' in UK higher education, straddling lines between the 'administrative/staff' and 'academic' roles. As Whitchurch argues, the blurring of historical boundaries separating professional designations in HE leads to 'shifting identities' among third-space workers. Whitchurch find that third-space professionals tend to locate their allegiances, models of collegiality, and, indeed,

understanding of legitimacy in identification with their projects and teams, as opposed to their wider organisational or professional positioning: they '[construct] new forms of authority via the institutional knowledges and relationships that they create on a personal, day-to-day basis' (Whitchurch 2008:10). They conduct their identity work with reference to the contingencies of their practice, as opposed to established vessels of community in their sector or field.

Raven, here, is claiming that her identification is with practice, going so far as to identify as a practitioner. In this process of transition, she has learned to think, and speak, like a practitioner. When it comes to evidence, she understands that the use-value of evidence ultimately holds more weight than its rigour or internal logic. This is not a decision that is free from doubt, scepticism, and tension, however. Evaluation, as an institution, sits in a similar tension. Throughout its life course, evaluation has shifted profoundly in its relationship to a positivistic notion of 'truth' and its onus to produce pragmatic, actionable evidence for stakeholders (see Pawson and Tilley 1997:Ch.1). These shifts notwithstanding, I concur with Dahler-Larsen (2012:13)'s reading that the aspiration of evaluation has always been to support a 'special modern undertaking: pursuing a form of assisted sensemaking as distinct as possible from what is believed to be the partisan, prejudicial, and unreflected viewpoints of everyday life'. Evaluators are lured by the nobility of this pursuit, and its injunction to follow the evidence wherever it may lead.

In his review of *The Evaluation Society*, Julnes, who originally developed the term 'assisted sensemaking', drives home how it is impossible for evaluation to make good on this aim. The role of evaluation is invariably 'to assist, or support, our natural decision-making capacities,' their imperfections, biases, and limitations included, and not to replace them' (Julnes 2015:586). Indeed, sensemaking, as Weick (1995) theorised it, is itself a constructivist act, a means of creating meaning in a world that demands

interpreting. There is no pre-social truth that evaluation has access to, as evaluation itself is a socially contingent institution.

In interacting with practice, Raven has confronted this contradiction head-on, recognising that evidence cannot purely speak for itself. Evaluation always must speak for, and by way of, something else. In working with, and as, practitioners, moreover, evaluators were compelled to confront the field-level standards that dictate what evaluation speaks for in a performative policy landscape.

Practice pushing back on performativity

We have thus far discussed the mandate to cultivate a 'culture of evidence' as it relates to what evaluators actually do on the ground. We find that, in being asked to implement an evaluation culture by integrating evaluation into practice, evaluators find themselves increasingly refracting their daily work through the sensibilities of practice. Now, we will discuss how evaluators draw on these lenses to evaluate the field-level logics that they are asked to import into their WP teams. In their appraisal of these logics, evaluators directly addressed the tenets of performativity and how they are largely incompatible with the aims of practice.

When I asked for their appraisal of the OfS and its role in their work, evaluators framed their response around OfS targets, generally expressing a measure of scepticism toward them. Raven and Bran both identified problems with the targets' lack of independence from the government. Raven dialled her critique on the ephemerality of targets, drawing attention how their politicisation runs counter to the aims of evaluation:

> [The] issue with these national targets are [sic] that governments change and the targets change… And that creates a problem in the way we analyse. Because if targets change midway, we are really at a loss to ensure continuity of those objectives.

Bran is concerned about targets, not necessarily because of their liability to change, but because the pressure to demonstrate outcomes creates perverse incentives for WP teams.

> I think the difficulty is that on the one hand, you have this push for evaluation. *But on the other hand, it's all about outcomes and being able to show that something works, et cetera*. And like there's this push from the OfS as well, right? Like, and it becomes really difficult when, like, they used to have this metric where I think they talked about, like, the amount of outreach spent versus the amount of disadvantaged candidates that apply and how that ratio changes… And I think that the difficulty is, there are a lot of perverse incentives, I would say.

He provides the following example:

> And then you as a university are spending X amount of pounds on your activity. And then you know, like, I should be taking this most disadvantaged student, right? But it's going to make my target look worse. And that's a super extreme case, right? And that will happen in some individual cases in terms of not what we as the university do. But, but, hypothetically, that could happen, right?... So in some individual cases, you'll get the wrong people, right?

The field-level legitimacy afforded by the flaunting of outcomes conflicts not only with the rigour or effectiveness of an evaluator's work, but also with the normative question of who the 'right' students are. This conundrum hearkens back to Chapter 7's discussion of the contradiction of outreach. Like practitioners, evaluators identify how the current field-level mechanisms for measuring 'disadvantage' and 'potential'—attainment metrics contextualised by measures like POLAR and ACORN—are insufficient. Also in a similar manner to practitioners, evaluators also tended to zoom in to the student experience to assess the legitimacy of different frames for what the 'right students' mean.

Raven expressed her doubts about quantitative measures for measuring potential thusly:

> So for example, when we look at the admissions process, for example, that's what I do most, right? So if you think about it, we can easily capture how people do in courses. Yeah, like in terms of the exam performance. But is that the only thing that makes a good student? I think that it might, there might be more things to it—in different ways. In fact, we've been challenged by some tutors who say that that is not the main point of interest, we need to make it wider and look at like either professional success, or even like their journey, as a student, say, somebody

> who's come from a very a background very, which was not very enriching. And now they are in Oxford, where they have access to a lot of opportunities, then, would we discount that just because they may not have got a first, but their journey as a student is also very important, right?

In consideration of what is enriching for WP students, Raven disaggregates the measurable and immeasurable manifestations of 'success' in a HE trajectory. Jae noted a similar distinction between 'the APP as one of the things that we have to deal with' and the more fundamental matter of student experience. She deployed category work to further tease-out why field-level constructs fail on-the-ground work for, and around, WP students more generally. She began by expressing critiquing the category of 'widening participation' for not including WP students:

> I think, as far as kind of the work that we do around research and evaluation, we tend to use the term widening participation as kind of a field and discipline within education, and [that's] good as far as other OFS targets and APP, discussion as it's less clear, I think, also around what 'widening participation' (in quotes) students look like?

She then specifically drew attention to a subset of WP students, WP students of colour, and how reigning categories fail to honour their experiences.

> I think that's a very big issue at the moment, what constitutes BAME, why do we use BAME? Why do we use BAME? Why is it particularly important to focus on potentially Black students? What that might look like for particular awarding gaps in different departments and disciplines?... Are we trying to address inclusion? Are we trying to impress that students feel that they are represented within their staff body and within their student experience? Those are the types of things that we're trying to address and that awarding gap is one of the reasons why we do it and how we do it.

Although it is increasingly standard fare in policy circles to critique 'BAME' for its lack of specificity (e.g., the condemned 2021 Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities report), Jae elucidates its failure to centre Black students in particular, who have poorer outcomes in HE compared to white and non-white peers (see Rana et al. 2022). The

further one zooms in to the granularities of the WP experience, the less broad-brush metrics for outcomes seem useful.

Indeed, Wren and Raven both contended that there are epistemic limits to measuring success in WP. Wren cites the example of programmes that intervene in the early stages of a student's education,

> But I think for some programs, it's difficult for us to actually formulate targets. So for programs that start early on, earlier, in the learners school career, or education, it's difficult to sort of formulate a viable target that doesn't reduce the program into just one measure or variable.

Raven makes a more general statement of the limitations of evaluation, characterising it as a blunt tool in a field full of delicate, intersecting variables of interest.

> I think that it's absolutely essential to have the evaluation at the core of all of these activities and to have the culture of evaluation embedded in, you know, in our kinds of offices. The only thing, I think, is that we have to be careful to make sure that it does not become a very blunt tool, where, where, you know, we are only focusing on things that we can evaluate, but don't think about the things we cannot evaluate… So I think that I'm, I'm for it, but with a caveat that it has to be done properly. And with the idea that there are things that may not lend itself to evaluation, and to be aware of that.

Raven is commenting on the fraught issue of 'evaluability': that is, the debate around what can and cannot (or should and should not) be evaluated. We will return to the notion of evaluability, and its relevance to evaluation of social change enterprises, shortly.

The findings presented in this section demonstrate that, through their exposure to practitioners, evaluators find themselves questioning practices that are legitimate at the field-level through internal legitimacy structures. In particular, they perceive the pressure to prioritise outputs as irrelevant, or even morally questionable, when faced with the students at the heart of their work. In response to their shared scepticism about the demands of performativity, both evaluators and practitioners deployed similar strategies to turn performativity on its head, in effect, 'performing performativity'.

As I raised in previous sections, practitioners, on the whole, find qualitative data on student experience more useful than quantitative reports on outcomes. They are, as I discussed, keenly aware of the outsized legitimacy of quantitative data in the WP policy space. Lance outlined the practitioners' strategy for navigating competing legitimacies:

> I think it just depends on what you're evaluating and reporting on, and who that audience is. So interestingly, like academics, for example, particularly those that are working directly on the course, they really do value, like the student opinion, and what they have to say… you know, it was a report that was to go more broadly around the department or maybe to the VC, then yeah, it would be very sort of, you know, number focused, for sure. Yeah. With the odd quote.

The code-switching protocol Lance is outlining is an instance of 'loose-coupling'. While practitioners internally devote their energies to modalities of evaluation that they perceive as most helpful to the programme, they are aware of the quantitative production deemed legitimate at the field-level.

Wren, with whom I contrasted Lance at the beginning of the findings sections, articulates a nearly identical strategy, highlighting how quantitative evidence can be used to increase buy-in while it might not be the most important facet of an evaluation.

> So I think that what, and we can do both quantitative and qualitative evaluation, and we find that it's easier to maybe influence people, or it's easier to get buy-in when there are more numbers thrown in… So that is something that is that's been that we have learned from the process of evaluation, where, although it may not have been a core aim of evaluation.

But what is the 'core aim' of evaluation anyway? We will use the question as a springboard to launch our final chapter discussion.

Chapter discussion: evaluation, epistemology, and doing good

Evaluator-academics themselves continue to turn the question of evaluation's purpose. One can easily become swept up in the infinite debates about which methods of evaluation are best suited to gauge and measure change: from the battle between constructivist (Guba and Lincoln 1994; Lincoln and Guba 2013) and realist (Pawson and

Tilley 1997; Pawson 2006, 2013) evaluation paradigms, to the rise and proliferation of various theory-based methods (see Rogers and Weiss 2007), and the introduction of more deliberately emancipatory modalities, like praxis-centred (Patton 2017; Dhaliwal et al. 2020) and Confucian evaluation (Dinh et al. 2019). Though it is not my intention to minimise the stark onto-epistemological and axiological differences between these schools of thought, I would contend that, at least among the evaluators I spoke to, where they fell methodologically was subservient to a larger shared vision.

Take Bran and Jae's responses to my question of what the most effective evaluation looks like. Jae answered that

> I think I'd probably say it makes structural change. And the most effective evaluation is probably, that's probably the way that it does it. And thinking about the institution as beyond just access and participation, but thinking about how we include people, staff, and everyone that we engage with, in a process of development across the lifecycle of the student, and time. So that's I think that's probably what the most effective evaluation does. That's obviously the idea.

While Bran was convinced that

> obviously what's important is to try to make your evidence as causal as possible. Right. But that's obviously difficult, right? And I would say that what you want to do is not like you can have some evaluation at focusses on a holistic overview of the activity itself, right, like did the activity work? But in a way that's less useful for moving forward as an entire field… We want to understand the why behind it so that we can improve.

As these responses show, there were substantive differences in their approach to measurement and their faith in evaluation's ability to seize upon cause, with Jae advocating a participatory, and emancipation-oriented approach, and Bran a more traditional realist model of evaluation. Harrison and Waller (2017) convincingly argue that any attempt to understand 'what works?' implicates the epistemological question of 'how do we know?' They find that, without sufficient scaffolding to answer this question, practitioners approach evaluation in uncritical and ineffective ways. It is therefore imperative to develop strategies of evaluation built on an 'appropriate epistemology that

allows for robust evaluations (of various types) in complex social fields' (Harrison and Waller 2017a:30). Bran and Jae, I would wager, are advocating two epistemologies that can fit in the WP context.

And yet, as Julnes (2015) argues, the epistemic properties of a given evaluation are subservient to the particularities of the evaluand. As a tool for assisted sensemaking, 'the moral imperative of evaluation is not to conduct it more universally or even in a more technically sophisticated way; rather it is to *provide appropriate sensemaking support for appropriate stakeholders*' (Julnes 2015:586, emphasis original). Though Julnes is attempting to make a prescriptive argument here, it is my contention that evaluation is essentially consigned to this kind of pragmatism. Although evaluation the institution prescribes a technical, and, moreover, a universalised paradigm for measuring and assessing legitimacy, evaluation the practice does not exist without a programme, and has utility insofar as it assists a programme in better achieving, or better formulating, its aims. To evaluate a programme is to become entangled in its success, however that is defined. Such is the fatal flaw, and transformational potential, of evaluation in the realm of social change.

This chapter has borne out that evaluators express a desire to be collaborators in WP practice's programme of social change. Like their practitioner peers, they have complicated and conflicting understandings of what WP should be, and how its effects should be judged. Nevertheless, they see themselves as accomplices to the project of WP practice and to add a theoretical foundation and scaffolding to the change work, indeed, a theory of change.

Its interrelation with practice aside, evaluation still faces an uphill battle for its internal legitimacy. To frame the conclusion's discussion of institutional work and change, I will conclude with the existential tensions that Julien raises between faith and certainty in WP practice.

> So I'm actually quite scared about doing evaluation of events because I'd love to be able to say X number of students applied to my university because I did this event, but I just don't think it's possible ever to map that with real certainty. And so as an access officer, quite a lot of the stuff I do is just in faith that it's a good thing. It's like, this is a good thing to do.

The proposition of evaluation is that, however minimally, it can buttress an act of faith with, if not certainty, information. As Wren puts it,

> You know, we talk about evidence informed practice, but I'd really like to talk about practice informed evidence… But I think just because of time and constraints and everything else, I think it's difficult sometimes to understand how the abstract can more, what seems more abstract can actually affect change. So yeah, I'd like to be able to do more of that: the practice informed evidence.

Given constraints and engrained scepticism, can practise-informed evaluation create a bridge between the abstract and doing good? To this question, evaluators must keep a faith of their own. As Wren told me with a tinge of exasperation,

> 'We do the best we can, right? We do the best we can'.

Conclusion

τὰ πάντα ῥεῖ
All things are in flux.
Attributed to Heraclitus.

From the moment I decided to explore UNIQ's theory of change, my fundamental interest has been in change and contradiction, and how the two paradoxically seem to be ontological constants in social life. In this, I take inspiration from perhaps the original 'theorist of change', the presocratic philosopher Heraclitus, who was active in Ephesus (modern-day Turkey) in the 6th century BCE. Heraclitus is best known for his confoundingly paradoxical maxims: 'the road up and down is one and the same' or, perhaps the most enduring, 'you cannot step in the same river twice'. One can thus read Heraclitus many ways, as 'a rationalist, or a mystic; a conventional thinker or a revolutionary;' as 'the first genuine philosopher or an anti-intellectual obscurantist' (Graham 2019). Plato, however, finds in Heraclitus a consistent, albeit radical, doctrine of flux. Plato's dialogue with the Heraclitan disciple Cratylus underscores how far-reaching and arresting this doctrine becomes when taken to its logical extreme. As philosopher Peter Adamson puts it, 'Cratylus is famous for having held that it's impossible to name anything, because it is always changing, flowing away before your eyes' (2016:33).

Everything is in flux, flowing before our eyes. Writing in April 2023, the intensity and stakes of debate in HE feel in some ways unrecognisable from discourses in 2020 and 2021. In the US, where I am currently located, the so-called culture wars surrounding critical race theory, EDI, and free speech have transmogrified from reactionary grandstanding to unmitigated authoritarian action. House Bill 999 is currently pending in Florida. The bill would ban public universities and colleges from using state funds to 'promote, support, or maintain any programs or campus activities that espouse diversity,

equity, or inclusion [DEI] or Critical Race Theory rhetoric', and grant the state's board of governors unprecedented latitude in controlling curricula; it can excise any academic programme that 'utilises pedagogical methodology associated with Critical Theory' (see Mandler 2023). At the moment, Florida governor Ron DeSantis' sights are set on stamping out so-called 'gender ideology' from every facet of public life, especially education (e.g., the infamous Don't Say Gay Bill of 2022). In her reading of a 2021 essay by Judith Butler, Ahmed (2021b) argues that, for reactionary institutions, the spectre of 'gender' has become symbolic of a far wider project of destroying the social fabric as we know it. In the context of HE, moreover,

> [f]ields of academic inquiry including gender studies, queer theory, and critical race theory, have come to be represented as 'destructive forces' that threaten the breakdown of social institutions, including marriage, the family, the nation, civilization, 'even man himself'.

The conservative movement in the US is calling for no less than the destruction of these so-called 'destructive forces'. Liberals unilaterally condemn such bald displays of illiberalism, but largely because they are so flagrant about it. More often, reactionary impulses successfully cloak themselves as liberal desiderata. In particular, regressive political goals are packaged as reasonable concerns for 'free speech', and liberals often take the bait. In the UK, for example, lawmakers across parties are attempting to make an amendment to the *Equality Act* that defines sex as 'biological' in response to concerned hand wringing about having a proper debate. This, effectively, removes legal protections for transgender people in the UK. Unlike in the American context, the battleground for this regressive legal challenge in the UK has a distinctly academic veneer, and is highly intellectualised. Rather than appeals to religious or family values, a great deal of transphobic action in the UK is predicated on 'gender critical' ideology, which is premised on offshoots of radical feminist thought (see Stock 2021). Notably, the primary agents and actors come from university professors (e.g., Kathleen Stock),

authors (e.g., J.K. Rowling), and well-educated journalists in legacy media (e.g., Hadley Freeman).

For gender critical and transphobic ideologues, 'free speech' is a dog whistle for airing some views and not others. And yet, many institutions still cling to free speech's promise of neutrality. Relevant to this study, the OfS has, inexplicably, mounted an obsessive campaign to protect freedom of speech in universities, even when it jeopardises the protection of marginalised groups. In fact, they retool the language of marginalisation to suggest that those who are marginalised are in fact those who cannot discriminate with impunity against these groups seeking protection: '[w]e… believe that censoring or marginalising some groups to protect others is not appropriate' (OfS 2023). On the day of my writing, April 18th, *WONKHE* reported that OfS student panel members felt 'silenced' by the regulatory body (Kernohan 2023). When students raised the issue of inclusive curricula, there was a noticeable change in tenor in committee meetings. Freedom of whose speech? Certainly not POC students, which is ironic given the OfS' expressed interest in outcomes for, and the mental health of, BAME students.

The project of WP implicates existential questions about HE, in pushing for the inclusion of underrepresented communities in HE, it implicitly hands us a referendum: who is HE for? When I think about these questions in light of HE's landscape today, I share Cratylus' dumbfoundedness. At times, I feel immobilised by how outdated this thesis becomes day by day. I find solace, however, in an odd place for a social scientific researcher: namely, in the fact that Cratylus and Plato misread Heraclitus. Heraclitus' ontology of change cannot be separated from his theory of the unity of opposites. Through riddles and puzzles, Heraclitus argues that we experience a unified universe as a series of opposites. The road is either up or down depending on where we enter it; saltwater is poisonous to humans but nourishing for fish. What is real and true is a contradiction in terms, and how we encounter reality depends on our standpoint. Since

the unified world is constantly at war with itself, moreover, change is not only a constant, but constitutive of that which we encounter as stable reality.

At the risk of engaging in brazenly transhistorical thinking, I cannot help but see fruitful parallels between Heraclitus' thought and the social constructionist ethic on which OI is premised. Alfred Schutz, Berger and Luckmann's intellectual ancestor, spoke of the durée of social life, our experience of which is a unity of temporal opposites:

> In simultaneity we experience the working action as a series of events in outer and in inner time, unifying both dimensions into a single flux which shall be called the vivid present (Schutz 1962:216).

Inspiring the cultural-cognitive approach to institutional analysis, Berger and Luckmann sought to understand the social structures and strictures that determine how we interact with, and conceptualise, the flux of life and human action (Vera 2016). Institutions regulate which knowledges of flux are acceptable, and their mechanisms of control have profound material consequences. OI teaches us that institutions have a tendency toward regression and toward reproducing inequality.

While it is not my intention to undersell the current horrors wracking society, it is prudent to note that the same institutional mechanisms have always been at play. Ahmed's work on diversity and HEIs shows how institutions have long been 'non-performative' when it comes to EDI (Ahmed 2007, 2012). When actors see through non-performance, institutions shamelessly resort to the brutest of regulatory mechanisms. The point of departure for *Complaint!* (Ahmed 2022) is the bullying Ahmed endured when she complained about racism and sexual harassment at her former university. When brute force accomplishes its goal, non-performativity can set back in. On the Equality and Diversity page of Ahmed's former institution: 'our aim is to embed equality, diversity, and inclusion across [the university] and make it a part of everything that we do by working together collaboratively and proactively'. Everything changes, yet everything stays the same.

For all their reproductive power, however, institutions all share a similar critical weakness. In that they impose stability on that which is metaphysically fluid, institutions are doomed to be contradictory, both internally and when they are forced to interact with other institutions intervening in the same aspects of life (e.g., Oxbridge and WP). Awareness of contradiction is the precondition for consciousness-raising among actors (Seo and Creed 2002), and one cannot understand awareness of contradiction without turning to the actors who tangibly encounter contradiction (Ahmed 2012; 2017). In its prioritisation of the micro-level action of institutional actors, IWP is the vein of OI research that can best capture how actors confront contradiction, and how this inflects upon their attitude toward institutions. We confront contradictions idiographically, constrained and enabled by contingent factors. Moreover, IWP privileges the centrality of standpoint to institutional work. Where we are located within, and whether we come up against, institutions mediates how we judge institutional action. The institution's activities around WP access seem good to some, and woefully insufficient to others, depending on where one stands.

Contributions, limitations, and future openings

Throughout this thesis' inquiry, my primary objective has been to justify and test a set of conceptual tools that can adequately capture the agentic, yet complicated, ways in which practitioners intervene in institutional contexts. In doing so, I have made several key contributions to both WP and OI that I will now explicate in detail.

Chapter 2 has a broad objective: to canvass the current theoretical landscape of critically-oriented and emancipatory WP research. Through its inquiry, however, it ultimately gains insight into a question highly relevant to ongoing research on practitioners in WP: *why* are practitioners so underrepresented? It argues that, at present, critical WP's collective resistance toward acknowledging the realities of ruptures in social reproduction makes it wary of centering the perspectives of practitioners.

Chapter 2 in itself, as a meta-reflection on trends and tendencies within critically oriented WP research, is itself a salient contribution to the bodies of knowledge surrounding critical WP.

In Chapters 3, 4, and 5, I make an extended apologia for OI's addition to the critical WP canon, which comprises my principal theoretical contribution to critical WP. I stake the claim that WP can be understood as an organisational field replete with its own logics and mechanisms for dictating actors' action. Institutional logics are generally contradictory (Bjerregaard and Jonasson 2014). Critical WP scholars have long shown interest in WP's contradictions (e.g., Jones and Thomas 2005; Archer 2007; Stevenson et al. 2010; Burke 2012; Mavelli 2014). In positioning WP as an organisational field, I hope to have added another source of conceptual grounding for exploring contradiction and the manifold ways it can manifest in practice and in fields.

Moreover, I survey various perspectives on institutional change to argue that, while institutions are resistant to change, and the inevitable contradictions they take on create the conditions for change-related agency. I show how IWP adds great value to critical WP inquiry in its delicate balance of acknowledging institutional power and actors' agency not only in pushing against institutions, but in propping them up. IWP, in my estimation, hands us the appropriate tools for understanding how practitioners interact with the social reproduction of inequality in HE.

Over Chapters 4 and 5, I put IWP to the test in the WP context. I explored how we can theorise WP as institutional work, and how WP can be studied using IWP. In showing that WP amounts to an invited act of maintaining disruption, I break open a new line of inquiry within IWP by introducing the notion of 'invited institutional work'. Building on previous work in IWP (Brown and Toyoki 2013; Brown 2015; Fernando and Kenny 2021), I show how all strategies of institutional work amount to assessments of an institution's legitimacy. Legitimacy offers an apt and potent frame for understanding the ways in which practitioners determine whether what they are doing is good, and why.

My findings offer a substantive contribution both to research on WP practitioners and to the body of empirical work on WP at selective institutions (e.g., Reay et al. 2009, 2010; Wariko and Fuhr 2014; Fernando and Allouch 2020; Kenny 2021). Moreover, I break new empirical ground by defining practitioners widely, designating student ambassadors and in-house evaluators as practitioners. Through widening my purview in this way, I yield nuanced insight into the empirical topics of interests captured by the following research questions:

RQ1: What contradictions do practitioners face as they go about 'maintaining disruption'?
RQ2: What strategies of institutional work do practitioners draw on to navigate these contradictions and assess the legitimacy of their work?

> *RQ2a: What frames of legitimacy do WP practitioners draw on to assess their work? How do internal and field-level legitimacies interface in this context?*
> *RQ2b: What is the relationship between identity work and category work and legitimacy?*

With regard to RQ1, the findings show that there are an array of contradictions central to maintaining disruption. In Chapter 7, I demonstrate how two fundamental contradictions—the contradictions of outreach and that of demystification and myth—are at the core of WP work at Oxford. The effects of these contradictions reverberate across all communities under study, but instantiate themselves differently. For practitioners, they are ever-present dimensions of their daily work. For student ambassadors, the question of demystification—of showing Oxford for what it 'really is'—invariably bleeds into the question of 'who am I to the institution?' in a manner that is more pronounced than for practitioners and evaluators. For evaluators, the contradiction of outreach and attendant questions of selection are not only problems of practice, but of field-level standards for assessing who is a good and worthy WP student.

Though there are two operative contradictions that reverberate across all dimensions of WP practice at Oxford, more contradictions invariably emerged. For

ambassadors, the act of negotiating privilege is rife with contradictions between operative definitions of privilege and one's experience of it. For evaluators, moreover, the dichotomy between practice and evaluation on which their position is premised is arguably false, which gives way to contradiction.

I found that practitioners are acutely aware of the inherent contradictions of Oxford's dual dedication to merit and access, and to showing Oxford for what it really is to the UNIQ students. In service of RQ2 and its subquestions, I found that they navigate these contradictions differently, calling on category work, identity work, and level-jumping to make sense of the contradictions in which they are ensconced. For practitioners, category work and level-jumping reigned supreme, since practitioners had to reconcile their understanding of field-level expectations, their experiences with WP, and their institutional directives. Though I will soon question this binary, practitioners emphasised knowledge as opposed to their own experience in their institutional work. For ambassadors, the overwhelming majority of whom were WP students themselves, identity work was central to how they navigated both their practice and their positioning within the institution. Evaluators, finally, had to wrangle with the confusing category of evaluation itself and the different legitimacy structures to which it was subjected.

With regard to RQ2a, all three communities heavily relied on what I coined 'level-jumping' to assess legitimacy. Across the data, I found examples of legitimacy frames ranging from the individual student level to the societal level. Unsurprisingly, across communities, the student-level carried the most cache, especially for practitioners who were particularly critical of Oxford WP. Indeed, the value of Oxford WP to students grants Oxford WP enough internal legitimacy to make it worthwhile, even if it is woefully insufficient in addressing structural problems.

When I started data analysis, I had assumed that my working answer to RQ2b would acknowledge that all three strategies are related. I underestimated, however, how difficult it was to analytically separate them. All strategies of institutional work, I found,

interweave in that they all act in service of (de)legitimising the institution. This observation merges Brown and Toyoki's (Brown and Toyoki 2013; Brown 2015) theorisation of identity work and legitimacy and recent empirical explorations of said theories (e.g., Fernando and Kenny 2021) with extant work that conceptualises category work as an inherently evaluative act (Lamont and Monar 2002; Lawrence and Phillips 2019). I believe that my findings show that, in being inherently evaluative, category work constitutionally broaches the legitimacy of its object. I hope for this finding to amount not necessarily to a theoretical contribution to IWP, but a clarification of how normative questions of legitimacy are imbued in all institutional work.

In the context of a social justice project with deep personal and ethical value to those involved, I find that category work and identity work become at times indistinguishable. Identity work and category work share a number of structural similarities: they are both processual, both rely on distancing and boundary drawing, and both invariably interface with the institution and its legitimacy. In the case of evaluators, the question of their professional identity and role within the institutional work of WP could justifiably be construed as both category work and identity work. I ultimately opted to use category work as my vessel for analysis because it was slightly more represented in relevant data, and because the interest of that chapter's analysis was the category of evaluation. It is no coincidence that Lawrence and Phillips (2019) name 'self work' (which corresponds to identity work) and 'category work' as crucial to the future of organisational inquiry. Though both have distinct genealogies, I would suggest that there is great potential in theorising how the two operate in tandem, and where and how they differ and align.

Finally, I believe that how I have determined who counts as a practitioner widens the purview of inquiry into practitioner perspectives. In my analysis of student ambassadors and their unique relationship to WP work, I offer an account of how lived experience and institutional identity interact, building on Rainford's (2021c) finding that

practitioner experience shapes their orientation toward their institution and WP. My exploration of evaluators, moreover, offers two insights into WP practice. First, it illuminates just how integral the notion of 'demonstrable success' is to WP practice. WP researchers have certainly identified the problematic nature of evaluation in WP (e.g., Doyle and Griffin 2012; Harrison 2012; Clements and Short 2020; Crockford 2021), and have proposed a raft of critical modalities for WP evaluation (recently, Barkat 2019; Gordon et al. 2021; Dent et al. 2022). I build on this work to stake the bolder claim that evaluation sets the terms of legitimacy for WP practice at the field-level, equating 'good' social change work with 'measurable' social change work. Second, I show that we cannot merely understand evaluation as a disembodied social practice; in HEIs, evaluation is conducted by *evaluators*, whether they are in-house evaluators like those I studied, or WP practitioners. I found that, in light of evaluators' proximity to practice, there is seepage between external and internal legitimacy frames when it comes to 'good' evidence, with internal legitimacy ultimately winning out among the evaluators I spoke to.

Though it makes strong theoretical and substantive contributions to WP and OI, this thesis' inquiry is inescapably limited by the contingencies of its context, and various choices I have made. First and foremost, this is an idiographic single case study, which means that it does generalise to other cases. In focalising WP practice at Oxford, I have chosen a case that is exceptionally representative of WP's contradictions, but profoundly unrepresentative of the institutional work of WP practice at essentially every other HEI in the UK. To truly understand how 'maintaining disruption' operates across the UK HE landscape, far more work—preferably, comparative work—must be performed. Whether the institutional work entailed by UNIQ captures WP practice at Oxford as a whole is now an open question. During the writing of this thesis, the Opportunity Oxford and the Astrophoria Foundation Year schemes saw their inaugural deliveries. Both are

ostensibly more structural interventions than UNIQ, and their contradictions and institutional positionings deserve to be studied in their own right.

Moreover, this thesis' attitude to the temporality of practice precludes it from making certain claims about institutional work, especially *vis-a-vis* WP policy. As I outlined in Chapter 6, in my inquiry, the granularities of practice and its relationship to policy are secondary to how practitioners understand and assess them. However, over the decade under study, WP policy substantially changed, seeing the entrenchment of HE marketisation, and the expanded purview of WP to 'the whole student lifecycle', among other policy developments. It is true that practice and policy follow different temporal timescales; practice often lag behind policy developments (Rainford 2019). An intriguing point of departure for future work could be how analyses of IWP and policy enactment could be merged. Moreover, given that practice occurs within change-averse institutional contexts, we might even say there is a queer temporality to WP practice. In the context of complaining in institutional settings, Ahmed suggests that complaint in institutional settings resembles a queer conception of time as 'looping and folding, zigging and zagging, circling back, and moving sideways' (Grogran 2020:xiv in Ahmed 2022a:101). Though it was not the subject of my analysis *per se*, practitioners mentioned how often practice involves frustrating repetition of tasks, long waiting periods for bureaucratic approval, and other instances in which change work gets 'stuck' within institutional processes. As an act of institutional work, I would therefore wager that WP practice exhibits a similar non-linearity, a dimension of practice ripe for future inquiry.

Agee's (2009) metaphor of the inquiry journey acknowledges how qualitative inquiry is its own unity of opposites; it can feel nonsensical and recursive, invigorating and endlessly frustrating. If my reading of Agee and other big-Q qualitative scholarship like Braun's and Clarkes' is correct, moreover, one's inquiry journey does not start and end within the bounds of a particular project. My inquiry journey into WP is far from over. I began this journey in a fit of desperation, to find something workable during a

time of geopolitical and personal crisis. I was and still remain a newcomer to the WP space. If I am to take seriously Ahmed's reading of Freire, which argues that transformative knowledge comes from practical action, then I must acknowledge that I do not have direct access to this knowledge *per se*. The research community surrounding WP has always been practitioner-led (see Thompson 2019; the ongoing work of the *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning Journal*). For all the reading and learning I have done, I must acknowledge my outsiderness, and find ways of using it to support the practical action of practitioners.

I hope to have leveraged my outsiderness well, to infuse a small set of new lenses and new considerations into our body of knowledge on WP practice. In focalising the particularities of an odd case in an even odder sociopolitical moment, my aspiration for this thesis project is a modest, primarily conceptual one. I have not sought to historicise nor explain the whole of WP policy and practice, nor have I sought to definitively unpack the nuances of WP practice at Oxford. Rather, I have offered a conceptual frame that honours how fundamentally institutional WP is, and a vocabulary for probing how WP practitioners understand their relationships to these institutions. My aim is that WP practitioner-researchers can draw on this vocabulary as a vessel not only for further inquiry, but also reflexivity in their practice.

So much of what we do in social scientific inquiry is a delicate balancing of as opposites; agency and structure, qualitative and quantitative, micro- and macro-analyses. Though some of us land squarely on either side of a given polarity, I would wager that most of us see the value of the opposite side. I do not think we can ever reach a theoretical frame that can in itself hold a unity of opposites; that feels like too formidable an epistemic task for limited human subjectivities. However, returning to Agee's writing on the sinuousness of inquiry journeys, and Bourdieu's conviction that practical knowledge often exceeds the province of theoreticians, we can do our utmost to find and refine tools that showcase a community in all its particularity. In doing so, we can

acknowledge—even celebrate—the mysteries inherent to an enterprise as diffuse, contradictory, and vitally important as widening participation practice.

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Appendices

I have attached the following appendices.

Appendix 1: Participant recruitment template email
Appendix 2: Ambassador survey
Appendix 3: Interview schedules
Appendix 4: CUREC 1A form

Appendix 1: Recruitment email template

Dear _,

I hope you're doing very well! My name is Gabi Stewart, and I am a PhD candidate at the University of Oxford, studying under Dr Velda Elliott and Dr Ann Childs. My PhD project aims to better understand how the UNIQ programme works and what its goals are. I'm attaching more information on the study below. I am reaching out to you to ask if you are interested in being interviewed for this project. If you are interested, please reply to this email at gabrielle.stewart@education.ox.ac.uk, and I'd be happy to provide more details. Thank you so much for your time and consideration!

All the best,
Gabi Stewart

This research is being conducted to understand how UNIQ operates and to get a better sense of the programme's aims. One of UNIQ's main goals is to **widen participation**, to make it easier for all students—regardless of their background or experiences—to apply to and attend university. Widening participation has been a national goal in the UK for decades. To this day, scholars, policy makers, and advocates continue to think about how to best achieve equity in education. Researching a programme like UNIQ sheds light on how widening participation programmes work on the ground. Understanding how widening participation is actually conducted is an important part of determining where it is succeeding and how it could improve.

I will be studying UNIQ by constructing a theory of change for the programme. A programme's theory of change is its leaders and participants' 'theory' of *how* and *why* it will work, and *what* its goals are. I am conducting interviews with people involved in UNIQ to get their perspective on UNIQ's theory of change.

Appendix 2: Ambassador survey

You are receiving this short survey because you were an ambassador for the UNIQ programme at Oxford University. The results from this survey will contribute to doctoral research that examines widening access and participation efforts at the University of Oxford. This research is independent, and not affiliated with the UNIQ programme or Oxford's office of Undergraduate Admissions and Outreach.

Your data will provide crucial insight into how UNIQ widens participation in higher education, so your time and energy are greatly appreciated!

All questions are optional.

If you have any questions, please direct them to gabrielle.stewart@education.ox.ac.uk.

Demographic Data

Age
Gender
Racial/Ethnic Identity

UNIQ Before Oxford

Did you participate in UNIQ before attending Oxford?

Year You Participated in UNIQ

UNIQ-Specific Data

Were you a site manager or ambassador?

What year(s) did you work for UNIQ?

Could you please briefly reflect on your UNIQ experience. What was your general experience?

What, in your opinion, were UNIQ's goals?

In your opinion, what is UNIQ's relationship to widening access and participation?

Interview

Would you be willing to participate in a short interview about your experience being a UNIQ ambassador or site manager?

If so, what is your email?

Thank you very much for your contribution to this research!

Appendix 3: Interview schedules

PRACTITIONERS

OPENING SCRIPT:

Thank you so much for taking the time to interview and contribute to this project. My dissertation research focuses broadly on UNIQ's theory of change—that is, how people working on UNIQ conceptualise the programme's aims and activities, and how they're linked to its outcomes. I'm specifically interested in how practitioners bring different perspectives and experiences to the table, and how this diversity makes for a more nuanced programme. I'm also interested in how critical evaluation is to WP practice, and I want to analyse the ways in which the two influence each other.

Throughout the interview, I'll endeavour to tailor the emphasis of the questions to your role, so please let me know if a question doesn't fall within your purview or experiences; you are also obviously not obliged to answer any question without giving a reason. You also may withdraw your data from the study without giving a reason.

I am planning to pseudonymise data included in findings. The CUREC originally specific anonymisation, but I want to keep track when I include multiple responses from the same person. Is this ok?

Finally, is it ok with you if I record the interview so that I'm able to focus on what you're saying more intently?

Let's begin!

Introducing the Participant

Can you describe your involvement with, and your work on, the UNIQ programme?
    How long have you been involved? On which projects?

From your perspective, how has UNIQ developed over your time working on the programme?
    What have these changes been in response to?

People: Selection, Targeting, Recruitment, Identity, and Marketing

In broad strokes, what kind of community does UNIQ strive to foster? Who is included in this community?
    How have you seen this community grow and/or change over time?

Potentially prompt for 'UNIQ champions' and work office culture

How does UNIQ conceptualise 'potential' to succeed at Oxford? What informs this?

How does the programme account for the ways in which marginalisation might complicate our idea of 'potential'?

How much does encouraging students to apply to university align with recruitment to apply specifically to Oxford?

What is the programme's philosophy for recruiting and selecting ambassadors and site managers?

What, broadly, is UNIQ's social media strategy—both in terms of recruitment, and also conveying itself to the general public?

The Academic and Social Programme

Show 'AIMS' on ToC: What do you think unites these aims? What kind of WAP strategy do they reflect?

Prompt: push for how emphasis on a realistic glimpse of Oxford is in tension with high-barrier programmes like Classics?

What forces—be they insights from evaluations, shifts in UAO's approach, or OFS policy changes—have pushed the programme to develop over time?

How much autonomy do course directors have in designing their curriculum?

Evaluation Culture

What is UNIQ's philosophy toward evaluation?

What role does evaluation play in programme development and delivery?

How has UAO's wider approach to evaluation influenced this?

How does the priority UAO places on evaluation shape the work environment?

Innovations & Disruptions on the Digital Frontier

Does UNIQ digital further UNIQ residential's aims, or does it have different goals?

How easily do UNIQ's objectives transfer to an online format?

Could you reflect on how COVID-19 has influenced operations this year?

General Questions

How does UNIQ, as an outreach programme, contribute to Oxford's broader WAP strategy?

Prompt: push for reflection on 'outreach', e.g., programme length and its lofty goals for sustainable engagement with participants

Did your work with UNIQ change your conception of access and outreach?

What should good access and outreach programmes prioritise?

AMBASSADORS

OPENING SCRIPT

Thank you so much for taking the time to interview and contribute to this project. My dissertation research focusses broadly on UNIQ's theory of change—that is, how people working on UNIQ conceptualise the programme's aims and activities, and how they're linked to its outcomes. I'm specifically interested in how practitioners—and I very much include student workers in this group— bring different perspectives and experiences to the table, and how this diversity makes for a more nuanced programme. I'm also interested in how critical evaluation is to WP practice, and I want to analyse the ways in which the two influence each other.

Throughout the interview, I'll endeavour to tailor the emphasis of the questions to your role, so please let me know if a question doesn't fall within your purview or experiences; you are also obviously not obliged to answer any question without giving a reason. You also may withdraw your data from the study without giving a reason.

I am planning to pseudonymise data included in findings. The CUREC originally specific anonymisation, but I want to keep track when I include multiple responses from the same person. Is this ok?

Finally, is it ok with you if I record the interview so that I'm able to focus on what you're saying more intently?

Let's begin!

Can you introduce yourself a little? If you're a student, what you're studying, etc.? What is your line of work? Etc.

Thinking back to when you applied to work for UNIQ, what sparked your interest in the programme?

> *Adjust as necessary to what aspects of UNIQ people worked on/participated in*
> *How have you witnessed UNIQ change?*

What do you remember most poignantly about your time working on UNIQ?

> *Participating in*

Are there challenges that you recall?

What aspect of the programme do you think stays with participants most?

What distinguishes the most effective WAP programmes?

What, in your opinion, are the most powerful ways of getting more state school students to enrol in higher education institutions?

EVALUATORS

OPENING SCRIPT

Thank you so much for taking the time to interview and contribute to this project. My dissertation research focusses broadly on UNIQ's theory of change—that is, how people working on UNIQ conceptualise the programme's aims and activities, and how they're linked to its outcomes. I'm specifically interested in how practitioners bring different perspectives and experiences to the table, and how this diversity makes for a more nuanced programme. I'm also interested in how critical evaluation is to WP practice, and I want to analyse the ways in which the two influence each other.

Throughout the interview, I'll endeavour to tailor the emphasis of the questions to your role, so please let me know if a question doesn't fall within your purview or experiences; you are also obviously not obliged to answer any question without giving a reason. You also may withdraw your data from the study without giving a reason.

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Finally, is it ok with you if I record the interview so that I'm able to focus on what you're saying more intently?

Let's begin!

Describe your role and history with UAO.
    What motivated the formation of the evaluation team?

How do you understand your role? What is the task of the evaluator?

What role does evaluation occupy within UAO?

Are there tensions you've noticed between programme development and delivery and the need to evaluate?
    Prompts: *What are some challenges practitioners have engaging with evaluation?*
        e.g., It's not advisable to collect data after intervention: problems of doing it during?

Evaluability: What are the limitations of evaluation?

What is the purpose of evaluation?
    What does the most effective evaluation do?

Monitoring, sharing, and evaluation
    Prompts
    What kind of office culture does this create?
    Tensions with practice
    Importance of a vocabulary

OfS wants a culture of evidence: how do you feel about this, and what does it look like?

How do you engage with empirical research and other academic literature in your work?
    Prompts
    Philosophy of education
    Theoretical literature
    Theories of change, versus logic model

How do national targets guide your work?

FACULTY

General questions:

What has been your involvement in Oxford WAP?

What has your experience been like working in Oxford WAP?

Classics Specific Questions

What do you hope participants take away from SOAR Classics?
    How does this relate to access?

Are there challenges associated with access to classics, namely its high barrier to entry?

Do you see any access challenges specifically related to classics?

Appendix 4: CUREC 1A form

CENTRAL UNIVERSITY RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE (CUREC)

Form CUREC 1A Checklist for the Social Sciences and Humanities

The University of Oxford places a high value on the knowledge, expertise, and integrity of its members and their ability to conduct research to high standards of scholarship and ethics. The research ethics clearance procedures have been established to ensure the University is meeting its obligations as a responsible institution. They start from the presumption that all members of the University take their responsibilities and obligations seriously and will ensure that their research involving human participants is conducted according to the established principles and good practice in their fields and in accordance, where appropriate, with legal requirements. Since the requirements of research ethics review will vary from field to field and from project to project, the University accepts that different guidelines and procedures will be appropriate.

- Please check **"Where and how to apply for ethical review"** and the **CUREC flowchart** first to see if you need ethics approval.
- Please complete this form using a word processor and email it, together with your supporting documents, to your **Departmental Research Ethics Committee (DREC)** (**if applicable**). If you don't have a DREC please email this form to **ethics@socsci.ox.ac.uk** using your official **ox.ac.uk email** address. **Only type-written, emailed applications will be accepted.**

SECTION A: Filter for CUREC 2 application This section determines whether your study raises more complex issues requiring the completion of a full application for ethical review, known as the CUREC 2 application. **(Please mark 'X' in the Yes/No column.)**		
1. Are research participants classed as **people whose ability to give free and informed consent is in question**? (This may include under 18s (although see "competent youths"), prisoners, or adults "at risk".) Your attention is drawn to the University's **Safeguarding Code of Practice** and its implications for researchers involving children or adults at risk. This includes the need for the work to be risk assessed and for researchers to undertake related training. (**Note**: If any of your participants are aged 16 or under, answer 'Yes' here **and** also answer question 5 below.)	Yes ☐	No ☒
2. By taking part in the research, will participants be at risk of criminal prosecution (e.g. by providing information on drug abuse or child abuse)?	Yes ☐	No ☒
3. Does the research involve the **deception** of participants?	Yes ☐	No ☒
4. Does your research raise issues relevant to the **Counter-Terrorism and Security Act (the Prevent duty)**, which seeks to prevent people from being drawn into terrorism? Please see advice on this on our **Best Practice Guidance web page**.	Yes ☐	No ☒
If you answered 'No' to all the questions above, go to **Section B**. If you answered 'Yes' to any question above, continue to question 5 below.		

5. Is your project covered by a CUREC **Approved Procedure** (formerly known as "CUREC Protocols")?	Yes ☐	No ☐
If yes, give the specific Approved Procedure number(s): IDREC_25_Version 5.2 and IDREC_15_Version 2.0		
If you answered '**Yes'** to **ANY** of questions **1-4**, **and** answered '**No'** to question **5**, **stop completing this checklist and do not submit it for ethical review**. Instead, complete the CUREC 2 application form from the CUREC website, then submit that for ethical review. If you answered '**Yes'** to ANY of questions 1-3, **and** answered '**Yes'** to question 5, go on to **Section B**.		

SECTION B: Contact details and project description	
Contact details:	
1. **Principal investigator** OR supervisor (if student research) (give title and full name)	Dr Velda Elliott; Dr Ann Childs
2. Name of student (if student research)	Gabrielle Stewart
3. Degree programme (if student research), e.g. BA, BSc, MSc, MPhil, DPhil	DPhil
4. Department or Institute name	Department of Education
5. Address for correspondence (if different from above)	Corpus Christi College, Merton Street, Oxford OX1 4JF
6. University (**not** private) e-mail address and telephone number	gabrielle.stewart@education.ox.ac.uk. I do not have a university telephone.
7. Name and status of others taking part in the project (e.g. third year undergraduate; postdoctoral research assistant)	n/a

Project description:	
8. Title of research project	Constructing a Theory of Change for the UNIQ Widening Participation Programme
9. List of location(s) where project will be conducted	Oxford, England

10. If your research involves overseas fieldwork or travel and your department requires a travel risk assessment, will you have completed and returned a risk assessment form beforehand? (This must be approved by your department before you travel. If you are travelling overseas, you are strongly advised to take out University travel insurance.) Please also address any physical or psychological risks for Oxford researchers and local fieldworkers in Section 16 below and discuss with your safety officer.	Yes ☐ No ☐ Not required in this instance ☒
11. Anticipated duration of overall research project	1 year
12.a) Anticipated start and end dates of the part of the research project involving human participants and/or personal data	From: (01/06/2020) To: (01/06/2022) **Note**: You will need ethics approval **before** you start your research. CUREC 1As may take up to 30 days to process. **Retrospective ethics approval cannot be granted.**
12. b) In the case of international or collaborative research, will you submit or have you submitted this project for ethical review or consideration elsewhere (e.g. collaborator's/local ethics committee, or other local approval)?	Yes ☐ No ☐ If 'Yes', please attach ethics or other approvals and give more details below. If 'No', please explain your reasons below. Please also refer to the Best Practice Guidance on Ethical Review of social-sciences based research conducted outside the UK (BPG 16), which includes an Ethics Issues Checklist for International Research (Appendix A)
n/a. This research is neither collaborative nor international.	

13. **External** organisation funding the research (if applicable)	

14. a) Title and brief description of **research** (about 150 words) in lay language.
When describing the research, include your methodology, how you are applying professional guidelines, and the use to which results/data will be put. **Please also declare any conflicts of interest here.**

Constructing a Theory of Change for the UNIQ Widening Participation Programme

This dissertation will thoroughly examine the operations and aims of the UNIQ, Oxford's flagship widening participation programme. Through residential and/or online courses, the programme aims to 'demystify' Oxford for students who are marked as disadvantaged. UNIQ been in operation for since 2010, but in order to meet OFS targets for widening participation, it was restructured dramatically in 2016. UNIQ's express goal now is to raise attainment in university admissions for learners from disadvantaged backgrounds, but whose performance in GCSEs indicates they have a realistic chance of gaining admission to selective universities. Through constructing a theory of change (Toc) for UNIQ, the thesis will explore how it has gone about meeting this goal. The ToC approach to programme evaluation analyses how a programme's 'theory' of how and why it will work links to its actual operations. My methods for constructing the theory of change will be document analysis of internal University Admissions and Outreach office (UAO) documents and UNIQ's public-facing media, and semi-structured interviews with UNIQ practitioners in the UAO office, UNIQ interns, and past UNIQ participants. The aim of my research is to deepen Oxford admissions', and the scholarly public's, understanding of how Oxford conceptualises and conducts outreach, which is a crucial part of the broader national endeavour to 'widen participation' for disadvantaged students.

I will comply with the British Educational Research Association Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research and declare no conflicts of interest.

14.b) Description of participants and how you will **obtain informed consent** to take part in the research
(about 200 words in total)

1. Description of participants **and** your criteria for inclusion/exclusion

Participants fall into one of three categories: 1) practitioners in the Undergraduate Admissions and Outreach office who currently, or have in the past 10 years, worked on the UNIQ programme; 2) Oxford undergraduates or recent graduates who worked as ambassadors (student interns) for the UNIQ programme in the years 2016-2019; 3) undergraduates or recent graduates of various universities who participated in the UNIQ programme in the years 2016-2019.

2. Your method(s) of recruitment

I will select participants from all three populations with purposive sampling, and recruit them via a recruitment letter (see attached). As a UAO casual employee, I have relationships with key practitioners in the UNIQ programme, and I will ask each of them directly to interview. During these interviews, I will ask interviewees to recommend other stakeholders, as well as interviews or past participants, to request for interview. In addition to this tactic, I will draw on a database of prior interns and participants to recruit participants from these pools.

3. Your processes for obtaining consent from participants

Since the research is low risk, and given current global circumstances, will not involve face-to-face interaction with participants, I will obtain consent via email,. The email will include an information sheet (also attached) that outlines details of the study, and then participants, having read the sheet, will be asked to give their consent via a response to the email, which utilizes the CUREC-approved template email consent form

Please **attach separate supporting documents (in Word)** if appropriate for your research (English language versions only). Tick those you are submitting below. If appropriate supporting documents are not submitted, you will be asked to provide these separately, which may delay the ethical review process.

- ☒ Recruitment and advertisement material (e.g. a poster, social media recruitment text, or br invitation letter/ email)
- ☒ Information for participants to read (or hear) before they agree to take part (e.g. written information or, if applicable, an outline oral information script).
- ☒ A document to record informed consent. Templates for written consent forms and/or oral information scripts (in case of an oral consent process) are available from the CUREC wel
- ☒ Questions to be asked of participants (e.g. interview questions, or a preliminary scope of questions, or a sample questionnaire)
- ☐ (If relevant) debriefing document after participants have taken part
- ☐ If you feel the above approaches are not appropriate for your study, provide details on hov will obtain consent from participants
- ☐ Please complete section 15 if you cannot obtain informed consent

Please add any further details here.

15. If you cannot obtain informed consent from participants according to CUREC guidelines and good practice in your discipline, please give a brief explanation and justification of this decision below.

16. What are the ethical issues connected with your research and what steps have you taken to address them? **Please do not answer 'none'.** We need to see evidence that you have identified potential ethical issues with respect to your research and have taken steps to address them. If applicable, please address:

- Participant burdens and/or risks

As it only asks them to engage in relatively short, semi-structured interviews, the research presents a low burden to participants. For stakeholders and interns, the research also carries little risk to participants given that data will be anonymized and the issues discussed are not sensitive. For UNIQ participants, however, the interview questions could potentially include their experiences of disadvantage, since the aim of UNIQ is to widen participation for students from underserved background. I will mitigate the potential psychological burden by making it clear on the information sheet that participants are not obligated to answer any questions during interviews that make them uncomfortable, by regularly checking in with them during interviews about their well-being and comfort level, and by giving them the opportunity to review and redact interview transcripts.

Another risk I will aim to mitigate is the problem of anonymizing data from practitioner interviews. Akin to problems with elite interviews, the fact that the UNIQ team is small and that each member works on distinct, identifiable projects makes anonymization difficult. This problem is compounded by the fact that I will prompt interviewees to critically assess the programme. Respondents might be hesitant to answer candidly if they believe doing so will risk professional harm, especially if there is a possibility they can be identified. Though I cannot wholly change these circumstances, I plan to mitigate both concerns by conducting member checks, i.e., allowing members to review and redact aspects of their interview.

I will give participants from all three populations the opportunity to redact any information they do not wish to be publicly available from all published versions of the thesis, which include the version uploaded to ORA and any published articles that draw on thesis data.

- Your own physical and psychological safety as a researcher or of fieldworkers you may employ (see the University's and Social Science Division's Safety in Fieldwork guidance)

Given that collection will take the form of conducting remote interviews about UNIQ's operations, no aspect of the research will compromise my physical or psychological safety.

- Data protection/ confidentiality (also see Section 18).

As I will meet or exceed all requirements laid out in Section 18, I do not see risk of ethical issues arising in this respect.

For more guidance on ethical issues, please see
http://researchsupport.admin.ox.ac.uk/governance/ethics/resources

Discuss other ethical issues here

17. Will your research involve discussing sensitive issues? This could be information relating to race or ethnic origin, political opinions, religious beliefs, physical/mental health, trade union membership, sexual life or criminal activities.	Yes ☒	No ☐

If you answered 'Yes', make sure you include some supporting information (as directed in Section 14 b.) above, showing the range of questions covering these issues.

18. Management and handling of personal and other research data	
For the purpose of completing this section, all information provided by participants is considered **research data**. Any research data from which participants can be identified is known as *personal data*; any personal data which is sensitive is considered *special category data*. Management of **personal data** and **special category data** of human participants, either directly or via a third party, must comply with the requirements of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and the Data Protection Act 2018, as set out in the University's Guidance on Data Protection and Research. In answering the questions below, please also consider the points raised in the Data Protection Checklist. For advice on research data management and security, please consult with the University's Research Data Team (researchdata@ox.ac.uk) and/or your local IT department, and the University's web pages on research data management. a.) **Please mark 'X' against the data you will collect for your research**	
Consent records (written consent forms, audio-recorded consent, assent forms (for research involving minors) including participant name	☒
Online consent (may be anonymous)	☐
Opt-out forms	☐
Contact details for research purposes only (destroyed when no longer needed for this research)	☒
Contact details kept for future studies	☐
Audio recordings (preferably using PIN-protected audio recorder and stored on device's hard drive)	☒
Video recordings	☐
Transcript of audio/video recordings	☒
Photographs	☐
Task results (e.g. paper/online tasks, diary completion)	☐
Questionnaire answers	☐
Field notes	☐

Other (please specify below) ☐
b.) For **each** of the types of data selected above, state how this will be physically transferred from where it is collected to a local secure storage site (and backed up as necessary). This includes paper records and data captured electronically.
All data will be stored electronically. The electronic data (Consent Records, **Contact details for research purposes only, Audio recordings,** and **Transcript of audio/video recordings)** will all be stored in their respective file formats (all encrypted Microsoft Word documents except the audio recordings, which will be compressed into ZIP files then encrypted) on an external hard drive with Whole Disk Encryption (WDE) capabilities. This hard drive will be stored in my personal office at home.
c.) How and where will **each type of data** be stored during the research (until the end of all participant involvement)? Describe the arrangements for ensuring confidentiality, i.e. location of storage (e.g. Nexus 365 OneDrive for Business, SharePoint), security arrangements and de-identification of such data. Do not store unencrypted data in freely available cloud services or unprotected USB drives.
As aforementioned, all data will be digitized and stored on an encryptable external hard drive. Data will remain on this hard drive for the remainder of the study. This hard drive will reside in my personal office.
d.) Will you use a unique participant number on research data instead of a participant name? If **yes,** state whether or not you will retain a list of participant names against numbers (i.e. pseudonymisation via a linkage list). Where will the list be stored, and when will it be destroyed?
No, I will not be using unique participant numbers. I will anonymise names for online publication, but I will retain personal data via a linkage list to the pseudonyms. The list will be digital, and I will store it in my aforementioned hard drive. I will destroy this list upon successful defence of my thesis, which will precede online publication.
e.) Who will have access to the research data?
Only my supervisors and I will have access to the research data.
f.) If research data is to be shared with another organisation, how will it be transferred / disclosed securely?
n/a
g.) When and how will identifiable data (including audio/video recordings & photos) be destroyed or deleted? **Note:** Records of consent should be retained for a **minimum of three years after publication or public release**. Some funders may require longer periods (see http://www.dcc.ac.uk/resources/policy-and-legal/overview-funders-data-policies). If you wish to retain contact details

in order to re-approach participants about future studies, you must detail this in information provided to them and obtain specific consent for this.		
Identifiable data, with the exception of consent forms and contact details, will be deleted upon successful defence of my thesis. I will permanently erase this data using the delete function on my external hard drive. Consent forms and contact details (whose retention I specifically consent for and outline details of in my supporting documents) will be stored in the same encrypted hard drive. I will store consent forms for at least three years after the online publication of my thesis and contact details until the research is completed in June 2021.		
h.) Please confirm that you will store **other research data** safely for at least 3 years after final publication or public release and adhere to any additional research funder policies. For more information about the University policies, please see the University's web pages on research data management.	Yes ☒	No ☐
If '**Yes'**, please give details of who will store the data and on storage format, location and security. Note that open science is encouraged. If **'No',** please provide further details below.		
Yes, the data, in pseudonymized form, will be stored on the aforementioned encrypted external hard drive for at least three years.		
i.) Does your research involve the use of secondary (i.e. previously collected) data? Common sources of secondary data include censuses, information collected by government departments, organisational records and data that was originally collected for other research purposes (If "**No**", please go to section **19**.)	Yes ☒	No ☐
j.) Do you have data access agreements for the use of this secondary data? (If so, please attach these.)	Yes ☐	No ☒
k.) Is your use of this secondary data compatible with what data subjects/participants agreed that their data should be used for?	Yes ☒	No ☐
l.) Could this data be linked back to an individual or individuals? If yes, address how securely any personally identifiable data will be transferred to you, and where and for how long it will be stored during or after the research. Who will have access to it?	Yes ☒	No ☐
I will be researching organisational records that have authors indicated. The data will be transferred to me via a locked channel on the University Admissions and Outreach office's SharePoint database. I will retain these data in the aforementioned hard-drive until completion of my thesis (projected for June 2021). Only I will have access to these data, and I will destroy them immediately upon completion of the thesis.		

19. Publication and dissemination of research data	
How will you disseminate and feedback project outcomes at the end of the research?	In addition to sending participants transcripts of their interviews for member checking (see Section 16), I will send all participants an electronic copy of the completed dissertation and clearly state that I am open to receiving feedback.

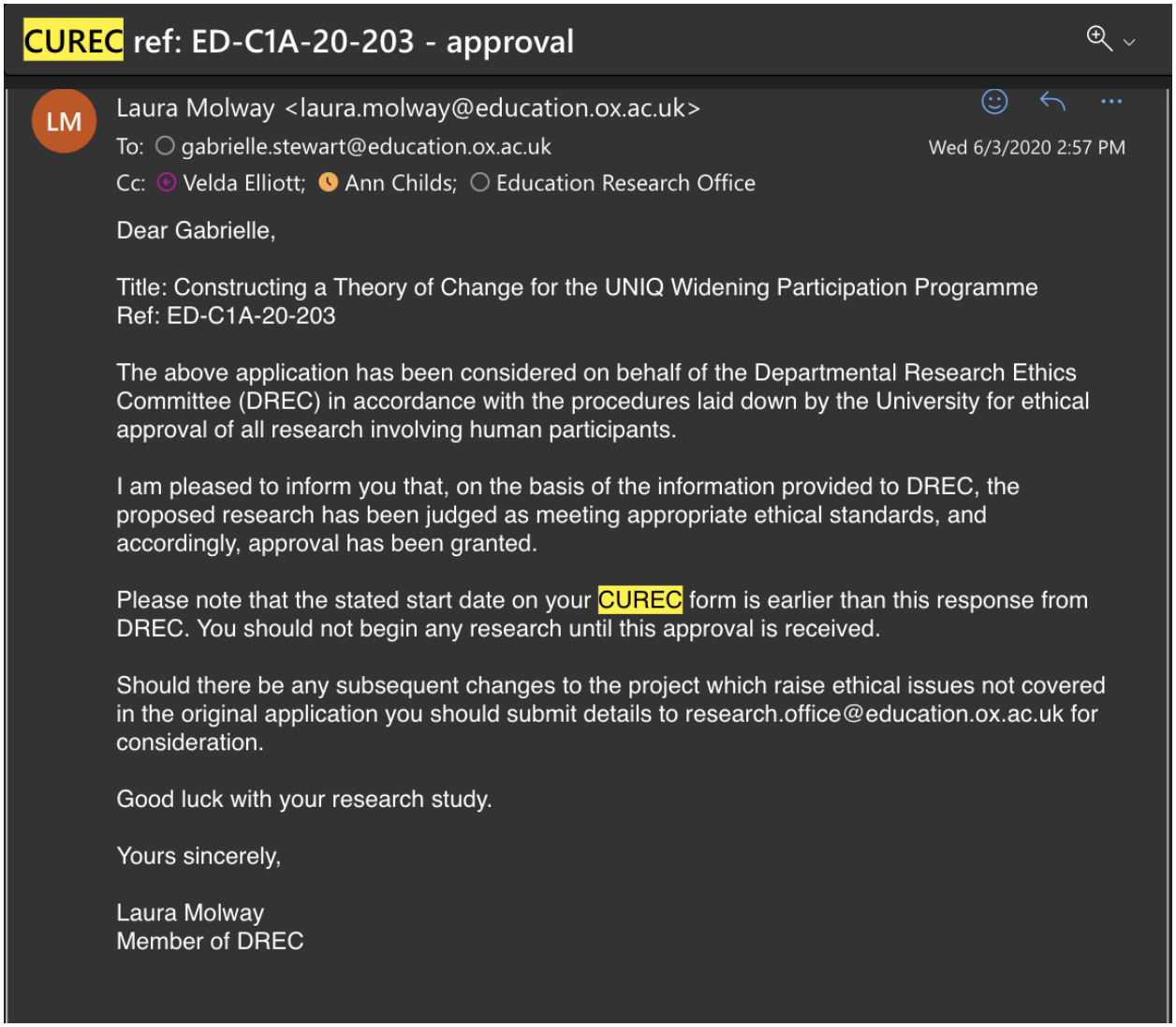
SECTION C: Methods and procedures to be used	
Method used: Please ensure you have addressed any potential ethical issues related to these methods in Section 14 and in your Participant Information Sheet	**Please mark 'X'**
1. Analysis of existing records	☒
2. Snowball sampling (recruiting through contacts of existing participants)	☒
3. Use of casual or local workers e.g. interpreters	☐
4. Participant observation	☐
5. Covert observation	☐
6. Observation of specific organisational practices	☐
7. Participant completes questionnaire in hard copy	☐
8. Participant completes online questionnaire or other online task	☐
9. Using social media	☐
10. Participant performs paper and pencil task	☐
11. Participant performs verbal or aural task (e.g. for linguistic study)	☐
12. Focus group	☐
13. Interview	☒
14. Audio recording of participant (you will generally need specific consent from participants for this)	☒
15. Video recording of participant (you will generally need specific consent from participants for this)	☐
16. Photography of participant (you will generally need specific consent from participants for this)	☐
17. Others (please specify below)	☐

SECTION D: Professional guidelines and training		
1. In this section, please mark 'X' against at least one of the following professional guidelines you aim to adhere to. You should use the principles listed in your chosen guideline(s) in conducting your own research. **Note**: this is not an exhaustive list.		**Please mark 'X'**
Research specialism/ methodology	**Association and guidance document**	
Anthropology	Association of Social Anthropologists of the UK and Commonwealth	☐
Computer Sciences	ACM Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct	☐
Criminology	http://www.britsoccrim.org/ethics/	☐
Education	British Educational Research Association Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research	☒
Geography	Association of American Geographers Statement on Professional Ethics	☐
History	Oral History Society of the UK Ethical Guidelines	☐
Internet-based Research	British Psychological Society: Conducting Research on the Internet Association of Internet Researchers Ethics Guide ACM Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR) Also see our Best Practice Guidance on internet-based research	☐
Law (Socio-Legal)	Socio-Legal Studies Association: Statement of Principles of Ethical Research	☐
Management	Academy of Management's Professional Code of Ethics	☐
Political Science	American Political Science Association (APSA) Guide to Professional Ethics in Political Science	☐
Politics	Political Studies Association. Guidelines for Good Professional Conduct	☐
Psychology	British Psychological Society Code of Ethics and Conduct	☐
Social Research	Social Research Association: Ethical Guidelines	☐
Sociology	The British Sociological Association: Statement of Ethical Practice	☐

Visual Research	ESRC National Centre for Research Methods Review Paper: Visual Ethics: Ethical Issues in Visual Research	☐
Other professional guidelines. Please specify the other guidelines used here*:*		☐

2. Please indicate what training in research ethics (or research methodology) the researchers involved with this study have received, e.g. the title of the course and date completed (online training available at http://researchsupport.admin.ox.ac.uk/support/training/ethics), or discussions between researchers and supervisors, if applicable.

As part of my DPhil programme, I have taken courses in the Foundations of Educational Research methods (Hilary Term 2019) and have attended a probationary research seminar (Hilary and Trinity Terms 2019) that focussed on issues surrounding social science research. I have also thoroughly discussed the potential ethical quandaries of the project with my supervisors. Additionally, I have worked as a research assistant for the Undergraduate Admissions and Outreach Office, which requires me to input and store sensitive personal data safely and in compliance with GDPR, as well as to analyse said data appropriately. As part of my job at UAO, I also completed an online information security training.



CUREC ref: ED-C1A-20-203 - approval

LM

Laura Molway <laura.molway@education.ox.ac.uk>

To: gabrielle.stewart@education.ox.ac.uk

Wed 6/3/2020 2:57 PM

Cc: Velda Elliott; Ann Childs; Education Research Office

Dear Gabrielle,

Title: Constructing a Theory of Change for the UNIQ Widening Participation Programme
Ref: ED-C1A-20-203

The above application has been considered on behalf of the Departmental Research Ethics Committee (DREC) in accordance with the procedures laid down by the University for ethical approval of all research involving human participants.

I am pleased to inform you that, on the basis of the information provided to DREC, the proposed research has been judged as meeting appropriate ethical standards, and accordingly, approval has been granted.

Please note that the stated start date on your CUREC form is earlier than this response from DREC. You should not begin any research until this approval is received.

Should there be any subsequent changes to the project which raise ethical issues not covered in the original application you should submit details to research.office@education.ox.ac.uk for consideration.

Good luck with your research study.

Yours sincerely,

Laura Molway
Member of DREC