

**‘Access is not about taking people who are already
superstars’? Exploring constructions of merit and
fairness in the University of Oxford’s undergraduate
admissions routes**

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**A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Education**

Word count, excluding bibliography and appendices: 98,806

Abstract

There is a well-researched tension between conceptions of academic merit based on prior attainment and equity concerns regarding widening participation at selective UK universities. Given its decision not to implement contextual offer-making policies, this is particularly true at the University of Oxford. This thesis explores how admissions stakeholders conceptualise merit and fairness in the context of the Astrophoria Foundation Year's (AFY) development and implementation. The AFY is an innovative admissions programme for applicants from acutely disadvantaged backgrounds; its introduction represents a moment of disruption in the context of Oxford's admissions because it systematically lowers the entry grades required of its applicants, challenging existing norms which oppose such action in mainstream admissions.

The project focuses on the narratives and conceptual framings of merit and fairness which academics and student representatives construct and enact in the mainstream admissions process and the AFY. Using a Bourdieusian framework incorporating doxa and institutional habitus as my primary analytical tools, I explore the spectrum of normative views salient in the mainstream undergraduate admissions space. I find that Oxford's doxic boundary of autonomous academic judgement facilitates the existence of both credentialist and contextualist conceptions of merit, which operate in the mainstream admissions process as institutional habituses. These tensioned practices are stabilised and maintained via a legitimised mode of relational interaction, a new concept I term the *relational institutional habitus*. The introduction of the AFY generates both support and opposition among admissions stakeholders, articulated in complex and messy ways by participants; it disrupts the relational institutional habitus, generating new forms of strategic action I theorise as institutional work (Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006). The AFY programme becomes a site of contestation where divergent constructions of the appropriate value frameworks in admissions are advanced, critiqued, synthesised and managed, reflecting the performance of these narratives in the mainstream admissions process. I explore differing attitudes to the relationship between the

mainstream admissions process and the AFY, offering insight into how change and stasis in attempts to widen undergraduate admissions in Oxford, both through policy positions and their enactment, occur.

Acknowledgments

Here I stand; I can do no other.

Max Weber, quoting Martin Luther, 'Politics as a Vocation'

Bamboo bones, nervous energy

Blind ambition, skin of your teeth

Push back, push back, push back, with every word and every breath

Laura Jane Grace, 'Bamboo Bones'

There is an internal tension between recognising yourself as the beneficiary of chance encounters and relationships leading to statistically unlikely academic success and being proud of your work. Have I done well, or have I got lucky? The mutually constituting nature of structure and agency is central to my understanding of educational progression and something I continue to wrestle with at an affective level, a fact I suspect is a shared experience for many working-class scholars. These pages, though, are firmly dedicated to the quirks of structure which have brought me into contact with people who have supported me, encouraged me, and told me through words or actions that this work matters and that I should be one of the people doing it.

First, to James Robson and Steve Puttick, my supervisors. From seeing the 'merit' in my doctoral plans, through critical suggestions which pushed me to define what mattered in the project, to encouragement and advice on my first publication, thank you.

To the other educators who tacitly convinced me that undefined anger at the structural injustice I couldn't name yet was best addressed through writing (and that I was already OK at it, and that I could get better). At Dereham Sixth Form College, Jo Philpott, Charlie Uddin and Grace Costenbarder (I'm sorry I didn't end up studying History or English), there were so many points where I could have stayed comfortable and hence stayed still – thank you for expecting more of me, and so many of my peers. At the University of Cambridge, Paul Sagar, the best supervisor I ever had, thank you for helping me rediscover the ability to argue for something. At University College London, Caroline Oliver and Patrick Bailey, thank you for helping me find my sociological voice. At the University of Oxford, David Mills and Susan James Relly, thank you for helping me realise what positionality really means and its centrality for social constructivist research – your comments during my Transfer and Confirmation of Status helped make this thesis what it is.

To my colleagues at Causeway Education, especially Sam Holmes and Michael Englard, the years I spent working with you transformed my understanding of what education can be and still informs my practice as a scholar and a teacher. I've never worked with such a concentration of astoundingly talented people.

To Ben Hart, Mirna Šumatić, and Antonin Charret, the Eduboiz – pressure might not always make diamonds, but you all are. Absolute legends of Norham Gardens.

To Helen Webster and the rest of the academic skills community at Oxford, you've taken me from being an intuitive but technically naïve teacher to the foundations of professionalism. I promise I will keep working to give my students the tools they need to succeed.

To Rosalie Warnock, you have been a constant source of insight, sagacity, and courage to trust myself ('write assertively!') and call out bullshit where I can. I cannot thank you enough for your support over the past three years. Your students and colleagues are privileged to have you.

Perhaps somewhat unorthodoxly, to my students, past, present and future. Every week you come up with something remarkable – your tenacity, perspicacity and sheer ability are inspirational. You are a collective reminder of why this work matters.

Last, and most, to my wife – I could not have done this without you. Thank you, always, for everything. As Shane says, you are the measure of my dreams.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Sector and institutional context

The UK's higher education (HE) sector is heavily stratified (Croxford and Raffe, 2015; Boliver, 2015). UK universities can be categorised into four distinct status 'clusters' based on 'research activity, teaching quality, economic resources, academic selectivity, and socioeconomic mix (Boliver, 2015: 608). The universities of Oxford and Cambridge cluster together atop this hierarchical pyramid of status, differentiated by the combination of their superlative wealth, their high research output, their intensive undergraduate teaching methods, and the extremely high academic attainment of their entrants. In a highly differentiated sector, the question of who secures a place at the highest-status institutions impacts upon individual social mobility (Marginson, 2018): Oxford graduates in particular are more likely to enter elite professional positions (Wakeling and Savage, 2015) and enjoy among the highest early-career salaries (Belfield et al, 2019). Moreover, as elites exert a disproportionate influence in producing cultural norms (Khan, 2012), the values which universities like Oxford espouse resonate throughout the sector. For instance, Marques and Powell (2020) find that education departments at UK universities situate themselves in reference to the oldest and most prestigious institutions, cleaving in varying ways to the discourse of distinction. Images of 'Oxbridge' also pervade government policies and strategies; Lomer et al (2018) highlight the 'foregrounding' of Oxford and Cambridge in the UK's national branding of its HE sector, and over three quarters of British Prime Ministers have attended Oxbridge. Finn (2018: 39) characterises this situation as 'the benchmarking of all subsequent "ideas of the university" against the two ancient English universities'. As such, the explicit admissions practices and tacit narratives which inform the process of selection for a place at universities like Oxford communicate powerful messages about what is valued – and who is valuable – in UK HE.

This study's focus on undergraduate admissions processes must be understood within the context of ongoing efforts to widen participation in HE. As Kettley (2007) demonstrates, access to

HE, and particularly elite HE, is likely a centuries-old object of concern. Thompson (2012) outlines the history of widening participation policy from the 19th century in more detail, arguing that despite a plethora of initiatives which are oft-repeated across successive decades, “education is much more concerned with the maintenance of social stratification than the improvement in mobility, no-matter what the policy makers wish” (Blackledge and Hunt, 1985, p 88)’. As Thompson observes the embedding of ‘access’ in the 1990s as part of a radical expansion of the UK HE sector did not lead to more equal participation across all parts of the sector by different social groups. Successive studies illustrate that sector expansion has primarily benefitted more socioeconomically advantaged students both in terms of absolute numbers of students admitted to HE courses (Blanden and Machin, 2004; Tight, 2012) and admissions to more selective and prestigious institutions (Boliver, 2011) – phenomena which are respectively termed maximally and effectively maintained inequality (see Lucas, 2001).

Partly in response to the failure of expansion to reduce disparities in HE participation, and the concerns about fair access to a publicly supported sector which this raises, successive UK governments have instituted policies to encourage universities to admit a greater number of students from ‘non-traditional’ backgrounds. As Tight points out, such students are defined by who they are not: ‘namely, white, middle and upper class, young men studying on a full-time basis’ (2012: 212), and highlights participation among students from lower socio-economic backgrounds as a particular area of limited progress. During the 2000s and early 2010s selective universities tended to focus their efforts on recruiting students from non-traditional backgrounds who already exhibited high academic attainment. McCaig (2015: 5) argues that particularly since the introduction of the UK’s current tuition fee structure, pre-1992 universities have sought to situate their widening participation efforts as focussing on the “brightest” of applicants from poorer backgrounds’. McCaig demonstrates how such efforts are discursively positioned as about preparing the applicant for meritocratic competition, constructing widening participation as *shaping* talented

but disadvantaged individuals to fit the needs of the institution, rather than as *reforming* the institutions themselves.

These framings replicate the wider position adopted by selective universities: that the UK's marketised HE sector is broadly meritocratic, with students' attainment determining their destination. The 'meritocratic myth' in selective HE has been widely and forcefully critiqued in scholarly work as empirically false (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977; Liu, 2011; Brennan, 2013) – even, as Reay (2021) shows, for those individuals who do gain admission to such institutions. This legitimises the status and material differences between graduates' outcomes while downplaying the impact of their context on their attainment. Students from lower socio-economic status groups face greater barriers to attaining the highest grades and are consequently far less likely to do so (Gorard et al, 2017), yet these differences are positioned as reflecting natural differences in talent between *individuals*, thus condoning radically differing outcomes as fair. In spite of this, selective universities' admissions policies routinely rely on prior attainment as a filter to select applicants.

The inception in 2018 of England's current HE regulator, the Office for Students (OfS), saw more proactive and stringent expectations of universities imposed, with calls for selective providers to 'engage in a process of "rethinking how merit is judged" (OfS, 2019: 8)' (Boliver and Powell, 2023a: 38). Selective institutions have engaged with this policy shift through changing the nature of their efforts to widen participation, including through changes to their admissions policies and processes as well as their outreach efforts, which are explored by Boliver and Powell in their analysis of Access and Participation Plans from the 25 most academically selective universities in England. For some very selective universities these changes have been dramatic - for instance, through committing to reducing the grades in conditional offers for disadvantaged students. However, Oxford is one of only three institutions with very large Q5:Q1 disparities in POLAR4¹ admission to

¹ [Participation of Local Areas](#), a measure of how many young people in a particular local area go on to attend HE. The metric assigns every postcode in the UK to a quintile, with the highest quintile (Q5) postcodes the most likely to attend HE, and the lowest quintile (Q1) the least likely. The OfS uses the ratio between Q5 and Q1 admissions as a key measure to judge the success of universities in widening participation.

decide against reducing entrance requirements for disadvantaged students, on the basis that relatively high entrance grades are correlated with success on-course (Boliver et al, 2023a: 47). Instead, Oxford has launched two alternative routes to undergraduate study, detailed in its Access and Participation Plan (APP) (University of Oxford, 2020): Opportunity Oxford and the Astrophoria Foundation Year.

Opportunity Oxford, launched in 2020, is a bridging programme which provides up to 200 reserved places per year to ‘candidates from disadvantaged backgrounds...who meet our standard offer but who may not otherwise be offered a place and need support to make a successful transition to undergraduate study at Oxford’ (2020: 20). Applicants made an offer under the Opportunity Oxford scheme complete a two-week academic skills programme online in the summer before they arrive at Oxford, followed by a two-week residential immediately before the start of their first term. As Boliver and Powell (2023a: 39) highlight, despite Oxford’s A level grade requirements typically being A*AA or AAA, the average UCAS entry *tariff* for Oxford undergraduates is 205 points, translating to more than A*A*A* at A level. As such admitting candidates with AAA might arguably be construed as a soft form of contextual admission. Crucially though, while providing a protected route for the admission of relatively low-attaining applicants from disadvantaged backgrounds, the Opportunity Oxford scheme does not involve making offers below the standard minimum level deemed acceptable by Oxford’s Common Framework on Admissions (CFA) (University of Oxford, 2006).

1.2 The Astrophoria Foundation Year (AFY)

Development of the AFY began in 2020 and the programme admitted its first students in 2023. The AFY provides a year of ‘intensive tuition and support for students with high academic potential from disadvantaged backgrounds to bring their level of attainment to that required for entry to undergraduate study at Oxford’ (2020: 20). The scheme is small, offering up to 50 places per year in selected subjects, and is specifically targeted towards ‘academically able students from very

disadvantaged backgrounds who, because of a lack of educational opportunities, are not able to achieve our standard offer' (2020: 20). The conditional offer made to AFY applicants is therefore three grades lower than the analogous offer for a direct-entry applicant to the same course – where the standard A level grade requirement for direct entry is AAA, an applicant applying via the AFY is required to attain BBB. As such, the AFY represents a small but highly significant departure from the expectation of high attainment which governs Oxford's undergraduate admissions policy and practice regarding widening participation.

Within this context the development and initial implementation phase of the AFY offers a unique opportunity to explore the norms and narratives which govern the mainstream undergraduate admissions process and the AFY within it. The AFY is conceptualised by its stakeholders in relation to the mainstream admissions process and the context described above; understanding the meanings ascribed to the AFY therefore also offers insight into the narratives governing the mainstream admissions process. This is demonstrated by previous work in similar contexts which finds that innovations relating to meritocratically normative processes such as selective university admissions can provoke debate and surface tensions regarding how such norms are understood and acted upon. Boliver et al (2018) describe how narratives surrounding the difficulty of their courses, the prestige attached to the abilities of their graduates, and perceived unfairness towards higher-attaining but more advantaged applicants constrain very selective Scottish universities from undertaking more progressive admissions policies. The subsequent introduction of the government-backed Scottish Framework for Fair Access serves to demonstrate the difficulties inherent in promoting equitable admissions policies solely at an institutional level in a marketised HE system. Similarly, McLellan et al note the resistance towards the introduction of a similar foundation year at the University of Bristol on the basis that this might 'diminish the overall quality of undergraduate cohorts' (2016: 66; see also similar arguments in Kettley and Murphy, 2021).

The salient question in this context is therefore the extent to which disadvantaged students are required to meet academic standards which, within their socio-educational context, are more challenging than for their more advantaged peers. This issue is at the heart of the quote in the title of my thesis, a paraphrasing of a comment from Rebecca, one of my participants. The project therefore speaks both to the ongoing salience of admissions decisions at universities like Oxford, and the significance of the introduction of the AFY as a disruptive innovation within this context. The study explores the norms and narratives germane to Oxford's mainstream admissions process through the lens of a programme which potentially challenges them. I consider how stakeholders connected to the AFY construct the value frameworks which govern mainstream undergraduate admissions at Oxford; their interpretations of the meaning of the AFY in this context; and the strategic action they undertake to negotiate, maintain, challenge and accommodate the tensions which the AFY raises. I analyse how the potentially challenging emergence of the AFY impacts and is impacted by existing narratives about fairness in the admissions to Oxford, and how such various narratives are enacted by stakeholders in relation to both the AFY and mainstream undergraduate admissions process.

The project provides a fresh theoretical perspective to Bourdieusian sociology, and the sociology of education, in three ways. First, it further develops the concept of the institutional habitus and explores the potential of plural institutional habituses as a mechanism for understanding change and stasis in educational institutions. Second, it theorises the relationship between doxa and institutional habitus through the introduction of a novel addition to the Bourdieusian toolkit, the "relational institutional habitus". Lastly, it synthesises Bourdieu's work with institutional work (Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006), a concept borrowed from organisation studies, developing existing theorisations of how habitus inclinations are enacted. I argue that in organisations such as the University of Oxford where institutional doxa and consequently the maintenance of competing institutional habituses are pressured by novel institutional practices

such as the AFY, the destabilisation of competing institutional habituses produces new forms of institutional work which reflect nuances in the institutional habituses present in the field.

1.3 Chapter summaries

1.3.1 Chapter 1: Introduction

Chapter 1 has outlined the rationale for the project, exploring its context, the value of the research's contributions, its temporal relevance, and the aims of the study. The remaining chapters are summarised below.

1.3.2 Chapter 2: Literature review and theoretical framing

Chapter 2 provides a review of the relevant empirical and theoretical literature in the area. I explore the tension between widening participation and (credentialist) meritocratic admission in more depth, and the challenge of widening participation in the context of a marketised and stratified HE sector. I particularly focus on the development of the use of contextual admissions policies and routes at selective universities in the UK, including through foundation years, and the discourses surrounding such policies and programmes. I find that although there is a significant body of evidence suggesting that contextual offer-making can lead to strong undergraduate performance for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, there remain significant narratives of distrust concerning such policies and entry routes at selective institutions. These narratives include concerns about the weakening of academic standards and fairness to higher-attaining students from advantaged backgrounds.

I then review the literature concerning admissions practices and norms governing undergraduate admissions at Oxford, as well as at the University of Cambridge². I find that while

² Research on the admissions practices of the University of Cambridge is included because Oxford and Cambridge are in many respects very similar in the overall structure of their undergraduate admissions. As well as requiring high prior attainment, as many selective UK universities do, both Oxford and Cambridge also 1) interview only a selected subset of their applicants as standard practice; 2) devolve responsibility for admissions decisions primarily to their constituent colleges (although for some subjects departments play a significant role); and 3) within these collegiate structures, offer a high degree of autonomy to individual subject tutors to select their own students. As such, the inclusion of research focussed on Cambridge's

previous studies have highlighted the tension between academic selectivity and widening access, there is a significant gap in the literature surrounding how individual agents in admissions settings at selective universities attempt this. Although there is a small body of work exploring the microprocesses of how such decisions are made, much of this research focusses solely on what admissions stakeholders do, omitting how they *construct the meaning* of what they do. However, the research which explores these constructions in detail is now over a decade old and the product of a different regulatory regime. Moreover, although many studies offer conceptual analyses of how these admissions processes function, there is no cohesive theoretical interpretation exploring how the norms governing admissions change or do not change. I also discuss the literature examining the Oxford tutorial system, considering the socio-cultural implications of its pedagogical assumptions and the potential links between these implications and its admissions process.

I then discuss foundation years and their differential usage in the UK's HE sector. Foundation years have typically been used as a tool to broaden recruitment to HE by less selective HE providers. However, they have also been deployed for over a decade by selective institutions as a means to widen access to more disadvantaged groups with lower attainment than would normally be considered. I further analyse the use of foundation years in the Oxbridge context, before outlining the nature of the AFY specifically, noting the nature of its admissions processes and teaching principles. Finally, I discuss the theoretical apparatus I deploy in my analysis. I consider and ultimately discard neo-institutional theory as a possible lens for analysing the issues at hand in the project. I then discuss Bourdieu's conceptual framework, offering an in-depth discussion of the notion of institutional habitus in relation to Bourdieu's wider concepts, its potential foibles, and my own theoretical clarifications and innovations. Finally, I consider the usefulness of institutional work (Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006), a concept borrowed from organisation studies, to understand the

undergraduate admissions is not intended to imply that the two universities are always comparable, or to draw Cambridge into the focus of the case study. Instead, it is to recognise the positional and procedural similarities between the two institutions which distinguish them from other highly selective UK universities, in order to broaden the pool of relevant literature available for consideration.

enactment of institutional habitus, and offer a synthesis which reconciles its potential points of conflict with Bourdieu's schema.

1.3.3 Chapter 3: Methodology

Chapter 3 outlines the study, its research design, and its methodology and methods. I first discuss my onto-epistemic positioning and its relevance to the project, research questions (RQs) and overall research design. I outline the salience of a critical constructivist approach to researching politically contentious issues in education, and particularly to my specific case study, exploring pluralistic and fragmented discursive positions and their implications for admissions decisions. I describe my rationale for choosing a case study approach, discussing its appropriateness for examining (porously) bounded problems with complex internal dynamics. I explain how I define the boundaries of my case before explaining my choice of methods through their likelihood to generate data germane to answering my RQs, opting for a design which places primacy on semi-structured interview data, supplemented by observational data and secondary document analysis. I then discuss the mode of analysis I employ, highlighting the epistemic congruence between critical constructivism and reflexive thematic analysis, justifying my decision to employ it.

I describe my participants and their relevance to the study, offering insight into the positions they occupy in relation to the wider university, the admissions process, and myself as a researcher, before outlining the recruitment process and my own positionality within the context of the research environment. Here, I seek to acknowledge how my previous professional experience has contributed to my axiological stance on the tensions between merit, equity and notions of social justice in selective university admissions. Finally, I explore the ethical issues salient to the study, particularly surrounding participant anonymity, and how I deal with these challenges. This discussion includes the trade-offs and sacrifices necessary to ensure a research project which honours its ethical obligations both to its participants, and to the wider research and practitioner community who might employ it, in line with a *critical* notion of constructivist research.

1.3.4 Chapter 4: The normative value frameworks governing the mainstream undergraduate admissions process

Chapters 4, 5 and 6 present the findings of the study. Chapter 4 explores the varying constructions of merit and fairness (and the interactions between these constructed concepts) which AFY stakeholders adhere to, challenge, negotiate and maintain in the mainstream undergraduate admissions process. I discuss fairness and merit as mutually constitutive and pluralistic concepts in the context of the Oxford undergraduate admissions system, constructed by participants in varying configurations which surface or negate the potential tensions between the two ideals. I interpret these constructions as broadly belonging to narratives which centre either credentialist or contextualist understandings of meritocracy. I then examine the differing forms which these narratives take for participants, discussing both strict and flexible versions of credentialist meritocracy, and examine how conceptions of fairness are germane to this narrative. I then explore different forms of contextualist meritocracy, discussing contextualised assessment for current merit, contextualised merit for future potential, and distinguishing these narratives from social justice rationales for contextual assessment which are also espoused by some participants.

I then discuss how these conceptual understandings of fairness and merit translate into empirical positions on admissions decisions for those with admissions or policy responsibilities. I explore how participants manage their individual constructions of fairness and merit in the wider context of an admissions process which marries high degrees of individual autonomy for decision-makers with the need to compromise with others whose views are equally as valued. I also highlight the importance of Oxford's teaching environment in shaping views on admissions decisions with regard to fairness and merit. In particular, I discuss the finding that despite the focus on academic merit (whether credentialist or contextualist) in the admissions process, admissions tutors also highly prize applicants they view as personally suited to Oxford's tutorial system, generating a

further potential tension in admissions norms. Finally, I explore how participants' constructions of fairness and merit, and their empirical positions on practical aspects of admissions, impact their praxis within the admissions process itself. I highlight the perceived importance of the interview and of the concept of exceptionalism, and their relationship to the primacy and centrality of individual professional judgement in Oxford's undergraduate admissions process.

I conclude that the concepts of merit and fairness are the core ideals governing mainstream undergraduate admissions at Oxford, but that the construction of these ideals is pluralistic and contains the potential for tensions in practice, which are actively negotiated and managed by decision-makers. I find that participants' stances on admissions decisions are inherently tied to their conceptions of Oxford's undergraduate teaching, and that the most ubiquitously recognised source of authority about an applicant's worthiness for a place is the individual judgement of their assessors, a fact reflected in the weight placed upon selection interviews.

1.3.5 Chapter 5: Constructions of and participation in the Astrophoria Foundation Year

Chapter 5 discusses my academic participants' construction of the AFY's meaning in the context of the narratives at play in the mainstream undergraduate admissions round. I first discuss the origins of the programme within the sector's changing regulatory context, and its relationship to earlier college-based widening admissions schemes (such as the Lady Margaret Hall foundation year programme) and other widening admissions policies launched at the same time (such as Opportunity Oxford). I then explore how colleges and subjects made the decision whether to participate in the AFY; I show that individual stakeholders' views and interactions were key to how these decisions were made and analyse such decisions in the light of participants' normative positioning with regard to the mainstream admissions process. Notably, there is not a neat mapping of credentialist or contextualist leanings onto particular views of the AFY, reflecting the multiplicity of nuanced viewpoints on both issues and the importance both of participants' structural positioning and the specific sub-organisations they exist and interact within.

I then explore the critiques and justifications offered in relation to the AFY, again finding that there is no simple correlation of viewpoints from the mainstream round to the AFY, but instead that participants' views were often refracted through the lens of their own structural positions and specific conceptions of credentialist or contextualist merit. Critiques included concerns about whether the AFY would sufficiently prepare students for undergraduate study; that the students the AFY is aimed at should simply be made offers through the standard process if they are suitable for study at Oxford, and the associated concern that the AFY might be co-opted to relieve pressure for wider structural reform. I also explore disquiet at the potential of 'leapfrogging', whereby disadvantaged students who had attained too highly for AFY application might be unsuccessful in the mainstream admissions process, yet students from similar backgrounds with lower grades might be offered entry through the AFY. Objections were also raised that Oxford simply should not consider students with grades as low as those required for AFY entry, or that the AFY might be used to introduce more radical admissions reforms to the mainstream admissions process. Justifications for the AFY included appeals to social justice concerns, regulatory pressure, and the potential to use the scheme to prompt conversations about wider admissions reform in Oxford. In the context of the AFY's introduction, each of these critiques and justifications has discursive meaning, which I discuss in relation to the pertinent narratives of the mainstream undergraduate admissions round.

Finally, I discuss participant perceptions of the teaching and learning methods employed in the AFY in relation to first year undergraduate teaching and learning, as well as the design of the AFY's admissions process. Given the importance of participant understandings of teaching and learning in mainstream admissions decisions, their constructions of the meaning attached to pedagogical choices in the AFY are revealing of normative positions concerning what the AFY itself means and how it is received.

1.3.6 Chapter 6: Negotiating space between the Astrophoria Foundation Year and mainstream praxis

Chapter 6 analyses how participants conceptualised the AFY's position in relation to the mainstream undergraduate and teaching ecosystems. It explores the forms of strategic action which participants engage in both to separate the AFY from these spheres and integrate elements of its principles and practices into them. As with participants' constructions of the AFY in principle, such forms of action are complex and nuanced. Participants generally adopted either the view that the principles of admissions and teaching developed for the AFY should be maintained separately from the mainstream admissions round or undergraduate teaching processes, or the reverse: that they should actively inform reform of these areas. I discuss the varied forms of action which participants adopted to promote these positions, considering them in light of participants' specific constructions of fairness and merit in the mainstream admissions process, effective teaching practice for undergraduates, and the AFY itself.

These forms of enactment are sometimes discursive, deployed through participants' positioning of the AFY's processes as distinct or comparable to the mainstream admissions or teaching spheres. Some, conversely, are more active; participants act unilaterally, or on behalf of their sub-organisations, to integrate or distance the AFY from the operation of undergraduate teaching. In some instances these actions create physical or administrative barriers or links, as well as normative ones, between undergraduate spaces and the AFY. These acts of compartmentalisation and integration highlight the intricacies of participants' conceptions of the relationships between fairness and merit, and undergraduate admissions and teaching, in the undergraduate ecosystem.

1.3.7 Chapter 7: Theorising the Astrophoria Foundation Year's introduction

Chapter 7 draws together my analyses from the preceding three chapters and applies my theoretical framework to the concepts identified in my data. I argue that the plural and varied institutional

habitus of credentialist and contextualist merit operate in stabilised tension with each other because they each abide by the governing doxa of the undergraduate admissions and teaching ecosystem, autonomous academic judgement. This stabilisation is achieved via what I term the “relational institutional habitus”, a novel theoretical contribution which conceptualises the appropriate mechanism of interaction with conflicting institutional habitus leanings which are nonetheless legitimate in relation to the institutional doxa. I argue that the introduction of the AFY pushes against the doxa of autonomous academic judgement through both its admissions processes and its teaching principles, dissolving the relational institutional habitus of deference which maintains these varying constructions of the ‘right’ way to conduct fair and rigorous admissions and teaching at Oxford.

The dissolution of the relational institutional habitus – which I conceptualise as a form of institutional maintenance work – opens space for more varied and individually driven forms of creative and disruptive institutional work. I argue that participants act to compartmentalise or integrate principles and elements of the AFY in line with their own specific institutional habitus conceptions. I outline the nuances and specific formulations of such manifestations of institutional habitus, troubling the binary notion of credentialist or contextualist meritocracy and highlighting the multiplicity of formations of these positions. I then examine the specific strategies of compartmentalising or integrating institutional work which individual participants undertake, discussing the relationship between the conception of fairness and efficacy in mainstream admissions and teaching practice they espouse, and their stance on the AFY’s relevance for such mainstream practice.

I show how the space between the AFY and the mainstream admissions process thus acts as a focal point for the enactment of strategies of institutional work; individual stakeholders within both domains engage in various forms of institutional maintenance and disruption through different mediums dependent on the context in which they are applied. The AFY can therefore be interpreted

simultaneously as a dynamically conservative policy of accommodation, offering strategic concession to the regulatory regime while leaving core structures of independence unchallenged; a maintained disruption of existing practice which opts for available reforms while opening the door to more radical change; or simply as the option most acceptable to all in the context of the tensioned narratives which govern Oxford's undergraduate admissions and teaching ecosystems. The final section of the chapter considers the epistemological and axiological consequences of my findings for what a just conception of admissions and teaching practice in the mainstream undergraduate sphere might entail.

1.3.8 Chapter 8: Conclusions

Finally, Chapter 8 considers the findings of the study and their theoretical and axiological implications, both for sociologists and for academics acting as admissions gatekeepers and educators. I highlight the tensions between the contested conceptions of fairness at stake in the research context and their potential implications for widening participation to the University of Oxford. Further, I draw attention to the mechanisms by which stakeholders within the study navigate the tensions at play, offering implications for understanding processes of change and stasis in entry to other elite institutions in HE and elsewhere. I also evaluate the theoretical framework I adopt to analyse my data and its relevance for future studies. I discuss the limitations of the study and suggest areas for future research focus in this and similar contexts.

The project makes both conceptual and empirical contributions to the understanding of how those who control entry to elite institutions respond to calls for increased equity in their sector. Within the sociology of (higher) education this is an abiding concern and the project significantly advances understanding of the empirical reality of this practice in a paradigmatic research site. It also offers a theoretical development to the concept of institutional habitus by introducing relational institutional habitus as a lens by which to understand the interplay of institutional interrelation and internal agentic action in producing and maintaining institutional norms. This

contribution advances understandings of how tensioned discourses within educational institutions are managed and their consequences for issues of socioeconomic equity and socially just transitions. The study will be of interest to researchers of elites (particularly elites in HE), as well as policymakers and other stakeholders in elite institutions both within and outside HE contexts, and regulatory bodies with oversight of HE.

Chapter 2: Literature review and theoretical framing

2.1: Situating the problem

Social mobility has formed a central plank of English HE policy under successive recent governments (Elwick, 2019; Brown, 2013), and progression to university is considered a key indicator of such mobility in policy discourses (Bathmaker et al, 2016). Prevailing neoliberal discourses, which position educational success as an individually determined demonstration of merit (Stahl, 2018), depend for their legitimation on narratives of social mobility for deserving students, driven by their supposed meritocratic worth (Reay, 2013). In such a regime students' choices at the end of their secondary education are significant for their future prospects with individuals bearing the responsibility for their destinations; progressing to university as a student from a low socioeconomic status (SES) background is cast as a success of social mobility. Given England's highly stratified HE sector (Croxford and Raffe, 2015; Boliver, 2015), the selectivity of their undergraduate institution can play a significant role in the social mobility low-SES students achieve (Broecke, 2012; Walker and Zhu, 2017; Wakeling and Savage, 2015). Students accessing more selective institutions are more likely to attain higher-paying and more socially prestigious professions upon graduation.

However, significant empirical research demonstrates that low-SES students are more likely to achieve lower grades than their average-SES peers (for a summary see Early et al, 2020). Furthermore, even low-SES students who do achieve high grades and progress to university are less likely to study at a selective university than average-SES students (Crawford, 2014). As such, uncritical meritocratic discourses surrounding social mobility can be interpreted as empirically unreliable but ideologically valuable myths which legitimate the existence of structural inequalities (Liu, 2011; Brighouse, 2022; Reay, 2020). As Brighouse notes, a genuine meritocracy might pose fewer issues in terms of individual equity (although it would still prove objectionable on solidarist class grounds); however, this prospect is, in the current discursive environment, almost unthinkable. As such, meritocracy as usually conceptualised troubles assumptions about long-range social

mobility as an unproblematic process, demonstrating the need to understand how meritocratic myths are perceived and engaged with by stakeholders within the elite institutions, membership of which is often lauded by social mobility narratives. This is particularly true in the context of sudden, radical life-changes such as the transition of non-traditional students to elite HE (Friedman, 2014; Reay, 2021). The use of meritocratic discourses in selective university admissions is increasingly being challenged by the exploration of alternative formulations of meritocratic admission, such as those based on equity of opportunity (Boliver et al, 2022); however, the willingness to implement alternative models of selection remains limited at the most selective and prestigious UK universities (Boliver and Powell, 2023a).

The increasing, if tentative, usage of contextual data surfaces what existing meritocratic discourses cast as a tension between equity and excellence. This argument suggests that attempts to improve equitable outcomes for disadvantaged individuals inevitably compromise the absolute standards of performance which universities can produce, and also that such attempts are unfair (indeed, inequitable) to others who have attained more highly (see, for instance, Abbot et al, 2023, in the US context). This apparent tension has proved difficult for universities in the UK context to manage under successive governments and regulatory regimes (Macfarlane, 2020; Deem, 2009), sometimes leading to its uncritical elision (Koutsouris et al, 2022). Since the advent of the 1997 Dearing report English universities have been encouraged in various ways to admit students from widening participation backgrounds. However, various studies have repeatedly highlighted that, situated within a marketised neoliberal sector, the premise of widening participation as separated from admissions practice is limited in its scope for impact (Harrison and Waller, 2018; Archer, 2007; Mavelli, 2014). In a deeply stratified sector, selective institutions attempt to gloss the structural dissonances between widening participation work based in aspiration-raising and high admissions standards, claiming the discursive legitimacy which equity-focussed practice bestows while linking equity in admissions to the prioritisation of meritocratic excellence (Bowl and Hughes, 2016). Such discursive acts have been described by Ahmed (2012) as 'non-performatives' – speech acts whose

purpose is to avoid enacting the action they advocate for. The purpose of these statements is to exist as statements, to signal action through inaction. This concept has since been deployed in relation to widening participation policy (Kimura, 2014; Chapman et al, 2015). I utilise Ahmed's work in my discussion of the compartmentalising strategies deployed in relation to the AFY in Chapter 6.

The second section of the literature review explores the development of contextual admissions policies at selective UK universities since the introduction of the OfS as England's HE regulator, covering both the increasing discourse surrounding their use and the lag in practical action to support this rhetoric. This section then focusses specifically on the Oxbridge context. It justifies the use of 'Oxbridge' as a category of analysis and considers the particular set of narratives and institutional features which inflect how the universities of Oxford and Cambridge have engaged with contextual admissions policies. The second section explores foundation years as a particular form of contextual admissions policy within the context of selective universities, before discussing the Astrophoria Foundation Year specifically. The literature review then turns to the theoretical literature which I will deploy to inform my analytical lens in this study. I consider, and dismiss, neo-institutionalism as a guiding theoretical framework, before turning to Pierre Bourdieu's theoretical toolkit. I discuss the classical formulation of his theory of practice, paying particular attention to the relationship between institutional habitus, a theoretical innovation stemming from McDonough's (1997) and Reay's (1998a) work which builds on the individual habitus, and doxa, before surveying existing uses of Bourdieu's theory in examining widening participation and widening admissions work in the UK, particularly to elite HE institutions. Finally, I discuss the relevance of institutional work (Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006), a concept borrowed from organisational studies which I use to examine how the institutional habitus(es) which exist within Oxford's admissions and teaching ecosystem are enacted.

2.2: Widening admissions at selective UK universities: the centrality of context

Given the stratification inherent in the UK's HE sector it is unsurprising that widening admissions policy and practice differ according to the relative level of admissions selectivity which providers employ. For instance, almost two decades ago Greenbank (2006) found that selective institutions were more likely to require higher UCAS tariffs or grades, to require A levels or other academically focussed qualifications, and to value middle-class cultural capital in their entry decisions. These facets of selective universities' admissions policies exemplify the narrow focus on academic attainment which Boliver et al (2017) interpret as limiting the scope to enact genuinely progressive admissions policies. Much widening participation work at elite UK universities has focussed on raising aspirations and attainment, framing the issue as a question of cultural or intellectual deficit rather than structural inequity within HE institutions (Rainford, 2023; St. Clair et al 2013). St. Clair and Benjamin (2011: 516) critique such reductionist notions of aspiration, highlighting their paucity in improving 'the material and cultural factors that affect actual outcomes'. Similarly, Harrison and Waller (2017) find that the Aimhigher programme (a large national widening participation programme which ran from 2004 to 2011) was primarily understood by practitioners as successful in raising aspirations rather than attainment, despite the crucial nature of attainment raising for university progression (Crawford, 2014) and the purported links between raising aspiration and raising attainment.

Although the 2005 Schwartz report advocated for the use of 'contextual as well as academic considerations' (Hoare and Johnston, 2011), Hoare and Johnston find that by 2011 there had been little progress in incorporating educational or social context into admissions practices (2011: 25). During the 2010s, however, contextualised admissions practices entered the mainstream of widening participation discourse among selective universities. Although there is (nascent, fragmented and often anecdotal) evidence that the UK's most selective universities, including Oxford, have been informally and tacitly employing contextualised assessment practices for decades (Zimdars, 2007: 234; Bamber and Tett, 1999), such policies were not officially adopted until

the 2000s, with a growing body of policy documents and research emerging from the early 2010s (for a summary see Mountford-Zimdars et al, 2016). By 2015 more than one third of UK universities considered applicants' attainment in the light of their socioeconomic context (Boliver et al, 2015); by 2022, some form of contextualised admissions was almost ubiquitous across UK HE institutions (Mountford-Zimdars and Bastedo, 2022).

The accelerated adoption of contextualised admissions policies in England is connected to the inception of the OfS as an empowered and active regulator with high expectations for institutional progress (Mountford-Zimdars and Bastedo, 2022; Boliver and Powell, 2023a). Contextualised offer-making, as opposed to solely contextual consideration, is increasingly common among selective universities. Boliver and Powell's (2023a) analysis of England's 25 most academically selective universities finds that 21 of these institutions, including five of the eight institutions with an average entry tariff of A*A*A* or above, either already made contextualised offers or planned to introduce them as part of their 2020-25 Access and Participation Plan. However, the picture is uneven between institutions; differences in how contextual admissions policies are enacted, not only through whether offers as well as decisions are contextualised, but also the temporal and administrative practicalities of how contextual data are considered, can impact the outcomes they generate (Moore and Mountford-Zimdars, 2024). Furthermore, epistemological differences between disciplines in how merit is understood have been found to impact receptiveness to contextual admissions policies among decision-makers (Kandiko Howson et al, 2022). These differences have far-reaching implications both for whether students from disadvantaged backgrounds decide to apply to elite universities, and also, crucially, whether their applications are deemed competitive as well as simply theoretically admissible.

It bears noting that the movement towards greater use of contextual offers at selective institutions is hard-won. Several studies note significant internal opposition to contextual offer-making. These oppositions are founded variously in institutional narratives promoting meritocratic

assessment (Jones et al, 2019; Boliver et al, 2018), risks to the institution's reputation (O'Sullivan et al, 2019a), and concerns about student success (Mountford-Zimdars and Moore, 2020). Boliver and Powell (2023b) discuss these concerns, rooting them in a dominant model of meritocratic *equality* of opportunity which subsumes and dominates the secondary consideration of meritocratic *equity* of opportunity. My own data strongly supports this dichotomy of definition, albeit with a more even and tensioned relationship between equality and equity – notions which I term credentialist and contextualist merit.

2.2.1: The Oxbridge context

Even within the UK's highly stratified HE sector, the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge are distinguished from others by their wealth, admissions processes, socioeconomic and cultural exclusivity, and academic selectivity (Bathmaker et al, 2016; Zimdars, 2007). Both universities position themselves as elites within elites, demanding differentiated (and differentiating) talents and capacities from their students (Boliver, 2015; Winnard, 2021; Tapper and Palfreyman, 2009). While I do not adopt the view that the normative understandings of merit and fairness which govern Oxford's admissions and teaching practices are prescriptively determined by its place in the broader HE sector (as outlined in section 2.5.1), it is important to recognise the historical exceptionalism which has led to Oxbridge's present structural differences with even other elite UK universities. As Stewart (2023: 130-131) highlights, until the early 19th century Oxford and Cambridge maintained a 'duopoly' on university education in England, retaining a distinctive mode of undergraduate teaching (Brockliss, 2016) which I discuss below and which, as we shall see, influences admissions practice at Oxford. While there is emerging evidence supporting selective universities in making offers to disadvantaged students with lower school attainment than usually required (see Mountford-Zimdars and Moore, 2020: 754), Oxford and Cambridge have previously resisted calls to do so, a position which is increasingly unusual among selective UK universities (Boliver and Powell, 2023a). Indeed, representatives from Oxford have previously claimed that lowering grade boundaries for admittance would amount to 'an intellectual contradiction' (Grimston, 2011). This

demonstrates the extent to which such schemes are potentially damaging to meritocratic discourses which influence perceptions of widening participation work among both academic, professional and student stakeholders at Oxford (Nahai, 2013; Warikoo, 2018).

To understand the context in which the AFY is being implemented, it is necessary to define some of the distinctive institutional characteristics of the University of Oxford's admissions and teaching system. 'Oxford' is made up of the central university, which organises exams and syllabi, central resource such as libraries, and most external regulatory activity; and the colleges affiliated to the university, which are autonomous bodies which operate within a federation. 33 colleges accept undergraduate students, who apply to the University of Oxford but usually specify a college as their first preference. This college then usually takes responsibility for the assessment of their application. Applicants to most subjects complete at least one admissions test, undertake several academic interviews including at other colleges, submit written work and personal statements, which are assessed alongside their school attainment records and a variety of contextual data. Tutors then make offers to applicants using a holistic selection process which incorporates consideration of each element of assessment with few set rules, wherein they decide through extensive discussion which applicants should receive a place (see Zimdars, 2007: 255, which remains accurate in its fundamentals). The central university adopted the CFA, a shared set of principles for undergraduate admissions, in 2006. However, there is significant variation between subject and college custom in how assessment takes place, with different subjects and colleges requiring different numbers of interviews, employing different procedures for making decisions about applicants and ascribing different weightings to different aspects of the process (Zimdars, 2007: 291). As my own data demonstrates, these principles hold true almost two decades later, with particular discrepancies existing between different tutors, but also between different colleges even within the same subject.

Soares (1999) outlines three competing philosophies of admission to Oxford. *Organic conservatism* advocates for prioritising the maintenance of the existing social hierarchy through

‘privileging the privileged’. *Democratic elitism* espouses a strict meritocratic admissions policy (i.e. accepting prior credentials as accurate reflections of ability) and thereby justifies significant inequality and the existence of elites. Finally, *social democracy* acknowledges the effect of differing educational and social backgrounds on attainment, seeking a rough equality of outcome rather than of opportunity. Exploring the views of Oxford admissions tutors on meritocracy, Nahai (2013) finds the values influencing admissions decisions to be heterogeneous, with evidence of all three philosophies present and meritocratic elitism dominating. Strikingly, when enacting individual admissions decisions led by social democratic values, admissions tutors ‘remain uncomfortable with the potential breach of procedural fairness this implies...and are cautious not to take it too far’ (2013: 694). Understanding the contradictions and compromises inherent in the process ‘is necessary to grasp fully the supremacy of democratic elitism at Oxford, and of the competing values which challenge this admissions model’ (2013: 695). Unlike in McLellan et al’s case study where there are no ‘sacred cows’ in terms of accepted university practice (2016: 62), Nahai’s participants are conscious of the importance of preserving institutional norms.

Zimdars (2007) likewise finds that there is a strong culture of credentially meritocratic admission. Although students are sometimes admitted with lower grades than the standard offer, this is ‘exceptional’ (2007: 221), with many subjects refusing to interview students with these predicted grades; ultimately, ‘academic attainment is absolutely seminal and is crucial not only for the decision on which students to invite for interview but also for actual post-interview admission decisions’ (2007: 219). However, she also highlights that the field is so competitive that it is ultimately impossible to separate many candidates even using the multiple measures of assessment in play. Marginal applicants perform varying well on different aspects of the assessment process but are overall very difficult to distinguish between. When this happens, she argues that strong preferences or ‘feelings’ about applicants generally win the debate, often subverting the quantitative data available (2007: 292-293). Zimdars finds, in line with Lane (2002), that interviews are often privileged above other forms of assessment and that interviewers are generally risk-averse

and show preference for culturally homogenous applicants (see also Stevens, 2007), suggesting homophilic recruitment as a possible explanation. More recent research has suggested that embodied cultural capital allows more privileged students to literally 'perform' better in the space of the interview (Stenhouse and Ingram, 2024), while research in the Cambridge context posits that the ability to adapt styles of interaction successfully is key to interview success (Weston, 2021). Hemsley (2016: 29) also finds that aptitude tests in history require applicants to demonstrate skills not taught at A level, such as 'originality and historical imagination'; the assumption might be that such traits are innate among the brightest candidates, yet this ignores the possibility that they are coachable through extension activities available to more advantaged students.

The overarching point is that Oxford's admissions system is complex and anachronistic, with a variety of inputs, norms which are subverted, ignored or excepted to at the micro level, and where individual actors hold huge influence in decision-making. Further, there is debate as to whether the selection tools it employs identify learned rather than innate traits and skills, available through specialised preparation. In light of this, whether and how contextualisation during the admissions process is employed is an integral part of how fairness in this process can be conceptualised. The context of the process also demonstrates the need for the conceptual framework I deploy: to capture the messy, conflicting practices through which institutional narratives and agentic enactment interact to produce outcomes in the admissions sphere. Zimdars' and Nahai's work demonstrate the importance of contests between different conceptions of merit in Oxford's admissions processes. The ideologically disruptive advent of the AFY provides an excellent opportunity to better understand how stakeholders within such institutions negotiate such contests, and therefore how issues of equity and justice are navigated, advanced, neutralised or opposed.

Oxford's undergraduate teaching system is also unusual in that it centres upon regular small-group teaching, often with senior academics, not only during dissertation writing but throughout the undergraduate journey. Centrally organised lectures and reading lists provide the

stimulus material and knowledge which undergraduates must engage with, while tutorials are intended to provide a space to explore their analysis and synthesis of this material. While Tapper and Palfreyman (2011: 95-109) describe the tutorial system as the 'jewel in the crown', they acknowledge that to be justified it must be designed for 'the intelligent undergraduate rather than the supremely gifted' (2011: 108). While they somewhat cursorily conclude that it succeeds in this, much of the rest of the literature calls this into question; indeed, Cosgrove (2011: 344) highlights that Palfreyman's work on the subject is 'quite clearly and openly biased', intended as a defence of the system. Pedagogically focussed research on Oxford tutorials suggests that most students conceptualise the tutorial space not as one designed for critical questioning of ideas, but for imparting knowledge and fixing deficits (Ashwin, 2005). Cosgrove (2011: 349) finds that the objectives of tutorials are 'implicit and somewhat mysterious' to students and are actively maintained as such by tutors in an attempt to ensure tutorials are not overly systematised. The students involved, conversely, find this inhibitory to their learning, citing lack of time to familiarise themselves with the material and the intense, anxiety-inducing nature of the tutorial as problematic.

Although Cosgrove does not discuss it explicitly, the implicit nature of tutorials might be expected to prove a greater barrier to students with no contact with the tutorial system, as opposed to those with friend, family or school links to Oxford. Horn (2013) finds that by its nature the tutorial teaching system and curriculum (or lack thereof) is open-ended and malleable and is best suited to students who understand that their role is to actively 'develop an autonomous capacity for noticing and characterising' (Collini, 2012: 81, in Horn, 2013: 361). This finding is supported by research in the Cambridge context, where Gaston and Duschinsky (2020) find that students from working-class backgrounds feel less able to perform in the manner demanded of small-group, tutorial style teaching.

The focus on the personal development of capacity for flexible thought, comfort with ambiguity, and minimal direction is aligned with Bernstein's (1975) notion of invisible pedagogy –

learning contexts where tasks and learning expectations are open-ended and defined by the learner rather than the teacher (though, crucially, often with tacit expectations of the ‘correct’ outcome on the teacher’s part). Bernstein’s work has been used fruitfully in tandem with Bourdieu’s extensively in studies of HE transitions (Katartzi and Hayward, 2020; Morrison, 2017; Lehmann, 2012). He contends that transition from the strong frames and classifications and sharp delineations which can characterise working-class individuals’ expectations of educational environments to the weaker ones of the invisible pedagogy of infant school – or university – can prove moments of disjuncture for working-class students, requiring them to draw on modes of knowing and thinking which are less readily deployed in the absence of prior habituation to them.

This framing should not be interpreted as a homogenising deficit approach to understanding ‘working-class modes’ of communication and learning. Instead, it is the recognition that the material conditions of disadvantage often leave less time, space and embedded confidence and knowledge to allow working-class children to develop the comfort with ambiguity which invisible pedagogies require – in part, as a result of the discontinuity between working-class habitus and capitals, and those of their (higher) educational environments (Crozier and Reay, 2011; McLean et al, 2013). Arguing in dialogue with academic literacy perspectives, Tapp (2015) highlights the tendency for the radically disruptive potential of invisible pedagogy to exclude students where a ‘framing for participation’ is not provided. This is relevant because, as we shall see, perceived suitability for the tutorial style of teaching is a key factor in applicants’ chances of success. Such suitability is often understood as neutral in a class and cultural sense, despite its potential links to learnable traits and skills as discussed above. Bernstein’s notion of invisible pedagogy thus provides a useful device through which to interpret the specific pedagogical aspects of my discussion.

2.3: Foundation Years, meritocracy and institutional discourses

Although foundation years have been a feature of the English widening participation agenda for at least two decades, they are primarily concentrated among recruiting providers with lower entry grades and league tables rankings and remain under-researched through the lens of widening

participation policy (O’Sullivan et al, 2019b). Marshall (2015: 68) notes that in stratified systems, the motivations to develop foundation years differ; for recruiting institutions they are a way to increase the possible pool of enrolling students, while for selecting institutions they offer a method of increasing the diversity of intake. However, as these differing concerns are not equally pressing, foundation years are deployed more by recruiting institutions. Marshall and Leech’s (2011) analysis of 127 UK universities demonstrates that while 46.2% of universities in the uppermost quartile by league table rankings offered foundation years to home students, 73.1% of those in the lowermost quartile did so. Freeman finds that only 4% of foundation year students in England are studying at high-tariff providers (2024: 19). Acknowledging differences between the ways foundation years are deployed by different types of institution is therefore important in understanding the narratives which govern their existence within an institution’s wider context (see, for instance, Hale, 2020).

Widening participation initiatives in general perform symbolically different roles in different types of HE institutions, with elite institutions more likely to perceive widening participation work as a bolted-on, fringe issue rather than part of the institution’s core mission (Graham, 2011). Particularly within elite universities with strong meritocratic norms influencing their institutional sagas (Clark, 1972; Warikoo, 2018), widening participation activity can be viewed as a ‘cream-skimming’ exercise intended to tweak and enhance the functioning of an already broadly equitable admissions system (McLellan et al, 2016). Such initiatives, described by Rainford as akin to ‘the all too often espoused rhetoric surrounding notions of a ‘deserving poor’’ (2017: 46), seek to reach a small number of suitably ‘talented’ students from disadvantaged backgrounds in a nod to meritocratic ideals of equality of opportunity while doing little to challenge the dominance of more socioeconomically advantaged students. These views help inform a crucial distinction: whether foundation years in elite universities are viewed by admissions gatekeepers as a form of contextual admissions, or whether they are conceived of as a separate entity which prepares otherwise inadmissible students for entry into mainstream study. I explore this distinction in Chapters 5-7.

Much of the existing work examining foundation years at elite universities focusses on the experiences and choices of the foundation year participants themselves. Johnson (2018) examines the experiences of the University of Bristol's Foundation Year in Arts and Humanities (FYAH); O'Sullivan et al (2019b; 2019c) offer similar studies exploring Lady Margaret Hall (LMH), Oxford and Trinity College Dublin's respective foundation year schemes. Research involving stakeholders at existing schemes reveals significant evidence of concerns and anxieties which demonstrate underlying tensions in the value systems determining individual and institutional views of inequality, merit and elitism. Pryce (2024) notes the significant concerns accompanying the introduction of the University of Cambridge's foundation year, and the degree of internal negotiation required to operationalise the scheme. McLellan et al highlight in relation to the Bristol FYAH that academic staff presented significant concerns about its implementation for fear that 'admitting students onto undergraduate degree programmes by progression from the foundation year would diminish the overall quality of undergraduate cohorts' (2016: 66). It emerged that these concerns were based on an inaccurate understanding of a typical undergraduate cohort, assuming much greater congruity and essential prior knowledge than actually existed. This demonstrates the pervasive influence of traditional but fictional images of university students, even among those directly responsible for their teaching.

O'Sullivan et al (2019a) similarly highlight that at Oxford the concept of reducing grade requirements was viewed as too radical even in the context of a foundation year. They note that 'Even the most liberal of those with responsibility for admissions were focused on the limits of potential academic growth of individuals, and how the presence of a foundation year could influence how the institution is perceived' (2019b: 48), making particular reference to the meritocratic ideals driving this stance. This demonstrates the potential 'clash' (2019b: 49) between radical widening participation policy and institutional culture. Indeed, while Kettley and Murphy (2021) argue for the transformative potential of foundation years in the context of elite universities, they specifically highlight perceptions of institutional culture as one of the primary obstacles

burgeoning foundation year schemes are likely to face. Some incarnations of institutional meritocratic discourses are therefore at odds with the habitus inclinations of individual stakeholders within elite universities' access and admissions communities. This is true despite – or, more cynically, due to – the potential for foundation years to offer productive and disruptive innovations in teaching and learning methods (Feather et al, 2023; Baker et al, 2024).

2.3.1: The Astrophoria Foundation Year

Against the backdrop of the contestation of contextual admissions practices at elite universities, particularly Oxford, the introduction of the Astrophoria Foundation Year in 2023 represents an ideologically disruptive moment for the institution. Existing studies suggest students admitted via contextualised admissions policies do not underperform their peers (see Boliver et al, 2022 for a summary); however, the literature discussed above demonstrates narratives concerning the lowering of academic standards remain significant in influencing the perceptions of admissions stakeholders. Because foundation years provide specialised learning experiences to their students they might be considered as separate to more orthodox forms of contextual offer-making – yet as McLellan et al (2016) highlight, this does not shield them from these same critiques. In the context of Oxford's highly meritocratic admissions practices, the AFY's attainment requirements are potentially subversive to the institutional norms which govern admissions practices.

The AFY accepted its first students in September 2023. It offers up to 50 places to students with significant academic potential who have 'experienced severe personal disadvantage and/or disrupted education' (University of Oxford: 2022) limiting their chances of success in the standard undergraduate application process. The programme runs during the standard academic year and is free to participants, with a stipend to support living costs. Candidates apply to one of four streams: Chemistry, Engineering and Materials Science; Humanities (encompassing Classics, English, History and Theology); Law; and Philosophy, Politics and Economics. Teaching throughout the year focusses on the academic skills which the course teams deem necessary in the corresponding undergraduate courses, with modules based on the degrees students are expected to progress onto. This is a

significant departure from mainstream undergraduate teaching practices, as discussed in Chapter 4-6. The course leads to a Certificate in Higher Education which is recognised by other institutions should students not to progress onto a degree course at Oxford, through choice or summative performance. Students belong to one of ten participating colleges³, which vary in size, subject mix and specific organisational outlook on admissions and widening participation. Candidates apply via the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) by late January, completing a supplementary questionnaire which provides information about their specific educational and social backgrounds. Shortlisted applicants are interviewed in March-April. Crucially for my study, applicants do not specify a college choice and are instead interviewed by a representative panel of volunteer tutors drawn from their department; if successful they are allocated to one of the participating colleges accepting students in their subject. This is a significant distinction from the mainstream undergraduate admissions process which I discuss at length through the thesis.

Only two possible cases provide adequate settings to examine the issues key to the study – the AFY and the University of Cambridge’s foundation year. After initially intending to focus on the latter, I was unable to secure access to participants via the most important internal gatekeeping committee. As such, the AFY is the most (and indeed, the only) appropriate setting in which to investigate the construction of discourses of meritocratic elitism in relation to foundation years. The inception of the AFY provides a new opportunity to examine how stakeholders in different structural positions in elite universities conceive of and manage contested discourses concerning disadvantage, meritocracy and elitism. The AFY challenges the notion that academic attainment fully and unproblematically represents an individual’s ‘ability’, regardless of their context. As such, it fundamentally subverts the meritocratic discourse central to the legitimisation of elite universities in the 21st century, a concept termed ‘democratic elitism’ by Soares (1999: 39).

³ One of these colleges withdrew from the scheme during the period of my data collection.

2.4: Theorists and empirical applications

In this section I outline the theoretical framework which I will use in the study, glossing the recognised concepts I think with and highlighting the tensions which require resolution with the schema I adopt. First, I address the theoretical elephant in the room, organisation studies and in particular sociological institutionalism. This study might naturally lend itself to sociological institutionalist perspectives, and indeed I deploy the organisational studies concept of institutional work (Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006) to theorise the enactment of institutional habitus(es). I consider the contributions of seminal theorists of sociological institutionalism, particularly Meyer and Rowan's (1977) conception of structures and processes as mirroring the symbolic and ceremonial legitimation requirements of the institution hosting them. However, ultimately I reject this approach in the specific instance of the admissions and teaching ecosystem, although I acknowledge its usefulness in considering other aspects of institutional life at Oxford. I then outline my use of Bourdieu's theoretical framework, particularly his concepts of habitus and doxa, and the later development by other theorists of institutional habitus as a lens to interpret institutional practices, particularly in education settings.

2.4.1: Sociological institutionalism and its discontents

Neo-institutionalism refers to a broad church of theoretical work in organisational studies which regards the actions of organisations and their actors as the product of wider institutional discourses within the sector they inhabit. Organisation studies scholars often distinguish between organisations and institutions, broadly defining institutions as overarching sets of norms, ideas and practices which help structure the behaviour of specific organisations which subscribe to them (see Akram, 2023: 143-144). On this reading, we might consider the institution of academia in the UK as providing a set of relational norms which structure the organisation of the University of Oxford. Herranen distinguishes multiples strands of neo-institutionalist thinking, but it is sociological institutionalism which I primarily discuss here – a variant which seeks to explain 'isomorphism and

agents' norms and culture', through 'cognitive frames, norms, values and scripts'. Organisational stability is 'maintained through rituals, myths and the like', while change occurs through 'the evolution of organisational meanings and practices' (Herranen, 2022: 56). One of the most prominent expositions of this position is Meyer and Rowan's (1977) work examining the mechanisms by which organisational practices and rules are conceived of as rational. Rather than through fulfilling aims of *efficiency*, Meyer and Rowan argue that organisational practices and rules persist in order to remain *legitimate* according to the governing norms of the wider institution they are situated within, even when such practices and rules cease to functionally fulfil their original roles. These practices are termed 'rational institutional myths'; they are rational in the sense that they perform a role in stabilising and maintaining the organisation, even if not in achieving its ostensible purposes.

Such myths-as-rules are generated partly through the hegemony of powerful organisations' immediate needs, but also through the consequent conformity which such hegemony forces upon other institutionalised organisations:

Automobile producers, for instance, attempt to create the standards in public opinion defining desirable cars, to influence legal standards defining satisfactory cars, to affect judicial rules defining cars adequate enough to avoid manufacturer liability, and to force agents of the collectivity to purchase only their cars. Rivals must then compete both in social networks or markets and in contexts of institutional rules which are defined by extant organizations. In this fashion, given organizational forms perpetuate themselves by becoming institutionalized rules.

Meyer and Rowan, 1977: 348

A key tenet of sociological institutionalism is isomorphism – the idea that in an effort to conform to institutional norms to confer legitimacy upon themselves, organisations' practices become more and more similar to each other. This tendency towards isomorphism has been examined a length by later scholars (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Bowl, 2018, in relation to widening participation; Wang, 2016, in relation to Bourdieusian theory). In order to reconcile the normative disjunctures which such rational institutional myths lead to, Meyer and Rowan postulate that organisations

deploy two strategies: decoupling, whereby the performance of actions is separated from their stated goals (leading to the use of undocumented professional expertise), and generated from this professionalism, a reliance that such professionalism will be received with good faith by internal and external constituents (1977: 357-358).

The schema offered by Meyer and Rowan is convincing, and many aspects of Oxbridge's institutional life could be interpreted through the lens of rational institutional myth. Indeed, Dacin et al's (2010) analysis of dining rituals at Cambridge offer precisely this analysis. However, I argue that Bourdieu's theoretical framework offers a fuller and a more accurate toolkit with which to analyse the normative landscape governing my participants' conceptions of fairness in admissions. Akram (2023: 152-157) highlights that much neo-institutional work, particularly that of DiMaggio and Powell, is theoretically indebted to Bourdieu, yet my interpretation of my data regularly suggested organisational practices which were difficult to reconcile within a sociological institutionalist, or more broadly neo-institutionalist, framework. While some participants discuss the need to legitimate Oxford's position (see, for instance, Rob's comments in section 4.1.2.3) many conceive of the drive to achieve fairness as either a moral good disassociated from wider institutional norms, or as a mechanism to recruit meritorious students. More importantly, as Chapter 4 demonstrates, my participants construct a far more heterodox set of definitions of fairness and merit than one might expect from the isomorphising mechanism of rational institutional mythology. While this might be interpreted as the operation of decoupling – the devolution of 'how' fairness in admissions is achieved to individuals, while retaining organisational control of the 'what' and 'why' of this process – this would be to strip my participants of the agency they routinely exhibit in their decision-making. Indeed, as Chapters 4-6 demonstrate, many of my participants are actively critical of Oxford's positioning on issues of fairness in admissions; such positions are indicative not of the clandestine enactment of conflicting institutional scripts, but (normatively informed and situated) strategic action.

As Akram (2023) notes, Emirbayer and Johnson (2008) and Mangi (2009) both highlight a sense of prescriptivism as a crucial weakness of neo-institutionalism. The tendency to reduce institutional actors to structured and constrained script-readers butts up against the central sociological debate of structure versus agency. Attempts to resolve this issue, for instance through ‘institutional entrepreneurship’ (DiMaggio, 1988; Fligstein, 1997), fail to satisfy the question of how such individuals come to be aligned with norms and narratives which, although relationally connected to their institution, are not fully determined by it. As Mangi asks, ‘how can organizations or individuals engage in institutional change if their beliefs and actions are determined or constrained by the very environment they seek to change?’ (2009: 325). Battilana’s argument for the viability of embedded institutional entrepreneurship requires that individuals ‘must perceive that they have an interest in changing the existing institutional order’ (2004: 11). Yet this condition does not apply to the majority of my participants; many seek only to improve practice within Oxford’s existing paradigms of merit and fairness. Battilana’s account also rejects Bourdieu’s theory of practice on the grounds that it leaves no room for agentic action, a criticism I dismiss below. Moreover, much institutional entrepreneurship depends on abilities to act which are rooted in the Bourdieusian concepts of capitals and habitus (see Jackwerth-Rice et al, 2023, for a discussion). As such, I argue that attempts to rescue neo-institutionalism through institutional entrepreneurship are dependent on the very concepts Bourdieu espouses. With large sections of the institutional entrepreneurship literature failing to discuss such issues of power (Hardy and Maguire, 2017), it does not provide a suitable theoretical basis for my study.

Although I began the study intending to utilise Bourdieusian theory, neo-institutionalism (and particularly sociological institutionalism) gave me significant pause, and indeed it was only once I began producing my empirical data that I resolved that it did not theoretically explain the patterns I was interpreting. The significant contestation of the AFY’s introduction, the multiplicity of positions and justifications my participants adopt in relation to it, and the fact that many participants did not see themselves as attempting to alter the institutional order, led me to conclude

that neo-institutionalist explanations, including through institutional entrepreneurship, were poorly suited to this study. However, I also argue that one important theoretical revision of neo-institutionalism, institutional work, has synthetic potential with Bourdieu's framework. I outline my engagement and interpretation of Bourdieu's theory below, before offering a synthesis with institutional work perspectives. Finally, I offer a brief explanatory note: reflecting my rejection of the neo-institutionalist position, I have chosen not to conform to the orthodox distinction between institution and organisation it offers in my analysis. Recognising the normative power of 'Oxbridge', and Oxford, outlined earlier in this chapter, I refer to Oxford as an *institution*, and to its constituent parts – colleges and departments – as sub-organisations.

2.4.2: Bourdieu

Pierre Bourdieu is perhaps the sociological theorist whose work is most commonly deployed in educational research. His concepts are so routinely used to interrogate issues of relationality, power, structure and agency that Diane Reay observed in 2004 that such research was in danger of becoming an uncritical reproduction of abstract theory, unconnected to the empirical data it purported to examine (Reay, 2004). Despite this, Bourdieu offers the potential for deep, nuanced exploration of the normative landscapes which structure individual value dispositions and decisions. In this section I outline the central tenets of his theoretical framework before exploring institutional habitus, an outgrowth of Bourdieu's original concepts from later scholarship which I deploy throughout the thesis as an analytical lens.

Habitus is one of the most commonly deployed theoretical concepts in the study of non-traditional students' participation in HE. Habitus is a set of 'durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures' (Bourdieu, 1990: 53; see also Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). Learned early in childhood through social interaction, an individual's habitus consists of their unconscious, default embodied behaviours, social perceptions and assumptions, a reference guide for decoding social symbols and values which vary between different social settings. Because social constructions of what is valuable, normal or acceptable

define individuals' social experiences, they inherently feel more comfortable and capable in social environments (or 'fields') which match their habitus. An individual's habitus is shaped by their socialisation during early life but continues to change and shift as they experience new social fields; where there is a mismatch between the field they are entering and the one they originate from individuals may experience discomfort and difficulty in establishing their social legitimacy, while those with greater habitus-field alignment experience less social friction in their embodied ways of being. Individuals who stray outside their original field can feel dislocation from the social norms they feel are 'natural', a phenomenon experienced by non-traditional students in HE (Reay et al, 2009; Nairz-Wirth et al, 2017; Attridge, 2021).

Within Bourdieu's framework, the final central element is capital: the economic, social, cultural and symbolic resources available to an individual to allow them to enact their agency. However, different forms of capital have relevance according only to the fit between the form of capital, the habitus of the individual, and the field they are operating within. For instance, while the use of Received Pronunciation⁴ might bestow respect and legitimacy in some settings or when used by some people (Braber et al, 2024) it might attract mockery or distrust in others (Spencer et al, 2013), depending on the congruence between the accent itself (a form of cultural capital), the embodied ways of being of the speaker (their habitus) and the wider environment (the social field). Bourdieu uses the familiar analogy of a game to illustrate the relationship between field, habitus and capital, wherein a player's tokens or cards represent their capitals and their 'strategic orientation' their habitus predispositions (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 99). The field, of course, is the type of game itself. The term can refer to macro-level fields such as the HE sector as large, meso-level fields such as the institution of 'Oxford', or even micro-fields, such as specific colleges or departments at Oxford. These fields can exist in a 'nested' state (Wang, 2016; Chua et al, 2024), with logics in larger fields informing but not necessarily determining those of fields nested within

⁴ A specific accent in British English speech, associated with formal education and southern England, which occupies a hegemonic normative position in many professional and cultural fields in Britain.

them. I primarily deploy the concepts of habitus and field (referring to the meso-field of Oxford, and the micro-fields within it) in this project.

Bourdieu offers a plethora of secondary concepts which augment and inflect the central triad of habitus, field and capital. Of these, I will focus particularly on doxa. Doxa refers to the unspoken and largely unrecognised boundary of the socially possible within a given field. Bourdieu describes doxa as appearing to be a natural and commonsense arrangement, so obvious as to be unremarkable; it is the misconception of the social order as a natural order which give doxic principles their power to structure the limits of their social field:

Schemes of thought and perception can produce the objectivity that they do produce only by producing misrecognition of the limits of the cognition that they make possible, thereby founding immediate adherence, in the doxic mode, to the world of tradition experienced as a “natural world” and taken for granted...[doxa produce] immediate adherence to the world, see as self-evident and undisputed, of which they are the product and of which they reproduce the structures in a transformed form.

Bourdieu, 1977: 164

Because doxic principles appear ‘natural’ and ‘undisputed’ they are therefore central to Bourdieu’s conception of the mechanisms of social and educational reproduction. The doxa of each field is distinct, determined by the interplay between the field’s ‘objective structures’ and ‘internalised structures’ (1977: 166). In Chapter 4 I outline how I conceptualise the doxic principles governing Oxford’s mainstream admissions and teaching ecosystem and consider how this principle interacts with the introduction of the AFY through the remainder of the thesis, particular in Chapter 7.

2.4.2.1: Institutional habitus

There is a significant literature arguing for the existence of ‘institutional habitus’ – a habitus shared, or at least enacted, to some degree by the members of an institution and shaped by the institution itself. byrd (2019) identifies McDonough (1997) as first utilising the phrase ‘organisational habitus’, with Reay (1998a; 1998b) and Reay et al (2001) developing and refining the concept into ‘institutional habitus’. Institutional habitus has been applied to HE contexts to attempt to explain why universities or their representatives may continue to utilise practices which alienate those

whose individual habitus does not fit the field of the university. For instance, Thomas (2002) highlights the influence of institutional habitus on student retention in HE; Reay et al (2001) argue that institutional habitus limits the range of options realistically available to working class students through tacit cultural exclusion; and Byrom and Lightfoot (2012) point towards the importance of physical place in enacting and reinforcing institutional habitus.

In a now widely read exchange with Burke, Emmerich and Ingram (Atkinson, 2011; Burke et al, 2013; Atkinson, 2013), Atkinson (2011) argues that institutional habitus as a concept is a confusing misnomer. He presents three major objections; first, that it ignores the relational nature of habitus and its vital links to the fields it operates within; second, that habitus is necessarily embodied property and so cannot be applied to non-human entities like institutions; and lastly that the notion of individual habitus homogenises the habitus of the individual members of an institution, thereby abandoning the duality of structure and agency central to Bourdieu's work. Here, I briefly consider Atkinson's objections to institutional habitus and offer a synthesis with Byrd's (2019) framing of the concept to outline the analytical lens I adopt. First, Atkinson (2011: 337) claims that institutional habitus separates the concept of habitus from the social structures which form it, confusing the products of structural relationships (such as particular practices in careers guidance) as the practice of a habitus. However, Burke et al (2013: 176) point out that such structural relationships are an integral part of forming the habitus as traditionally conceived. For Burke et al, a particular habitus (whether individual or institutional) can only be conceived of in relation to others with which it is connected; habitus is only salient when considered in relation not only to field but the other habituses which occupy that field. As such, Atkinson's charge of non-relationalism does not hold true when institutional habitus is considered as developed in relation to the other institutional habituses which might occupy the field (for instance, the varying institutional habituses in the field of HE).

Atkinson's second claim is that habitus necessarily functions as embodied practice (for instance, as ways of moving or speaking in individuals), and as such cannot apply to institutions. In

one sense, Atkinson's claim is manifestly false. Institutions do bear corporeal embodiments of unconscious attitudes, values and predispositions; for instance, Johnson's (2018) participants refer to the inflexibility of timetabling as a persistent issue following their completion of a foundation year at the University of Bristol. This is because the institution, and its administrators, are predisposed to believe that students do not have caring or work responsibilities. Atkinson also argues that because institutions cannot be considered to have human capacities such as emotions or experiences, this further invalidates the argument for an institutional habitus. Again, Burke et al's refutation is convincing. They argue that while institutions do not have emotions or predispositions of their own in terms of their actions, individual members of institutions do, including *specifically in relation to their position as a member of said institutions*. Thus, the aspects of members' habitus which relate to the institution can be considered 'an entirely legitimate *animation* of...the collectively engaged practices through which institutions are constituted' (2013: 173, original italics).

Atkinson's third charge against institutional habitus is that it 'dissolves' the differences between individual members' habitus and homogenises them into a monolith, disregarding the obvious differences between individual habitus. He suggests that proponents of institutional habitus, such as Ingram (2009), argue for an 'integrated set of [group] dispositions' (2011: 339), but by also acknowledging the diversity of predispositions and attitudes in their own work necessarily contradict this claim, reducing the institutional habitus to its constituent parts. Burke et al respond by pointing out that proponents of institutional habitus do not claim that members of a group will share a single uniform habitus between them. Instead, they argue that

the constitutive practices of members may, at times, resist or challenge the institution and refuse to conform to the dispositional arrangements within it. Nevertheless, the central analytic focus must be on 'conformity', 'agreement' and 'cooperation' of individuals with the shared practices of the collective as it is through these activities that the institution is maintained.

Burke et al, 2013: 171

They emphasise that the concept of institutional habitus refers to the aspects of many individual habitus which, taken together, serve to enact the predispositions prevalent within the institution and which are evident in practices carried out on its behalf by its members. Further, they note (citing Lahire, 2010) that individual habituses can themselves be plural and fragmented (2013: 176), and that as such it is manifestly unreasonable to demand a higher standard of purity from the institutional habitus. Although Burke et al emphasise the “‘conformity’, ‘agreement’ and ‘cooperation’ of individuals with the shared practices of the collective”, I argue for a more nuanced understanding of institutional habitus which recognises the possibility of plural institutional habituses – multiple legitimised ways of being and thinking within the institutional field which operate in concordance with the institution’s doxic principles, but which may appear different in practice and ends. Although this analysis has received little attention within the extant literature, Morrison (2009) does raise the possibility with regard to different sections of the same institution. I therefore argue that through a pluralist conception of institutional habitus, Atkinson’s (2011) critique of homogenisation can be overcome.

It seems that Atkinson’s (2011) attack on institutional habitus fails on the three specific fronts he proposes. Yet he also makes another straightforward and almost understated argument which finds more purchase. He points out that doxa might easily fulfil the role which he believes proponents of institutional habitus assign to it. As Atkinson alludes to when describing ‘the mystery of the ministry’ (2011: 342) and Rainford (2021) develops fully, in fields which are particularly subject to the use of power and symbolic violence, such as elite universities, institutional doxa is often seen as a more appropriate concept than institutional habitus because it communicates the unequal power relations present within the field in determining ‘what is done’. Where habitus is persistent and durable, but open to reflexive remaking by the individual who possesses it, doxa is more rigid; it is composed of unquestioned and unquestionable assumptions broadly agreed upon by members of the community and collectively upheld and preserved by them. As Rainford argues, in elite universities widening participation policy is enacted ‘not through institutional habitus as a

set of norms and dispositions but by taken for granted, unquestioned truths attestable to an institutional doxa' (2021: 177). Below, utilising byrd's (2019) work, I offer an interpretation of institutional habitus which, in *conjunction* with doxa, offers a stronger conceptual framework to interpret the narratives which shape admissions and teaching decisions in the Oxford undergraduate ecosystem.

Following an extensive systematic review of institutional habitus, byrd argues for a distinction to be made between two varying interpretations of the concept. Institutional habitus as 'institutional attribute' is defined as 'Embedded in discourses, practices, attributes, and rewards...[it] communicates "messages about who we are...and how we do things here" that encourage behaviour adhering to "preestablished routines that represent the accepted patterns" (Cornbleth, 2010: 281)' (Byrd, 2019: 180). This description is, essentially, institutional doxa: implicit, rigid institutional messaging about appropriate behaviour within a given field which is designed to encourage adherence to existing norms and which defines the limits of the possible. As Bourdieu (1988: 183) notes, changes or ruptures to doxa are so violent for the individuals concerned that they 'seem like *the end of the world*'. Yet the potential for changes to the admissions system which the AFY highlights, while subversive, are not earth-shattering, but rather contested and negotiated; they are recognised as within the limits of the possible.

'Institutional effect', conversely, offers a more nuanced interpretation of institutional habitus. byrd describes it as 'a "complex amalgam of agency and structure" (Reay et al, 2001) that generates its effects through institutional features like educational status, curriculum and pedagogy, attitudes, practices, networks and the expressive order' (2019: 180). While institutional habitus as attribute 'captures a mechanism of influence – for example, institutional norms and practices...institutional habitus as effect reflects the influences of these norms and practices' (byrd, 2019: 181). I argue that institutional habitus as effect can therefore be usefully distinguished from institutional doxa in that it can refer to the effect on an institutional member's habitus *as a result of* their contact with the institutional doxa, mediated by their existing habitus and structural

position within the institution. My analysis will explore how doxa and institutional habitus(es) manifest themselves in the Oxford field, both through 'Oxford' as an institution and through the attitudes and actions of stakeholders. It will examine their interactions and construct meaning from them in the interpretation of the AFY.

How should we theorise the relationship between an institution's doxa and its potentially plural institutional habituses? Deer (2014: 116-117) argues that doxa, as the arbiter of the questionable, 'takes the form of a misrecognized shared allegiance to the "rules of the game" on the part of agents with similar *habitus*' (original italics):

The mutual reinforcement between field and habitus strengthens the prevailing power of the doxa, which guides the appropriate "feel for the game" of those involved in the field via presuppositions that are embedded in the doxa itself (see Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992a: 66 and 74 [Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992 in my bibliography]).

Deer, 2014: 116

This interpretation of the relationship between field and habitus presupposes that the social field of the institution necessarily reproduces essentially similar habituses among its members. Yet this reading stretches the interpretation of Bourdieu's original text (1992: 73-74), which while recognising the congruence between *doxa* and field, does not claim this leads inexorably to a monolithic habitus. As I argue above, and as Atkinson (2011) contends, actors undertaking institutional activity can exhibit different habitus formations. Individuals bring to the institution their own pre-existing habitus formations, born of differing social, educational, intellectual and professional backgrounds. As such, adherence to an institutional doxa need not produce the same modes and mechanisms of embodied enactment. I therefore propose a new theoretical concept which mediates between adherence to the institution's doxa and variable practices of institutional habitus: the *relational* institutional habitus, which I outline in Chapter 4 and refer to throughout the remainder of the thesis.

2.4.3: Bourdieu, widening participation, and elite universities

Bourdieu's work on habitus, field and capital has frequently been used to explore both the broad issue of working-class university progression and the specific challenges of entering elite institutions in the UK (Webb et al, 2017; for specific examples see Reay, 1998a; Reay et al, 2010; Bathmaker, 2015; Costa et al, 2020). Habitus, particularly, has received significant attention as an interpretative tool to understand the process of making choices and applying to elite institutions. Oliver and Kettley (2010) explore the impact of teacher habitus on their students' applications to elite universities. McLaughlin (2024) analyses the role of habitus in whether working-class women apply to prestigious universities as mature students, while Archer et al (2007) explore habitus as 'taste' in informing working-class young people's decisions surrounding university application. Byrom et al (2007) also discuss the importance of 'fit', referencing Bourdieusian scholars, in student experiences of the Oxbridge application process as well as simply their choice to apply.

Student experience at elite universities has also received extensive attention. Reay et al (2009) find that working-class students entering an elite university engage in reflexive habitus reformation to meet the expectations of their new field, a process which creates discomfort and uncertainty for their participants. Abrahams and Ingram (2013) highlight the shifting nature of habitus as a negotiated practice across multiple fields for predominately working-class students at an elite and an inclusively focussed university in Bristol. More recently, Attridge (2021) has explored the development of a habitus clivé – a divided habitus – among working-class undergraduates at Oxford. However, the potential of habitus for understanding the practices of *gatekeepers* to elite universities has been significantly less extensively researched. Jones et al (2019) find that competing (institutional) habitus leanings among admissions staff result in varied conceptions of how to 'do' admissions at a prestigious university. While they note that there is a growing body of research on the identities of academics (see 2019: 933 for a summary), there has been comparatively little research on how these identities, both personal and institutionally situated, impact admissions

practices. As such, the use of Bourdieu's theoretical framework, particularly through institutional habitus and doxa, offers productive potential to explore this specific focus.

2.4.2: Institutional work

Although institutional habitus provides a conceptual lens by which to interpret tendencies towards particular inclinations or courses of action, it must not be understood as a prescriptive or deterministic mechanism. It is, as Bourdieu (1977: 72) describes, a 'strategy-generating principle', which although shaped by previous experience allows the practice of 'regulated improvisations' (1977: 78) – a set of more or less probable actions based on the interaction of the agent's past experiences and current situation. Bourdieu's intellectual project is therefore not necessarily at odds with individual agents' engagement with strategy; on the contrary, micro-level strategy is inherently informed by (institutional) habitus. Gomez (2015: 190) argues that it is 'not a calculation...It is based on the practical sense, which largely bypasses cognitive structures, is registered in one's body and enables one to act as "as one should" (Bourdieu, 2000: 139)'. I suggest that while the conceptualisation of the strategies emerging from habitus as 'bypassing cognitive structures' is too strong – agents are cognisant of the likely effectiveness of their strategies – such strategies are embodied and embedded, inextricably linked to the sense of how one should behave in a given field is a sense that extends beyond the purely rational logics of 'effectiveness'.

As such, I suggest that to scrutinise participants' specific actions within my case, informed through the priming of their complex and potentially contradictory institutional habitus inclinations in their structured and situated positionings, a synthesis with a micro-level account of the translation of inclination into action is required. To analyse these enactments of the various constructions of fairness and merit my participants espouse, I employ the concept of institutional work (Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006), a development of neo-institutional theory. Lawrence and Suddaby (2006) see institutional work as 'intelligent, situated institutional action' with 'a practice orientation...the work of actors as they attempt to shape [institutional] processes, as they work to create, maintain and disrupt institutions' (2006: 219). Institutional work is action undertaken in

relation to the institution in question, whether upon it or on behalf of it. Given the power relations which exist between institutions and their variously structurally positioned members, it is necessarily inscribed with ideological meaning; because institutional work is always done in relation to the institution it cannot be neutral.

This understanding of institutions sees them as socially constructed ontological entities, moulded and given meaning by the practices of their members and non-members but also their structural relationship to other institutions. The relevance of supra-institutional narratives to institutional work demonstrates its neo-institutionalist origins, yet I argue that institutional work as a mechanism to analyse the micro-level actions of agentic individuals is compatible with broadly Bourdieusian interpretations of praxis. Institutional work was developed as a response to the perceived failure of institutional entrepreneurship to explain how agents are able to endogenously generate change in their institutions (Mutch, 2007; Mangi, 2009). It 'relaxes' (Suddaby et al, 2013: 333) neo-institutional conceptions of both structure and agency, positioning individuals within institutions as culturally competent but structurally limited actors, and institutions as 'contingent structures' which are continuously made and remade through social processes.

2.4.2.1: Reconciling institutional work with Bourdieu

Previous studies have noted the links between Bourdieu's intellectual project and institutional work (see Stewart, 2023). However, these studies do not explore the extent to which Bourdieu's theory, particularly the interplay between habitus, field and doxa, can be interpreted as explaining specific manifestations of institutional work. To deploy institutional work in tandem with institutional habitus, we must attempt to resolve the well-worn critique of Bourdieu's theory of practice as essentially deterministic, leaving little room for agency (for a pertinent summary, see Mutch, 2007: 1127). If practice is strongly shaped by habitus, how can individuals act agentially? Mutch argues that if habitus is both 'durable and transposable', it is, 'contrary to the usage often made of it, a very strong constraint on reflexivity' (2007: 1127).

I argue that this reading is reductive, failing to situate the central concept of habitus within Bourdieu's broader conceptual map. A fact often not acknowledged in Bourdieusian scholarship (or its critiques) is that individuals are continually moving *between* fields – locally, between home, work, their sports club, their local pub – and in broader terms, through transitions between educational institutions, employers, cities and family constitutions. Although Bourdieu (1990: 54) holds that habitus is disproportionately shaped by early experiences, he also recognises that *all* experiences matter to the continual (re)formation of habitus:

The habitus which, at every moment, structures new experiences in accordance with the structures produced by past experiences, which are modified by the new experiences within the limits defined by their power of selection, brings about a unique integration...Early experiences have particular weight because the habitus tends to ensure its own constancy and its defence against change through the selection it makes within new information...the habitus tends to protect itself from crises and critical challenges by providing itself with a milieu to which it is as pre-adapted as possible.

Bourdieu, 1990: 60-61, original italics

While Bourdieu undoubtedly sees the habitus as durable, with a tendency to avoid social fields which challenge it, he clearly acknowledges the possibility of such change when such field transitions do occur. In a much more mobile and heterogeneous society than the one in which habitus was first conceived, such transitions and field overlaps are more common. The conditions of modernity and temporality produce a habitus which is 'in constant negotiation with itself and with its ambivalence' (Bourdieu, 1999: 511, in Aarseth et al, 2016). For Aarseth et al, this means that the habitus is constantly renegotiated in tiny ways; 'subjectively experienced tensions in the habitus emerge not from gross structural conflicts and transitions alone, but also from the way any habitus is produced in interaction with *significant others*' (2016: 151, original italics).

To this interpretation, we might add interaction not only with significant others, but with significant experiences. For Threadgold (2018: 41), 'Conflicts in the habitus form a spectrum from everyday reflexivity to moments of hysteresis'. Some agentic action is not a full recognition of a given field's doxa, as hysteresis signifies, but a pushing against boundaries generated by continual contact with other fields and the nagging dissonances this creates. Habitus need not be in constant

crisis in such conditions, but rather in constant state of more or less palpable *friction*. Threadgold characterises the spectrum of agentic action caused by such friction as informed by agents' commitment to and awareness of the *illusio* of their field – the extent to which they recognise and embrace the field's logics. He suggests that individuals' investments in certain fields' *illusio* embed themselves in their habitus, transferring with them and generating the potential for reflexive action across the multiple fields they inhabit. Taksa and Kalfa (2015) demonstrate this potential through their discussion of managerialist practices in university teaching and learning in Australia.

This reading of habitus – as a site of continual *small* renegotiations, framed and informed by early experience – provides for the imperceptible back-and-forth remaking of habitus through contact with different field conditions, recognising both its durability and transposability but also its capacity to gradually change. As such, I argue that institutional work is indeed compatible with habitus as an interpretative concept. Such small renegotiations, dilemmas, and appreciations of the value of alternative practices, even if fleeting, create the space for reflexive and strategic agentic action. Indeed, Lawrence and Suddaby refer extensively to Bourdieu's theoretical apparatus in establishing the concept of institutional work, recognising it as a 'major foundation' to the idea (2006: 218); Battilana and D'Aunno, despite also raising familiar criticisms of Bourdieu's theory of practice as deterministic, also argue for its value to organization studies (2009: 45). I conclude this section by highlighting Threadgold's observation that 'there exist more and less "deterministic" versions of Bourdieu' (2018: 38). To dismiss the potential of more flexible readings of his work on the basis that his vast corpus is not wholly cohesive is, to my mind, to sacrifice utility for the sake of purity.

2.4.2.2: Institutional work in university settings

Lawrence and Suddaby propose three broad categories of institutional work: creating, maintaining and disrupting institutions. All are potentially relevant to the AFY; although the institution in question is primarily 'Oxford' as a field, many of the actions they see as key to institutional creation are potentially to be found among AFY stakeholders, such as advocacy,

changing normative assumptions, and educating (2006: 221). The project's links to institutional maintenance and institutional disruption are obvious; it is likely stakeholders will attempt to maintain or disrupt the institutional doxa in their efforts to establish or limit the AFY's inception.

Perhaps unsurprisingly given that elite fields tend to be well-established and stable, much of the literature surrounding institutional work in elite settings focusses on maintenance and disruption of institutions. For instance, Currie et al (2012: 956) highlight this in their study of role creation in the UK health service, finding that elites utilised practices usually seen within institutional creation to maintain existing hierarchies. Within elite HE settings, Dacin et al (2010) explore the importance of ritual in maintaining elitist institutional norms. They explore how students at the University of Cambridge come to enjoy the traditional experience of formal dining as a form of valorisation and distinction, thereby aligning them with the elitist doxa of the Cambridge field. Lok and de Rond (2013) detail the reactive exceptions and accommodations which are made in the Cambridge University Boat Club to maintain institutional congruity when faced with events which threaten the doxa of the club, while Raynard et al (2021) describe a more proactive strategy of adopting conservative change to limit transformation of elite French business schools. Although less is written about disruptive institutional work in elite HE settings, a handful of studies suggest that such activity does take place; Archer (2008) and Churchman and King (2009), for instance, describe how early career academics attempt to disrupt neoliberal practices in their institutions. Significantly, Creed et al (2010) note that institutional work often comes to the fore as a strategy when external forces highlight institutional contradictions – such as the inception of the OfS as England's HE regulator, and its more stringent expectation of widening participation. Perhaps most pertinently for this study, Stewart (2023) offers an analysis of how widening participation professionals' work at Oxford helps 'maintain disruption' as a form of dynamic conservatism (Ansell et al, 2015). However, this study does not consider admissions work specifically, necessitating the need for further research in this space. Although the empirical settings above may emphasise the contradictions within organisations, I would suggest in line with Bjerregaard and Jonasson (2014)

that institutions are *inherently* characterised by unsettled-ness – and the management of the tensions this creates. As such, utilising the concept of institutional work in exploring how stakeholders respond to the AFY offers the chance to bolster the literature available on creative and disruptive institutional work in elite (and HE) settings.

2.5: Findings

My literature review frames the necessity and timeliness of this study. First, I examine the relevance of the selectivity and prestige of students' undergraduate institution for their social mobility trajectory, and problematise aspiration-based models of widening participation to such institutions which fail to recognise the centrality of differential attainment for students from different social and educational backgrounds. Second, in light of this, I consider the slow, variable and contested introduction of contextual admissions policies at the most selective institutions, in particular highlighting Oxford's outlier status among such institutions in its non-adoption of systematic contextual offering policies. This is particularly important given the advent of the new regulatory regime implemented by the OfS. I then review the literature relating to admissions practices and processes at Oxford (and to a lesser extent Cambridge), highlighting its complex and delegated nature, and the findings of previous studies which describe the centrality of tutors' autonomous and heuristic judgement, underpinned by a strong norm of credentialist meritocratic selection. I also discuss the small amount of research relating directly to Oxford's tutorial teaching system, concluding that social and educational background may play a role in perceptions of students' abilities to access such teaching equitably (and, hence, their ability to convince admissions tutors of their suitability). I then explore the use of foundation years in selective HE contexts in the UK and Ireland, discussing the frequent opposition they have faced, before finally outlining the features of the AFY. The first section of the literature review thus demonstrates the need to update the existing literature concerning normative conceptions of admissions practice at Oxford in the light of a more proactive regulator, and to understand the relationship between these conceptions and the introduction of the potentially disruptive AFY programme.

The second section of the literature review discusses my theoretical approach to the project. I consider at length, and ultimately dismiss, the neo-institutionalist perspective drawn from organisation studies on the basis that its central concept of isomorphism and the presumed rigidity of action this produces do not adequately capture the diversity of action my participants engage in. While institutional entrepreneurship attempts to overcome this problem, it ultimately fails through its inability to explain the genesis of institutional entrepreneurial action within normed institutions, or to offer an account of it which escapes the use of capitals and habitus. I then turn to Pierre Bourdieu; I outline his central conceptual apparatus and consider one of the theoretical conundrums this presents, the institutional habitus and its relationship to doxa. I argue for a conception of the institutional habitus as dispositions which are embodied in practices undertaken in relation to the institution, bounded by the institution's doxic principles. This also offers the possibility of understanding institutional habitus as a pluralistic concept; where the doxa allows, multiple incarnations of institutional habitus, sometimes in tension with each, can exist. Lastly, I offer a synthesis of this formulation with institutional work as a mechanism to understand the enactment of institutional habitus as simultaneously strategic action and also the product of normatively shaped and embodied practices. I apply this framework in Chapter 7 when considering the implications of my empirical findings.

The central focus of my study is therefore how to interpret the normative conceptions of merit and fairness which attitudes and action in relation to both the mainstream undergraduate admissions process and the AFY at the University of Oxford. Although not defined as part of the case study proper, teaching practices are also a constant backdrop to this question, as how they are conceived is central to such conceptions and enactments in admissions. Below, I set out the specific RQs which I use to parse this issue.

2.6 Research questions

My study investigates the construction of the ideals of merit and fairness within the context of the AFY's introduction by exploring three linked RQs:

- 1) How do AFY stakeholders construct merit and fairness within Oxford's mainstream undergraduate admissions process?
- 2) How do such constructions of merit and fairness interact with stakeholders' conceptualisation of and engagement with the AFY?
- 3) How do AFY stakeholders attempt to implement their conceptions of merit and fairness in the context of the AFY's introduction?

'AFY stakeholders' refers broadly to any individual or body with a professional or voluntary interest in what the AFY means for how fairness in Oxford admissions is understood. As such, 'stakeholders' includes participants whose colleges or departments have opted not to take part in the first year of delivery of the AFY as well as those participating; those whose college or department is taking part in the AFY, but who are sceptical of or opposed to its introduction as well as supportive of it; and elected student representatives who have university or college-based responsibility for access, admissions, educational or social justice concerns. Participants' specific roles can be found in Appendix 2. The inclusion of these participants reflects the nature of the study, focussing on the development of coexisting and sometimes incongruous norms (and the stances and actions they engender) within the same research site – the socio-educational space of admissions and teaching at Oxford. Where helpful, I also clarify participants' multiple roles within Oxford further within the text. I now explain and justify my RQs in turn.

- 1) How do AFY stakeholders construct merit and fairness within Oxford's mainstream undergraduate admissions process?

Rather than solely exploring the reasons for the AFY's development, my study seeks to understand the meaning and impact of its introduction on understandings of fairness in relation to the

mainstream undergraduate admissions process (including the Opportunity Oxford scheme). The AFY is a separate entry route with a distinct application and admissions process, curriculum, assessment criteria and expected outcomes. Yet the stakeholders designing and delivering it, at both a strategic and a practical level, are inherently concerned with the mainstream admissions process; the perceived inequity in its outcomes is the primary justification for the AFY's development. Moreover, the mainstream admissions process operates in the same broad context in which the AFY is being introduced. Similar regulatory imperatives and normative narratives, sector-wide and internal to Oxford, impact the mainstream admissions process and the AFY in different ways; the AFY has been developed in response to the results the mainstream admissions process produces, and the relationships of meaning between them must be understood within this context. As such, understanding how fairness is constructed in the mainstream admissions process is integral to interpreting similar constructions within the AFY.

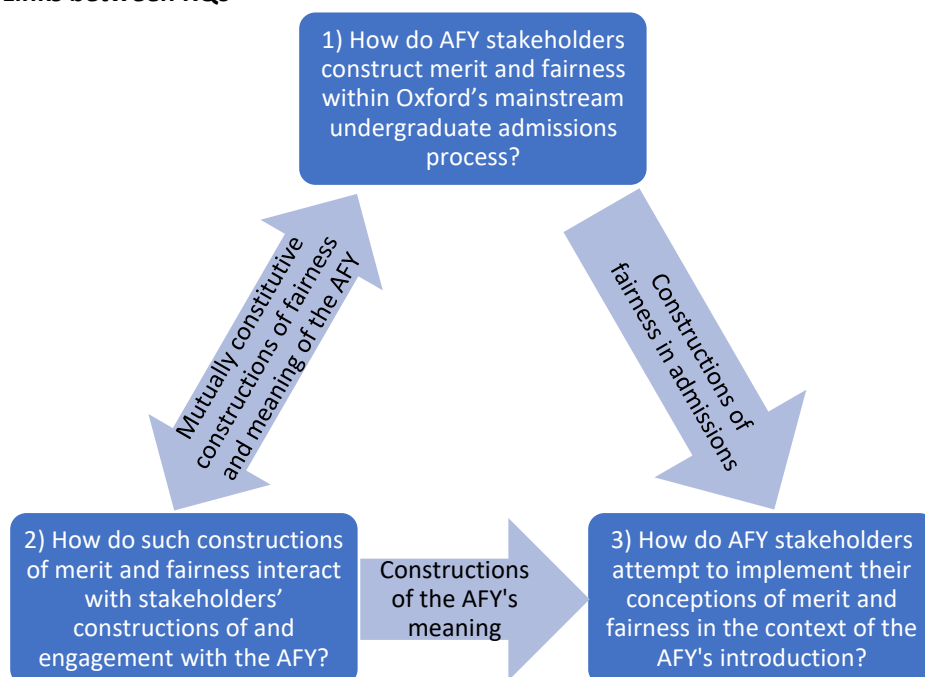
- 2) How do such constructions of merit and fairness interact with stakeholders' conceptualisation of and engagement with the AFY?

My second RQ examines the links between conceptions of fairness in the mainstream admissions round and how participants construct the meaning of the AFY and their interactions with it. The genealogical link between the results of the mainstream admissions process and the AFY's introduction does not inherently imply a hegemonic relationship, wherein the mainstream process is normalised and the AFY (and to a lesser extent Opportunity Oxford) pathologised. However, it does necessitate attention to how the pre-existence of the mainstream admissions process, and the contested nature of the ideals of merit and fairness within it, inform and shape how the AFY is conceptualised. This RQ therefore recognises the potentially *dialogical* links between conceptions of merit and fairness in the mainstream admissions process, and constructions of meaning regarding the AFY.

- 3) How do AFY stakeholders attempt to implement their conceptions of merit and fairness in the context of the AFY's introduction?

My third RQ moves from how meanings of fairness are constructed to how they influence the decisions and actions which stakeholders take to enact their understandings of merit and fairness, and how these enactments of different constructions of fairness are conceptualised by their enactors and other stakeholders. Rather than assuming a linear relationship between static mainstream constructions of merit and fairness and perceptions of the AFY, it ties together the mutually constitutive nature of the normative meanings in the AFY and the mainstream admissions process. It explores how the resulting constructions develop and generate institutional work (Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006), considering how individual understandings of the meaning of merit and fairness, refracted through the structural positions of the stakeholders involved, produce varying forms of institutional action in relation to the AFY. This RQ therefore investigates the links between constructions of merit and fairness, and the management of the space between the AFY and the mainstream admissions and teaching ecosystem. Such management helps us interpret change or stasis in the actions and decisions pertinent to all admissions routes to Oxford.

Fig. 1: Links between RQs



Chapter 3: Methodology

In this chapter I outline my epistemic positioning as a critical constructivist researcher, a stance which informs the framing of the problem at the heart of the study: how fairness is constructed and enacted in both the mainstream undergraduate admissions process, and the AFY. I discuss my RQs and their alignment with the qualitative methodology which I consequently adopt, before describing my research design in detail. Here, I discuss the suitability of a case study approach to the RQs, and specific form of case study I utilise, including its boundaries and limitations. I then introduce my data production methods – semi-structured interviews, supplemented by participant observations and document analysis – and reasons for selecting them, and discuss my purposive sampling methodology, with an extended consideration of the limits the specific case places on my sample and how this impacts the findings and meaning of the study. I describe the data production process before justifying my use of reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) to explore and make meaning with the data produced. Finally, I explore my positionality as a working-class Oxbridge graduate and former widening participation practitioner, and the ethical considerations of the study, with particular attention to the importance of anonymity and local power dynamics. I discuss how these issues relate to the previous sections of the chapter, and explain both the proactive and responsive steps I took to maintain ethical coherence as I undertook the data production phase of the research.

3.1 Epistemic positioning

I approach this study from an epistemic stance of critical constructivism. This position, elaborated by Kincheloe (2005), amalgamates constructivism with critical theory, offering an incisive framing for the type of knowledge the study produces; insights drawn from both constructivist and critical theory paradigms inform my analysis and findings. Constructivist assumptions underpin my research design regarding the nature of social knowledge. By this, I mean that knowledge, particularly knowledge about the social world, is *produced* collaboratively by the individuals and organisations which it pertains to, not *discovered* through collection. Rather than existing ‘out there’

to be found, what we are able to know about social interactions, processes and norms is literally constructed by what the people and groups close to a social phenomenon perceive and believe about it, and how they consequently behave. In addressing whether there is a “pre-social reality” which should inform qualitative research designs, Stewart (2023: 19) offers a simple ‘I don’t know.’ I suggest that in a phenomenological study primarily concerned with how social processes and values are understood and acted upon within a particular sociocultural context, this answer might be extended to ‘does it matter?’. Within any university admissions process, the question of which applicants are deemed more or less meritorious is inherently ideological. Even where such decisions are presented as neutral and technocratic – for instance, ‘selecting the most talented applicants’ – what ‘talented’ means is informed by discursive narratives which are shaped and contested by what individuals and groups hold to be true. As such, a constructivist epistemology focussed on how individuals interact with each other, with groups and with ideas to create the social reality which shapes what they think and do is well-suited to this study.

What does it mean for constructivism to be ‘critical’? Kincheloe (2005: 10) highlights that ‘Critical theory is concerned with extending a human’s consciousness of himself or herself as a social being in light of the way dominant power operates to manage knowledge’. A critical form of constructivism therefore recognises that the construction of knowledge surrounding a social phenomenon is necessarily inflected by the relational power dynamics which govern the phenomenon in question. Such dynamics create patterns of dominance and hegemony which validate knowledge and ways of knowing that support and reinforce existing structures. These patterns manifest themselves as

discourses...set[s] of tacit rules that regulate what can and cannot be said, who can speak with the blessing of authority and who must listen, whose socio-educational constructions are scientific and valid and whose are unlearned and unimportant (Lemke, 1995)

Kincheloe, 2005: 36

To conduct research from a standpoint of critical constructivism is to acknowledge not just that knowledge is contextually situated and produced by the interactions between knower and known, but that relational power shapes the unspoken discourses that inform which constructions of reality are deemed legitimate. As my thesis makes clear the discourses which shape legitimacy in admissions at Oxford are pluralistic, fragmented and occasionally oppositional. The central concept underlying my RQs is therefore how the multiple discourses at play within Oxford admissions are produced through alignment to the hazy and multifaceted ideals of merit and fairness which are dominant within the context of the study. My focus is on how these ideals are constructed, precisely because understanding the construction of powerful norms which bestow legitimacy allows insight into the practical perceptions, stances and decisions which determine who is successful or unsuccessful in gaining entry to Oxford. Critical constructivism as an epistemological lens marries well to Bourdieu's theoretical concepts of habitus, capital and doxa. How legitimacy is manufactured in different social contexts, and who can possess it, is innately tied to Bourdieu's theoretical project. Kincheloe's argument that 'consciousness is constructed by individual agency, individual will, and the ideological, discursive and regulatory influences of social forces. The self is both structured by forces and a structuring agent' (2005: 50) echoes Bourdieu's 'structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures' (1990: 53). Critical constructivism therefore offers an epistemological worldview which accommodates the productive tension between structure and agency at the heart of Bourdieu's thought.

3.2 Research design

Given the epistemological stance informing the study, my research design is necessarily qualitative. Quantitative paradigms based on measurement and the testing of hypotheses are poorly equipped to capture the complex, interacting narratives salient when understanding constructed meanings and the discursive allegiances which produce them. By contrast, qualitative research designs which take meaning as their analytical focus provide more suitable approaches to exploring how and why individuals and groups conceive of a specific social phenomenon the way they do. Specifically, I

subscribe to a 'biq-Q' qualitative paradigm (Kidder and Fine, 1987) which does not seek to place qualitative methods within a positivist-informed research design but instead views qualitative research as 'encompassing both philosophy and procedure' (Braun and Clarke, 2019). This approach does not seek to evaluate the relative impact of supposedly isolated factors on the development of meaning, but instead understands such factors as narratively intertwined. Individuals and organisations together generate inextricably linked webs of meaning; different elements of a social phenomenon are understood as mutually constituting each other, shaping meaning through their interaction within a relational and value-laden social field. As such, analysing the construction of narrative – 'what do you think is happening here?' – is the most apt way of understanding meaning in this context, actively creating space for complexity and contradiction.

In this study I deploy three research methods in a case study design: semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and document analysis. I first justify a case study approach and the specific methods I use in relation to my RQs and paradigm, before situating them in relation to each other within the study. I then explore their limitations, both methodologically and practically in relation to this project, and consider the impact these limitations may have on the study.

3.2.1 The use of case study

Case study is a well-established methodology to explore admissions in elite HE contexts. Extant studies include comparative case studies (Mountford-Zimdars and Grim, 2023), studies focussing on institutions as a whole (Karabel, 2005; Zimdars, 2007; Liu, 2011; Nahai, 2013), and more tightly-bounded cases examining particular aspects of admissions process (Allison, 2013; Weston, 2021), encompassing a wide variety of research foci, methods, and theoretical perspectives. Case study research designs stress the research site as well as the specific methods used as a key methodological concern. In a critical constructivist project focussed on institutional processes, case study is therefore a particularly useful research design as it offers the chance to incorporate the nuance of constructed social realities into how the research site is defined; it allows the researcher

to move beyond the potentially arbitrary boundaries of the institution to engage with how institution and context interact. Case study designs also offer the chance to combine different research methods to construct knowledge about an institution or phenomenon – to approach a problem from multiple standpoints and produce data about what participants think and do understood from the perspective of these different standpoints, mutually inflecting and augmenting the meanings of the data they generate. This ‘analytical eclecticism’ (Starman, 2013: 32) helps identify tensions, contradictions and conflicts, which within the context of this study is likely to prove fruitful in understanding how multiple conceptions of merit and fairness operate. The project is what Flyvbjerg (2011: 307) characterises as a paradigmatic case study – by examining the processes of social interaction in this setting, understood as being highly elitist, we may learn more about how other, less well-recognised or researched elites perceive and interact with the meritocratic narratives which sustain them. More specifically, it offers the opportunity to explore how institutional narrative, institutional doxa and individual stakeholders interact to influence how radical changes to widening participation and admissions policies in elite HE environments are enacted or resisted.

I particularly draw on Stake’s (1995; 2005) work in conceptualising my case study approach; in line with my critical-constructivist assumptions, I emphasise the necessarily fluid nature of case study design wherein “the course of the study cannot be charted in advance” (Stake, 1998: 22, in Yazan, 2015: 149) but instead develops as the researcher co-produces meaning with participants within the case. For Stake, the act of interpretation is central to case study research; making sense of the phenomena, relationships and meanings within the case and its context requires iterative, informed questioning of prior assumptions, methods and analysis in a permanently developing process which is markedly different to more positivist conceptualisations of case study research (for instance, Yin, 2014).

In finding myself aligned with the majority of Stake's views on case study research, I encountered a conceptual puzzle. While Stake generally emphasises the need for flexibility and adaptation depending on how the case study progresses, his definition of what makes a case is relatively rigid: 'The case is an integrated system. The parts do not have to be working well, the purposes may be irrational, but it is a system. Thus people and programs clearly are prospective cases. Events and processes fit the definition less well' (1995: 2). Yin (2014) also echoes the need for a clearly defined case, despite epistemological differences with Stake. I initially found this firmness difficult to reconcile with the reality of the AFY. The introduction of the programme seemed to be a process; yet the more data I co-produced, the more the AFY appeared to be inextricably interwoven with the broader context of mainstream undergraduate admissions and teaching at Oxford. With case study methodologists from differing epistemic traditions emphasising the importance, as well as the difficulty, of delineating case effectively, it was unclear to me how to reconcile this principle with my empirical experience of data production.

I decided to apply to the bounds of the case the same exercise of 'progressive focusing' which Stake suggests applying to RQs, wherein through data production they are "progressively clarified and re-defined" (Parlett and Hamilton, 1976: 148)' (Stake, 1995: 22). I included elements of what might have been considered 'context' as foci of my investigation as they progressively appeared more important in understanding the phenomenon of the AFY's introduction. I eventually concluded that it was possible to delineate my case as a bounded system – my initial attempt to do so was simply too narrow. Rather than framing the AFY and its introduction as a bounded system and the wider undergraduate admissions ecosystem as context, I reframed my case to *include* this ecosystem, albeit temporally bounded as the period during which the AFY was being introduced. Although the introduction of the AFY provides a focal point through its relevance to the study's guiding concept of fairness, this is in order to better understand the meaning of this concept in the case as a whole, including the AFY itself. I define my case as:

- The undergraduate admissions process at the University of Oxford (including the AFY as a potential entry route as well as a standalone qualification);
- During the period of the AFY's late-stage design, relationship management, and introduction (September 2022 to December 2023);
- Focussing on the conceptual interactions between the AFY and the rest of the case with regard to the conceptualisation(s) and enactment(s) of merit and fairness.

Thus, my case study is in Stakian terms an intrinsic one; I am 'interested in it, not because by studying it we learn about other cases or about some general problem, but because we need to learn about that particular case' (1995: 3). The ways in which different conceptualisations of fairness manifest themselves merits attention to specific issues within the case, but the focus remains the case itself. For instance, undergraduate teaching is highly pertinent to how conceptualisations within the case are made, and I regularly use it as a point of reference or analysis; yet it remains primarily outside the bounds of the case itself, as *context*. The context of the case includes issues such as:

- Undergraduate teaching and AFY teaching in terms of mode of delivery, volume, year structure and socio-cultural assumptions;
- Working conditions for academics involved in undergraduate and AFY admissions and teaching;
- The prevailing regulatory discourses in UK HE and the actions of other providers in the sector.

3.2.2 Research methods

In this section I discuss the specific research methods I utilised and explain their relevance to answering my RQs, including my sampling criteria for each method. I utilised semi-structured interviews as my primary data production method, supplementing these interviews with direct observations and document analysis. I selected interviews as the primary data production method

because they offer the chance to produce accounts of events from multiple, constructed perspectives, a key element of my research focus on conceptualisations of merit and fairness. Given the evolving, contested narratives I expected to emerge from my interviews, I opted to supplement them with direct observations and document analysis. This was both to foster a 'thick(er) description' (Geertz and Darnton, 1973) of the phenomena described in the interviews, and to allow primary interpretation of the enactments of merit and fairness articulated in the interviews themselves. I accorded interviews a privileged status because the primary focus of my analysis is the construction of different concepts of merit and fairness, and the actions and interactions based on these plural conceptions. As discussed below interviews are particularly well suited to exploring the construction of different social realities.

3.2.2.1 Semi-structured interviews

Interviews are an almost ubiquitous method of data production in qualitative studies, including case studies, so much so that Forsey argues they have assumed a 'taken-for-granted status' (2008: 57). This is partly simply because they are an effective way to generate data about events and processes which a researcher has not experienced first-hand; 'Well-informed interviewees can provide important insights into affairs or actions. The interviewees can also provide shortcuts to the prior history of such situations, helping you to identify other relevant sources of evidence' (Yin, 2014: 113). In case study approaches this is particularly valuable. All cases are embedded in complex social realities; in my case it would have been impossible to be party to every significant event, action and discourse construction which imparted meaning to the introduction of the AFY and its interactions with the wider undergraduate admissions process. Some of these events took place before the scope of the study; some were privileged meetings or conversations to which it would not be possible to gain access. Some actions or events relevant to my RQs were happenstance and unplanned, the result of chance encounters or ad hoc conversations rather than meetings or pre-determined policies. Finally, the number of actions, interactions and practices which continuously reconstitute the undergraduate admissions ecosystem is simply too large for a sole researcher to

engage with meaningfully. As such, descriptions of the relevant phenomena by informed participants are a practical way to engage with the issues at play in this study. More than this, the use of interviews allowed me to explore not just the events which surrounded the development and introduction of the AFY, but the different narratives which participants constructed about them and their conceptualisations of merit and fairness in this context. This capacity to explore plural constructions of the undergraduate admissions process, its relationship to the AFY, and how to understand merit and fairness within the case, was vital; as Stake (1995: 64) argues, 'The interview is the main road to multiple realities'. The recognition of such multiple social realities within my case was integral to generating an understanding of the contested norms informing and governing admissions decisions at Oxford.

My sampling criteria for interview participants was defined as individuals whose professional or voluntary roles involved a particular interest in admissions processes and principles at Oxford. For academic staff members, my initial approach included lead Tutors for Admissions at each college, Senior Tutors (senior college decision-makers in charge of educational and pastoral matters) at each college, and some central university staff involved in the development of the AFY. These participants are a varied group. Some still admit and teach students in their subjects, while others have taken on solely managerial roles on behalf of their college or department; some are academics, while others are senior HE professionals who have arrived at positions of admissions responsibility through their managerial careers. Most academic participants contribute to individual decision-making within their subject at a collegiate level, in addition to both discussions within the wider collegiate community and their department about admissions and teaching culture and processes. Depending on their roles, participants might be involved in committee discussion to determine college or departmental policy on admissions and teaching issues, or shape the structure of how such decisions happen; they might create resources or processes which facilitate aspects of the admissions or teaching functions required of their colleges or departments; or they might have advisory or decision-making responsibilities for sub-organisations they are not themselves a part

of. As such, most participants are managing multiple, sometimes tensioned or conflicting, organisational priorities, whether through direct responsibilities for different parts of the university, or through how one sub-organisation's decisions impact another's.

In the course of my first handful of interviews, it became clear that many participants recruited for their collegiate involvement also had significant departmental involvement with the AFY, and furthermore that decisions on collegiate and departmental participation in the AFY had in some cases been interlinked – for example, through a college not taking part because the relevant admitting tutors at that college had disagreed with the initiative at departmental level. As such, I broadened the inclusion criteria to include those with departmental posts who had been involved in decision-making concerning the AFY, course design, or AFY teaching. These participants often had collegiate affiliations which allowed them to also discuss the college-related aspects of the AFY. While initial approaches to participants were purposive, with potential participants being identified using college, departmental and university web pages, subsequent recruitment adopted a snowball approach whereby participants approached, signposted, or introduced me to colleagues who they felt would be interested and suitable participants. I made the final decision whether to interview a suggested snowball participant based on my understanding of their involvement, together with their professional experiences, and how they described their involvement with admissions, teaching, and the AFY. For student participants, I included those who held elected positions pertaining to access, admissions, or class and socio-economic background for their college, department, or the University as a whole. These roles typically include representation and lobbying work within their sub-organisation, both towards the student body and on its behalf. Students in these roles generally have a stronger awareness of admissions and access issues, policies and reforms than their peers, as it is often their role to communicate them more widely; as such they were excellent choices of informants regarding narratives on mainstream and innovative admissions routes within the undergraduate student body.

I initially intended to conduct interviews with 20-30 participants, with some participants taking part in a single interview and some in multiple interviews depending on their role, availability and willingness to engage with the project; I planned to conduct 60-90 interviews in total. I ultimately interviewed 50 participants, conducting 75 interviews in total; a short description of each participants' primary role can be found in Appendix 1. An interview breakdown is shown below in Figure 2 (two interviews were not audio-recorded at the participant's request, denoted by a *). 73 interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed, with the transcripts forming the data which were analysed, with the audio recording available for intonation or audibility queries where necessary. I opted to audio-record interviews to allow me to focus on the nuanced conceptual threads of conversation the interviews entailed, and for accuracy of data processing post-interview. Participants from colleges or departments which are not taking part in the AFY were only interviewed once, as they were generally not party to ongoing discussions in the AFY's development. Participants from colleges or departments which were taking part in the AFY were invited to take part in multiple interviews. I have listed participants as a 'College', a 'Departmental', or a 'University' participant according to the organisation through which they have had the most direct contact and decision-making responsibility regarding the AFY and the mainstream admissions process. However, the data co-produced from their interviews is generally coloured by their experiences in both their collegiate and departmental roles. Where this data is used later in the study, I have attempted to distinguish these dual roles where necessary for understanding.

Figure 2: Interview breakdown

Participant type	One interview	Two interviews	Three interviews	Total
Participating college representative	6*	2	4	12
Non-participating college representative	5*	0	0	5
Participating department representative	8	4	2	14
Non-participating department representative	2	0	0	2
University representative	3	2	1	6
Participating college student representative	2	2	0	4

Non-participating college student representative	7	0	0	7
Total	33	10	7	50

There were two main methodological issues to contend with in the interview strand of data production. The first and most notable is that among staff participants it proved far easier to secure access to those whose colleges or departments were participating in the AFY than those who were not; this is amply demonstrated by Figure 2. It should not necessarily be assumed that individual participants' views aligned with the organisations they belong to; several participants were personally critical or sceptical of the AFY, and had opted not to take part, despite their college or department participating. Likewise, the decision to participate in the AFY did not necessarily signal unfettered support of its design. However, the majority of my participants were broadly in favour of the AFY being introduced on a variety of grounds discussed in Chapter 5. The potential participants I approached at non-participating colleges and departments who opted not to take part in my research tended to be members of the relevant sub-committees which make recommendations to the decision-making bodies of both colleges and departments, and there is some evidence that such individual actors influenced key discussions about whether to participate in the AFY in its first year.

[Participant]: *There was a discussion in Governing Body [the college's legislature, composed of senior academics] and I think our Admissions Tutor was not enthusiastic about jumping in immediately if I remember right.*

[Interviewer]: *So it was primarily the Admissions Tutor's decision?*

[Participant]: *Well, no, what happened was I don't know, a 15, 20 minute discussion in governing body but in the usual college fashion we listened to the responsible officer first.*

- Matthew

This excerpt highlights a point of discussion in Chapter 6, namely how individuals seek to enact their conceptions of fairness throughout the admissions process, both in admissions decisions themselves and in policy formulation. However, its salience here is to demonstrate that because I

was unable to recruit significant numbers of respondents from colleges and departments which opted not to participate in the AFY, my sample should not be considered unproblematically representative of all staff admissions stakeholders' views. Rather, it offers the situated constructions of a particular group of participants who may be more likely to consider themselves progressive or innovative in their stances on admissions matters. This nonetheless provides insight into the norms and narratives this group interpret as governing the space they work within; however, as with any intrinsic case study, the meanings of the data produced cannot be uncritically transferred from the case itself.

The second methodological issue I found challenging during the interview process were the implications of my use of prompting and, more broadly, the process of meaning-making from one interview to the next, for my own role in the production of interview data. I planned to conduct interviews in three rounds, focussing on overlapping but different issues in each round, illustrated by Figure 3:

Fig. 3: Interview timeline, taken from Transfer of Status document, July 2022

<p>Interview 1</p>	<p>September-November 2022</p> <p>This period encompasses the beginning of the UCAS cycle in which the AFY will begin admissions. Preparation work will be underway for course content and practical considerations such as providing social activities, but also for the coming assessment and admissions process.</p>
<p>Interview 2</p>	<p>February-April 2023</p> <p>This period encompasses the final stages of the application window, the interview period, and the decision-making process concerning who to make offers to.</p>
<p>Interview 3</p>	<p>June-August 2023</p> <p>This period encompasses the offer-holders' exam period and the process of confirmation of places after exam results are released during July and August.</p>

In practice, the distinction between interview rounds was far more blurred than this figure suggests. Firstly, it became clear that perceptions and realities of teaching differences between the AFY and mainstream undergraduate education were crucial to understanding how stakeholders constructed fairness in different routes through the admissions process. As such, I realised that my data collection needed to encompass a period when AFY students were present in Oxford, being taught and interacting with their college and departmental communities. I therefore, with ethical approval, extended my data collection period until the end of December 2023 to include the first term of AFY teaching. Second, as the study progressed I recruited several participants through snowball sampling with whom it was appropriate to conduct an interview based on 'Round 1' or 'Round 2' topics despite the interview not falling within the envisaged time period for these topics. As such, when I approached some topics covered in Rounds 1 and 2 with snowball-recruited participants later in the data production window, I had already started to construct themes for analysis which appeared consistent across multiple interviews. For instance, the existence of a spectrum of opinions on the use of contextual data was clear from the first handful of interviews I conducted:

There is obviously a spectrum of positions. And it's possible for an individual to hold different positions on the spectrum with respect to different details.

- Andrew

...even with people around the collegiate University who think they are very pro access, they just understand it in a very different way...

- Rebecca

Where I constructed these themes of interest, I decided to create 'no-limits prompts' (Jiménez and Orozco, 2021) to elicit responses about these issues. No-limits prompts are questions framed so as to communicate to the participant that other participants have expressed a wide range of responses to a potentially contentious issue, with the aim of signalling that no opinion on the issue would be considered beyond the bounds of acceptability. Jiménez and Orozco find that this is

particularly useful when discussing ‘politically charged’ topics (2021: 524), mitigating the possibility of participants concealing potentially unpopular views or attempting to please the interviewer. For instance, I used the following framing when discussing later participants’ views of the varying conceptions of fairness in admissions which early interviews suggested existed in Oxford:

two of the things that people seem to raise as quite common things they're looking for are a fair admissions process, and an admissions process that finds the best or most suitable people for Oxford. But obviously, what that looks like can vary quite a lot from assessor to assessor, college to college. And I'm wondering what some of the sort of different positions on that spectrum that you've seen have been?

- Interviewer

The exact wording of this prompt varied depended on the context of the interview and participant and which issues the participant had already raised as salient, but the introduction of no-limits prompts to frame issues which early interviews had established as relevant and contentious proved helpful in communicating to participants that otherwise latent points of tension were of interest. Other instances where the use of no-limits prompts proved useful including framing common objections and supporting arguments for the introduction of the AFY. Communicating that these opinions, which might have been considered contentious, had already been expressed allowed participants to engage in discussion about them more fully.

These issues mean that temporality and relationality play important roles in the analysis of my interview data. First, interviews including similar prompts and questions were conducted at different time points between September 2022 and December 2023, meaning the contexts in which their focal issues are nested are not identical. While some elements of these contexts remained unchanged in this time period, the AFY progressed from mid-stage development concerning curricula and the admissions process to the end of the first term of teaching. As such, the meanings interpretable from data produced at different time-point of the study must be analysed with this in mind – later accounts are not ‘truer’ or more complete, they are products of different contexts and contingent upon the circumstances of their production (Braun and Clarke, 2021a). Hence, the use

of prompts constructed from earlier interviews must also be recognised as a key component of the production of later interview data. It is not simply that the prompts used form part of the background context of later interviews; my active choice to use them shapes the data which is produced. This choice is consistent with my broader methodological approach; my project deploys existing literature and theoretical perspectives to investigate the phenomena at hand and does not attempt an entirely naïve grounded theory approach to the salient issues in the study. However, the role of prompts in producing my interview data must be acknowledged and in my analysis I attempt to consider carefully how the use of prompts may have shaped participants' responses where they have been deployed.

3.2.2.2 Direct observations

I chose to supplement my interviews with direct observation of situations related to the development of the AFY. Direct observations provided a complementary avenue of data production to interviewing because they allowed me to generate data on the deployment and enactment of the narratives and norms which my interviews explored. Such enactments constitute what Lareau and Horvat (1999) term 'moments of reproduction and contestation'; they are chances to examine the interplay of the tensioned narratives present in Oxford's various undergraduate admissions routes. I opted to pursue a 'selective intermittent' model of observation (Jeffrey and Troman, 2004), based on short, repeated observations, rather than a more embedded ethnographic approach. Selective intermittent observation emphasises a flexible approach to the research site, allowing the researcher to reflexively consider which observations, when, are most pertinent to their project, and to 'pursue particular interests with gusto and to discard those avenues which seem less relevant or interesting' (Jeffrey and Troman, 2004: 542). This approach is consonant with my broader approach to case study methodology, prioritising fluidity and reflexivity in continually redefining the course of the study, and is also a practically implementable option given my positionality as a 'precarious insider' (discussed below) because it does not require uniform or constant access to a research site to be conceptually coherent. Given the nature of my case, dependent on rapport and

the goodwill of gatekeepers for access to data production opportunities, the ability to selectively move between observations rather than seek the embeddedness necessary for a traditionally ethnographic approach was therefore a pragmatic as well as a methodologically sound option.

During the project design phase I identified a broad range of potential situations which might be relevant for observation, including committee meetings at the university level focussed on the AFY, collegiate committee meetings where the AFY is discussed, recruitment events, or public meetings such as JCR (Junior Common Room - undergraduate college student union) meetings. In practice, however, my opportunities for observation were considerably more limited for two reasons. First, some of the events I anticipated observing simply did not (to my knowledge) occur. There was only one specific recruitment event open to the public during my data collection period, taking the form of an online Q and A message forum beginning in late November 2023. After considering whether to observe this event, I decided it was outside the realms of my ethical approval. The potential applicants asking questions would not have been aware that their online engagement was being used for research purposes; furthermore, my ethical approval did not cover contact with participants under 18. As such, I chose not to generate data from this event. Similarly, although it became clear through interviews with student participants that there had been some discussion of the AFY in public JCR meetings, these discussions were not advertised in advance and appear to have been very minimal; my student participants generally expressed that the AFY was not a topic that was discussed among the undergraduate student body, or that was the subject of communications from their college or department.

My opportunities to seek permission for observation were therefore limited to meetings discussing the AFY within the collegiate and federal university. Although interviews made clear that the AFY was discussed at various collegiate and departmental meetings across the university, I was unable to secure access to the majority of these meetings, either because the principal gatekeeper to them was unwilling to grant permission for observation, or because they felt that other members

of the meeting would object to my presence as a researcher; several requests to conduct observations were simply ignored despite introductions from intermediary participants. I ultimately conducted 22 observations, 21 of which were of administrative planning meetings for one AFY pathway. The remaining observation was of a segment of an undergraduate course committee meeting where the AFY was being discussed at length. Because of the relatively tightly targeted nature of the observations I was able to make, the data produced is specific to the development of the subject strand in question. However, the observations provided the opportunity to produce data about how admissions, teaching and learning, and assessment were being planned. My observations sometimes relay highly specific circumstances, and as such the risk of identifying participants is higher than when discussing my interview data. Although some interview participants are also present in observation data, I have therefore anonymised all discussion during observations to minimise the risk of triangulation.

This data allowed me to make interpretations about how the participants involved constructed the norms governing admission to mainstream undergraduate courses and the preparation required during the AFY to succeed in this, as well as the meanings and interpretations of the AFY itself which other parts of the university made during this period. I made field notes on a laptop during observations which I retyped into prose accounts once the observations were complete. During the observations I acted primarily as what Symon et al (2012; see also Gold, 1958) term an 'observer-as-participant'; I was known to most of the participants I was observing, and occasionally exchanged general remarks with them about their work and opinions of it at the beginning or end of observations, but mainly remained silent, without assuming a full understanding of the context which the isolated observations occurred within. However, on some occasions this role shifted into that of a 'participant-as-observer'; I was sometimes asked relevant questions during the meetings by the participants, many of whom knew I had worked in widening participation prior to beginning my doctoral study, and on one occasion I volunteered information about a factual query from participants.

Whether to engage in activity as a 'participant-as-observer' presented both methodological and ethical quandaries. Behaving as a 'participant-as-observer' carries with it the obvious possibility of influencing the data produced through the observation. Although the instances in which I acted as a partial participant were limited to asking questions or providing factual information, it should be recognised that in doing so I may have reminded participants of my presence and cued them to behave differently than they otherwise would have. However, I decided that this possibility was acceptable. First, given that my observation of meetings was the most difficult research site and source of data production to gain access to, the maintenance of a strong working relationship with participants was integral to ensuring my continued ability to produce observation data. Had I felt there was the potential to seriously impact the data production process, this would have been a difficult and perhaps impossible trade-off; however, given the relatively low perceived risk of changing the outcomes of observed meetings through my specific inputs, I decided this was an appropriate course of action.

Lastly, there was in one case an ethical imperative to act as a partial participant. The teaching team were discussing an external practice-sharing network but knew very little about it as an organisation. I had had prior experience attending their events and volunteered factual information about the focus of their work; I felt this was ethically necessary in that the potential benefit to the design of the AFY from full information about the external network's work outweighed any potential disruption to my role as observer. In making the decision to contribute this information, I inherently shaped the moment of data production. Yet I believe this decision was consonant with my overarching epistemological position. It was critical in the sense that I did not place my data production needs, or the maintenance of an easily explained or unproblematised role as researcher, before the construction of an effective programme of teaching for the AFY students; it was constructivist in the sense that it recognises the role of the researcher in co-constructing qualitative data with participants, and indeed the impossibility of escaping the necessary decisions and dilemmas this position creates.

3.2.2.3 Document analysis

The second supporting mode of data production I used was the analysis of documents, both those in the public domain and those made available to me during the course of the research by participants. Document analysis allowed me to consider how the AFY and the mainstream admissions process were presented in different contexts: in outward-facing media such as web pages, internal policy documents such as the CFA, and occasionally in personal correspondence. While my observations primarily considered the enactment of norms *inward* – by shaping and changing policy and teaching on the AFY – my document analysis is predominately *outward-facing*, considering how such norms and constructions are presented and justified externally. Both observations and document analysis therefore complement the interview series, shedding light upon how the construction of norms shapes action in admissions and teaching decisions. Wood, Sebar and Vecchio (2020) highlight the multitude of approaches to qualitative document analysis; documents can be considered through their framings, through ‘manifest’ or ‘latent’ meanings, as a transaction between document and person, or as a distinction between documents as created or creating objects – as content or topics.

I initially intended to analyse the documents I sampled through critical discourse analysis, examining their role in creating as well as displaying powerful discourses about merit and fairness within the Oxford admissions context. However, I decided to shift to using reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) to analyse the documents I gathered. As Braun and Clarke (2021b: 43) note, pattern-based forms of discourse analysis which focus less on microanalysis of language may often produce similar analyses to RTA, and so the differences between the approaches should not be overstated. Nonetheless, I identified three main reasons which motivated this shift. First, using RTA across all my data production sources allowed a greater degree of congruence and coherence for the analyses I generated. It ensured that I was applying the same standards of analysis and interpretation across the case, respecting the blurred boundaries between the production of interview data, observation data, and the written artefacts they both produce and are produced by. Second, as the study

progressed, I realised that my focus lay less in the analysis of the effects of highly specific language choices, often a mainstay of discourse analysis approaches, and more in the broader latent meanings which participants constructed (see Braun and Clark, 2021b: 44). Lastly, while I acknowledge the potential in the Foucauldian interpretation of artefacts as ‘actors’, shaping discourse as well as reflecting it, my study was focussed less on the interaction between such artefacts and discourses, and more on the interaction between discourses themselves. Thus, while at points I discuss the effects of the discursive power of documents-as-artefacts below, the focus of my study remains on how multiple discourses construct the concepts of fairness and merit, rather than the specific role of documents-as-artefacts in these processes. As such, the decision to shift to an RTA approach for the entire analysis made sense both theoretically and methodologically.

Documents were identified through selective sampling, targeting primarily publicly available documents which discussed the mainstream admissions process or the AFY. My criteria were as follows:

- Web pages or documents published on the AFY website, college websites, participating department websites or the central university website about the purposes and admissions procedures of the AFY;
- Web pages or documents published on college websites or the central university website about the mainstream undergraduate admissions process;
- Non-public documents made available to me as part of the production of interview and observation data.

In total this collection process yielded 146 documents, 144 of which were public-facing web pages. The remaining two documents were reports or letters not intended for public use, but which I have been given permission to use. Some of the webpages identified – for instance, those published by participating colleges about the AFY – contain duplicate text which has clearly been centrally coordinated; I chose not to omit these duplicates because the degree to which the messaging about

the AFY is coordinated is itself fruitful ground for interpretation of the management of the AFY's development. I also chose to only include external documents about the AFY, such as media reports, where they were referred to by sources (participants or other documents) within the field of research because my RQs focus on the creation of meaning about admissions and teaching within Oxford, rather than on wider public discourses about this topic. While I recognise that these spheres are mutually constitutive, I have focussed on the documents actively acknowledged and discussed within Oxford; the selection and omission of these documents contributes to the interpretation of the meanings being actively constructed about the AFY and the mainstream admissions process. Lastly, I was given cloud storage access to the repository where one AFY pathway's team were planning the contents of their course, which held policy and planning documents relating to the observations I undertook. These documents helped inform my observations. However, it was difficult to ascertain who had formal responsibility for granting permission to use these documents in analysis and reporting, and ultimately I opted not to include them as primary artefacts of analysis, instead consulting them to bolster my understanding of my observation data.

3.3 Data analysis

This section explores my choice of reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) as my method of data analysis and its suitability given my epistemological stance and research design, and the specific procedures I deployed to conduct my analysis.

3.3.1 Reflexive thematic analysis

I analysed the data I produced using RTA. RTA is a version of thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Terry et al, 2017; Braun and Clarke, 2022) developed and advocated by Braun and Clarke (Braun et al, 2018; Braun and Clarke, 2019; Braun and Clarke, 2021b). Building on their observation that empirical uses of thematic analysis are often poorly articulated and methodologically incoherent (2019: 591), Braun and Clarke propose RTA as a way to distinguish more clearly between varying forms of thematic analysis with differing latent paradigmatic assumptions.

They argue for three broad ‘schools’ of thematic analysis (Braun et al., 2018): ‘coding reliability’ approaches and reflexive approaches (with ‘codebook’ approaches falling somewhere between the two). Coding reliability approaches describe thematic analyses wherein themes are conceptualised as ‘domain summaries’ – they are ‘buckets’ (Braun and Clarke, 2019: 594) into which relevant data are deposited through a process of coding. Themes are determined before analysis of the data begins, data are usually coded by multiple researchers, and quantitative tests such as Cohen’s kappa are used to determine congruence between different coders’ interpretations of the data. Braun et al. acknowledge that some proponents of coder reliability approaches see them as “‘bridging the divide’” (2018: 847) between qualitative and quantitative paradigms, but contest this notion:

Qualitative data are collected and analysed using qualitative techniques of coding and theme development; the data are reported qualitatively as themes, typically illustrated by extracts of data. However, the underlying logic of these processes is firmly (post)-positivist

Braun and Clarke, 2018: 847, my italics

This epistemological incoherence leads Braun et al. to dispute coder reliability approaches as paradigmatically hybrid. To mount this objection they draw on Kidder and Fine’s (1987) distinction between small q and Big Q qualitative approaches. Small q approaches to qualitative research exhibit some methodological choices traditionally associated with qualitative paradigms, such as their data production methods, analytical processes or reporting methods, but import quantitative ideas and assumptions which underly and discipline these qualitative aspects, distorting them and compromising their internal validity. The use of multiple coders and Cohen’s kappa in coding reliability approaches to thematic analysis is an example of small q thinking. It prioritises reliability and replicability over richness of interpretation, leading Braun et al to critique coder reliability approaches as

“partially” qualitative...[they] require discarding what we see as central to good qualitative research practice – depth of engagement..., an open and exploratory

By contrast, RTA is presented as a fully qualitative and therefore epistemologically coherent approach to thematic analysis. Braun et al. distinguish RTA from coder reliability approaches through its procedures of analysis. Rather than establishing themes as domain summaries into which codes are 'deposited', themes are produced *through* coding, an 'organic and open iterative process' (2018: 848, original italics) during which codes change, merge, split and are redefined as the researcher reflexively (re)interprets data to generate meaning. Themes are therefore constructed as 'meaning-based *patterns*, evident in explicit (semantic) or conceptual (latent) ways' (2018: 848, original italics) which stem directly from the data itself. One of the primary advantages in generating themes inductively in this way is that interpretation is not limited by the rigidity of a pre-defined set of themes; instead, themes develop *through* interpretation to represent and preserve the richness of the data itself. Such approaches are not devoid of pre-existing theoretical ideas about the interpretation of the data – it is simply that such ideas do not pre-determine the themes which the researcher constructs. Braun et al. therefore present RTA as a Big Q approach to thematic analysis: conceptually coherent, internally valid, and wholly embedded in broadly qualitative epistemological understandings of knowledge production. As such, RTA is well suited as a mode of analysis to my project. Its active promotion of reflexive, open-ended coding to iteratively produce and refine themes is well-aligned to both Stakian conceptions of case study methodology and my broader critical constructivist epistemological standpoint. RTA is therefore an apt choice for the specific nature of my project, focussed on the interpretation of constructed meanings and norms; it is explicitly designed to facilitate the 'coherent and compelling *interpretation* of the data, grounded in the data [with] the researcher [as] a *storyteller*' (Braun et al., 2018: 848, original italics) which this study is focussed upon.

3.3.2 Procedures for data analysis

I now outline the procedures I adopted to analyse my data. I took as my starting point Braun and Clarke's (2006: 87) discussion of the phases of thematic analysis, adapting their suggested method to my own project and representing them visually in Figure 4 below. I have opted to include my phases of data collection as well as analysis in Figure 4 in order to illustrate how they interacted with the process of data analysis.

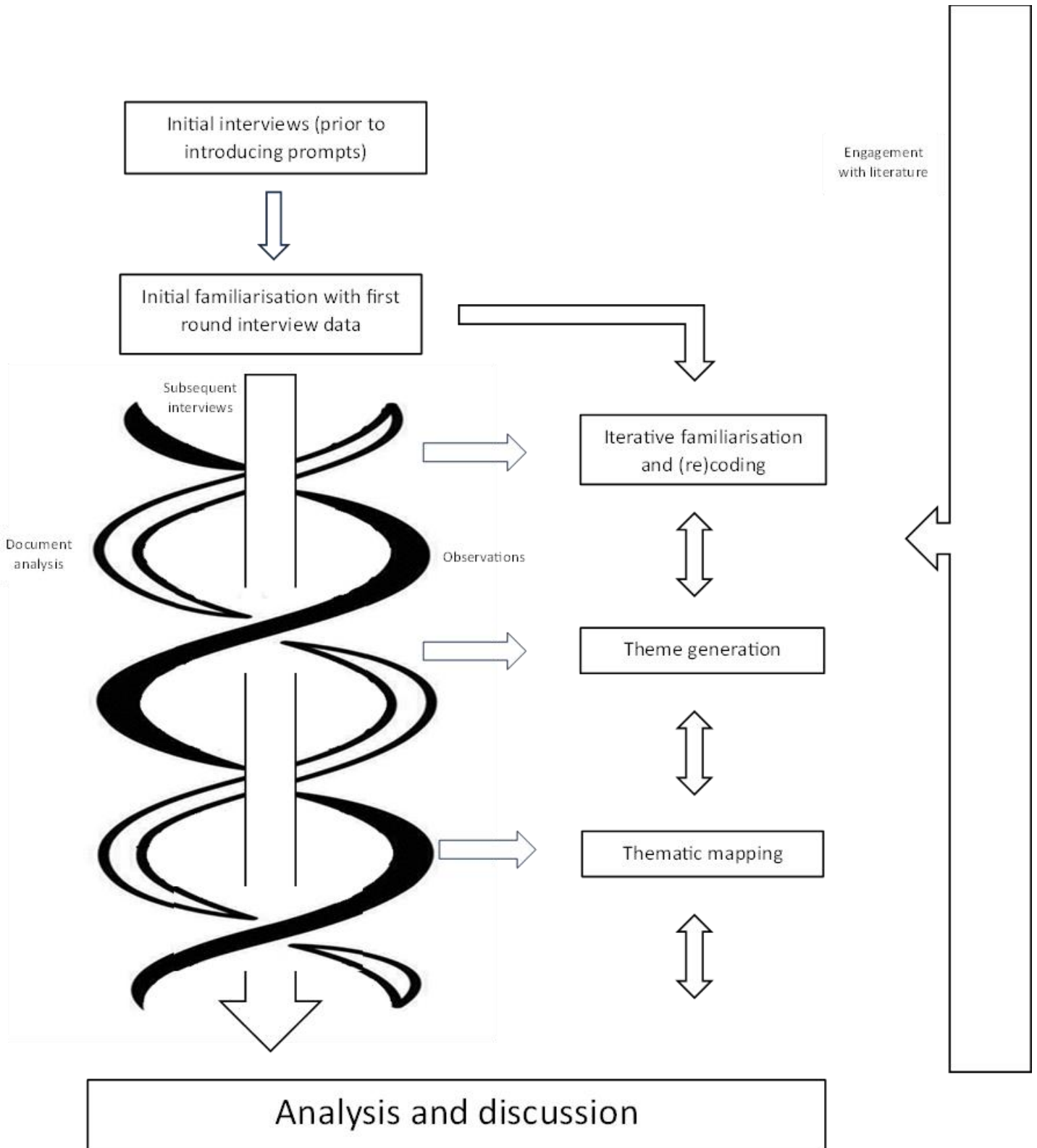
The first phase of data analysis involved familiarisation and initial coding of the first handful of interviews I conducted, before I resolved to begin using prompts. For my interview data, transcription was an important aspect of the familiarisation process. The close listening required and transformation of spoken data into written data necessarily helped me understand and mentally map the contours of the data produced – for instance, the points at which participants introduced new topics, how they linked some topics or questions to others, and the ideas or conceptions they supported or disputed more or less strongly. Furthermore, transcription was for me an active process of *interpretation*. This was true in both a mechanical sense (for instance, interpreting meaning where word order or cadence rendered it unclear) but also in that the act of transcription was a fertile opportunity for generating initial thoughts and ideas about the meanings of the data. These thoughts did not amount to systematic codes but were instead recorded as whiteboard notes which I referred to when conducting my initial coding of the transcribed interviews. The familiarisation process generated multiple repeated themes which I then incorporated as 'no-limits prompts' in subsequent interviews (see section 3.2.2.1). Once I had produced transcripts from my initial interviews I re-read them, augmenting my whiteboard notes.

Throughout the study I employed a coterminous data analysis strategy, producing data and analysing it contemporaneously rather than waiting until data production was complete before beginning analysis. Although standard practice in thematic analysis is usually to code the entire data set at once (i.e. once production is complete) I decided against this for two reasons. First, the

timeframe of my data production period was necessarily spread over 16 months to span two academic years, covering the late-stage development and first term of teaching on the AFY. This meant that it would be impractical to wait until data production was complete before analysing the data, given the time constraints of doctoral research. Second, given my epistemological leanings and research design there were methodological and analytical advantages to contemporaneous analysis. It allowed a genuinely reflexive approach to the project as a whole, wherein interpretations produced through analysis could be incorporated and pursued through subsequent data production, a benefit recognised particularly in qualitative analysis prioritising reflexivity (Cousin, 2009). Although it was not always possible to analyse data as soon as they were produced, I attempted to maintain analysis as a constant process, with the interpretations generated from it informing further data production. I employed the same familiarisation techniques with prompted interview data as with my initial unprompted interviews. Familiarisation with observation data was attained by typing up into fuller form my field notes and re-reading my accounts of the meetings I observed; I familiarised myself with the documents I gathered by reading them carefully in full. As with my interview data, I kept running whiteboard notes of the initial thoughts and questions which occurred to me during familiarisation.

I conducted my coding and recoding in NVivo. I resolved to use qualitative coding software purely for practical reasons, as over a sizeable data set it simplified the process of coding data in a uniform way and storing and modifying codes. I began by reading my data intensively, informally noting semantic and latent meanings relevant to my RQs. When it became clear a pattern of meaning recurred across multiple data sources or represented a new interpretation of an issue or question, I created a code and assigned the relevant sections of my data to it, building my codebook iteratively. As I developed the codebook further, I began to modify codes to better reflect diversity of thought or interpretation of particular issues; some codes developed subcodes to include plurality of meaning, which others became more latent in their nature, drawing together diverse

Figure 4: Data analysis procedure⁵



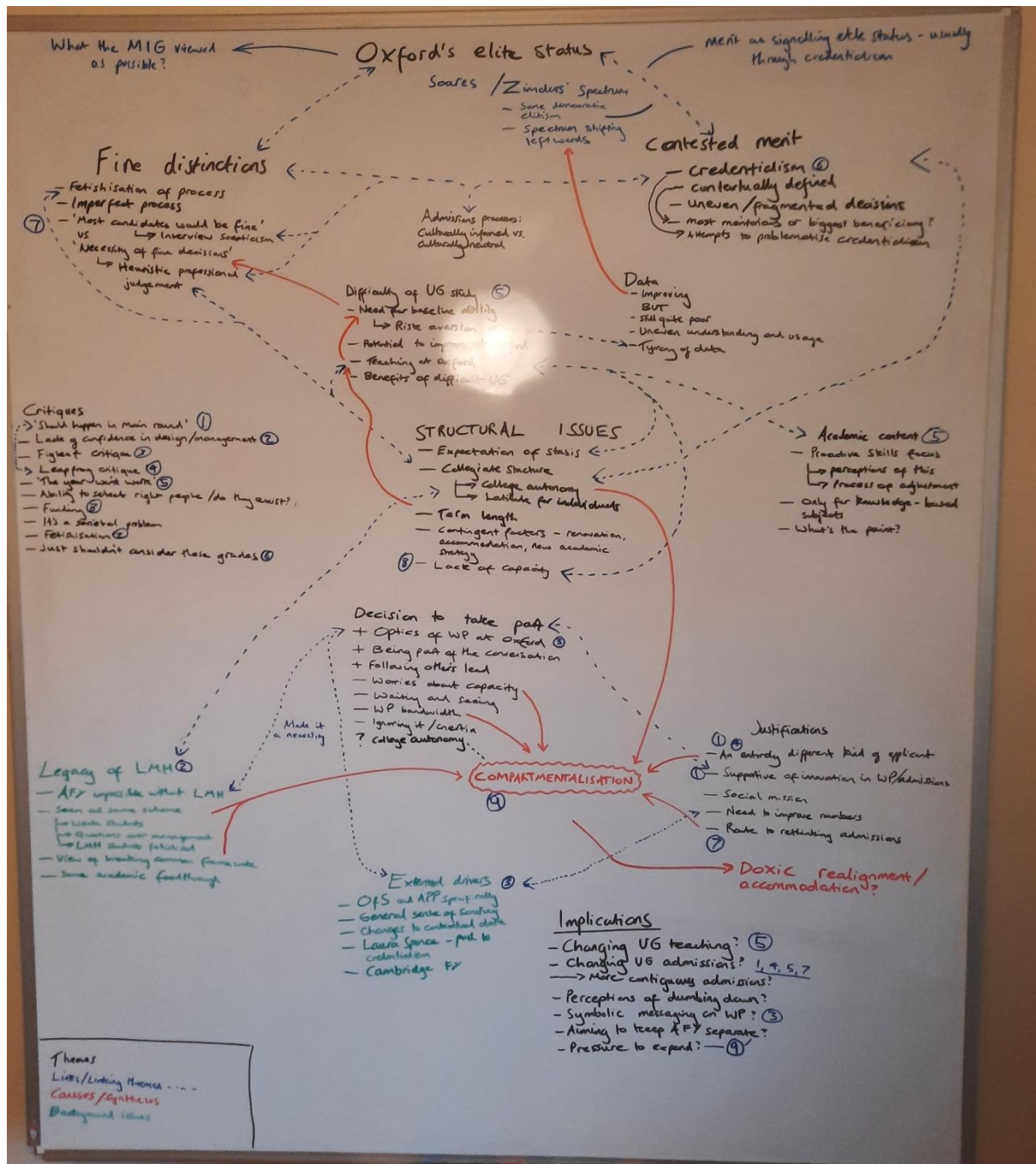
⁵ The left side of Figure 4 shows my data production process, while the right side shows the data analysis process. My three avenues of data production intersect, the helix and arrow structure indicating the potential for data and insights produced in one avenue to influence the others. Similarly, the stages of my data analysis process are mutually informing; interpretations produced in earlier stages shape the formation of later stages, and earlier stages are iteratively reworked to reflect interpretations from later analysis.

segments of data which viewed as a group helped evidence a code derived through interpretation. Some codes even graduated to become themes, albeit augmented or much modified. I attempted to maintain the contradictions and complexities present in my interpretations of the data as they were central to interpreting the contested norms my RQs focussed on.

I began developing initial themes as soon as I felt I had produced sufficient codes to adequately make inferential judgements about the normative meanings of my (mostly semantic) segments of coded data. This represents a point of divergence from Braun and Clarke's suggested procedure in that I began formulating themes before all of my data was coded (or indeed produced). However, this decision was in line with my coterminous production/analysis strategy. It carried the risk of path dependency - of early themes inflecting the interpretation of later data – and as such I sought to guard against this by reviewing early themes against the raw new data produced as well as simply their constituent codes, and actively considering alternative interpretations; I sought to justify why codes should remain the same, as well as why they should change. My theme generation blended Phases 3, 4 and 5 of Braun and Clarke's (2006: 89-91) suggested procedure in that I produced and reviewed themes simultaneously, moving reflexively between data production, coding, theme generation and theme review, and thematic mapping; this is again a feature of coterminous analysis consonant with my research design. I mapped themes by drawing whiteboard diagrams, iteratively moving and reshaping the connections between different issues until they formed a persuasive narrative of the particular phenomenon in question (see figures 5 and 6). This process was inevitably also an iterative one, with subsequent data production, coding, theme generation and theme review prompting amendments and shifts in thematic maps, and vice versa. This reflexive, iterative process continued even after I began to write up my findings; indeed, an openness to the continued, productive collision of theoretical and empirical understandings was integral to the epistemological coherence of the project as a whole.

Figure 5: An early thematic map of the admissions and undergraduate teaching ecosystem, c.

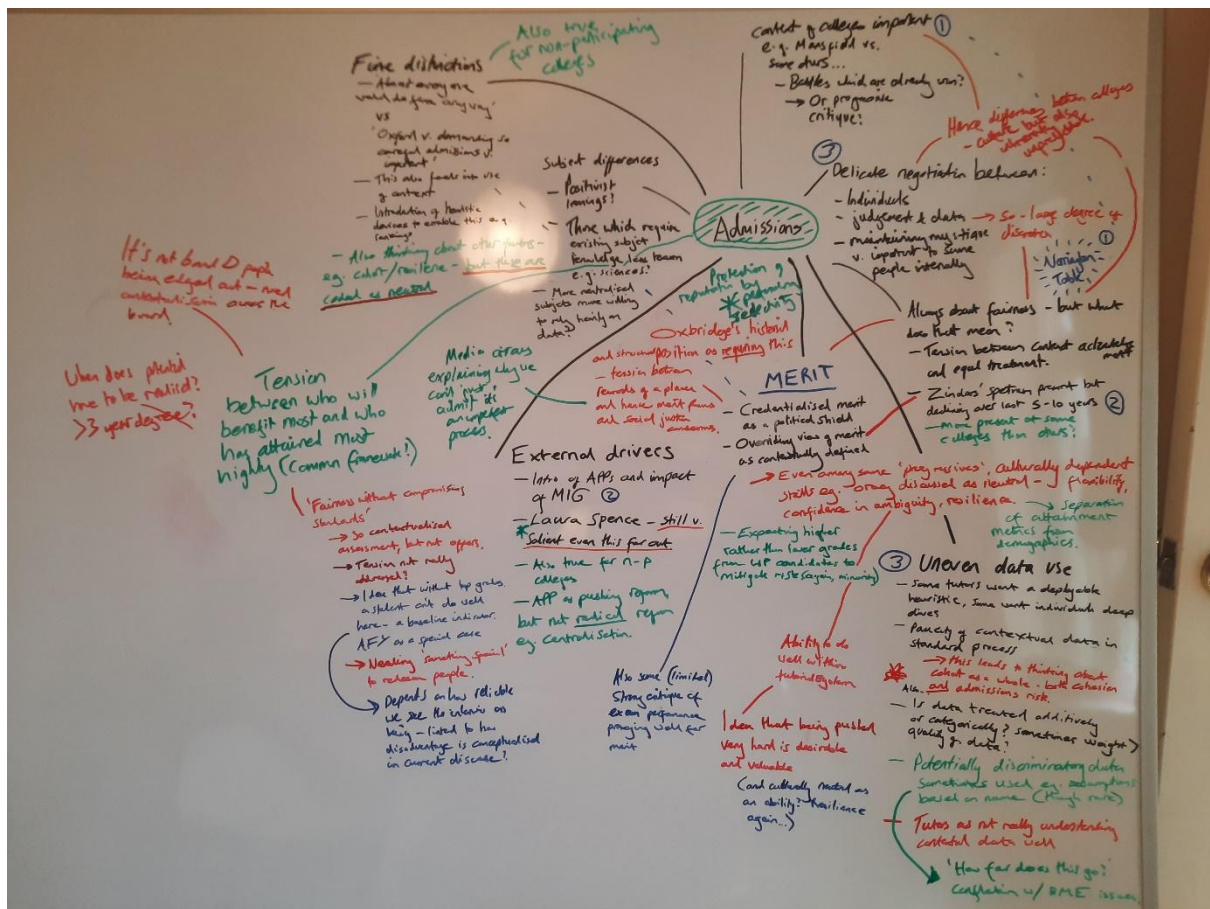
March 2023.



3.4 Positional and ethical considerations

In this section I consider my differential positional in relation to the varying structural positions my participants occupy within the research site, and the effects these positionalities may have had

Figure 6: Developed from Figure 5, a thematic map of the norms governing the mainstream admissions process, c. March 2023



on the production of my data. I outline my background as a practitioner and its influence on my identity and axiological leanings as a researcher. I then discuss the issues involved in researching elites, particularly the specific form of elite which academics at the University of Oxford might be considered to be, and how this positionality – which I term ‘precarious insider’ status – impacted my data production. I also consider the notably different positional status I occupied in relation to my student participants and the different challenges which working with these participants created.

My ethical discussion focusses on two main issues. The first is confidentiality and anonymity; this issue is especially relevant given the nature of Oxford as a research site, which I describe below. I consider the extent to which confidentiality and anonymity are possible and desirable, the practical implications of this for my research, and the decisions I made as a result of

these implications. The second major issue I consider is the potential impact of my research on the development of the AFY. As a *critical* constructivist I am inherently concerned with the relevance of research for practice and how the dynamics of power in any research situation impact and translate into ‘real-world’ consequences. As with questions of confidentiality and anonymity, I outline the potential implications which my data production could feasibly have for the AFY and discuss my resultant decisions on my use of data.

3.4.1 Positionalities: From applicant to practitioner to researcher

My interest in how fairness and merit are defined at highly selective universities, particularly Oxford and Cambridge, is born of personal experience. I completed my undergraduate degree at the University of Cambridge and went on to work for a Cambridge college and subsequently other universities and charities in widening participation. However, my route to Cambridge was unusual in that I come from a particularly socioeconomically disadvantaged background. I remain the only person in my extended family to attend HE as a standard age student; I was eligible for free school meals for my entire school career and attended a comprehensive school with no history of Oxbridge attendance. Furthermore, my childhood and adolescence were affected by a set of complex family circumstances including drug use and violence which were not captured by any metric used in university admissions. My experience of navigating the admissions process (and, indeed, subsequent undergraduate teaching) was therefore one of doubt and uncertainty. I was aware the contextual data available to the admissions tutors considering my application inadequately described my situation as an applicant, but was unsure how, what, and indeed whether to communicate this to them. I was unable to judge whether I would be considered ‘really’ disadvantaged compared to the rest of the applicant pool (an irony which is not lost upon me in retrospect), or whether I wanted to relay every aspect of this disadvantage – how much was necessary to demonstrate that my attainment was particularly impressive given these circumstances? The more subjective aspects of the application process were completely obscure to me; advice to ‘be yourself’, that the interview was an exercise in encountering new information

effectively, was of little help without modelling and discussion of what this meant in practice. As such, I developed an interest as an undergraduate in how Oxford and Cambridge's admissions systems sought to integrate context to achieve fair and desirable outcomes.

Early in my career as a practitioner, seeing the Cambridge admissions process from the inside, I became aware how simultaneously metricised and subjective selection could be. I encountered instances where tiny differences in UMS⁶ points determined which applicant was offered a place; equally, I saw a candidate from a comprehensive school, who had the highest UMS marks of any applicant in their subject across the university, offered to other colleges because of an interview performance which was deemed poor. Exploring how Oxford and Cambridge make such decisions, in the context of my work as a widening participation practitioner, encouraged me to think about the fundamental potential for tension between merit and fairness. Later work as a widening participation practitioner, particularly providing support for interview and admissions test practice, further encouraged me to question the supposed impartiality of such mechanisms for assessment. As such, exploring how the decision-makers in the admissions process think about issues of merit and fairness stems from a longstanding professional and personal interest in the topic.

Given my epistemic leanings, it will be obvious I do not approach the project with the pretence of being a neutral researcher. My stance is that many admissions stakeholders do not perceive the admissions process or undergraduate teaching ecosystem as the culturally contingent spaces that they undoubtedly are. Although many participants discuss the need for awareness of student background in spaces like the interview and make adjustments in terms of the questions they ask, I suggest that it is rarer for admissions stakeholders to fully conceptualise what such cultural contingency means for *assessment* of a candidate's performance even in these more subjective elements of the admissions round. Discussion of Oxford's undergraduate teaching as

⁶ Uniform Mark Scale, the method of standardising raw marks in A levels.

socio-culturally non-neutral is even less common; for instance, even where some participants discussed the reforms they had made to their tutorial teaching, they were reluctant to advocate for the idea of 'reform' in general. Belief in the ability of Oxford's admissions process to discern innate talent and for its teaching style to draw it out, regardless of prior social or cultural baggage, is therefore strong. My own view is that such adherence to these positions is demonstrative of an underlying belief in Oxford's exceptionalism, and that reforms in line with other highly selective UK institutions, such as contextualised offer-making and a slower-paced introduction and more pedagogically informed approach to undergraduate study, might lead to both a more equitable and more academically rigorous undergraduate community. I discuss these possibilities in Chapters 7 and 8.

3.4.2 Positionalities: Academic participants

Characterising my academic participants is challenging. In one sense, they are quintessentially elites in that they (and their decisions) 'create a public conversation that sets the legitimate boundaries of discourse' (Cookson, 1994: 116). Public and press interest in admissions to Oxford are informed and inflected by the decisions which such participants make throughout the admissions process. These decisions and their associated narratives both determine and reflect the discursive messages which are communicated about what and who is valued in elite universities. Yet perhaps more pertinently, such participants might be understood as *locally powerful*. Deem (1994) argues for distinguishing the locally powerful from elites broadly defined, as their power and normative influence is located in a particular space, place, time or institution. They exercise power 'by virtue of their frequent and sustained participation or their occupation of a key office' (1994: 155); they make key decisions about policy and narrative within their domain and act as gatekeepers to the production of knowledge relating to it. It is also useful to draw attention to the blurred distinction between research with elites and experts. Littig highlights that the terms are often used interchangeably and that 'the content of publications on these two interview forms does not really differ fundamentally' (2009: 98). Experts, unlike elites, 'do not necessarily have to be the people

who make the high-level decisions at the top of an organization. Ultimately, anyone who is responsible for and has privileged access to the knowledge of specific groups of people or decision-making processes can be seen as an expert' (2009: 100). Littig suggests that while many expert interviews focus on technical knowledge ('exploratory' or 'systematizing' interviews (2009: 101)) it is also possible to run 'theory generating' interviews, more akin to the idea of elite interviews in their content, which seek the interviewee's 'tacit specific interpretive knowledge (know-why)' and well as their 'procedural knowledge (know-how)' (2009: 101). In the context of my study, my academic stakeholder participants are in various facets both elites and experts. Ultimately, the semantics of these labels do not create the need for significant methodological differentiation; the crucial aspect is that they are elite and expert primarily in a local, bounded and specific sense, wherein their expert knowledge 'has the power to produce practical effects' (Bogner and Menz, 2009: 54).

Constructing my academic stakeholder participants as *locally powerful* expert-elites is a useful framing to understand my positionality in relation to them. My status as a member of the University of Oxford endowed me with a partial insider status which would likely have been much harder to attain for a doctoral researcher from another institution; I shared with my participants an institutional lexicon and cultural awareness of the structures, anachronisms and idiosyncrasies of Oxford as a social field. As such I was understood as 'local' within the field where my participants were powerful. This granted me an assumed surface-level familiarity with my participants which allowed me to approach them easily and facilitated introductions and 'ice-breaking' conversation. As a result, many of the issues with access to expert-elites commonly discussed in the literature (Deem, 1994; Littig, 2009; Ryan and Lewer, 2012) were less relevant to my study; most participants responded to a simple direct email and were happy to agree to interviews with no further details than those provided in my information sheet. However, my student status and the fact I had no official connection with either the mainstream undergraduate admissions process or the AFY also meant I was inherently a partial outsider, particularly given the potentially politically contentious

nature of my research focus. Furthermore, Cunningham-Sabot (1999) has argued that a researcher being perceived as 'local' can in some instances impede dialogue with elites; they are interpreted as more invested in the narratives of the locality and as such more of a potential threat. I term this dilemma of positionality 'precarious insider status'. My belonging to the locality was qualified, that of a 'provisional' (or occasionally a 'potential') insider (Dawson, 2010); my ability to produce data was dependent on the goodwill and comfort of my participants, who exhibited varying degrees of ease with their involvement. For instance, some participants required a dialogue by email to feel reassured enough to participate; a small minority requested that their interviews were not transcribed, or that I clarify any data I wished to use with them in advance.

This status as a precarious insider held relevance for how I conducted my interviews and observations. Through my first handful of interviews I quickly realised the need to maintain a position of simultaneous distance and closeness both to my participants and to the narratives, norms, policies and events they were discussing, for two reasons. The first relates to the nature of elite-expert interviewing. Pfadenhauer notes that experts modulate the semantic and latent messages they communicate to interviewers based on their assessment of the interviewer's competence in the subject, prompting experts to 'play down or to dramatize or to be inclined to adopt a paternalistic or self-legitimizing conversational behaviour' (2009: 85). As such, demonstrating detailed and extensive knowledge of the subject at hand is a prerequisite for ensuring that elite-expert interviews generate interpretive knowledge, rather than remaining at the level of procedural description. Yet in such a normatively charged area, demonstrating too much knowledge might involve expressing a normative judgement by the interviewer, inflecting and potentially limiting the usefulness of the interview data. It was necessary to maintain a balance in demonstrating a well-informed grounding in the processes, policies and debates informing the issues, while striving not to explicitly endorse any specific normative position.

The second reason relates to my presence as a researcher living, working and interacting within the social field I was researching. Oxford is a small city; it gradually emerged I lived in close proximity to many of my participants. I would see them by chance in the street; my teaching responsibilities occasionally led me into contact with them, as did my involvement with university sports outside my doctoral research. The potential for issues to arise related to participant anonymity, misuse of power dynamics, or perceptions of my own normative alignment, were clear. For instance, one of my participants was involved in the shortlisting process for my application to a collegiate teaching role (I alerted them to this potential conflict of interest to allow them to take appropriate mitigative action). Similarly, while I always politely refused to answer participants' questions about who else I was working with, the simple fact of my knowing a participant – to say hello to at the pub, for example – could have invited questions from others about my assumed allegiances to one or other of the normative frames I had discussed with participants. Navigating the richness of Oxford as a real, inhabited place as well as a conceptually constructed research site invited me to consider how my chance interactions with participants in non-research contexts inflected our relationship, whether by encouraging trust and familiarity, or by generating tension through raising awareness of the research as an active and inherently political project. I endeavoured – I am sure not always successfully – to present myself and indeed behave as an 'interested but not invested' researcher, mitigating the possibility of perceptions of interest, or indeed the slim chance of retributive or patrimonial professional action beyond the bounds of the project.

3.4.3 Positionalities: Student participants

My positionality in relation to my student participants shared some traits with that in relation to my academic participants, most notably a shared social field and lexicon, and the accompanying partial insider status this brings. However, as a postgraduate rather than an undergraduate student, a decade older than my student participants, my insider status was again qualified; my understanding of the dynamics of undergraduate collegiate interaction on issues of access, fairness,

merit and social justice were informed by my own undergraduate experience in a comparable institution but inevitably do not represent the lived experience or contemporary discourses of current undergraduates. A second key distinction from my academic participants was that although in some studies these undergraduates may have been considered elite – for instance, research examining the experiences of undergraduates at different types of university – it does not necessarily make sense to consider them as such in this context. My student participants had very limited agency to effect change or make decisions with regard to the AFY or the standard admissions process, although they did have the chance to make their views known through, for instance, JCR meetings or other forms of student action. Although they influence and shape discourse and norms to some extent, their structural ability to do so is markedly more constrained than my academic participants. This inflects not only the data produced from my interactions with them, but my positionality to them; here, my position was not precarious to the degree that it was with my academic participants, but rather peripheral. I was adjacent to the social world of meaning they inhabited and constructed as undergraduates within their colleges, but not part of it.

This differentiated positionality regarding my student participants mediated the interactions with them by which I produced data. Although I was not involved in teaching any of these students, there is an implied hierarchy between doctoral and undergraduate students' understandings and interpretations which is reinforced by the common practice of doctoral students teaching undergraduates at Oxford. The potential for this power dynamic to become palpable in data production was further heightened by the fact that the topics of discussion in my study focussed on undergraduate admissions and teaching, again realms where doctoral students often have the ability to make decisions affecting undergraduates' futures. As such I spent considerably more time in the lead-up to my interviews with student participants outlining the nature of the knowledge I wanted to produce in my interactions with them (i.e. their own interpretations and constructions) and reassuring them that I was not interested in testing their understanding of processes but rather exploring their views of them. Finally, although student

participants were not recruited on the basis of their class background, 10 of the 11 students I interviewed variously identified as coming from working class, disadvantaged, or comprehensive-school backgrounds. I disclosed my own working-class background where I deemed it appropriate to establish participants' comfort in discussing the topics at hand, particularly as this is not readily established from my accent or appearance (I am a tall white man with a conventional dress sense and a Received Pronunciation accent; particularly in Oxford, I am often assumed to come from a privileged background). In line with Mellor et al (2014) the interview process proved instructive in demonstrating the wider degree of variance and ambivalence in participants' construction of disadvantage and its relationship to social mobility, emphasising the dangers of assuming congruence of interpretation simply through shared class characteristics or 'matching'.

Finally, it is important to note that the data I produced in conjunction with my student participants yielded significantly different meaning in relation to this study than I had anticipated. Contrary to my expectations, my student participants reported that there had been very little discussion of the AFY's normative meaning among the student bodies they represented. As such, the data produced in these interviews is generally less relevant to discussions of credentialist or contextualist conceptions of merit, although there are a handful of instances where I discuss it. Conversely, these participants' own experiences of the admissions process and, particularly, the tutorial teaching system proved invaluable, throwing into sharp relief the student experience of such spaces compared to (some) academic participants' conceptions of them.

3.4.4 Ethical considerations

The primary ethical consideration in the study was the maintenance of participant confidentiality and anonymity. This issue was particularly salient (beyond the usual importance of respecting participant privacy) due to both the identify of my participants and the nature of the research site. There is considerable media interest of the Oxford undergraduate admissions process, and admissions tutors and others who work in applicant selection can sometimes receive direct scrutiny

for the decisions they make. As such, attempting to maintain anonymity for my participants as far as possible matters because there is a greater probability than in other research contexts that they personally may receive media attention because of the data and analyses produced. The nature of the research site also presents a related if distinct problem; Oxford is a tightly and intimately connected academic environment. Academics and students hold both a college and a departmental affiliation, and significant variances in practices between colleges and departments could potentially lead to triangulation of individuals involved even if overtly identifying features such as names or locations are redacted. This principle also applies to activity such as attendance at particular meetings; there are instances where disclosing the specifics of the meeting observed could identify particular participants through the stances they take in relation to their colleagues. This meant a particular focus on ensuring participants understood the measures I would take to safeguard their anonymity, as well as the potential for such safeguarding to fail; on data storage and analysis; and on discussion and reporting of findings, including meeting my funder's expectations for data dissemination.

When gathering consent from participants, I included explicit discussion in my information sheet of the possibility that their identity as a participant could be uncovered as a result of the nature of the research site. For instance, it was possible that they might disclose information to me which others in the field, through their own personal knowledge of the topics at hand, realise could only have been known by specific individuals, and thus deduce their identity as a participant. I initially gave participants the option to either grant permission for the anonymised use of their data, or to not grant permission for data use; after discussion with some early participants, I amended my consent form to add a third option allowing the use of specific data if granted explicit permission in advance. All identifying data (consent forms, audio files, transcripts, observation notes, and unredacted analyses) were stored on my institutional cloud storage using two-factor authentication, with additional file-specific passwords. Local physical and digital copies were deleted as soon as they were uploaded. In analysing my data, I had initially planned to refer to

participants by pseudonyms (e.g. 'JCR Access Officer 1' or 'Admissions Tutor 2'); to facilitate ease of reference, I subsequently decided to assign each participant a pseudonym, the gender of which is randomly assigned to further anonymise participants – a typically female pseudonym does not necessarily represent a female participant (see Appendix 2).

All of the pseudonyms I use are Anglophone in origin. While the large majority of my participants, particularly my academic participants, are themselves White British presenting, this creates an issue of representation; a handful of participants were from ethnic minority backgrounds and had non-Anglophone names. After much consideration I decided there was no clear way to afford these participants nominative representation without risking their identification, particularly given the small number of participants in this situation. Given that my research does not focus on race, ethnicity or nationality I decided this was acceptable, but I remain aware of the ethical compromise it represents.

In some instances, to avoid triangulation, I have changed or obscured incidental details of the data in discussion with participants themselves. My funding body also holds an expectation that data produced from public funding is made available for future use; however, the data in this case is both sensitive and nuanced and could be misused if dislocated from the context necessary for its understanding. As such, I reached an agreement with the funding body to make aspects of the data available where participants were willing to agree to this, with three options available – for anonymised data to be made available in full, for data to be partially redacted, or for data to not be made available. I further negotiated permission-only access to the data, and for an embargo period to be placed on its use, together with restrictions on researchers from the University of Oxford in using the data. Data approved by participants for use will be deposited with the UK Data Service.

A further consideration is the extent to which elite-expert practitioners' wishes for confidentiality *should* be respected when their actions are potentially complicit in maintaining structural inequalities (Higgins and Kunz, 2023). An argument might be mounted that if research

with elites produced data which might be used to effectively challenge social inequality, the ethically correct course of action would be to use the data, regardless of the permissions attached to it. Arguing against this clear-cut view, Ayling and Lillie (2023) suggest that the deployment of an 'ethic of care' might be an appropriate starting point to navigate such conundrums. An ethic of care

takes context and interpersonal relationships into account when solving moral dilemmas...Adopting the ethic of care means being 'reflexive and deliberate' (Reich, 2021, p.578) about the power that we, as researchers, hold over how we engage and represent our participants – even as we are simultaneously confronted by their broader social power and role in social inequalities.

Ayling and Lillie, 2023: 20-21

As Ayling and Lillie highlight, there are no certainties in what 'should' be done in such situation, and my own positionality as a doctoral student, studying at the institution I am researching, inevitably impacts the ethical decisions I am able to make in terms of protecting my own career. In practice, some of the data I produced could be considered embarrassing to either the participants involved or the university as a whole. However, this data was tangential to the central RQs I was examining; it often takes the form of offhand remarks which do not centre on the topics participants identify as the 'real issues', or constructions of perceived positions they themselves do not hold. Further, some participants, although falling into the elite-expert category, are themselves early-career academics, impacted by precarity and instability, and inhibited by the structures of the very institutions they work in (and which they have limited opportunities to transform or leave). As such, I decided not to report such examples of peripheral if sensational data, in accordance with what I deem an ethic of care and the participants' own wishes.

Chapter 4: The normative value frameworks governing the mainstream undergraduate admissions process

This chapter addresses RQ1: how do AFY stakeholders construct fairness within Oxford's mainstream undergraduate admissions process? It explores how participants understand the underlying value frameworks which inform how selection decisions are made during the mainstream admissions process; how the concept of fairness is embedded in these frameworks; the factors which they perceive as contributing to the importance and construction of fairness in this ecosystem; and the practical implementation of differing conceptions of fairness within the admissions process itself. This chapter engages with data from the 75 interviews conducted and 146 documents collected, but does not consider the 22 observations conducted, as these did not relate to the mainstream undergraduate admissions process but instead to the AFY.

4.1: Academic merit and fairness as dance partners

The most common values which academic participants deemed important in the mainstream admissions process were academic merit and fairness. These values were understood as both complementary and contradictory, depending on the specific conception of them which participants subscribed to; some conceptions considered them synonymous, some as potentially symbiotic but also potentially dissonant, and some as antagonistic. The first section of this chapter explores the varying conceptions of these values which participants offered and how they situate them within the mainstream undergraduate admissions ecosystem at Oxford. To frame the discussion that follows, I begin with a quote which highlights the intertwined yet tensioned relationship between these values in the admissions process:

it's absolutely inherent in the way the system works, in the data that the colleges and admitting tutors are provided with, that there is an understanding that academic excellence is the priority, that decisions are made on academic excellence...But the question of what academic excellence is, is the question that then becomes debatable, and clearly, I guess the most salient debate in recent years is around the extent to which contextual factors related to candidates affect their ability to demonstrate academic excellence in the way that we ask them to demonstrate it.

While academic merit is considered the norm at the heart of the admissions process, it is inextricably linked in the context of Oxford's relational position within the UK's stratified HE system with fairness. How academic merit should be conceived of in the light of a radically unequal pre-tertiary education system is contested precisely because it is important for the admissions process to be considered 'fair' – itself a contested term. The commitment to meritocratic decisions which are also seen as fair is illustrated by how the concepts are often positioned together on the admissions pages of College websites and in university policy documents:

In all subjects, procedures should be seen to be fair for candidates and should ensure that the best candidates are selected.

- University of Oxford Common Framework on Admissions, paragraph C

We welcome applications from anyone who thinks they can benefit from the opportunities the College offers, and who can meet the necessary standards for admission. We make every effort to ensure that the admissions process is as fair as possible to applicants from every background and type of school.

- Jesus College, Oxford: 'Who can apply' webpage

This marks a shift away from Zimdars' (2007) and Nahai's (2013) findings of the dominance of strict meritocratic ideals, perhaps reflecting the growing pressure in educational research (Boliver et al, 2022) as well as sector regulation to rethink how merit is defined. The first sections of this chapter explore the various interlinking conceptions of academic merit and fairness which participants construct, together with how such concepts are presented in relevant public documents.

4.1.1: Conceptions of academic merit: Credentialist meritocracy

The first conception of academic merit I discuss is what might be termed credentialist merit. This construction of merit was directly espoused by a relatively small number of AFY stakeholders, although a larger number referenced it as an important governing norm for colleagues in their college or department (it is important to reiterate here that my interview participants are not

intended to be a representative sample of admissions tutors at Oxford, and appear to skew towards more progressive views of admissions policy, as discussed in section 3.3.2.1). The credentialist conception of merit in admissions decisions is simply to prioritise the applicants whose attainment record, as demonstrated by their public exam grades (but also sometimes by any admissions assessment or, more contentiously, interview scores), is highest compared to the application cohort. This is apparent in some discussion with participants, as well as some applicant-facing online material:

I think the thing that you're looking for [is] kind of like the people who look like they're kind of like the best prepared, the brightest people based on things like how well they did in A levels or GCSEs or the written exams that we give them here.

- Vicky

Admissions at Oxford is based solely upon academic merit, and we welcome applications from those with high academic potential.

- Brasenose College, Oxford:
'How to apply' webpage

In practice, the strict credentialist conception of merit was more commonly discussed in reference to the views of colleagues in the admissions process rather than those of my participants themselves, who generally situated themselves in opposition to such conceptions. Although the majority of my participants did not themselves endorse this view, it was often perceived as a common refrain from colleagues which exerted significant influence over discussions about undergraduate admissions decisions. For instance, they describe

those who think that the A level grades are immutable. They represent a kind of divinely ordained truth and cannot be superseded in any way...there is an assumption often amongst people in that other end of the spectrum, that it simply doesn't matter what the background is. It's not our business at Oxford to take account of background, it is our business at Oxford to find the people who answered the questions quickest, smartest, best, and, and take them.

- Andrew

This description tacitly indicates two important points which I discuss in detail later in this chapter – first, the potential tension between how to reconcile an applicant's attainment and their

background in the context of the admissions process, and second, the notion that most admissions decision-makers operate on a 'spectrum' between credentialist and contextualist norms of meritocracy. The positioning of A level grades being 'immutable' as at 'the (other) end of the spectrum' speaks to its extremity in terms of its strong focus on credentialised merit. Where previous work (Zimdars, 2007; Nahai, 2013) finds this norm to be dominant to the point of actively discouraging the enactment of alternative conceptions of merit, my data suggests it is simply the *most* purely credentialist norm among an ecosystem of overlapping and blurred conceptions of merit. To describe the norm as extreme does not suggest either peripherality or questionable status. Credentialist meritocracy is thus both influential and recognised as a legitimate understanding of how to operationalise merit with the undergraduate admissions process:

*I'm looking to try and take people who I think are going to do really, really well. For all that I think that three A*s at A level doesn't necessarily tell you you've got the best person...For me three As just is the bottom to be honest. And there are going to be in any system injustices and you have to have a cutoff somewhere. And I don't think three As is an unreasonable cutoff to have.*

- Kevin

not everybody is engaged, lots of people rely more on the ranking, knowing that...if they take the top people on paper, they're likely to be very strong, worthy people and there's an argument for taking them. But I think even those people are kind of thinking what they're trying to do is take the strongest candidates.

- Michael

The second quotation, from a participant who does not align themselves with strict credentialist meritocratic norms, highlights that ideas of fairness are salient to this conception of merit: the 'top people on paper' are cast as 'worthy', an appeal to fairness forming part of the reasoning for offering them a place as well as their ability to do well in undergraduate study (their 'strength'). The links between merit and fairness are discussed at length later in this chapter. However, it is crucial to note that for most participants espousing or discussing strict credentialism, the ability to excel on course is vital; as the first quote notes, stakeholders are looking for applicants who they think 'are going to do really, really well'. Credentialist meritocratic norms of assessment

are thus rooted in the dual objectives of selecting applicants who will achieve the greatest success possible on course, and the ancillary yet influential addendum that this process of selection is justified because it satisfies (a form of) fairness through rewarding measured merit.

4.1.2: Conceptions of academic merit: Contextualist meritocracy

Juxtaposed to strict credentialist meritocracy is a contextually driven view of merit which seeks to account for applicants' socio-economic backgrounds and personal circumstances when assessing their potential. Recognising that applicants from non-traditional backgrounds may have been impeded in their ability to attain highly, this conception of merit advocates for the acceptance of applicants who may not be the most formally credentialled among their cohort if they are able to demonstrate the potential to excel on undergraduate courses through other means (such as interview performance or admissions assessments). This norm is evident in documentary data; while college websites sometimes espouse more credentialist leanings, assessment of merit is more commonly framed as contextual in that it makes reference to applicants' potential to achieve, as well as their current attainment. For instance, the snippet from Brasenose College in the previous section is complemented by the following one:

We fully realise that there will be wide differences of educational background among those seeking admission, and every effort is made by the Tutors in selecting their undergraduates to recognize potential as well as present achievement.

- Brasenose College, Oxford:
'How to Apply' webpage

We're not only interested in your grades and achievements, but in understanding your potential to grow and thrive here. We understand that not all applicants have had the same opportunities, and take that into account.

- Oriel College, Oxford:
'Applying to Oriel' webpage

Participants describe the need to contextualise applicants' performance in multiple ways: to ensure the students who have the best chance of achieving highly in undergraduate study are admitted, recognising they may not have achieved highest thus far; as a necessary legitimization of Oxford's status as an elite university; and perhaps most unexpectedly, to reward the most talented

applicants as a mechanism of social justice, even where prior disadvantage might render it unlikely that they would exceed their peers over the course of undergraduate study. I explore each of these variations of contextualist meritocratic selection in turn.

4.1.2.1 Contextualised meritocracy: Fulfilling potential

Of the justifications for contextual selection outlined above, ensuring the applicants who are most likely to thrive in their undergraduate study is the most commonly deployed by participants:

...if you make contextual decisions, and you make sure that you think carefully about what you can expect from the person in front of you, given where they've come from, then those students who might not look quite so strong on paper, or even maybe not be so strong in interview, and quite often are not so strong on the test, but show lots of promise...they're likely to shoot forward really fast.

- Michael

I think it's about trying to work out who's going to get the best grades...the better someone's track record so far, you know, the better it is for them. But, you know...some people with sort of relatively modest records up to this point, who have been taught in big classrooms, and with all sorts of distractions from home and other circumstances, may actually have both the motivation, the drive, but also the sort of talent and potential to really excel on the course.

- Julie

These quotations, drawn from participants from different colleges and subject disciplines, demonstrate the widespread nature of the justification of contextualist meritocracy through appeals to finding the students most likely to excel. This norm represents a development from the previous comparable literature's (Zimdars, 2007; Nahai, 2013) findings, in that contextual assessment of merit in previous works was discussed but never endorsed as a realistic strategy. However, it should also be noted that this justification of contextual assessment remains essentially meritocratic in nature, seeking to reward those deemed most talented. The importance of context in assessing talent represents a recognition of the imperfections of the enactments of credentialist meritocracy and an attempt to mitigate for them, rather than a move away from meritocratic norms in a wider sense.

The notion of potential, in particular, is an important one for participants who see contextualist selection as meritocratic at its heart. Participants regularly conceptualise some applicants from disadvantaged backgrounds as having very significant potential which is not (and perhaps cannot) be realised in their current educational circumstances, but which can be drawn out by Oxford's supportive environment and teaching:

...I'm not saying that, you know, we take weak students and don't take really good students, you know, obviously, we're also out to find really good students, I think we just think we can look under different rocks...quite often the risks really do pay off. And that is fantastic...I think in terms of value added, where the students start, and where they end up, I do think that we have a really good story to tell, and that involves really teaching. You actually just have to teach them a bit [laughs].

- Susan

I return later in the chapter to this participant's loaded remark concerning teaching, exploring whether Oxford's unusual undergraduate teaching methods promote or impede 'risk-taking' in admissions. However, this excerpt serves to illustrate the meritocratic nature of one strand of contextualist admissions practice: that the likelihood of disadvantaged applicants excelling on course justifies their selection.

4.1.2.2 Contextualised meritocracy(?): Social justice

Although less common, some participants did offer alternative justifications of contextualist assessment which were less closely tied to meritocratic norms at their core. For instance, a small minority of participants argued for contextualist meritocracy on the grounds of outcome rather than fair process. Where most justifications of this norm of applicant assessment were ultimately rooted in the meritocratic need for a 'truly' fair admissions process to select the best candidates, some participants advocated for a consideration of to which (sufficiently promising) applicants an offer might make the most difference:

I think it's really interesting to talk about the concept of best and brightest, that you'll hear a lot around the University, and what that actually means. We, something we like to think about here also, is who will benefit most. And it's about combining those two things, because obviously the people who would benefit most

are the people who've received absolutely no education up to this point. So there's a point at which you know, we're joining together the people who've excelled the most and achieved the most so far and the people who would kind of benefit most from it...

- Rebecca

This model of contextual assessment only partially incorporates meritocratic motivations, marrying them with considerations of social justice to justify the use of contextual assessment. Interestingly, although many participants who advocated for contextual assessment used the language of social justice in their discussion, the majority ultimately returned to justifying this position through reference to meritocratic ideals, perhaps demonstrating the hegemonic power of the concept. Furthermore, the language of social justice was only used very sparingly in the documents I analysed, and even in these cases, its phrasing was perhaps less explicit than the language used by individual participants:

There is universal agreement that Oxford needs to make rapid progress in diversifying its undergraduate and graduate student bodies. Diversity is important as a social good in its own right, and it is manifestly in Oxford's self-interest – for the University to continue to thrive, it needs to recruit the best people from all backgrounds. Greater diversity will strengthen the University's intellectual vitality.

- Somerville College, Oxford:
'University-wide outreach' webpage

Although this excerpt does justify selection policies aimed at diverse intakes on their own merits, it also situates this statement alongside an appeal to meritocratic norms, demonstrating the relative weakness of claims rooted solely in social justice in the discursive environment of Oxford's undergraduate admissions process.

4.1.2.3 Contextualised meritocracy: Legitimising status and regulatory compliance

Some participants linked the active practising of contextual assessment to the legitimisation of Oxford's status as an elite institution. Recognising Oxford's potentially fraught position as an elite institution which has historically both explicitly and tacitly excluded various demographics, some

participants view contextual assessment as necessary in terms of justifying Oxford's reputation, as well as an attempt to ensure fairness:

I think there is a genuine sort of attempt to manifest a fair process of admission...But I think that a component of fairness is recognising the relative advantages and disadvantages of some candidates. And that privilege plays an extraordinary role in Oxford admissions, and that that by rights ought to be factored in as contextual information. I think the fact that we attempt to integrate it within our decision-making apparatus is, to my mind, completely essential, I don't think the university will, will sustain its credibility going forward, if it doesn't engage with that agenda...

- Rob

The reference to Oxford's engagement with the 'agenda' of contextual assessment for reasons of fairness was also discussed by participants in relation to the regulatory regime surrounding access and participation. Participants discuss, in general terms, the long-standing exhortation from regulators and the press for Oxford to admit more non-traditional students. Some explicitly identify increasingly stringent expectations from the OfS regarding selective universities' efforts to diversify their undergraduate intakes as a driver for greater consideration of context in undergraduate selection. For instance, one participant situated this regulatory shift in the broader narrative of long-existing public pressure on selective universities:

so there's been that persistent pressure, 'you're not taking enough people from disadvantaged backgrounds'...it's been going on for 15 years...the previous Access and Participation Plan...Is that the one that started in 2017, or 18?...sort of people said, 'yeah, okay, why not, let's just be a bit less bound by the spreadsheet'...I suppose the previous fear is, 'how can you not take people who are highly ranked? That would seem to be unjust, and the spreadsheet is telling us they're in the top group. So how can we not take them?'. And, yeah, combination of this longer-term pressure from outside, and maybe the kind of specifics of having to create the access and participation plan, just I can't think of other factors, have created a shift...

- Anthony

The centrality of 'data' is clear in Anthony's exposition of the development of contextual assessment as a norm in Oxford; the wealth of data on applicants' credentialised attainment has historically meant that if 'the spreadsheet is telling us they're in the top group', strict credentialist norms of merit have dominated discussion of candidate's worthiness for a place. It is therefore

telling that perhaps the most frequently mentioned driver in the growth of contextual assessment is the significant improvement in the quality of contextual data available when assessing candidates. Participants regularly refer to the increasingly focussed and individually linked contextual data provided to them as enabling contextual assessment which was previously not possible to reliably implement. Across a wide range of college and subject backgrounds, the introduction of Oxford's 'banding' system – wherein applicants are assigned to a band from A (most disadvantaged) to D (least disadvantaged) using a basket of individual and group measures - was perceived as crucial to increasing the degree to which tutors felt able to admit students on the basis of contextualised conceptions of their merit.

As part of the APP conversations on other things, we changed how we did our admissions process, how we did our contextual information, we introduced the bridging programme, we agreed that we would do the foundation year. A huge amount happened at the same time, it's really hard to unpick those different things actually...But I think the thing that's had the most impact has just been how we understand contextual data during the standard admissions process.

- Rebecca

It's more the granularity, the fact that it's broken down into the different elements, which I think wasn't the case 10 years ago, you wouldn't have had that kind of level of, you'd that kind of ACORN, POLAR, free school meals. There's just much more of it. And it's better presented.

- Claire

...[contextual data] has become more sophisticated ...pretty much all our selectors are very, you know, sort of keen to look very carefully, and positively, at applications in Band A and Band B. And, you know, there is a general consensus that this provides relevant information of disadvantage...

- Julie

The main drivers for the growth of the norm of contextually assessed merit are therefore twofold: an increasingly proactive regulatory regime, demanding faster and further-reaching change; and the improvement of internal data use through the nature of the data available, its accessibility, and the policy levers which govern it. Although previous comparable literature has identified contextually assessed merit as an object of consideration for admissions stakeholders, it generally finds that it is ultimately (if regretfully) dismissed in favour of credentialist norms, often

on the basis of ensuring fairness within the admissions process (Nahai, 2013). However, my data suggests that contextually assessed meritocracy is not only accepted as a legitimate norm to be deployed in this context, but that its use is widespread and even expected. The final part of this section examines the symbiotic relationship of merit and fairness as core guiding values in the admissions process, and the different ways in which they interact within the coexisting norms of credentialist and contextually assessed meritocracy.

4.1.3: Intertwined and tensioned conceptions of merit and fairness

Several participants refer directly to the high-profile case of Laura Spence, a very high-attaining medicine applicant from a state-maintained school who did not receive an offer in the 1999/2000 admissions cycle. They perceive this case, which developed into a national political debate on elite university admissions, as increasing the pressure to enact fairness as a value in the admissions process. However, in the context of the early 2000s when public and press conceptions of ‘unfairness’ in Oxford admissions focussed more on class and educational patronage than attainment differences, this meant stronger rather than weaker norms of credentialism in undergraduate selection. One participant describes the ebb and flow of credentialist and contextualist norms of assessing merit, and their relationship to fairness, in the light of the Laura Spence affair:

I feel like subsequent generations are generally, you know, on average, more enthusiastic about thinking contextually, but I don't think we would be where we are today without the Laura Spence thing in 2000, and the way that led to what in my view was a slightly unfortunate kind of diversion in the Common Framework and the sort of emphasis the university had in sort of the mid 2000s, on choosing ‘the best’ people, which ends up sounding a bit credentialist, towards thinking more and more about students in a kind of contextual sense, where you can try and do a sort of holistic evaluation of somebody and think about whether their credentials fully reflect their potential.

- Samantha

Crucially, Samantha conceptualises the credentialist norm as emerging in response to accusations of preferential treatment for more educationally privileged applicants; it is a way to

identify merit, but also at its root a rebuttal of one iteration of the critique of unfairness. Both credentialist and contextualist forms of meritocratic assessment incorporate fairness to justify their claim to legitimacy as governing norms within Oxford's admissions process. However, both 'merit' and 'fairness' are interpreted and manifested differently in each norm. Credentialist meritocracy positions merit as (broadly) measurable and comparable; public examinations and admissions assessments are understood as imperfect but are nonetheless accorded a central role in assessing an applicant's merit; they are 'among the information we have the most reliable [indicators]' (Lauren). This conception of merit is relatively simple conceptually, if not in empirical practice.

Contextualist meritocracy, conversely, considers merit as more intangible and consequently harder to measure. Recognising the demonstrable impact of social and educational background on formal attainment, it focuses on merit as demonstrated through attainment within context. However, given the wide variety of different circumstances which could qualify an applicant as disadvantaged, and the fiendishly complex interplay of these factors on individual students' educational attainment, the contextualist meritocratic norm calls into question the *possibility* of measuring merit accurately, instead invoking more heuristic judgements of an applicant's potential. One cannot *know* a candidate's precise merit; one can only make informed judgements given the information available. Although grades and marks attained (in context) form part of this heuristic assessment, the interview process is also central in that it putatively offers a way to assess how applicants think and attempt to solve problems which is divorced as far as possible from their background. Notably, there is a temporal element to these alternative conceptions. Credentialist merit is judged as it presents itself at the point of application. This stands in potential tension with conceptions of contextualist merit which adopt a future orientated view of merit which may stretch beyond the bounds of undergraduate study:

...we're allowed to search for people who have the potential for excellence...some people, I suppose, have a view that effectively, what we're looking for is the people who will be getting the highest marks in finals. Whereas others think some people

have exceptional academic potential that just won't be realised within three years and still we should be taking them.

- Jess

The bounds of the realisation of merit within the undergraduate admissions system at Oxford therefore stretch from merit which has already been realised as current attainment, through potential merit which admissions stakeholders hope to see reflected in undergraduate degree results, to encompass nascent merit which may still not be formally demonstrated by the end of an applicant's undergraduate study. In a zero-sum admissions system, the potential tensions between these conceptions of merit are obvious: admitting a student with strong extant attainment might mean not admitting a student with exceptional potential to achieve over their whole academic career, and vice versa. These differing norms of merit are also to some extent epistemological as well as conceptual or ethical. If one views merit as reliably measurable enough – through exams, admissions assessments, and, with less certainty, interview scores – to make judgements about an applicant's worthiness of a place, a credentialist meritocratic norm may be more compelling. If, conversely, one considers attainment too mediated by context to be a useful measurement of merit, one might be more inclined towards a heavily interpretative stance which considers context to a greater degree.

'Fairness', likewise, is a contested concept in this context. Credentialist meritocratic assessment simply roots fairness in the selection of applicants who have attained most highly in the various metrics used in the admissions process. While recognising that none of these metrics are infallible, it situates fairness as selecting from among the best performers, because these are the people most likely to attain highly on course and who are therefore most deserving of a place. By contrast, contextualist meritocratic assessment deems it inherently *unfair* to consider attainment divorced from an applicant's context – and given the extreme difficulty of measuring this impact accurately, leans towards heuristic assessment of applicants' as yet unrealised potential as a fairer method of selection (as well as one which is more likely to select for students who will thrive at Oxford).

The relationships between both these conceptions of merit and fairness are complex. Both norms exhibit interdependent and mutually legitimating links between their respective conceptions of merit and fairness. Credentialist meritocratic assessment must be perceived as genuinely meritocratic in order to justify the very significant advantages it offers to the highest attainers, many of whom are socially or educationally privileged. In order to do this, it relies upon a conception of fairness which acknowledges the relationship between advantage and attainment, but which maintains that in spite of this, the centrality of measurable attainment is essential to make the distinctions between applicants which must in practice be made in a relatively uniform, accountable and reliable way. This conception of fairness is itself justified by the meritocratic belief that measured attainment is, despite its foibles, a sufficiently reliable indicator of ability or worth. Similarly, contextualist meritocratic assessment denies both the meritocratic nature and the fairness of strict credentialism through reference to the links between advantage and attainment. It thus positions its conception of merit – with its attendant need to demonstrate itself as fair – in accounting for background insofar as possible through a more heuristic model of assessment. Merit and fairness are therefore in both norms mutually dependent upon and mutually reinforcing of the legitimacy of the norm as a whole. In practice, as I discuss in the second section of this chapter, most individual stakeholders adopt blended (sometimes dissonant) positions between the poles of credentialist and contextualist meritocracy. It is these compromises and negotiations with both themselves and their colleagues that produce the eventual results of the admissions process, and as such it is these micro-processes, informed by the normative positions I have outlined, which I now explore.

4.2: Translating normative frameworks into empirical positions

The norms of credentialist and contextualist assessment of merit described in the section above are best understood as ideal types; they are only likely to be fully representative of individual stakeholders' stances on admissions in extreme cases. Indeed, none of my participants advocated themselves for the strictest possible versions of either norm, although some stated that they know

of colleagues elsewhere in the university who would be aligned with strict credentialist positions (although, notably, not strict contextualist ones). Instead, most participants exhibited a range of compromise positions between these two poles. Their individual positionings tended to be characterised by a partial concession to the basic legitimacy of the alternative governing norm, combined with an emphasis on what they perceive as the more relevant and impactful elements of the norm they are inclined towards. Other participants, although a smaller number, espoused multiple normative positions which appear fragmented or contradictory, although they often offered further explanations which in their view reconciled these positions. This section explores these hybrid, individual compromise positions, examining the concessions individuals with differing normative inclinations make, and their justifications for leaning towards either normative pole.

4.2.1: Compromise positions in credentialist meritocratic assessment

Stakeholders who are more inclined towards the credentialist norm of meritocratic assessment often accept that social and educational background impacts applicants' attainment. They do not advocate for the strictest conception of credentialist meritocracy possible – simply making offers to the applicants who have the overall highest attainment in a composite measure comprising public examinations, admissions assessments and numerical interview scores. Instead, they generally concede that it is important to try to include some recognition of an applicants' context in assessing how meritorious their attainment record should be considered to be. However, these participants view such contextual considerations as often either being too weak to overturn the broad indicators of credentialist merit which the assessment process has yielded, or of limited practical relevance in producing a fair outcome:

I would say the dominant goal is fairness...[but] in the end, the scores do the work...the final ranking is done algorithmically based on the recommendations in the [subject] handbook. At that point, there'll be ranked one through n, one to 22, say, and then there is discussion about who to admit at the boundaries that often will result in people that are say 14th being admitted because the gap between say sixth and 14th might be vanishingly small percentage points. At that point, socioeconomic considerations...as recorded on the UCAS form can come into play very hard, especially if a person is say, Opportunity Oxford eligible. But that is really

the first point in which those explicitly come into the discussion and can make or break a decision.

- Lauren

Lauren highlights that contextual information is only taken into account once a ranking is produced based on attainment data (including admissions tests and interview scores). While this contextual data might lead to relatively large changes in the ranking of candidates, this is only true because the differences between them in terms of attainment are so small; candidates with a significant attainment gap in even one metric are less likely to be moved into the offer-making range simply because the attainment distinctions between many applicants are so tiny. This approach stands in contrast to those deployed by some other participants in their subjects or colleges, wherein performance in some aspects of the admissions process is contextualised in real time (for instance, interview scores). These two approaches have the potential to produce radically different rankings. Although contextual data is acknowledged as justified in its use, the specific way in which it is deployed means that attainment data sets the contours and boundaries of the admissions process; contextual data can have an impact on the outcome, but only a limited one. Other participants who exhibit credentialist preferences in their admissions involvement describe their perceptions of the consequences of incorporating contextual data into decision-making:

...you look at the ancillary data and think if this person has been disadvantaged in some way...in those cases we actually lower the threshold to give people a better chance to get over it. You wonder if you're being kind doing this. I mean, we have taken people who really, we wouldn't have taken were it not for all the pressures we have to lower, to widen participation and stuff. And they struggle.

- Mark

Mark acknowledges the perceived legitimacy within the institution of the use of contextual data, characterising it as 'pressure', and recognises that it must be factored into the admissions process despite their obvious reservations about its use. He discusses his view that such students 'struggle' as a result of the attainment threshold being lowered in recognition of their social or educational background. Elsewhere, he clarifies that this threshold-lowering mechanism only applies to the most borderline group of students selected for interview in his subject; however, it is still of

sufficient concern to Mark that he felt it merited discussion when explaining the impact of contextual data use in their department. Admissions stakeholders who prioritise credentialist norms therefore respond to the norm of contextual assessment by incorporating it into their assessment of candidates in limited ways, either through only applying contextualisation to a limited number of possible interview candidates or by applying it only at specific points during the admissions process. Some participants express regret that the admissions system requires such a strong focus on credentialist attainment, with (as they perceive it) limited room for contextual adjustment, but suggest that there is simply no other way to satisfy the requirements of fairness which a meritocratic admissions system demands.

Notably, these participants appeared to conceptualise interview data in a slightly different way to exam grades or admissions test scores. While these markers of attainment were viewed as being impacted by context, and for some participants often as impossible to discount, interview performance was sometimes seen as a way for applicants to demonstrate their ability in a way which was somewhat distanced from their context. For instance, although this participant notes that interview performance 'usually correlates' with other markers of attainment, the interview is characterised as a space in which applicants can demonstrate their innate ability more easily than in other settings:

It's more just down to the individual tutors at individual colleges to decide whether, even though John was from Band A and didn't do that well at interviews, we thought there's something there and we're willing to take a punt.

- Mark

Interviews are therefore sometimes an avenue through which the credentialist expectations they usually have of applicants can be mitigated, in a way which does not appear to be as straightforwardly true as in the case of lower exam or admissions assessment attainment. 'John', the fictitious applicant for whom 'we thought there's something there', might be given an offer despite his interview performance being less compelling than some other candidates. This type of

contextualisation is framed in a way which the participant finds less concerning than the contextualisation of grades. I discuss the specific nature of interviews as a means of assessment later in the chapter.

4.2.2: Compromise positions in contextualist meritocratic assessment

Similarly, participants who were strongly supportive of the use of contextual assessment nonetheless recognised that the norm of credentialist meritocratic selection in Oxford is strong, salient and therefore necessarily must be incorporated into selection decisions. It is important to note that there were, among my sample, significantly more participants who exhibited a notable inclination toward contextualist rather than credentialist norms of assessment; the ubiquitous acceptance across this group that measured rather than heuristically interpreted merit could not be ignored demonstrates the perceived importance of compromise positions for participants. Perhaps the most straightforward way in which these compromises make themselves evident is through the interpretation of examination results during the confirmation process. Admissions stakeholders within colleges have the option to grant ‘clemency’ to students who have missed the grades stipulated in a conditional offer – to accept them despite their attainment falling short of the nominal standard required. This option is almost always reserved for offer-holders who have suffered acute adverse personal circumstances such as a bereavement around their exams, or for candidates from socially or educationally disadvantaged backgrounds. However, the decision to grant clemency is not automatic, and is influenced by the grades candidates receive.

*so we've had confirmation, A level results three weeks ago...So one got three Cs and one got, I don't know, a B and two Ds, something like that, that, to me, that's way off. So it's something about...what's a less strong profile, but less strong that can be, that we might argue, is explained by the opportunities?...we ask for A*AA in [subject], I think in confirmation just gone...everyone who got A*AB, or three As got admitted. So kind of one grade down. But three Cs...*

- Claire

Claire elsewhere describes her attempts to implement a contextually informed assessment of applicants' attainment through the admissions process, both during on-paper assessment and

during interviews. She also expresses her willingness to accept a less highly attaining applicant when this is 'explained by the opportunities' they have had. However, given the simultaneous importance of credentialist norms in the Oxford admissions system, there is a level of attainment below which she deems it inappropriate to admit an applicant (or, indeed, an offer-holder). She resists attempts to quantify this level precisely because, she suggests,

...the minimum might vary for Person A versus person B because of the context.

- Claire

However, it is clear that many participants sympathetic to contextual norms of assessment also employ the concept of an attainment 'baseline' which is necessary to achieve well in the context of Oxford undergraduate teaching. This is generally linked to the perceived difficulty of undergraduate study at Oxford, a theme which I discuss later in this chapter in the context of the negotiation of specific admissions decisions.

So there's a kind of lower bound on like the background skills and knowledge that you need to have, just because the academic terms here are really intense, and they're very compressed, and they have a lot of work. And there's only so much that, like, getting you up to speed stuff that we can do...if you don't have a kind of minimal ability to craft some sort of like coherent prose, you're just doomed...

- Vicky

...there's a certain baseline of current aptitude that's required to thrive on the course. And you know, that correlates only roughly with getting three As at A level...but I think there is still something to the thought that...they hit the ground running at such a pace that they, you just need a current level of aptitude to sort of keep up. And that has to be measured somehow.

- Jess

It is important to recognise, too, that contextualist norms of admission are in a sense automatically tempered by the highly credentialist nature of the admissions process at Oxford. As discussed in Chapter 3, Oxford is unusual even within the context of selective UK universities in that it does not make contextual offers to applicants from disadvantaged backgrounds. Many participants point out that Oxford's minimum grades are lower than those of many other selective universities – yet this disregards the fact that applicants from disadvantaged backgrounds to many of these universities

would not usually be expected to attain the standard offer, instead being eligible for lower contextual offers (Boliver and Powell, 2023a). These policy decisions both reflect and shape individual participants' conceptions of contextual offer-making. As Peter describes,

we are not prepared to compromise on academic standards. So the sort of overriding headline is we want the brightest people we can get, and we are not going to lower standards by doing things like contextual offers.

- Peter

Contextual offers are described as lowering standards, a credentialist reading of merit which is embodied within Oxford's admissions policies. Thus, those participants who are more aligned to contextualist norms of meritocratic assessment recognise that they necessarily have to offer concessions in how contextual data might be incorporated into Oxford's admissions system:

the obvious thing that we never talk about that I've always thought we should is just contextual offer making more generally...it's always felt to me that that's something we should consider, but it's never been considered in my time, it's always been one of those sorts of taboos.

- Paul

Stakeholders who are contextually inclined thus also make concessions to credentialist assessment, both through their own informal navigation of the admissions process, and also by the very shape and structure of the process itself – a process in which introducing contextual assessment even in line with most comparable UK institutions is considered 'taboo'.

4.2.3: Norms of merit and fairness in Oxford's admissions: the role of learning and teaching

This section considers the role of stakeholder perceptions of undergraduate learning and teaching at Oxford on admissions selection decisions. It first explores how stakeholders conceptualise undergraduate learning and teaching at Oxford, before exploring the links between these conceptualisations and the normative frameworks of merit and fairness which structure admissions decisions. I argue that although the differing conceptions of learning and teaching exhibited do not align directly with credentialist or contextualist admissions norms, they are ultimately influenced by the same conceptions and normative ideas surrounding performance, ability, power, context

and culture. As such, the relevance of learning and teaching for how merit and fairness impact admissions decisions should be understood as a normative as well as a practical issue.

4.2.3.1: Conceptions of learning and teaching at Oxford

Although many participants exhibited an inclination towards more contextualist or more credentialist norms of meritocratic assessment, almost all participants situated these norms of merit and fairness in relation to their perceptions of Oxford's undergraduate course designs and teaching and the ability of applicants to cope well in this environment. I first explore how participant perceptions of learning and teaching impact on applicant selection and consider the complex relationships between norms of credentialist and contextualist assessment and participant constructions of learning and teaching at Oxford. The majority of participants perceived Oxford's undergraduate courses to be particularly challenging, even within the context of selective UK universities. They emphasise that the expectations placed upon undergraduates at Oxford are extremely high, and – as discussed later in this chapter – often couch this understanding in dramatic terms:

we do need to recognise that undergraduate education in Oxford, and in Cambridge as well, is simply not the same as in other universities...I spent quite a lot of time teaching elsewhere, I taught at [selective university] for six and a half years, and there really is no comparison to the intensity of the work that we require of students.

- Simon

[Participant]: *I just have to plough on even if you don't know what you're doing...*

[Interviewer]: *...has that been sometimes your experience teaching on the undergraduate course in first year?*

[Participant]: *Yes. The content is enormous.*

- Daniel

all the courses are really demanding. They're really hard...A tutorial system means that there is nowhere to hide. And you have to have people on your course who are going to produce outstanding work week after week after week, who are going to cope with the pace of it...you know, I think that's what Oxford tries to do. It tries to create the most challenging courses that we could expect of an undergraduate.

- Christopher

Participants often located this perception in the volume of work which undergraduates are expected to complete; they must be able to cope with the 'intensity' of the workload, which demands 'outstanding work week after week after week'. As a result, participants describe the importance of finding students who are not only meritorious (in whatever sense they individually prioritise) but who will also be suited to the Oxford model of teaching in small tutorial discussion groups, regular demanding deadlines, and rapid mastery of a broad range of material:

we're trying to fit students not just to an elite institution, an academic institution, but also to an academic institution that teaches in a particular way. And we really want students who are going to thrive here. I think that's what tutors are looking for. That creates all sorts of problems, because it tends to be that students who are quite confident verbally, just in talking with people do quite well at that kind of assessment. And it's difficult then to control for previous experiences and academic experiences.

- Christopher

As Christopher highlights, the pressure to identify candidates who appear well-suited to the specific style of teaching used in Oxford creates potential challenges in terms of fairness of selection. The perception of extreme difficulty and intensity as a necessary characteristic of study at Oxford creates, for some participants, a sense of risk aversion. They are wary of admitting applicants who might find the course too challenging and therefore not attain highly – and as selectors are aware, prior attainment and, perhaps, study skills are impacted by social and educational background. This wariness is rooted both in a sense of moral obligation, often framed as 'fairness', towards the applicant themselves (i.e. the need to ensure a student who would find the course too difficult is not set up to fail), and in the practicalities of acting as a subject tutor. In a teaching system where staff feel 'overburdened', as Vicky describes, the prospect of admitting a student who may require significant additional support weighs heavily on the minds of admissions stakeholders. Furthermore, some participants identified tacit intercollegiate pressure to be seen to be selecting high-achieving students as an additional practical nudge towards selecting applicants who appear to be 'safer':

the greatest of all curses in Oxford is the Norrington table⁷...colleges and tutors are extremely keen not to come at the bottom...there's a huge brake on what many colleagues would think of as risk taking in admissions. Were we to shift to a Norrington table based on value added over the course of the degree, however measured, I think that would have a more transformative effect on the admissions round than almost literally anything else the university could do.

- Lee

Although the intensity of the undergraduate workload is positioned by many participants as an unfortunate practicality which impedes the acceptance of applicants with lower prior attainment, I suggest that this position is rooted in normative assumptions about the kind of student who is able to do well at Oxford. Above, Christopher describes creating the most challenging courses possible as an active objective at Oxford. I was so struck by this statement that I used it as a 'no-limits prompt' with several other participants, who broadly agreed that it was a fair characterisation of undergraduate course design. Some participants saw this simply as an anachronism of the convoluted system of collegiate and university-based teaching employed by Oxford, discouraging the review of teaching materials and curricula:

I think that there was probably never much thought put into the design of the first-year curriculum. I, what I suspect is like a lot of things at Oxford, you know, it's been this way for a long time...redesigning the first-year curriculum properly would take a bit of time and effort. And I think almost nobody feels like they have the time and effort to do that sort of thing.

- Vicky

Other participants viewed this as a conscious process in order to attract the most ambitious students through institutional prestige, arguing that:

It shouldn't be easy because then if people at Imperial are doing a more difficult course than in Oxford, all the really aspiring, ambitious [scientists] will go to Imperial, won't they? So in order to attract the best we have to offer the most stretching and challenging course.

- Mark

The broader view that much of the value of Oxford's academically elite education lay in its difficulty and the degree to which it stretched its students was echoed by participants across a

⁷ The [Norrington table](#) is a ranking of how each college's students perform in their final examinations each year; it was last produced for the 2021/22 cohort, but still plays an active role in tutors' conceptions of college performance.

range of subject backgrounds. Adam, for instance, describes his intentional choice not to offer his students more structured support in their teaching for formative assessment in order to encourage them to grapple with and (attempt to) solve difficult problems independently:

the students always say 'I wish we had a class' when they come to the tutorial, right, that they would have done so much better with the essay or the problem if they just had an hour talking about the, what they read before the tutorial...But my view is that that's probably not in their long-term best interest, that the experience of really fighting with the reading list by themselves, and coming to a tutorial, and realising where they've gone wrong, and then drawing on that experience next week is better for them than my just sitting in a room and scaffolding things for them. That's part of the point of them being here.

- Adam

This view, echoed by participants across various disciplines, is itself a normative position. It contains within it the presupposition that highly independent work which demands a large volume of output with little direction is the mode of learning which will ultimately serve the type of student which Oxford admits best. Although less high-attaining students may be admitted on the basis of their potential to excel in this system, it is clear that this potential is not uniformly realised in practice. Given that applicants from differing social and educational backgrounds are likely to have had significantly different levels of preparation for this style of learning, such a teaching style might be expected to generate significant disparities in the accessibility of the teaching model (and therefore, given the importance of perceived compatibility with the Oxford teaching model in the admissions process, in admissions chances).

When I raised this prospect with Adam he recognised it, but characterised it as an inevitable consequence of Oxford's admissions and teaching practices:

I think there is a danger, but it's one which we're obliged to risk. Right. So there's two pieces to this. One is to do with academic support for undergraduates more widely. So, you know, different colleges have different resources for things like tutors whose job it is to help students work through difficulties that they're having with the reading lists or with essay writing...And I think that there's a case for doing that. I don't think there's a case for singling out particular students for special treatment...If you've come in worse prepared, which of course students do, and you struggle more with the reading list, you struggle more. The struggle is part of the point.

- Adam

Such participants were strongly opposed to the prospect of altering academic provision for specific students on the basis of their background. While supportive of offering umbrella support to all students to help them meet the demands of the course, this academic support was positioned as something which should necessarily be auxiliary to core teaching and accessed only if a student required it in order to cope with their course demands. Encountering the dense and difficult material of the core course is therefore positioned by Adam, among others, as the most valuable part of undergraduate teaching at Oxford. Concerns about the potential implications of accessibility disparities for fairness were accepted as the necessary price of the intellectual engagement which Oxford aims to promote.

Other participants, though, question the desirability of aspects of Oxford's undergraduate teaching model. They raise questions around, variously, the volume of work required of undergraduates, expectations of the ease with which they will be able to complete it, undergraduate course design, and perceptions of the importance of teaching more generally which their colleagues display. These concerns are not solely related to the least advantaged students, but to the more general experience of undergraduate students at large. For instance, Daniel describes the growth in course content for one of the papers he teaches:

...the course has barely changed since I did it in the 1990s...But then more and more things just get added in. And nothing ever seems to leave. And that just doesn't leave much room for skills, it's just then content, and it really comes down to who you have as a tutor to help you unpick some of that. I think, yeah, I think it's a problem...You know, you hear lots of comments, you know, 'the undergrads, they're just a bit rubbish. The undergrads are just a bit rubbish'. Like, well, it's your job as a teacher [laughs], like, help them!

- Daniel

As with Vicky, Daniel sees course design – and specifically the volume of content which undergraduates are required to study – as unconsciously expanding, with an assumption that there is a necessity for undergraduates to cover as much material as possible. If they have difficulty doing so, they are characterised by Daniel's colleagues as 'just a bit rubbish'; rather than requiring different approaches to deal with the material effectively, some undergraduates are considered

innately lacking in either motivation or talent. Neil questions the utility of the delivery and volume of academic work for developing students' skills within the subject, perceiving it as being driven more by the symbolic prestige of the course being difficult than the degree to which it contributes to student development:

Oxford is very, very sink or swim. And my view is you can teach people to swim. It doesn't mean you keep them in the shallow end forever with water wings. But you don't just drop them in and let them drown...we're making it hard for reasons it doesn't need to be hard. And that impairs their potential for learning, which is really counterproductive...there is a kind of almost valoristic element of 'we survived it'.

- Neil

Considered in conjunction with Mark, for whom 'in order to attract the best we have to offer the most stretching and challenging course', this view is demonstrative of the dichotomous views held about the modalities of teaching and learning at Oxford and their impact on how admissions decisions are constructed. The degree to which undergraduate learning and teaching is perceived as equally accessible - and the degree to which this is deemed to *matter* – have clear implications for how admissions decisions are made, a normative distinction I discuss at the end of section 4.2.3. Susan connects the pathologising of students who struggle with Oxford's teaching system to the teaching expectations of tutors themselves:

You can't assume that they're so perfectly schooled, and I use that word sort of carefully I suppose, that they know exactly what you mean when you ask this sort of question and what sort of thing they're meant to produce and how they go about doing it...you know, sometimes my tutorials are about structure, you know, they're about how to structure an essay, or, I'm very careful to correct English and writing and style...the tutorial isn't always going to go the way you expect it to go. And you just have to go with that flow. 'Okay, that didn't work, right. Let's see where you are. And let's go from where you are'.

- Susan

Susan connects some tutors' teaching expectations to tacit knowledge – the ability to navigate Oxford's pedagogic expectations – displayed by higher attaining students, suggesting that this knowledge may be related to social or educational privilege – being 'perfectly schooled'. Such conceptions of teaching and learning at Oxford – the expectation of students to 'know exactly what you mean' – support the suggestion in Chapter 2 that Oxford's tutorial teaching system can be

interpreted as a form of invisible pedagogy (Bernstein, 1975), wherein the specific skills required for success remain implicit, despite often specific and high expectations regarding the work students produce. Such a system carries the risk of inequitable delivery for working-class students. For Neil this unwillingness to provide clear scaffolding for academic tasks, assuming the value of completely open exploration, is how Oxford's tutorial teaching system 'makes it hard for reasons it doesn't need to be'.

Alongside the norm of risk aversion in admissions choices in relation to undergraduate teaching, there is thus also a normative position discernible which questions the structure and ethos of Oxford's volume-heavy and intensive teaching, both on the grounds of utility and of accessibility for all.

...undergraduate teaching is, I suspect, for many colleagues a bit of a nuisance, and they would rather not have to make allowances for students that don't present with the same sort of, you know, readily available tools for cognition that most sort of middle-class privileged young people often have...what they don't particularly want is for that [teaching] stint to bleed into their other crucial day to day activities, because they have to have...a more prominent, you know, just educational function of not just assuming you can give someone a problem sheets, walk away, and then have it beautifully completed within 24 to 48 hours. So, yes, I think it is leading to a lot of interesting and challenging conversations about admissions.

- Rob

AFY stakeholders who conceive of Oxford's undergraduate learning and teaching model in this way are therefore clearly conscious of its potential impact upon admissions decisions. Crucially, the tension between these constructions is largely not focussed on whether social or educational background has an impact on an applicant's ability to transition effectively to Oxford's teaching system. Most participants, including those who are broadly supportive of Oxford's existing teaching arrangements, recognise that applicants with lower prior attainment due to social and educational disadvantage may find the transition to Oxford more challenging; however, they see this as unavoidable and, for some, the root of the benefit which Oxford offers. Conversely, those who are more (constructively) critical of Oxford's undergraduate teaching suggest that this disparity in accessibility is problematic on the grounds of equality of provision, the implicit preferences this

view may encourage in admissions decisions, and in some cases the utility of undergraduate teaching for the entire undergraduate cohort, as well as solely less advantaged students. Although these differing conceptions of Oxford's undergraduate teaching practice do not perfectly map onto the credentialist and contextualist norms exhibited in the admissions round, they are founded on a similar tension focussed on the degree to which performance in a specific cultural context is influenced by prior cultural context and material circumstance.

4.2.3.2: The normative links between conceptions of learning and teaching, and fairness and merit in admissions

For participants aligned with both credentialist and contextualist norms of meritocratic admission, much of the salience of learning and teaching at Oxford focusses on how quickly a student could adapt to and cope with Oxford's teaching system. Because of the perceived difficulty of undergraduate study, identifying applicants who can transition relatively smoothly is deemed of central importance. This can hold true for participants with credentialist assessment leanings who perceive measured attainment in its various forms to be a good (or good enough) indicator of the potential to thrive on course. It can also satisfy some forms of the contextualist norm of assessment, wherein the assumption is that by changing the applicant's learning context – for instance, by providing smaller group teaching or a more stable or better resourced learning environment – their academic ability will be able to develop fully, unconstrained by context. In practice, most contextually-aligned participants recognise the ongoing impact of social and educational disadvantage, and do not assume that such students' transitions to undergraduate study at Oxford will be straightforward. However, a central assumption of the argument for contextualist assessment of meritocracy is that transition to Oxford's undergraduate teaching system removes barriers to attainment; recall, for instance, the discussion of contextualised assessment of merit in 4.1.2:

...if you make contextual decisions, and you make sure that you think carefully about what you can expect from the person in front of you, given where they've come from, then those students who might not look quite so strong on paper, or even maybe not be so strong in interview, and quite often are not so strong on the test, but show lots of promise...they're likely to shoot forward really fast.

Some participants therefore coherently incorporate a desire to select applicants who are suited to Oxford's teaching style into both largely credentialist or largely contextualist norms of meritocratic assessment – although successful applicants in each case might look quite different. However, it is also important to recognise that for some participants, Oxford's teaching system does not represent a neutral chance to attain regardless of background. While most participants recognise that like all social spaces teaching at Oxford has non-neutral cultural practices embedded within it, some participants position these tacit, unspoken norms as powerful enough to materially impact the degree to which students from different backgrounds are able to access undergraduate learning and teaching. For instance, one participant discusses the para-academic skills required of Oxford undergraduates, exemplified here by 'resilience and ambition', as independent of social or educational background:

there's an element of what the course demands from you which is skills-based...those are things that we can teach to an extent...But I think there's a resilience and ambition piece where I'm not sure that there is a correlation between economic privilege and having that kind of resilience and that kind of ambition. I just think they're unrelated.

- Adam

Here, Adam casts resilience and ambition as personal traits, presumably randomly distributed throughout the population. However, other participants see attributes such as these, which facilitate and mediate the process of learning and teaching, as culturally reproduced and value-laden forms of socio-academic capital which transmit tacitly interpreted signals about an applicant's suitability for study at Oxford. They describe familiarity with the style of Oxford tutorial learning and teaching as allowing students from more advantaged social and educational backgrounds to exhibit behaviours which present them as (and perhaps genuinely make them) more adept within this system, in line with existing research on Oxbridge interview practice (Sharkey, 2017; see also Weston, 2021, on successful interview behaviours). For these participants, such students display learning behaviours – engagement, willing to reflexively revise and modify

their positions, self-correction, openness to discussion (the hallmarks of invisible pedagogy) – which are deemed useful within the Oxford undergraduate learning and teaching milieu simply because they have more recognition of these styles of engagement as valuable within this space:

...the thought is that certain sorts of students would just be much more comfortable picking up a completely unstructured, unannotated reading list and navigating it, maybe in part, because they've had explicit instruction on how to do that at school, whereas others haven't? Yeah, yeah. So it's easy for us to say, 'Oh, we don't want to be prescriptive' when in fact, there's been prescriptive education that some have had earlier, and others haven't...the current system kind of does allow certain sorts of students to just sort of persistently fail without them really understanding why.

- Jess

Jess, responding to a 'no-limits prompt', identifies advantages in applicants' backgrounds as potential reasons for their apparently innate potential to 'navigate a completely unstructured, unannotated reading list', suggesting that previous educational experiences may better prepare some applicants for a highly dynamic, fluid educational environment. It is important to reiterate here that such interpretations are not intended to homogenise students from particular types of background, but to recognise the impact of the material conditions in which their prior learning has occurred on their confidence and fluency in engaging with unstructured and ambiguous learning environments. Jason also identifies family and socioeconomic background as relevant to applicants' apparent potential to be comfortable with the culture of study at Oxford:

they think online interviews are better for more disadvantaged students. I really am not sure...just thinking about the fact that one person is going to probably have used a tablet almost all their lives, and the other person might just have been given the tablet for the interview...They're in a room where the light keeps going out, because they've been put in a room and you know, there's a motion sensor, kids are knocking on the windows...or they've done it at home, and they're kind of doing it with a sibling on their knee...this idea that, 'Oh, they're, well, they don't then have to come to Oxford and be in the scary situation'. It's like, okay, but you're still really not judging everyone equally.

- Jason

Jason suggests that although some admissions decision-makers are in one sense aware of the challenges more disadvantaged students face, they do not fully understand the impact these material circumstances have on the ability to demonstrate the reflexiveness and precision of thought prized at interview. Nicola argues that for more privileged students, it may be easier to

demonstrate poise and comfort with ambiguity because there is quite literally less at stake; they are tacitly aware that not receiving an offer of admission is less likely to damage their chances of achieving academic or professional success.

...they know the rules of the game. They've all experienced it, either Oxbridge or other big Russell Group institutions, but particularly the Oxbridge set up...It's the schooling that's afforded them the experiences that are similar in terms of intensity and pace...Also the affordances that I think some students come with that, if they did fail, life isn't going to end for them.

- Nicola

This is particularly salient when considering the words of a student participant reflecting on their own admission to Oxford:

...for me, a place at Oxford was almost like my ticket out of poverty...it was a higher stake for me...if it's a higher stakes environment, you're more likely to feel these stresses, and there are things that kind of get in the way of your fluid intelligence kind of acting in the way that it should act...there's times where I speak to people who say like, 'I kind of applied to Oxford because I wanted to, it wasn't that big a deal if I didn't get in'. And I think that's such a privilege to say that, because for me, like the entire trajectory of my life has changed...

- Jack

Participants recognised that individual applicants' cultural comfort with Oxford's learning and teaching ecosystem was not fully or always even partially determined by their social or educational background. Many participants referenced working-class students who were highly confident, or whose innate talent for their subject meant they were able to transcend their lack of understanding of the internalised norms of their subject. Indeed, Daniel discussed an individual student who ultimately attained exceptionally highly despite a very disadvantaged background, yet who still required significant assistance to adapt to the expectations, conventions and norms of Oxford's learning and teaching system:

[They] nearly dropped out several times in first year, 'I can't cope with the reading list. I can't get work in on time. I just can't do anything'. [They] ended up getting the highest mark in [subject] that there's ever been at the University at the end of first year because [they're] actually ridiculously smart. But there was a lot of time, you know, I had to sit with [them] for hours saying, 'This is how you read a paper. You don't need to read every single word. Does the abstract make sense? No - ditch it then. We'll come back to that'. [They'd] never read a paper. [They'd] never actually

held a physical textbook in [their] life. You know, no one in [their] family had ever been to university, and [they] just did not know what to do.

- Daniel

However, how the existence of such students is interpreted relies on the wider normative positions that participants adopt. The distinction, and relevance for fairness and merit, ultimately lies in whether participants view the culturally specific mode of undergraduate teaching at Oxford as significant enough to impact on even an innately talented student's ability to access the course and, crucially, the various elements of the admissions process. Where participants understand the effect of this culture to be trivial, they may be more likely to be risk-averse in their admissions decisions, because they perceive the lack of para-academic traits such as confidence with unfamiliar material or intellectual risk-taking to signal lack of fit with Oxford's teaching model. Conversely, participants who understand such traits as culturally inculcated may be more willing to take such risks, believing them to be 'learnable' skills. The practical question raised by Daniel's anecdote above is how many similar students might not be offered places as a result of their embodied learning styles appearing unsuitable for Oxford's teaching processes.

4.3: From conceptions to actions: the praxis and practice of undergraduate admissions decisions

The final section of this chapter explores how participants manage and enact the contrasting normative schemas and practical positions of compromise they adopt to make admissions decisions. I argue that, because of the relatively homogenous nature of much of the applicant pool, the contrasting norms governing the process which tutors tacitly accommodate, and the perception of imperfect (and sometimes even unreliable) data regarding both attainment and context, admissions decisions are often dictated by very fine distinctions made using autonomous academic judgement. I particularly focus on the admissions interview as a site of heuristic interpretation of merit and consider the potential implications this holds for the interaction of merit and fairness within Oxford's undergraduate admissions process. Such heuristics involve the negotiation

between the various normative structures relevant in the space, and I explore these negotiated practices in light of the differing constructions of merit and fairness outlined above.

4.3.1: The centrality of heuristic judgement

Although credentialist and contextualist meritocratic assessment are valuable in understanding the broad normative structures which inform selection for undergraduate admission, in practice participants routinely emphasise the extreme difficulty of discerning between applicants. The most basic cause of this difficulty is that most applicants are extremely well-qualified for admission on the basis of their prior and predicted examination record. As such, distinguishing between them on this basis is essentially impossible.

I mean, pragmatically, you simply can't just rely on prior attainment, or indeed, in the case of A levels, predicted attainment, simply because of the supply demand issue. There is not a lot of supply of Oxford places, and there are many more people who have everything that you need, who are attaining significantly above what our benchmarks are...we take [subject] in my college, we have 17 candidates for one place, for each place. Of those 17 probably 12 look equally good on paper, they have exactly the same in terms of attainment.

- Paul

...you do just have an overwhelming number of candidates with effectively perfect GCSEs and perfect A levels. And there you can contextualise all you want, but, you know, a set of straight nines and a set of A predicted is going to be the same thing no matter how you contextualise it...*

- Lauren

Furthermore, drawing distinctions even between applicants who present with very different profiles is (for some participants) problematic. Although the participants most aligned with credentialist norms discuss their preference for following the rankings produced by the various measures of attainment considered, they acknowledge that significant deviation from such rankings are possible (recall, for instance, 'Lauren's' thoughts in section 4.2.1):

...there is discussion about who to admit at the boundaries that often will result in people that are say 14th being admitted because the gap between say sixth and 14th might be vanishingly small percentage points.

- Lauren

Most participants openly recognise the difficulty of choosing between applicants with markedly different profiles, and that such decisions are ultimately influenced by the normative values of the specific admissions stakeholders involved:

...it's not easy making that prediction, and, and in particular, you know, trying to weight the various sources of evidence against each other. Now, I think, you know, our selectors would say, 'yes, we're all trained to do that'. But I have also talked to some who say, 'Well, I would, sort of, maybe this person with the rather modest record would do well, but I couldn't bring myself to reject the person with the rather better record, you know, who we think can be relied upon to at least do okay'. And that is arguably, where you get down to a matter of academic judgement.

- Julie

Julie argues it is simply not possible to objectively and neutrally discern between the different sources, and different types, of information which admissions selectors are required to consider. The extent to which a particular type or degree of disadvantage has impacted an individual's attainment is in practical terms not possible to measure, and selectors therefore resort to their own 'academic judgement', informed by the various information available to them. This finding is consonant with previous work in the field which explores how the large degree of autonomy enjoyed by Oxbridge tutors insulates them from market- or regulator-driven decisions (Mountford-Zimdars and Grim, 2023). The decision between applicants with 'modest record[s] who might do well' and those with 'rather better records who can be relied upon to at least do okay' is ultimately one related to individual applicants, but also to the normative frameworks of fairness and merit which particular selectors find more plausible and persuasive. Notably, the deployment of 'data' (considered as a technology of power, rather than simply an administrative tool) in the admissions process also has complex effects which impact and complicate the autonomous academic judgement which admissions stakeholders endorse. Attainment data readily supports norms of credentialist meritocracy, while contextual data can equally promote norms of contextually assessed merit. However, despite stakeholders recognising that neither data type is a perfect indicator of either ability or context, some participants see 'data' being deployed as a heuristic itself to guide and sometimes shape admissions decisions. This concern applies both to

misleading attainment and contextual data, illustrating the tension between interpretative and measuring approaches to admissions decisions.:

...how tutors are saying it more now is, 'now we've got much better data, if these people now emerge at the top, they must be the best'. And so they're thinking less about how getting that number, who's top, how flawed, and actually, how many kind of decisions have gone into that number ...they kind of internalise that into sort of like, 'well, you know, kind of the numbers don't say it'.

- Michael

The uneasy tension involved in incorporating 'data' into the inevitable heuristic judgements which admissions stakeholders make illustrates the normative attraction of legitimising objectivity through 'data' as a technology, and the recognition by most tutors that subjective decision-making is both inevitable in such a process, and contentious due to the need for perceived fairness. Crucially, the individual judgements which tutors make, in conversation with their colleagues, are treated as essentially sacrosanct. Although collegiate decision-makers in some subjects receive stronger steers from their departments than others, final decisions about which candidates to admit fall to the small group of subject specialists within each college. Neither colleagues from their own college in different subjects, nor even colleagues in the same subject from other colleges, can legitimately object to these decisions:

*I say, '...it's important to sort of think about various contextual things' or whatever...[but] I want to nearly always say, 'but this is your decision'...**Ultimately, academic judgement, you know, is not itself challengeable.** So tell me what the academic judgement is, what the academic basis is for the decision, and we will go with your judgement.*

- Julie, my bolding

4.3.2: The role of the interview

The admissions interview is a core aspect of the heuristic decision-making which is central to enacting plural norms of fairness and merit in Oxford's undergraduate admissions. Given the widely recognised limitations of each type of attainment data available both from public examinations or admissions tests, the large majority of academic participants viewed interviews as a key opportunity to more accurately discern innate merit, ability and suitability for Oxford's teaching among applicants, supplementing the other data available to selectors.

...I do think in that respect, interviews, whilst they have certain problematic characteristics, also have the potential to give us an insight into how an individual will respond to tutorial teaching...it gives us an opportunity, I think, to see how people learn, and there's nothing else in the application that gives us that opportunity...I've sat in on interviews in a number of different disciplines. And you do occasionally see people and think, 'Oh, that was sharp. Shrewd'.

- Julie

I'm aware that there is research that says 'ooh, interviews, take them with a pinch of salt, take them with a pinch of salt', my very anecdotal personal experience is that actually they're not a crazy way to do Oxford admissions...Oxford interviews are remarkably like Oxford tutorial teaching. And actually, it works best for everybody if we admit people that do well in that context...Less as an assessment of what you're doing at school and much more of an 'okay, if I introduce you to something that you haven't seen before...do you ask questions that help you think through it and can we have that conversation that really quickly gets you through that?'

- Charlotte

Interviews are understood as significantly different from the other aspects of the admissions process in that they allow the chance to both model undergraduate teaching, and to interact with candidates to discern their ability to think 'shrewdly'. Strikingly, interviews are highly valued by participants with radically different normative inclinations surrounding admissions. There are a small number of participants who question the usefulness of interviews within the admissions process. For some, this is because they view the very fine distinctions which interviews help identify (or, perhaps, create) as essentially meaningless in terms of merit:

I am a strong believer that we spend far too much time and effort on...very fine-tuned selection from among a group of very bright people...a simpler system wouldn't necessarily be less perfect than the one we've got at the moment. But I have no confidence at all in my ability to persuade most of my colleagues of that.

- Peter

These participants regard interviews as superfluous in that any additional distinctions they help draw between applicants are not indicative of differences in talent or working practice to the degree that they should influence decisions. Other participants who critique the interview do so on the grounds of fairness and effectiveness, arguing that the interview is a culturally contingent space the outcomes of which are influenced by embodied forms of cultural capital. For these participants, the traits which most interviewers perceive as innate are actually culturally inculcated modes of

communication and learning which advantage applicants from particular - generally more privileged - backgrounds.

There are some people I've interviewed with over the years who, and still interview with, who I think are so keen on very dry academic qualities that they find it hard to allow for disadvantage ...we'll quite often begin with something that should be a bit of a kick it out the park job, something simple, based very much [at] GCSE level...For me, that's to test nerves. But I have had colleagues who see that as a sign of inadequacy...the way you're laying out a problem or explaining it or trying to give a hint may not resonate in somebody's mind and grasp it quickly, especially when you're under time pressure in an interview. So those things, I think I've seen them affect decisions...

- Lisa

Such observations evoke the discussion in section 4.2.3.1 surrounding views of Oxford's teaching and learning ecosystem and are discussed further in Chapter 5. Despite her strong credentialist stance, Rachel identifies understanding how to interact with the setting of the interview, and applicants' preparation for it, as a salient factor in gaining admission, reflecting her critical position on Oxford's admissions processes:

if you do [subject]...one way of thinking about it, which I'm not unsympathetic to is, it's just like, it's an incredibly rich articulation of bourgeois thinking, right? That's more or less what I do, that's my job. And, you know, you can't really do that stuff well, without a little bit of training in being a bourgeois thinker, you know, like, you have to read a bit of middle class, you have to read a few novels and chat around the dinner table with your family, or whatever it is...

- Rachel

This suggests that Stenhouse and Ingram's (2024) interpretation of embodied cultural capital in terms of how to hold space and engage with discussion, rather than the specific words used, may be a relevant factor in understanding the sociocultural space of the interview.

While Peter, Lisa and Rachel raise critiques of the interview process, they are among a small minority to do so. The excerpts from Julie and Charlotte above demonstrate the widespread perception that interviews provide value to the admissions process by offering the chance to 'find potential' in applicants. I argue that this conception is prevalent because the interview space is sufficiently flexible to allow admissions stakeholders to deploy the normative framework they are

most inclined towards in identifying potential. Whether admissions stakeholders prioritise a credentialist or contextualist understanding of merit, the interview space offers the latitude and individual discretion to operationalise either conception while acknowledging the importance of alternative understandings. For more credentialist stakeholders, the interview offers the chance to ‘double-check’ the indicators of merit which a strong prior academic record suggests while maintaining a route for contextual assessment; for contextually orientated stakeholders, it allows for an avenue of assessment removed from more formally credentialised aspects of the admissions process such as exam and admissions assessment grades and scores. It is the strongest expression of the ubiquitously accepted norm of autonomous academic judgement; while in other elements of the process data is heuristically assessed, here is it heuristically *produced*. It therefore provides an avenue to question or override the logic of data-driven ranking which would signify a purely credentialist admissions process, and which sets the bounds and defines the limits of legitimate decisions even in Oxford’s pluralist and contextually influenced system.

These findings speak to some extent to Zimdars’ (2010) conclusion of homophilic selection. I position the preference for students who demonstrate their ability in particular ways which are consonant with Oxford’s existing model of teaching as a recognition by assessors from across the spectrum of normative leanings of the supremacy of individual academic judgement. However, in line with Stenhouse and Ingram (2024) and Sharkey (2017), I ultimately argue in Chapter 7 that this teaching model itself represents a form of invisible pedagogy – one with the potential to reproduce inequities in admissions decisions, whether assessors favour credentialist or contextualist norms of merit.

4.3.3: The role of exceptionalism

Across the admissions process, but particularly in the context of the interview, some participants discussed in general terms applicants they perceived as ‘exceptional’. Such applicants were framed in two main ways: either as disadvantaged students with relatively low attainment, but who

nonetheless demonstrated very high levels of talent and potential during the admissions process (usually at interview); or as constructed images of what successful Oxford applicants were required to be. For instance, some participants describe their colleagues' attitudes to applicants they deemed exceptional (strikingly, using the same metaphor of 'rough diamonds'):

...there are people who go on about like, diamonds in the rough and all that kind of thing. And I hate that. I don't like that at all. I, personally I'm a sort of first-generation university person...This is not how that works. But obviously, from the point of view of selective university, I can kind of see how that logic starts to seem inevitable.

- Samantha

you know, there's the rough diamond, right, which is the kind of model everybody's working with. I think that's totally obviously a possibility in some [subjects]...but I think it's not obvious that...the rough diamond model works for everybody.

- Rachel

Although the majority of my participants were critical of such an understanding of talent, as with strictly credentialist meritocratic norms, they firmly identify it as a facet of many admissions stakeholders' conception of merit. The salience of 'exceptionalism' in the sense of innate talent which transcends more formalised mechanisms of measuring ability has clear implications for how the role of credentialist meritocracy is conceived for some admissions stakeholders:

[Participant]:...the people we were actually after who have got the relevant deprivation and are good enough, are just good enough to do the degree...the issue is, can we have the confidence to take people with three Bs, sometimes? That's all we needed to do...[just] some careful work in thinking about for whom to make lower offers.

[Interviewer]: So that's really interesting, right? Because - and I don't mean this as a gotcha, I'm interested in how the tension works - you said earlier that three As is kind of for you the minimum standard...is it just that there are very, very rarely these exceptional people?

[Participant]: Yeah. Yeah. Now the question is, to what extent should we be doing it?...I'm absolutely confident that there are a relatively small number of people who, for various reasons, are really, absolutely able to do the degrees that we offer.

- Kevin

Discussing the AFY, Kevin resists the idea of lowering entrance grades in a routine or procedurally determined way, instead prioritising the heuristic judgement of individual admissions selectors to lower grades when they identify such exceptional individuals. Kevin favours a relatively 'hard' grade cut-off of three A grades at A level, yet recognises the contextual limitations placed

upon disadvantaged applicants in attaining these grades. The notion of exceptionalism, recognised through heuristic assessment by subject experts, allows him to reconcile this tension. As such, the combination of exceptionalism and the latitude which individual tutors enjoy justifies the lack of formal flexibility in entry requirements because tutors are able to make lower offers at their discretion in cases which are deemed extreme outliers. Other participants, conversely, perceive the idea of exceptionalism as potentially damaging in that it creates additional hurdles for disadvantaged students to meet, either in terms of their personal circumstances or their performance. This participant discusses the role of exceptionalism in 'redeeming' applicants for interview who would otherwise be rejected:

I'd be going 'look, there's lots of interesting, interesting people in here' as in not just people who looks like the standard, every other person. And the thing is to be able to then rescue them from that list, I had to be able to say there was something, if you like, exceptional about that person. And often I'd be reading their forms going 'well, they're just normal people'. And it's not that...it said something terrible had happened to them or whatever, then you could say, 'look, actually, there's a reason this person might not have been shortlisted'. But I started reading and thinking, well, actually, it's just that they're normal kids from normal schools with normal backgrounds.

- Jason

For Jason the idea of the 'exceptional' candidate is inhibitory to admitting students from less advantaged backgrounds. Rather than focussing attention on their attainment within their context, the notion of exceptionalism demands that for applicants who do not fit the usual attainment profile to be considered, they must exhibit either extreme adverse circumstances or perform exceptionally well in the more heuristic aspects of the assessment process. Because some applicants from such backgrounds are deemed exceptional, those who simply perform well given their background are deemed inadequate.

4.4: Conclusions

This chapter constructs a portrait of the admissions and teaching ecosystem into which the AFY is being introduced, and the normative tensions which structure and discipline it. This portrait frames the remainder of the thesis and inflects both its empirical and theoretical findings, providing a stage

which is both background and foreground – the environment in which the AFY is developed, and also a core influence on how it develops. The argument for multiple narratives surrounding the admissions process’ core concepts of merit and fairness departs from the extant literature significantly, shifting from homogenous explanations of how admissions decisions are made to a recognition that understanding the interplay between different conceptions of the process’ end goal is crucial. In Chapter 7, I place these tensioned normative conceptions within the context of my theorisation of my case. I argue they should be interpreted as multiple institutional habituses: institutionally inflected and normatively generated modes of being which structure and inform my academic participants’ constructions and actions in relation to both the mainstream admissions and teaching ecosystem, and the AFY.

Discussion of the importance of learning and teaching for admissions decisions is also crucial to understand how individual decisions about applicants happen in practice, and to make sense of how participants construct the AFY. By making explicit the centrality of undergraduate tutorial teaching in admissions tutors’ considerations of applicants, this chapter highlights the necessity of interpreting the learning and teaching methods at Oxford as socio-culturally imbued practices rather than neutral and apolitical encounters. This topic is explored further in Chapters 5 and 6, which examine how participants (including student participants) construct the AFY’s teaching principles in the light of their experiences of the mainstream tutorial system, and how they respond to their presence through their mainstream teaching practice.

Lastly, I have explored the crucial role of autonomous academic judgement and notions of exceptionalism which underpin the admissions of many applicants whom participants consider ‘access candidates’, concepts which are deployed through the medium of the admissions interview. Recognising the importance of the interview in the mainstream process is necessary to analyse how selection is constructed in the context of the AFY, and how ‘exceptionalism’ and its divining rod, autonomous academic judgement, are mobilised to maintain, police and subvert boundaries

between the AFY and mainstream undergraduate study. I explore the concept of boundaries, and their enacting and dismantling, in Chapters 6 and 7 through reference to the interactions between the AFY and the mainstream admissions context in which it is delivered.

Chapter 5: Constructions of and participation in the Astrophoria Foundation Year

This chapter primarily addresses RQ2: how do the normative constructions of fairness present in the mainstream admissions round interact with how stakeholders construct and engage with the AFY? It therefore draws upon the findings established in Chapter 4 to explore how the existing admissions environment impacted how normative meaning was ascribed to the AFY during its design and implementation phases. This chapter also partially speaks to RQ3: how do AFY stakeholders interact with one another, both within the AFY and the mainstream admissions process, to enact their constructions of fairness? Inevitably, the lines between construction and enactment are blurred and messy, and as such including some elements of action here – simply put, decisions about AFY involvement and the shape of the programme – serves the broader analysis. These actions are included in Chapter 5 because they largely took place before teaching on the AFY's first intake began; they speak to how the programme was shaped and influenced by the tensioned constructions of merit and fairness already present in Oxford. Chapter 6 also focusses on RQs 2 and 3. However, it examines smaller and more informal acts of institutional work which shaped the practical reality of how the AFY's normative meaning(s) came to rest against the mainstream admissions process once the programme was in place. Chapter 6 therefore closes the analytical loop of the case study by reflecting not just on how the existing admissions ecosystem shaped the AFY, but how the AFY in turn interacts with and reshapes the normative field of admissions which it joins.

This chapter's first section discusses the broader context of alternative entry routes to Oxford in light of the University's 2020-2025 Access and Participation Plan. This section explores two collegiate projects which served as the basis for wider university-led initiatives covered in the APP, the LMH Foundation Year and the University College Bridging Programme. These programmes were germane in the development of the AFY and Opportunity Oxford respectively, and I explore how their reception within the collegiate university laid the groundwork for the programmes which

followed them. The second section analyses the AFY as a locus of contestation for the tensioned norms explored in Chapter 4. It considers the justifications and objections to the AFY which key decision-makers and constituents raise, and how to interpret these arguments in the light of the mainstream admissions round's governing norms.

The third section considers how sub-organisations within Oxford – colleges and departments – made decisions regarding their participation in the AFY. I theorise the factors influencing such decisions as shaped by both the doxic bounds of the field, in the form of autonomous academic judgement, and the multiple institutional habituses which operate within these bounds to structure the mainstream admissions and teaching space. Finally, the chapter's fourth section brings together the theoretical analyses offered throughout the chapter to offer a coherent account of how the concepts of heuristic, autonomous tutor judgement as a bounding normative principle, and the institutional habituses of credentialist and contextualist meritocratic admission, inform views of the AFY. I introduce the concept of 'maintained contradiction', which builds upon Stewart's (2023) work on maintained disruption to suggest that the differential ways in which Opportunity Oxford and the AFY are viewed are rooted in the extent to which they challenge the autonomy of academic tutors – and therefore the notion of autonomous academic judgement as a doxic boundary within Oxford.

5.1: Alternative entry routes amid the emergence of contextual assessment

This section examines how Oxford has resisted the sector-wide drive to implement contextual offers for undergraduate students, and the programmes it has included in its regulatory commitments instead. It explores the origins of these programmes and the development of their normative meanings within Oxford's admissions landscape, before considering their relative reception to frame the discussion in the remainder of Chapter 5.

The inception of the OfS as England's HE regulator prompted more urgent demands for improvement on access, continuation and success measures for undergraduate students through

the introduction of Access and Participation Plans (APPs). APPs sought to move the expectation on HE institutions from what they would do to promote access, continuation and success to the results they would achieve, with the expectation of faster progress, more ambitious action and clearer plans for implementation (OfS, 2018; 2019). As Boliver and Powell (2023: 47) note, Oxford is among only four very high-tariff institutions in England to refuse to lower academic entry criteria for disadvantaged students, despite the growing call to do so from researchers and the OfS itself (OfS, 2019a; Boliver, Gorard and Siddiqui, 2021). Oxford's 2020-25 APP justifies this so:

Oxford's courses are academically demanding, fast moving and intensive. We believe this is essential in order to challenge and stimulate some of the brightest minds in the country, and to produce graduates equipped with the high level skills and intellectual dexterity that society and the economy needs. All our courses set standard entry grades of AAA or higher.

University of Oxford, 2020: 3.

The implication is that students with grades lower than AAA could not be expected to cope with an 'academically demanding, fast moving and intensive' course, a subject already discussed at length in Chapter 4. However, given the pressure of the regulatory climate it was necessary to demonstrate commitment to the widening participation agenda in other ways which signalled a step forward from previous initiatives. As Peter explains,

[Participant]: *all universities had to prepare an access and participation plan five years ago... on the back of that, we really wanted some significant initiatives that were going to turn the dial...*

[Interviewer]: *Why was it perceived within the university that turning the dial quite decisively was necessary?*

[Participant]: *I mean, I think we recognised that our data weren't good enough.*

- Peter

As a result of this impetus, the 2020-25 APP set out an ambition to focus on 'improv[ing] the opportunities for admission for those from disadvantaged backgrounds who fail to receive an offer, or who, because of prior academic attainment, are not able to make competitive applications' (University of Oxford, 2020: 2). Both the AFY and Opportunity Oxford were therefore introduced in

a context in which Oxford had chosen not to adopt the more radical option of contextual offer-making, as many other highly selective institutions had. As such, in the 2020-25 APP they are specifically framed as 'addressing the challenge' outlined above; they are labelled as 'the major access initiatives' (2020: 26), distinguishing them from existing types of access and admissions intervention.

Both schemes were conceptually developed from existing college-based initiatives to widen access. Opportunity Oxford was based on University College's Opportunity Programme, which from 2016 aimed to safeguard a small proportion of undergraduate places per year for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, paired with a three-week pre-course bridging programme designed to develop key academic skills. The AFY was inspired by the LMH Foundation Year, which operated from 2016 - 2020 offering a similar model to the AFY, although with different subject options. Participants generally agreed that the collegiate projects were crucial in the development of both the AFY and Opportunity Oxford.

we alighted on two particular initiatives that had potential and had support from, seemed to have fairly wide approval in some parts of the university. And those were the Univ Opportunity programme, which evolved into Opportunity Oxford, and the LMH foundation year which provided the inspiration for the Astrophoria Foundation Year.

- Peter

[Interviewer]: *Do you think the University foundation year would be possible if the LMH foundation year hadn't happened?*

[Participant]: *Would it be possible? Yes. Would it be happening? No.*

[Interviewer]: *Why is that?*

[Participant]: *The LMH foundation year kind of advocates worked really hard to make it part of the conversation. And particularly when we were doing the APP.*

- Rebecca

I think without those pilots...I don't think this conversation would be happening if, if those other schemes had not been in place.

- Christopher

The AFY and Opportunity Oxford must therefore be understood as both genealogically connected to their collegiate precursors not merely in their structure (although there are important differences between the collegiate and university programmes) but in how they are understood by the admissions ecosystem's constituents. Participants often spontaneously link the schemes together in their discussion or assume similarities between them, and these inherited constructions of both Opportunity Oxford and the AFY shape participants' thoughts about the programmes. The differential reception which Opportunity Oxford and the AFY received must therefore be considered in the context of their collegiate inspiration. Opportunity Oxford, which first ran in 2020, is generally accepted and positively viewed by my academic participants. It is interpreted as a mechanism by which admissions tutors can make offers they might otherwise feel uneasy about due to a candidate's social and academic disadvantage, which they perceive as being mitigated for by the provision of the course.

...Opportunity Oxford has had a very positive impact on admissions in [subject]. It makes tutors think hard about giving places to candidates who are disadvantaged. Knowing that extra tuition will be provided by the programme reduces the perception of risk around taking students who are close to being admitted. The programme also provides tutors a legitimate venue to argue for the admission of certain disadvantaged students.

- Gemma

I think we were all very surprised that after the first year of the change in contextual data kind of provision and the way things were represented on UCAS forms, and also the first year of Opportunity Oxford, just what a step change was achieved.

- James

This point is best illustrated by Paul, who notes that (in contrast to the AFY), '[their college] doesn't particularly like Opportunity Oxford either, but we do it'. Opportunity Oxford, although not universally popular, is accepted despite the reservations which some stakeholders in the mainstream admissions process hold towards it; while some participants suggest that more resources and a longer intervention is required, very few seriously critique the concept of the programme itself. As Peter describes,

It wasn't completely uncontentious. There were parts of the university that said, you know, the candidates you're targeting...we think we're already looking really closely at those and admitting them where they're good enough. And there was some scepticism about the bridging elements of the programme as well...but I think there was a broader will to give it a go.

- Peter

This near-universal acceptance, if not outright advocacy, was not replicated for the AFY. In contrast, the scheme was met with starkly divergent responses from different stakeholders. While some admissions professionals were supportive, others were immediately and deeply opposed to the scheme. In some cases, colleges or departments made blanket decisions not to be involved with the scheme on the basis of ideological objections within these sub-organisations to the principles of the AFY. For instance, Paul explains that

the basic view that this college has, is that the appropriate thing to do is to invest very heavily in you know, efforts that raise attainment, raise aspiration, amongst people in schools. But a foundation year kind of runs counter to that, it's...a sort of Willy Wonka golden ticket. It's a very, very small number of people. It's quite random who gets it, the selection criteria...

- Paul

Paul suggests that this view was 'pretty hard-boiled into the college', with no individual subject tutors expressing a desire to be involved. However, across the majority of the university there is significant diversity of views both in colleges and departments which are participating and those which are not; most participants' constructions of the AFY were not wholly determined by the sub-organisations within Oxford they belonged to, further demonstrating the diversity of opinion the AFY's proposal inspired. Few participants describe their impression of why Opportunity Oxford and the AFY received such different responses. However, those who do raise two central reasons for the greater level of consternation surrounding the AFY, both of which relate to the central concepts of autonomous academic judgement and competing definitions of merit in different ways. First, Jason describes his view that some colleagues simply objected on the basis that entry grades to Oxford were being relaxed.

it was then considered that LMH had totally trashed the common framework by saying 'well, we're going to put in place this programme that says we will offer people slightly lower grades'...Univ didn't seem to [get] quite as much stick for having done something around admissions as well. So there was a lot of, you know, 'how dare you have done this? How dare you bring in people who are lower than the average grades...?'...it was very much 'How dare you bring people in with lower grades', rather than 'how dare you do something that is against the framework' because that was what Univ was doing too.

- Jason

For Jason, the official objection raised against both the LMH foundation year and the AFY rested on the principle that the CFA, the document governing admissions arrangements between colleges, had been breached by the introduction of the AFY's collegiate precursor. However, he interprets this as being rooted in the grade reduction inherent in the AFY's design; although in his view University College's Opportunity Programme was comparable to the LMH foundation year, it did not compromise the prevailing norm that Oxford's standard offer should not be reduced. As such, Jason interprets latent norms of credentialist merit as instrumental in generating opposition to the AFY.

Lee also discusses the introduction of Opportunity Oxford in relation to the AFY but situates his analysis in the level of control afforded to individual admissions tutors in its implementation. He argues that the willingness of Opportunity Oxford's administrators to allow flexibility to individual tutors in applying the scheme as best suited them in their collegiate context prompted greater appetite to adopt and embed the scheme within Oxford's existing admissions processes.

in order to persuade admissions tutors to internalise Opportunity Oxford as a thing that basically everyone would do and everyone would sign up for right from day one, the price for that is to basically let people bend the criteria in whatever direction they want...Doing that through a process that has been in effect 100% consensual, through allowing people to bend the rules at every point, I think has been a quite striking contrast to the foundation year scheme, where that kind of as it were rule bending and allowing colleges and faculties to make what they want of it has not really happened.

- Lee

Lee locates the wider degree of objection to the AFY in the doxic principle of tutor autonomy – the primacy of individual autonomous academic judgement about which students to admit. Because it offers less flexibility around student eligibility – and, indeed, how students are admitted – the AFY challenges a central tenet of Oxford’s admissions ecosystem which is more fundamental than simply how merit is defined, but which instead forms the boundaries of the possible within the social and professional field of Oxford admissions. As such, it provokes greater debate and opposition from stakeholders throughout Oxford, including those who subscribe to more credentialist norms of merit. I explore specifically how these dual contraventions of normative positions interact with the AFY’s introduction, and the objections and justifications they prompt, throughout the chapter, and consider their theoretical implications in Chapters 6 and 7. However, at this point it is sufficient (and necessary) simply to recognise that the collegiate precursors to both the AFY and Opportunity Oxford, and indeed the pre-existence of Opportunity Oxford itself, shape the environment in which the AFY was introduced and inflect the constructions which stakeholders throughout the admissions ecosystem form of it. I now explore the specific conceptions, justifications and objections which my participants offer regarding the AFY, and how these influence their actions towards it, both on their individual parts and as representatives and influential decision-makers within their sub-organisations.

5.2: The AFY as a locus of contested norms

This section will analyse the various specific arguments advanced in support of and opposition to the AFY. I first explore the variety of arguments commonly deployed, and then analyse them in the context of the normative positions explored in Chapter 4. In doing so, I situate the positions different participants take in relation to the AFY in relation to their views on the mainstream admissions process. It might reasonably be expected that stakeholders with more contextualist leanings might be more positively predisposed to the AFY, and this does broadly hold true; however, this is by no means a universal rule. As my analysis makes clear, participants’ positionings on the AFY are complex and nuanced, reflecting the sub-organisational context of their college or department, and

the particularities of their conception of the scheme's purpose, as well as simply their broad views on mainstream admissions. I explore further how participants' individual positions are mediated by their sub-organisational position in the following section, concerning the participation decisions made by both sub-organisations and individuals.

5.2.1: Support for the AFY

Participants offered three common justifications for participation in the AFY. These justifications rely on different argumentative logics which suggest varying positionings in relation to the norms prevalent in the mainstream admissions round. I consider them in turn, before discussing the broad characteristics of the actors who tended to support the AFY – insofar, indeed, as this is possible.

5.2.1.1: *The regulatory impetus*

The first justification I discuss is the bald recognition of a regulatory need to admit a more diverse cohort of undergraduates. Participants in a wide variety of stakeholder positions identified pressure as a result of the 2020-25 APP as a pragmatic reason to support the introduction of a bold new initiative; recall Peter's words earlier in this chapter that 'I think we recognised that our data weren't good enough'. This view is clear from many participants who strongly support the introduction of the AFY:

Universities then had to come up with an Access and Participation Plan...there was an expectation there'd be a step change in our admissions profile, and this plan, and whatever we were going to throw into it, would be the driver...When you'd go to a meeting where the Pro-VC for Education didn't say step change, it was like access bingo.

- James

[Participant]:...my reading between the lines of what made it change was this, was the external regulator in this report, I can't remember what it's called...

[Interviewer]: *The Access and Participation Plan?*

[Participant]: *That's it, and the university needed to write down something pretty strong [laughs] and they thought 'Oh, okay. Maybe actually, we should try doing what LMH has been doing'.*

- Charlotte

However, this argument is also recognised as influential by participants who wholly or partially disagree with it as a justification for introducing the AFY. For instance, Paul, whose college opted not to participate in the AFY, constructs the regulatory pressure created by the 2020-25 APP as leading to undesirable proposals in the form of Opportunity Oxford and the AFY:

it felt very much like, you know, the university got put on the naughty step by Ofsted [the OfS], and it just out of the blue very quickly picked these two schemes said, 'This is what we're doing'...when they were presented to colleges and people doing admissions they just hadn't been thought through.

- Paul

Michael presents a similar critique of the argument for the regulatory imperative, specifically with regard to the AFY:

people looked at it and went, 'Oh, my God, I'm desperate to find something that we can put in to make people happy. So let's go for that one. [We] don't have anything else'. But what we're not doing is saying, 'Well, should we actually be doing that? Or should we be doing clearing? Or should we be doing something else?'

- Michael

There are two key differences between Paul and Michael's views here, which I examine more fully later in the chapter as an example of key normative differences in the AFY's construction. First, Michael reserves the critique that regulatory demands pushed the university into instituting admissions reform solely for the AFY, while Paul also levels this charge at Opportunity Oxford. Second, while Paul's college elected not to take part in the AFY, Michael's college opted in, despite their reservations which were shared by many colleagues. The structural position of their respective colleges, and the differential demands and negotiations this placed upon them, is an example of a crucial aspect of the AFY's construction, which I analyse in the final section of this chapter.

The accession to regulatory demands could be interpreted as value-free, simply the recognition of the realpolitik of the sector. However, as Paul's college's response demonstrates, both individual actors and sub-organisations retained agentic independence in their response to the central university's decision to implement the AFY, and the deployment of the regulatory imperative

argument signals a conception of Oxford's status as an institution subject to the same pressures and obligations as other institutions. As Rob explains,

I suppose being frank another motivation was that I didn't want to be left behind. I didn't want Oxford to be one of the few Russell Group universities not doing this.

- Rob

By contrast, the question of whether Oxford should be doing 'something else', as Michael discusses, raises the possibility of setting Oxford apart from the majority of its comparator highly selective institutions. The extent to which participants see Oxford as operating within a separate paradigm to other institutions is an important lens of analysis which links to both admissions and teaching practices, and which I draw into a wider analysis at the end of this chapter. This is a valid question: significant prior research suggests that Oxford and Cambridge can be considered functionally a separate category of university compared to others in the UK (Boliver, 2015; Stewart, 2023). The perception of Oxford being 'different' to other universities with similar programmes introduces a crucial tension which I explore throughout the rest of the thesis: whether the AFY should be a distinct, compartmentalised programme within Oxford's admissions and teaching ecosystems, or whether (some of) its principles should be integrated into the design of mainstream teaching and admissions processes. At this point, it suffices to highlight that the extent to which participants construe regulatory pressure to conform in admissions reform as desirable is itself a normative position, with implications for both mainstream admissions and teaching, and the AFY.

5.2.1.2: The social justice imperative: "We have to do this..."

The second common justification offered is also *prima facie* straightforward: that introducing the AFY is simply the morally correct thing to do. This is generally presented by those who support the AFY as an uncomplicated position – that measures which widen access to Oxford are generally accepted as ethically right. Anthony summarises one department's willingness to participate in the AFY thus:

I think probably the simple answer is that they thought it was the right thing to do. This is an access issue, we should be in there with the latest access initiative.

- Anthony

There is a wide assumption in many participants' discussion that presents such issues as obvious, and indeed, this is often replicated in the online documents I analysed which present the necessity of diversifying Oxford as unquestionable:

Mansfield was originally founded to provide an education to those previously denied access to the University. That founding principle of inclusion and openness is still central to the College's aims.

- Mansfield College, Oxford:
'Access and Outreach' webpage

When asked to justify the social justice imperative with regard to the AFY specifically, these participants frame the severe disadvantages which applicants have faced, coupled with their relatively high attainment given their context, as necessitating the creation of a more equitable route to elite institutions such as Oxford.

for the foundation year in particular, I mean, a lot of the criteria we're using to think about who to bring in involves people who have like, very serious kind of disadvantages in their life...I think that those people ought to be given kind of more of an opportunity than they have, like [as] a moral matter.

- Vicky

Earlier in this passage of discussion, Vicky links the necessity of diversifying elite institutions to the role they play in the wider world, describing the risks associated with populating institutions such as Parliament with graduates of very similar background and experience. Indeed, some participants adopt a more overtly critical line towards Oxford's moral position on admissions reform and its manifestation through the AFY; by highlighting the AFY's relatively late introduction compared to similar initiatives elsewhere, they frame its introduction not only as a moral good but a moral obligation.

My gut reaction is about time [laughs]. These things have been standard, and I've worked with them at other universities for a while.

Neil's interpretation, like Rob's, highlights the question of whether Oxford should be considered as categorically different from other universities is a core issue in how participants conceptualise the moral and normative meaning of the AFY. Indeed, for some participants the social justice imperative also raises the spectre of the integration debate. In discussing the reasons why different stakeholders have opted to support the AFY, Peter nods to the importance of the 'social mission' in driving engagement, but also highlights that the AFY is relatively small in scale compared even to Opportunity Oxford:

they feel Oxford should be doing more to support really disadvantaged people than it is...there's a sort of numerical aspect of setting targets for diversifying our intake, but actually, the foundation year is always going to be a relatively small contributor to that.

- Peter

Peter argues that the AFY's size means its drivers are inherently at least partially purely altruistic. However, the small, separated nature of the AFY also speaks to the second way in which its introduction is considered a social justice issue – one which lays bare one side of the integration debate.

5.2.1.3: The social justice imperative: "...to reach this kind of person."

The truncated explanation in the titles of the previous two sections is a paraphrasing of a normative position, rather than a direct quotation. It is intended to demonstrate that beyond the broad notion that introducing the AFY is an ethical good, there is a specific formation of the social justice argument which positions the hypothetical AFY applicant as categorically different from other types of undergraduate applicant – even those who would normally be considered disadvantaged. Several participants who were involved in varying degrees with the AFY's introduction argued that the programme was intended to reach applicants whose circumstances were so disruptive that attaining the standard grade offering was functionally impossible.

if someone is presenting with three As, even if they do have various flags, that is highly likely that they've come from more supportive educational environments...there are a lot of young people that would be working just as hard, who just simply could not amount to three As, because they might be, you know, someone coming out of local authority care, or they might be on free school meals, or health care responsibilities...

- Rob

these are not just candidates a bit further down the list, they are candidates who have suffered such educational disadvantage that they could never make a competitive application. So we really have to try and divorce it from this idea that we're just looking at a ranking list and randomly picking some people from a bit further down it.

- Peter

The positioning of AFY applicants as those who could 'never make a competitive application' is crucial to analyse because, simply put, it is not true. Although it is rare, each year a small number of students who would be eligible for the AFY on the basis of their social and educational background do receive offers through the mainstream admissions process. For instance, in 2023 Oxford admitted 178 undergraduate students who were eligible for free school meals (University of Oxford, 2024: 11); many of these students will have also attended non-selective state-funded schools and therefore be AFY-eligible. As such, the construction of the *impossibility*, rather than simply the unlikelihood, of AFY-eligible applicants being made a mainstream admissions offer is discursive rather than simply descriptive. I argue that such constructions fit a broader pattern of the compartmentalisation of the AFY: acts of institutional work which attempt to maintain distance between the programme and the spaces of mainstream admissions and teaching. Set against these compartmentalising actions are strategies of *permeation*, which resist the attempt to draw conceptual distinctions between the AFY and its students and the mainstream admissions process. For instance, Neil questions this characterisation of AFY students, connecting it to the AFY's place within the broader context of Oxford as an institution:

I wonder how that compares, again, to criteria across the sector for foundation years, whether they position it as 'these students are, quantitatively, qualitatively, so very different from the norm'...and why, and whether that's true...Are we

positioning the students as in some way intrinsically different? Are they really that different? Is that helpful?

- Neil

The construction of the AFY as serving wholly different purposes to mainstream admissions allows participants espousing it to support the AFY without situating it as a threat to the autonomous academic judgement central to the mainstream undergraduate admissions process. I return repeatedly to the tension between strategies of compartmentalisation and permeation throughout the thesis. The immediate point here is to highlight that such strategies, like the notion of 'regulatory drivers' as an impetus for the AFY, are not neutral; they instead reflect active strategies of *response* to the normative positions prevalent within the Oxford ecosystem into which the AFY is introduced.

5.2.1.4: The route to rethinking admissions

In juxtaposition to the participants in the previous section, there are also a minority of stakeholders who conceptualise the AFY as valuable primarily for its potential to lead to wider admissions reform. Such participants accept that the AFY itself is unlikely to radically alter the makeup of the university by itself but see it as having the potential to engender a fundamental shift in how admissions decisions are approached. Far from aiming to compartmentalise the AFY, they consciously view it as a vehicle for more wide-ranging change.

I think it's a way of making the University rethink its admissions process as a whole. Even if, in its first year, the foundation year only affects a dozen students, it does require a rethinking of what works, what doesn't work, why we do things, the way that we do things, etc.

- Tom

The participants who discuss this idea in the fullest detail connect it to an end-goal of promoting contextual offers in line with many other selective universities. The AFY, although it does not fully normalise the notion of contextual offer-making, is both politically viable and (potentially) a step towards such policies.

where we ought to be in five to 10 years' time is contextualised offers, because that's where, as I understand it, the educational research points as being the single most effective way of getting to a fair admissions round. The Foundation Year, like the Opportunity Oxford scheme, seems to me a poor second best. But unlike contextualised offers, it's currently on the table within the university. And because it's currently on the table, I argued we should take it and take it very enthusiastically...

- Lee

Such positions directly contradict both the university's official admissions stance, as detailed in the 2020-25 APP, and the normative positions which many admissions stakeholders espouse. Notably, objections to contextualised offers (as opposed to solely contextualised assessment) are evident among some participants who favour contextualist norms of meritocracy as well as credentialist ones; only a small number of participants explicitly frame the AFY as a route towards contextual offer-making specifically.

The wider minority of participants who frame the AFY as a route towards 'reform', broadly defined, sometimes also include teaching as well as admissions reform as an area for consideration. They highlight the teaching practices deployed in the AFY (discussed later in this chapter) as a method for encouraging reconsideration of the mainstream tutorial teaching model employed with undergraduate students.

There is some behaviour, some teaching development that's happening for [AFY tutors]...It's been an opportunity then to revisit some of their teaching practices and think about things that they should continue doing. And perhaps some things they might change doing with their first, second and third years.

- Nicola

As noted in Chapter 4, Oxford's teaching practices are imbued with social and cultural assumptions which valorise particular modes of behaviour and academic production – for instance, the fast-paced nature of tutorial work, coupled with a focus on oracy. Participants such as Nicola moot the AFY as a way to create space for critical engagement with these practices. Conversely, other participants explicitly oppose such justifications; recall Adam's view in Chapter 4 that

If you've come in worse prepared, which of course students do, and you struggle more with the reading list, you struggle more, the struggle is part of the point.

- Adam

Such positions express normatively different constructions of the AFY. Both Nicola and Adam are in favour of the programme and support it in different roles. For Adam the AFY is understood as a separate preparatory course the principles of which should not be applied to mainstream undergraduate teaching. Nicola, conversely, is actively in favour of modifying not just teaching styles but the structure of courses in order to promote greater accessibility to a wider variety of students. This tension between compartmentalisation and permeation runs through almost every tensioned act of institutional work which AFY stakeholders undertake; it is inescapably intertwined with not just whether participants adopt credentialist or contextualist understandings of merit, but the specific form of each construction they most adhere to. For Adam, whose adherence to the doxic principle of autonomous academic judgement is strong, contextual assessment is necessary at the admissions stage in order to recognise and reward potential. However, while he describes his personalisation of tutorial teaching for different students, he decides against radically changing the structural shape of this model – his students are still required to read a large amount each week and submit regular essays. He conceptualises the AFY's different teaching model as serving the fundamentally different purpose of equipping students for traditional undergraduate study, maintaining a distance between this preparatory work and the mainstream teaching process. Nicola views the cultural and social disparities of the mainstream admissions process as extending into mainstream teaching – yet as opposed to 'the struggle [being] part of the point', for her the learnings of the AFY should be integrated into the university's mainstream provision. Nicola is therefore contextualist in her views on both admissions and undergraduate teaching, while Adam resists the implication that undergraduate teaching should take account of context.

The justifications for the AFY I have explored here stem from different conceptual roots, which relate to the normative positions prevalent in the mainstream undergraduate admissions process. However, it would be a radical oversimplification to assume that all contextualists are straightforwardly supportive of the AFY, or indeed that all credentialists straightforwardly oppose it. It is true that the most ardent supports of the contextual assessment of merit (for instance, Lee) tend to be in favour of the AFY primarily as a route to change underlying assumptions about the mainstream admissions and teaching landscapes. The same appears to hold true for those who question the usefulness of the idea of merit entirely (such as Nicola). However, less radical contextualists such as Adam are happy to support the AFY on the basis of its moral and educational rectitude, yet shy away from advocating for either contextual offer-making or outright reform of the undergraduate teaching system. Indeed, some participants with more credentialist leanings also opted to support the AFY for pragmatic reasons. For instance, Emma, who stresses the importance of a high level of existing ability in joining her course, explains that

we want to have our part in shaping it, if we are going to do this we want it to actually work for us...

- Emma

Support for the AFY thus stems from numerous different normative positions on the nature of merit. I argue in Chapter 7 that these positions should be analysed using the framework of a relational institutional habitus shaped by the doxic principle of autonomous academic judgement. In the next section, I demonstrate that this analysis also holds true for those stakeholders who offered objections to the AFY.

5.2.2: Critiques of the AFY

This section outlines the objections raised against the AFY. Similarly to the sections above, such objections do not necessarily signal overall decisions against participating in the AFY. Instead, they illustrate the complex positions and strategies which actors adopt in reconciling the specific normative positions regarding merit they embody and espouse with the process of the AFY's

introduction. In outlining the common objections raised, I again explore their links to the institutional habituses at play in the mainstream admissions round, before considering the normative implications of such objections – the signals they send and the positions they indicate. Because the objections raised by my participants are more diverse than the justifications offered, I have chosen to group them in terms of the normative positions I interpret them to indicate, rather than the explicit form of the objections themselves.

5.2.2.1: Critiques from credentialist constructions of merit

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the largest set of objections are rooted in essentially credentialist objections to the AFY. The simplest of these is baldly that students with grades as low as those acceptable to the AFY should not be studying at Oxford. Such straightforwardly credentialist objections were relatively rare and tended to be paraphrased by participants rather than espoused themselves, as a result of my sampling bias, yet their presence requires recognition.

...in the College conversations there was quite a bit more of as you say that kind of credentialism...particularly with the foundation year, not wanting to look at someone with, you know, lower A levels or that sort of thing... people do just, you know, profoundly believe that A levels accurately measure something.

- Samantha

they've sort of got this odd idea that they select people with potential not necessarily knowing as much as they ideally would need to. But if they're bright enough, then they can come into the first year and do it. And if you're only getting three Bs at A level, then that probably suggests you're not going to be good enough to do the course, however bad your education has been.

- Anthony

For the tutors Samantha and Anthony describe, lower A level grades indicate that a student is not suitable for study at Oxford, regardless of their background; their construction of academic ability suggests that achieving close to the standard Oxford offer should be possible for candidates with the requisite talent, even if they are disadvantaged, and as such that the AFY is likely to produce poor outcomes both for its students and their colleges and departments. A connected but more nuanced critique of the AFY rests in concern that the programme will not be able to raise

participants' level of academic performance sufficiently within the year provided, and thus that students will again be set up to fail.

*the standard qualifying offer for [subject] in the ordinary admissions stream is AAA...the actual modal interview prediction is A*A*A* and indeed that goes up for admissions as far as I know...I think there was real apprehension about whether people that were just making [BBB] would after a year be in a position to succeed.*

- Lauren

I do have some concerns about whether this is appropriate in the [subject] context...it probably is easier in [subject] to get up to the required level, even if you are from a very disadvantaged background, because ultimately, it's basically how well you can do maths. And that probably is easier to teach...

- Emma

As Emma suggests, some such participants were concerned about the specific nature of their subject field and whether it was possible for students with lower prior attainment to reach the levels required for the undergraduate course. However, such thoughts are visible across a variety of subject areas; Lauren, from a separate academic division of the university, offers the same critique. This objection ultimately rests in a conception of ability which is not wholly credentialist, but which lends significant weight to the importance of prior attainment as a marker of potential, even given the impact of social or educational disadvantage. Both these objections are clearly influenced by participants' constructions of merit in the mainstream admissions round; both Emma and Lauren espouse views which place them as more obviously credentialist in their mainstream admissions practice, and these views influence the positions from which they critique the AFY. Meanwhile, the outright credentialists who Samantha and Anthony describe couch the (il)legitimacy of the AFY in terms of the mainstream admissions round's assessment processes.

These credentialist objections broadly position the need for absolute performance – or at least the ability to perform to a minimally acceptable level immediately – as outweighing equity or social justice concerns, however regrettable this is. They are therefore credentialist primarily in their concern with ensuring academic *merit* from the students they admit. However, some participants

also offer a form of credentialist critique to the AFY which is squarely situated in the widening participation agenda. This objection might be dubbed the leapfrog critique: that the AFY creates a paradox whereby disadvantaged students attaining BBB or equivalent might eventually be admitted to undergraduate courses, while higher attaining students from the same backgrounds might apply for mainstream entry and be unsuccessful due to intense competition from their more advantaged peers. Sarah neatly encapsulates this issue and the impact it had on her college's decision not to take part in the AFY's first year:

there are all these potential inequalities and so on between candidates who just missed out on the standard admissions process, and those who will end up being admitted with much lower grades on Astrophoria. Yeah, and that, you know, that was certainly one of the factors that played into the college's decision...

- Sarah

Christopher explains this issue at greater length, explicitly situating it as a problem of 'justice':

it's not like those people don't exist, there are plenty of them who are coming in with the standard offer, but from an educational background that means that they are less resilient, less confident, less able to cope with the kind of social, academic demands of an Oxford course...I think if the foundation year had been pitched that this was essentially a programme for that cohort, or from a cohort where they're getting, you know, AAB against a AAA offer...I think the great worry is the fact that the foundation year sets the bar much lower than the standard offer...[it is] about justice, about whether it's fair...

- Christopher

It should be noted that Christopher's college is taking part in the AFY; again, how both justifications and objections translate into participation decisions is mediated by the specific sub-organisational pressures which specific actors face. Tellingly, he raises the issue of the specific grade boundaries chosen for the AFY, suggesting that if they were closer to the mainstream standard offer there might have been less resistance on the grounds of credentialist *fairness*. I argue that this policy choice is connected to the central tension between the compartmentalisation and permeation of the AFY. Recall Peter's assertion in section 5.2.1.3 that 'these are not just candidates a bit further down the list' but instead a qualitatively different kind of applicant. As discussed, the

effect of framing the AFY's applicants in this light is to compartmentalise the programme as serving a different population and therefore as distinct and removed from the university's mainstream admissions and teaching processes. As Christopher's discussion makes clear, this positioning generates pushback from some quarters – yet for others, it is a precondition of considering the AFY as a desirable proposition. In light of these competing concerns, the level at which the entry criteria for the AFY are set can be interpreted as a point of contestation where the compartmentalisation/permeation tension crystallises. I discuss this tension, and the various strategies of institutional work deployed in relation to it, further in Chapters 6 and 7.

Thus, credentialist objections to the AFY are varied, stemming from nuanced understandings of the role of credentialism in assessing both merit and fairness. Participants who raise such objections both opt in and out of the AFY on behalf of both their colleges and departments, and unilaterally on behalf of their subjects within colleges, according to a complex amalgam of their normative positions on the year itself and their relational interaction to norms prevalent within these sub-organisations. I examine participation decisions more fully in the final section of this chapter.

5.2.2.2: The fig leaf critique

Stakeholders who considered themselves more progressive than many of their colleagues offered an unexpected objection to the AFY which one participant (who did not subscribe to the view) termed the fig leaf critique. They contend that the AFY could remove impetus for more fundamental reforms to the mainstream admissions process through its position as a high-profile scheme targeting particularly disadvantaged students.

lots of us who, kind of colleges who think of ourselves as quite 'access' colleges were kind of not in favour of it. Lots of colleges that were not very good access colleges felt that it was a bit of a golden bullet, I think. So there was a bit of a divide there.

- Michael

maybe it is the sort of, you know, that's the tick box. We don't have to do that, because we've got the foundation year. And that can mean that you don't think through the bigger structural problems of getting other people into the university.

- Susan

The majority of participants do not view the fig leaf critique as a substantial concern with regard to the AFY; some, for instance, suggest that the small number of AFY students admitted per year is simply not large enough to operate as a smokescreen for the need for wider reform (although, as one participant, Richard, points out, some targets within the 2020-25 APP only require a handful of particularly disadvantaged students to be admitted in order to meet them, raising the fact that the AFY could in fact 'solve' the specific regulatory demands of the APP). Several participants also raise the converse possibility – that the AFY's introduction could act as an avenue to promote further reform of mainstream practice:

my instinct is to say the opposite is true. That, you know, actually, if you are consciously thinking about admitting students from extremely disadvantaged backgrounds through the foundation year, I just can't see any reason why that wouldn't also filter through to your decision making in the main admissions round. I don't sort of subscribe to the logic, I guess, of that argument.

- Christopher

The fig leaf critique's orientation in terms of institutional habitus is ambiguous. Michael is clearly concerned that the AFY will obscure the need for more careful consideration of context in the mainstream admissions process – yet this, by its nature, can also be read as a credentialist concern, limiting incoming students to those able to achieve Oxford's high entry grades. Ultimately, the framing of the fig leaf critique is founded in the tension between compartmentalisation and permeation. For Christopher, who sees permeation as an inevitable outcome of the AFY's introduction, the critique holds no salience. Conversely, Michael expresses concern about the AFY overshadowing existing programmes such as Opportunity Oxford, which he feels offers change at a larger scale. As such, his subscription to the fig leaf critique demonstrates not a worry about

compartmentalisation, but an implied endorsement of it in order to ensure the longevity and viability of other forms of widening admissions work.

5.2.2.3: Normative critiques from the tutor autonomy perspective

While the first two sets of critiques discussed operate broadly along lines of institutional habitus shaped variously by credentialist or contextualist norms of merit and fairness, I frame the third set as instead drawing on a *doxic* basis – that of the sanctity of tutors’ autonomous academic judgement. Building on my discussion of autonomous academic judgement as a central principle in Oxford’s mainstream admissions ecosystem, in this section I develop this analysis further by suggesting that such autonomous decision-making power – both in admissions practice and teaching – is a doxic principle at Oxford. I offer a full theorisation of this interpretation in Chapter 7; here it suffices to distinguish doxa from institutional habitus(es) in that while both concepts are institutionally situated and specific, institutional habituses act as *appropriate, expected, or normal* modes of thinking, seeing and acting. Doxic principles, conversely, form the limits of what is considered *possible or comprehensible* in a given social setting. In this way, doxa bounds the limits of conceivable action in its field. The practical distinction between these ideas is observable in Chapter 4’s empirical discussion; while the institutional habituses germane to the mainstream admissions process are varied and contested, almost no participants seriously question the notion that tutors should have discretion over their own admissions and teaching decisions.

The criticisms levelled at the AFY from this doxic basis relate to the perceived infringement of the programme upon tutor and college autonomy. They manifest themselves in different forms, which I consider in turn. Perhaps the simplest expression of the objection is the claim that the contextualisation and consideration which the AFY aims to afford disadvantaged candidates should take place in the mainstream admissions round (or, for some participants, that it already is). For instance, Sarah explains that her college’s fellowship was leery of participation because

many of the people in the room have been doing access well, for the last 20 odd years, and saw that they were already doing kind of you know, contextualised

admissions such as they could, they were looking very, very closely at students from the most disadvantaged backgrounds, and they didn't feel that they needed additional activities in order to do that, [they were] doing it anyway.

- Sarah

Sarah's explanation highlights many participants' positions that their judgement, as applied in the mainstream admissions round, is sufficient to fulfil the contextualised assessment of applicants which many tutors espouse. The AFY is framed as an 'additional' activity seeking to achieve contextualisation via the same mechanism as the mainstream admissions round, rather than as an alternative entry route which mitigates its credentialist requirements. As Andrew highlights, this is in a practical sense not the case:

'why don't you just trust us to spot their potential?...well, if they get three Bs, you can't take them, because the university won't let you. Okay, it's the college's decision. But basically, if they get three Bs, you can't take them.

- Andrew

Andrew's ventriloquising of his colleagues as asking to be 'trusted' to make contextualised decisions themselves demonstrates the degree to which this objection is rooted in the doxic norm of autonomous academic judgement. Although they are in practice not able to make the decision to admit applicants with such markedly lower grades, the autonomy they exercise in relation to suitably credentialled applicants is seen as the obviously preferable route to helping more acutely disadvantaged students enter Oxford.

The doxic principle of tutor autonomy and respect for professional judgement also manifests itself through concerns that the AFY's admissions process might not reliably identify and select the applicants most able to benefit from it. Crucially, this objection is not presented as a broad issue of the possibility of identifying the ability to thrive in a tutorial setting – the understanding that this is possible is, after all, the basis of the doxic principle of tutor autonomy itself. Instead, participants offer two more nuanced articulations of this issue. The first is that the type of student the AFY is intended to select for is unclear:

the conception here, right, is that there are people who wouldn't get through via the standard route not because tutors aren't contextualising appropriately, but because...they're not sufficiently educated in the respects in which you need to have been educated to make a success of it here. But they do not just need better teaching of A level stuff...But they are nevertheless not sufficiently well trained, to be able to flourish on the degree...it's a bit unclear who these people are...That's my view, even though I'm very supportive of it.

- Rachel

Rachel's view here is illuminating on several fronts. First, her description of the AFY's design presents a contentious view of contextualised assessment; not all participants agree that tutor contextualisation in mainstream admissions is universally well applied, or indeed even that it is practically possible. Yet Rachel (perhaps wryly) refers to the AFY in the terms in which it has been presented within the university: as targeting a qualitatively different type of disadvantaged student (recall here the discussion in section 5.1.2.3). The effect of this framing is to insulate the mainstream admissions process from any potential critique of tutors' contextualising practice through the AFY's introduction. Rachel then goes on to point out the tension this framing creates: that AFY applicants' prior attainment is both the reason they cannot be considered for mainstream admission, yet also does not require revisiting during the AFY itself. This version of the 'selection objection' is founded in the doxic status of the principle of tutor autonomy. Framing the AFY as targeted towards a uniquely disadvantaged group who could never otherwise access Oxford protects the integrity of the principle of autonomous, professional tutor judgement within the mainstream admissions process. However, in this, the potential contradictions this framing implies about the nature of the AFY, as Rachel discusses, are exposed.

The second form of critique attached to the difficulties of selection relates to the principle of autonomy more straightforwardly: the question of who actually makes admissions decisions about AFY applicants. As Michael notes, within the broad admissions rules set by the university, 'colleges are kind of sovereign, we can do whatever we like'. Negotiation with departments exists within some subjects to varying degrees, yet the college – and specifically, the relevant admitting tutor within a given subject – retains the ultimate decision-making function. Yet the admissions

process for the AFY yet again challenges this bounding principle. Although admissions interviews were conducted by academics, many of whom also act as admitting tutors at their colleges, students applied to the AFY as a programme and were then allocated to a college. Colleges were able to specify a preference for particular applicants based on interview reports but were not guaranteed to receive the students they requested. This mode of operation disrupts the doxic assumption that college tutors are able to make autonomous decisions about which students they wish to admit. As Simon explains,

it's one thing to run your own foundation programme, where you're responsible as a college for those you admit, and you then take those people, it's another to be participating in one where they're going to be chosen by somebody else...that has generated some problems. We had one college, [redacted], which withdrew, basically, because they were not able to have sight of the candidates before admission.

- Simon

For some stakeholders the importance of the doxic principle of tutor autonomy was so strong that it prompted them to remove themselves from the AFY, having originally agreed to participate. I argue that this objection to the AFY is a useful avenue to explore a wider phenomenon, that of the simultaneous demand from colleges and departments to be both involved in decision-making about the AFY and kept at arms-length from its management. I argue that this pattern of institutional work can be interpreted as a product of the doxic principle of college and tutor autonomy, in combination with the move towards compartmentalisation of the AFY from some stakeholders. I explore this facet of the AFY's development in Chapter 6.

5.2.2.4: Cost

The final critique, that of the programme's cost, does not map neatly onto the normative narratives outlined in Chapter 4; however, it was so frequently raised as an objection to the AFY that it cannot be omitted from the discussion. The issue discussed here focusses on the cost per head of the scheme, as opposed to the specific funding models used in the programme. Stakeholders whose

sub-organisations are both participating and not participating argue that the AFY is simply very expensive for the small number of students it reaches:

it's such a huge investment of time and effort and people for such a small number of students...the money and effort and time that's been spent on it could probably be kind of spent much more effectively by doing other things.

- Sarah

I think the thing about the foundation year is that we're talking about a very small group of people going on an extraordinarily costly programme, the foundation year is very, very expensive. It isn't something that would be easy to scale up to offer to a bigger group of people.

- Rebecca

The widespread recognition of the salience of the programme's cost – for example from Sarah, whose college did not participate, and Rebecca, whose college did – illustrates the complexity of interpreting normative meaning from the critique. However, I argue that this issue, too, brings into relief the fault lines in stakeholder perceptions of Oxford's difficulty in admitting more non-traditional students. As Sarah raises, the implication of this objection is that this money could be better spent improving access in other ways. Participants suggested a wide variety of alternative programmes they deem more impactful, and through these alternative conceptions participants' habitus leanings on issues of access and admissions, more broadly, can be inferred. Some participants – generally those offering more credentialist interpretations of merit – suggest interventions which broadly focus on outreach and attainment-raising, situating the issue as one primarily generated through a lack of applicants of sufficient attainment from such backgrounds.

the basic view that this college has, is that the appropriate thing to do is to invest very heavily in you know, efforts that raise attainment, raise aspiration, amongst people in schools.

- Paul

the bottom line for me is there's far too many people we're not letting in who get three As or above, because they don't apply. What we don't do is go out to every single comprehensive school in the UK and say, 'Who are your really good students?'. Those are the people that I want us to take.

- Kevin⁸

Such suggestions pose the solution to admitting more non-traditional students as ensuring that more of these students attain the grades required by Oxford and encouraging them to apply more systematically. This approach tacitly endorses credentialist conceptions of merit by framing the problem as one of aspiration and attainment rather than structural disadvantage. Conversely, the participants with the most radically contextualist views of merit tend to suggest alternatives to the AFY which involve structural reform within Oxford itself.

tutors are extremely keen not to come at the bottom of the Norrington table...there's a huge brake on what many colleagues would think of as risk taking in admissions. Were we to shift to a Norrington table based on value added over the course of the degree, however measured, I think that would have a more transformative effect on the admissions round than almost literally anything else the university could do.

- Lee

for example, why do we not have centralised interviews, a centralised admissions process for all departments across the university? It's quite clear from the evidence that it's good for access...Yet, we still do this college by college for as far as I can tell no reason other than some sort of historical decision that it should stay that way.

- Tom

These views position issues of access and admissions as related to internal university policies rather than disadvantaged applicants themselves. As such, the issue of funding is illuminating less in its own right than through the alternative suggestions for the use of funds it elicits from participants – which reflect existing normative divides in stakeholder conceptions of merit. Although it is not integral to this point, it bears highlighting that student participants almost

⁸ Kevin's position is complex. He can be construed as a 'baseline' contextualist in that he sees A level grades as useful in providing an indicator of minimum ability for the vast majority of applicants. However, he also maintains that there are, very rarely, disadvantaged applicants who are obviously intellectually exceptional, and who should be admitted onto undergraduate courses with lower grades than usually required. This position exemplifies both the centrality of tutors' professional judgement, and the role of exceptionalism as a fundamental idea within the Oxford admissions ecosystem. I discuss further examples of such nuanced positioning from participants in Chapter 7.

universally rejected objections to the AFY on the grounds of cost, instead arguing that Oxford was sufficiently wealthy to fund multiple access and admissions initiatives:

I don't think that should be an issue at all in terms of money, like we get, like all my friends like no matter their like, income status, we get money for like going on free holidays and stuff, like it's ridiculous what we get here, for silly things.

- Samuel

Oxford's great at throwing money around everywhere. Like if they can spend this much money on like doing formal dinners and like subsidising – like I went on like a subsidised holiday to Malaga, you know. Like that was just for fun, and it's like you know, you can always argue that money can be spent better elsewhere, but...

- Chloe

As with the justifications offered for the AFY, the critiques raised towards it can also be interpreted as having a basis in the normative frameworks employed in how participants construct the admissions and teaching space at Oxford. The subsequent section of this chapter explores how participants construct their, and their sub-organisations', decisions to participate or not in the AFY.

5.3: Exploring participation decisions

The final section of this chapter explores the process by which individual participants and their colleges and departments opted in or out of participating in the AFY's first year of delivery. First, I discuss the processes by which these decisions appear to have been made and how they relate to the specific manifestations of doxa and habitus I have already discussed. In particular, I explore how the dual interactional norms of sub-organisational consensus and individual tutor autonomy shape these processes, concluding that such norms should be recognised as produced from Oxford's, and its sub-organisations', social fields. Second, I analyse the specific considerations which prompted individuals, colleges and departments to variously opt in or out of participation. The outcome of these considerations is determined by a complex amalgam of the specific institutional habitus leanings which are dominant for these individuals and sub-organisations, as well as their structural and narrative positioning within Oxford's field. The doxa and habitus positionings discussed thus far influence these decisions, but generally not in straightforward or predictable ways; they are instead

refracted through the wider concerns and discourses of the individuals and sub-organisations which the participation decision pertains to. As such, participation decisions are innately dialogic and negotiated, produced by a confluence of competing normative positions and binding doxic principles. These positions and principles crystallise into particular strategies of enactment for differentially positioned actors.

5.3.1: The principled basis of the decision-making process

I first examine the boundaries and principles which govern the decision-making process, rather than the specific reasons given for participation decisions themselves. The first facet of this set of normative principles is the notion of college sovereignty and individual academic autonomy. As discussed in Chapter 4, Oxford colleges are responsible for their own admissions decisions. Greater or lesser degrees of pressure are applied by academic departments, meaning specific decisions can lead to consensual tugs of war, yet the ultimate power to admit students lies with colleges. However, the principle of college autonomy extends to every aspect of a college's functioning; they are separate entities from the central university, members of a federation rather than subordinate bodies. As such the central university can persuade, cajole or apply political pressure, but not command. Although the same principle is not formally enshrined for academic departments, in practice the relationship operates in a similar way; dialogues of varying urgency exist between the central university and departments, yet with departments making many if not most of their policy decisions internally. As Darren explains throughout our discussion,

our Vice Chancellor is not like a CEO of a company where they can even though they've got to report to a board, they can still make decisions. The Vice Chancellor, any big decisions still have to go to council and congregation. They don't have an autonomy like you would expect a CEO to have elsewhere.

you've got the college decision down here and the university decision right up here [gestures with hands to demonstrate distance]. And because they're, in governance terms, two completely different entities to try and get that university policy to filter in is incredibly difficult...

- Darren

This means that the decision on whether to participate in the AFY was largely in the hands of colleges and departments themselves – and, ultimately, of individual tutors and policymakers (although attempts to persuade and negotiate consistently informed such decisions, as we shall see). Decision-making in these sub-organisations is typified by discussion and the attempt to reach a consensus. In this context, decisions such as whether to participate in the AFY are characterised by intense discussion, framed by the recognition that multiple perspectives can be considered legitimate. Because what confers academic legitimacy in collegiate settings is simply the judgement of the relevant subject tutor, the decision-making process is *necessarily* negotiated and driven by the need for consent if not consensus. As Nicola explains,

I think it's fundamentally a lack of trust. And I think it's an Oxford syndrome, not to trust anybody else's decisions unless you've made [them].

- Nicola

The departmental decision-making process appears more committee-driven, with those sitting on education committees within the departmental structure making such decisions on behalf of their department. This reflects the fact that at undergraduate level admissions decisions are made by colleges, and as the principle of autonomous academic judgement is most salient in these sub-organisations.

it tended to be that in a college, it's like, 'well, we have to get all of Governing Body on board for us to be able to join the foundation year'...Within a department it tended to be there would be a committee that was discussing whether or not they were going to be on board...It's just the way that the department is run tends to be more by committee and the way that a college is one is by governing body.

- Jason

Despite Jason's comments, in practice it is clear that it was not necessary to convince every member of a Governing Body of the AFY's merits in order to secure a college's participation; several of my participants are members of colleges who are participating in the AFY, yet who opted to exclude their own subjects from it. This demonstrates the second crucial aspect of the principled boundaries governing college and departmental participation decisions: the importance of individual tutor

discretion. At colleges and departments which opted to participate, tutors were generally allowed the freedom to make decisions about their own subject's participation (or, in the case of the department, whether they involved themselves in work relating to the AFY). This phenomenon is remarkably consistent across a variety of colleges involved in the AFY:

I kind of thought I don't ever want to stop anybody doing something which they think is going to bring more people who might have an opportunity...if they feel strongly that in their subject it works...

- Michael

college opted in, but that was always on the understanding that that there was a right of veto over particular subjects...there's been a process of deciding which subjects would accept a foundation year student, in principle...we are accepting students on just three of the four strands, we're not accepting students onto the [subject] strand.

- Christopher

we got GB [Governing Body] to say that if a subject was willing to admit into the foundation year, then, you know, it wouldn't be college policy not to and then we had to work on you know, sort of tutors in individual disciplines.

- Samantha

This mode of operation is the necessary corollary of the principle of consent in collegiate decision-making. Just as extended discussion to respect and recognise opposing views is the product of the principle of tutor autonomy, so is the need to accommodate such views when a consensus cannot be reached. By delegating participation decisions on the AFY to individual tutors, participating colleges reach a compromise which can be seen as legitimate, if not ideal, to tutors with opposing views because it recognises the normative principles present within the social field of the college. The fact that decisions were not made in this manner in departments is consonant with this interpretation, because departments are not the bodies responsible for undergraduate admissions. I argue that committees making participation decisions on behalf of the department is deemed acceptable because such decisions do not create obligations to admit students, in contravention of the principled boundaries of the field. In practice some tutors opt simply to follow

their departmental lead – yet the maintenance of their agency in the decision reproduces and reifies the structuring principles at play.

Holding this space for contradictory opinions represents what Bjerregaard and Jonasson (2014) term the management of contradiction. I theorise this institutional negotiation as constituting a relational institutional habitus – a ‘correct’ mode of interaction within an institution with multiple legitimised institutional habituses, which respects its norms by facilitating mechanisms by which habitus tensions are managed. I articulate this concept fully through my theorisation of the case study in Chapter 7; in the case of Oxford’s mainstream admissions ecosystem, this translates to deference to colleagues’ admissions choices. In the realm of AFY participation decisions, this relational institutional habitus is rendered as the ability for individual tutors to decide for themselves whether the AFY is the right course of action for their subject, at their college. As I discuss further in Chapters 6 and 7, while the relational institutional habitus appears to hold firm in participation decisions, it is fragmented and compromised through the ongoing development of the AFY, resulting in various institutional work strategies which are the product of participants’ habitus leanings and their sub-organisations’ institutional positionings.

Only one academic participant, Tom, is supportive of the AFY yet also based at a college which appears to have never openly discussed taking part. He describes his college as

much more hierarchical than those colleges. There is a pyramid of people who sit on different committees, which gets smaller with each advancing level. And I guess, in an attempt to keep it that way, there's a limited number of people who sit on each one.

- Tom

The norms of this particular college therefore represent an exception to the principles exhibited throughout the broader Oxford field. The atypicality of this social sub-field is referenced by several student participants.

[Participant]: *Is it being carried out at [Tom’s college]?*

[Interviewer]: *No.*

[Participant]: *[Laughs] Surprise.*

[Interviewer]: *Why do you say surprise?*

[Participant]: *[Laughs] Because it's [college]...you find that like all these stereotypes are found at all the colleges but that are obviously like quite a high volume at [college].*

- Samuel

[Referring to their own college] it's not very Oxford. It's just kind of, I don't know, it's not like [Tom's college], like [laughs].

- Chloe

These exchanges therefore frame the college in question as unusual. It represents for Chloe the traditional notion of 'Oxford' – aristocratic, elitist – which Soares (1999) frames Oxford as moving beyond, both through credentialist and contextualist norms. While this is not to suggest that this college does not adhere to meritocratically informed conceptions of good admissions practice, its image among many members of the university as a peculiarly hierarchical and traditional space perhaps explains its relative incongruence with the norms found elsewhere.

The processes by which participation decisions were made, both within colleges and departments, are therefore reflections both of the existing structures within these sub-organisations, but also of the doxic parameters which govern Oxford as a whole. The decisions which individual colleges and departments make, however, are produced by how these principles interact with the specific habitus leanings of individual decision-makers and their positioning within the wider institution of Oxford. The following sections explore how participants arrived at these decisions, both individually and on behalf of their sub-organisations.

5.3.2: The bases of participation decisions

This section explores the specific drivers of participation decisions for individual actors and the sub-organisations they belong to. I analyse these drivers from the perspectives of those who opt both in and out. The factors relevant to such decisions are typically multi-faceted, with the same broad

issue being interpreted differently based on the structural positioning and individual habitus leaning of the individuals involved. As such, these dualisms present useful lenses through which to understand participation in the AFY. I then theorise these individual decisions in relation to my emerging conceptual framework, considering how the doxic principle of tutors' autonomous judgement, and the multiple institutional habituses at play, influence participation in varied ways across the broad social field of 'Oxford'.

5.3.2.1: Being part of the conversation(?): the issue of stakeholder engagement

The first dualistic lens I present is the extent to which actors, both individually and on behalf of the colleges and departments, sought to engage with and shape the AFY during its formative phases. Participants variously discuss their desire to either (in my paraphrasing) 'be part of the conversation' or to 'wait and see' how the programme developed. These strategies represent divergent responses to the central issue of how colleges and departments construe their likely involvement and responsibilities to the AFY. Such responses are neatly encapsulated by Andrew's words:

[Other college] is not doing Foundation Oxford, because their Governing Body decided they'd watch and see what happened, then if it worked they'd join in and if it doesn't they won't. I'm afraid I'm a bit more hands-on than that [laughs]. I want to shape it...so the decision-making process was that I was asked...if I would take this to my college and discuss it.

- Andrew

Stakeholders who wished to participate in decision-making concerning the AFY generally offered similar explanations for their position: a desire to fully understand the operation of the AFY, and a need to ensure that the final programme reflected their sub-organisation's preferences and needs. For instance, Rebecca and Emma, whose relationships with the AFY differ in several key aspects, offer similar descriptions of their advocacy for involvement:

I think it's really important to be part of the conversation. You know, we can't criticise it if we're not also putting in the work to make it work...we want to really understand how it's happening. And we want to be able to offer expertise where we can...

- Rebecca

Firstly, we don't know what sort of students we're going to get. Nobody knows this yet. And we will only really understand that if we're part of it...The other reason is of course that we want to have our part in shaping it, that if we are going to do this, we want it to actually work for us and to be a success.

- Emma

Emma's words here, also discussed in section 5.2.1.4, demonstrate the translation of policy positions into actions in terms of participation. The congruence between the desire to genuinely understand the process of the AFY's development, together with sub-organisational protection of interests, is striking; Rebecca is a strong advocate for contextualist norms of merit, operating from a college context, while Emma is considerably more credentialist and primarily speaks to the interests of her department. I interpret this blend of a sense of ownership tempered by pragmatism as a form of dynamic conservatism (Ansell et al, 2015; Raynard et al, 2021). Both Rebecca and Emma are seeking to protect aspects of the mainstream undergraduate ecosystem they value. For Rebecca, this ensuring that disadvantaged students who attain too highly to apply through the AFY are given strong consideration in the mainstream admissions process; for Emma, ensuring the AFY's course content includes aspects her department deems important for undergraduate study. They therefore make the decision to participate in the AFY to guard against what they perceive as the risk of these valuable elements being threatened. Such participation decisions do not map neatly onto contextualist or credentialist lines. Although more individuals with broadly contextualist institutional habituses are involved in the AFY on behalf of their sub-organisation, such involvement can also be demonstrative of the desire to maintain elements of credentialist practice in mainstream admissions and teaching.

Sub-organisations who opted to 'wait and see' also espoused common shared reasons for doing so and deployed shared language about their choices. Two college representatives cited lack of accommodation for AFY students as part of a broader issues of space availability at their college; others pointed to ongoing large projects within their collegiate environment, such as major building

work or policy changes. Participants representing sub-organisations who chose not to participate often framed their decision in terms of risk aversion:

we're not sort of saying we'd never participate, but we thought we'd like to let it bed in for a year or so. Just until it's up and running and on its feet. And then we get a sense of how it's gonna work.

- Sarah

we thought it was a very high-risk thing, the foundation year, we thought it was going to be a lot of money thrown at something that might well not work. And that we did not want to be involved in the beginning.

- Simon

These extracts demonstrate the multi-faceted nature of decision-making around AFY participation. Simon, involved in the AFY in his departmental capacity, describes his college's decision to opt out of the process; Rebecca, whose college is participating, describes how some subject tutors at her college exercised their professional autonomy to remove themselves from participation. I argue that the sub-organisations and individuals described above opted to 'wait and see' primarily because there were few structural inducements, with regard to their institutional position, to persuade them to take part. Conversely, those sub-organisations which opted in tended to both be at least partially sympathetic to contextualist norms of merit, while simultaneously experiencing institutional pressure to participate in varying forms. I now explore two forms of such institutional pressure, again through tensioned dualisms: the internal optics of widening admissions work at Oxford, and the importance of individual persuasion.

5.3.2.2: Optics versus bandwidth: the AFY as continuum and distraction

Participants describe institutional pressure to participate in the AFY being applied first simply through the expectation of participation as a moral imperative. As discussed earlier in this chapter, this argument is often presented as a justification for the AFY. However, some stakeholders also experience it as a point of institutional leverage, creating an onus on sub-organisations, if not

individuals, to take part. The pressure this applies to particular sub-organisations is dependent on their internal reputation and self-conception within Oxford. For instance, as Rachel describes,

[College] fancies itself as a progressive college, it's a significant part of the way we sell ourselves to the donors we need. And not to be participating in this would have been kind of unthinkable in light of that.

- Rachel

Because of Rachel's college's reputation as 'progressive', there is a heightened expectation that it will take part in initiatives such as the AFY; its structural positioning in relation to the tensioned institutional habituses which govern admissions at Oxford make it more inclined to participate, despite uncertainty from some of its constituent tutors. Similarly, Matthew notes this trend within his department:

I'm not revealing a great secret when I say that, because of the situation with [subject] and state schools, [my department] always feel that we need to go the extra mile with access and outreach.

- Matthew

Sub-organisations which are either deemed particularly progressive or particularly retrograde in terms of widening admissions experienced an institutional expectation to participate because of their positioning. Stakeholders within these sub-organisations are aware of these positionings and attempt to negotiate them through institutional work which sometimes takes the form of participation. However, as Michael observes, the other side of this pressure is a concern that other widening participation initiatives will receive less attention and support as a result of the focus on the AFY.

there's lots of people who felt that once LMH had made enough noise, we were looking very retrograde if we didn't do it. And I'm a bit worried that they're now almost sort of like running away from Opportunity Oxford, the kind of amount of investment in that. And the amount of care about who's going to take over that is dropping...

- Michael

This concern is one echoed by participants across many differently positioned sub-organisations. For instance, recall comments from Paul (who describes his college as ‘consistently under the curve’ in terms of widening admissions) in section 5.1:

the basic view that this college has, is that the appropriate thing to do is to invest very heavily in you know, efforts that raise attainment, raise aspiration, amongst people in schools. But a foundation year kind of runs counter to that, it's...a sort of Willy Wonka golden ticket

- Paul

Likewise, Darren describes a subject perceived to have a relatively poor record of widening admissions which decided entering the AFY risked disrupting its internal plans to diversify its intake further:

[Subject] had been doing a huge amount of work to try and overcome some of those issues...they felt that joining Foundation Oxford at the moment was just another thing that would get mixed up in the noise...

- Darren

Thus, sub-organisations facing institutional pressure to participate sometimes resisted it to avoid crowding out their existing efforts to widen admissions. How, then, should we make sense of whether institutionally pressured sub-organisations chose to participate in the AFY? I argue that the final lens necessary to understand college and department participation decisions is the role played by individual actors in the process. It is clear that for many sub-organisations, interventions from specific individuals were key in prompting their (non-)participation. The penultimate section of this chapter explores the role played by individual actors within specific sub-organisations. My concluding section then draws together the strands discussed in this chapter to consider how narratives and norms present in the mainstream admissions and teaching ecosystem influence stakeholder actions towards the AFY.

5.3.2.3: Individual autonomy, individual persuasion

Across a variety of colleges, departments and indeed individual tutors, the theme of individual persuasion from influential colleagues is a persistent one, both in convincing and dissuading individuals and sub-organisations to participate or opt out of the AFY. Knowing an individual well when consulting their opinion is clearly a steering factor in many of the decisions my participants made concerning their AFY involvement. In some cases, this mechanism appears to be the straightforward deployment of political and social capital within the sub-organisation concerned. For instance, Samantha describes the influence exerted by individuals within the doxic bounds of collegiate consensus and individual tutor autonomy already discussed:

...college wise, it's always kind of consensus based...so the decision isn't really a sort of decision for the whole college, individual subjects can sign up...[but] both the senior tutor who was just widely respected and beloved, and the Head of House who was...What's the word? A big personality [smiles], he would help people round on it.

- Samantha

The Senior Tutor and Head of House at Samantha's college 'helping people round' through the respect they commanded within their sub-organisation might be interpreted as a facile case of senior intervention to facilitate an organisational goal. However, this would be to ignore the sense of academic-professional cache which Samantha's words convey; as Chapter 4 demonstrates, colleges are not organisations where power can be exercised directly and hierarchically, instead relying on goodwill, persuasion and respect for academic judgement.

Many such interventions appear based both on position together with long-standing professional association and trust in academic judgement. Tutors in decision-making roles consulted their networks to gauge colleagues' views of the AFY, with these views often feeding directly into their decisions.

Really, it was not considered. I don't think there was anyone who was arguing for it...I never remember there being a discussion as such, I think our then admissions

coordinator who in all other ways is very open to all sorts of outreach stuff...[they] certainly expressed reservations about it.

- Claire

In Claire's discussion of her department's decision-making, she suggests that participation in the AFY was not seriously considered – yet in doing so, she highlights the role of the department's admissions coordinator. She casts them as 'very open to all sorts of outreach stuff'; the perception that they are concerned with widening admissions, together with their academic-professional acumen, means their views are trusted by colleagues and hold enough weight to merit mentioning as an example of the decision-making process. Similarly, several participants separately mention another individual as a key factor in persuading their department or college to take part in the AFY:

there was a feeling we should participate. And my colleague [redacted] was quite heavily involved for several years with... Opportunity Oxford. So, [they were] in many ways, the driving force in us taking this step.

- Matthew

there's a really significant chunk of people here who care about [widening admissions] massively and devote huge amounts of time to it...So [redacted]...when it was coming before [subject], I chatted to [them] about it, and [they] persuaded me that we should definitely go all in on it...better to be in and make it good than to wash your hands.

- Rachel

Rachel references a theme already discussed here – the desire to be part of shaping the AFY's development. However, the point here is that her colleague's intercession was a key factor in influencing her decision to support the AFY, again on the basis of the fact they 'care about [widening admissions] massively' and invest time in work on it. The importance of persuasion through individual relationships is linked to the principle of tutors' autonomous academic judgement in matters of admissions and teaching. The AFY's structure offers potential challenges to this normative principle because its admissions are conducted centrally, as discussed in section 5.2.2.3. Yet the invocation of individual relationships allows tutors a sense of greater comfort with said challenge through delegation of this autonomy to trusted colleagues – crucially, not simply to

individuals occupying the right positions, but whose institutional habitus and judgement is felt to align to the delegating tutor's. This point is illustrated best through a specific occurrence during the AFY's first admissions round.

At a participating college, one subject group had opted not to take part in the AFY. However, during the admissions process a very promising candidate in this subject could not be allocated a college place due to insufficient colleges opting in to the subject. A member of the admissions panel for this subject contacted the admitting tutors at this college and explained the situation, and on this basis they reversed their decision not to participate and admitted the candidate. When discussing this episode, one admitting tutor explained the importance of their specific relationship with the colleague who had sat on the admissions panel:

I think this becomes very important in Oxford admissions in general...If I know a colleague and I trust their approach, I would feel confident about taking a student that they recommend...With [colleague], this personal link really helped; having seen [them] run admissions in [subject] for a number of years, I appreciated [their] rigour and attention to detail and felt comfortable with the idea of admitting a student recommended by [them].

[Because of the highly particular nature of this episode, I have opted not to attribute this quote in order to protect participant identity.]

Thus, the smoothing of potential ruptures to the bounding principles of Oxford's admissions process through individual relationships was a vital aspect of the decision-making process for many sub-organisations. This point is further exemplified by the consternation which greeted some more vigorous attempts to persuade colleagues who were not immediately convinced to participate. For instance, Darren describes how he perceived his role in persuading colleagues:

I'm just sort of involved in, 'Okay, X, you need to get this programme up and running...[subject], you need to get on board...I think I was sometimes brought in as a bit of a scary 'Well, [senior position] said you've got to do this, you've got to do this'. Not that I ever said you've got to do this, but...which is why I then dragged [colleague] along [laughs].

- Darren

This approach occasionally caused significant upset, to the point of refusal to engage with the idea of participation. In response to more forceful efforts to bring her department on board (not specifically from Darren), Emma describes her colleague's reaction:

That is not a very good way of persuading bloody-minded academics. So we do have a history at faculty meetings where people come in and tell us what we should do...of essentially doubling down and putting our finger up.

- Emma

Emma's department rejects the more robust attempt to 'tell us what we should do', I argue, because it contradicts the boundaries of the possible in Oxford. More than simply a rebuttal of the premise of the AFY, this exchange exemplifies the sense that such an approach strikes at the heart of who the potential participants are: 'bloody-minded academics' who find such attempts to cajole their professional decisions 'insulting' (a word Emma uses). Emma's department eventually agreed to participate after the intervention of a senior academic colleague with close personal and professional ties to the relevant decision-makers, demonstrating further the centrality of individual persuasion as a proxy for autonomous judgement:

I know [colleague] well...[colleague] phoned me up and tried to persuade me that going in was a good idea. And so that's sort of been the informal process.

- Emma

I therefore argue that understanding sub-organisations' participation decisions in the AFY requires us to imbricate three tensioned thematic lenses. These are the sub-organisation's inclination to either involve itself in design, or to 'wait and see'; whether it understands organisationally specific expectations of participation as an inducement, or a risk to its other widening admissions work; and the degree and direction of individual influence and persuasion brought to bear within the college or department in question. These tensions combine in various ways. For instance, where a college or department had reservations about the programme, they often opted to 'wait and see' and did not participate; however, where individual intercession occurred, as with Rachel's discussion with her colleague, this inclination was sometimes

overturned. Likewise, the department Darren describes as concerned about its bandwidth for widening admissions work appeared resolved not to take part, with Claire's description of her colleague's intervention simply confirming this view. Sub-organisations therefore exhibited greater or lesser inclinations to participate based on their structural positioning within the university and their interpretation of its meaning, with individual persuasion – but crucially, not pressure – sometimes either clinching this predisposed decision, or overturning it.

5.4: Conclusions

This chapter began by exploring the relevance of pre-existing widening admissions scheme, the University College Bridging Programme and the LMH Foundation Year. It examined how constructions of these programmes, and their relationships to the doxic boundaries and institutional habituses salient in the mainstream admissions and teaching spheres, set the stage for the reception of the AFY, framing it in immediate conjunction with Opportunity Oxford. It then explored the basis of the justifications and objections participants voiced about the AFY (as distinct from the actual actions they undertook in relation to it). As we saw, justifications for the AFY were founded in the institutional habitus positionings on merit and fairness, both credentialist and contextualist, which exist in the mainstream admissions process. Critiques of the AFY were also to be found from both credentialist and, arguably, contextualist perspectives, with the fig leaf critique occupying an ambivalent space in this regard.

However, in critiques of the AFY we also see the influence of normative principles which, in Chapter 7, I theorise as doxic. The design of the AFY's admissions process is perceived to infringe upon the established norms of tutor autonomy which structure the limits of the possible in Oxford. This prompts not the negotiated acceptance which tensioned institutional habituses generate in the mainstream admissions process, but questioning of the validity of the AFY as a whole, signalling its status as a partial doxic rupture. In practice, this rupture is only resolved in decisions regarding participation through individual intercession. Juxtaposed views of the political necessity of

participation versus the potential risk to other widening admissions programmes, and the tension between shaping the AFY and avoiding the perceived risk it poses, influence participation decision differentially depending on the sub-organisation's institutional position. Yet individual persuasion, whether for or against participation, appears to have been crucial in a number of cases where strong advocates existed. I suggest that this is a reflection of the fettering of autonomous tutor judgement as a doxic boundary. Where decision-makers' colleagues are well-known to them, and their professional practice is deemed comparable, participants are more comfortable delegating their prized decision-making authority, or deferring to those deemed closer to the decision at hand.

I theorise the various constructions of the AFY, and the subsequent participation decisions which they inform, as manifestations of what I term 'maintained contradiction'. This concept synthesises Bjerregaard and Jonasson's (2014) work on managed contradiction with Stewart's (2023) model of maintained disruption. Bjerregaard and Jonasson deploy managed contradiction to explain how, during periods of externally imposed change, actors undertake institutional work to amalgamate pre-existing institutional logics with newly created ones. However, this framework does not wholly fit my case. The introduction of the AFY is not an instance of global institutional change, but rather of incremental and piecemeal adaptation to external pressures, as demonstrated by the delicate negotiation explored in this chapter. Similarly, Stewart's model is not wholly contiguous with my research site. They theorise widening participation (as opposed to widening *admissions*) work at Oxford as an institution inviting practitioners to perpetually trouble the status quo of the organisation while 'only authorising tapered, softer forms of disruption' (2023: 142), thereby reproducing its legitimate status in the face of external criticism.

Yet the 'disruption' the AFY generates is not symbolically invited and managed by the organisation; it stems from actors who have real, immediate power over admissions decisions, and who are sanctioned to act autonomously in this capacity. As such, the contradictions surfaced by the AFY's introduction are *not* managed or manageable. They represent deep, fundamental

differences in participants' conceptions of the aims of admissions and teaching at Oxford, with these differing conceptions legitimised and bound together only by the shared doxic boundaries of the field. As such, they are fundamentally contradictory, central rather than marginalised, and maintained rather than managed; these conceptions cannot be co-opted or controlled by the institution, because the very doxa which bounds and legitimates the institution also legitimates tutor conceptions. In my final findings chapter, I explore how the AFY's implementation refracts back upon the mainstream admissions round. I consider how participants deploy varying strategies of institutional work to police or subvert the boundary between compartmentalisation and permeation, and the specific institutional positionings which inform these strategies. In Chapter 7, I then connect the conceptual apparatus I have developed – the tension between compartmentalisation and permeation, and the broader notion of maintained contradiction – to my theoretical framework, analysing the relationship between doxa and institutional habitus, and interposing relational institutional habitus as a novel concept which marries and explains their manifestations within the research site.

Chapter 6: Negotiating space between the AFY and mainstream praxis

This chapter speaks primarily to RQ3: how do AFY stakeholders interact with one another within the AFY and the mainstream admissions process to enact their constructions of fairness? Answering this question necessarily draws upon the findings of the previous two chapters. The AFY obliges my participants to define their positioning on issues of fairness and merit in the course of situating their responses to it. Their management of the relationship and space between the mainstream admissions and teaching ecosystem and the AFY is therefore vital to understanding the enactment of participants' constructions of fairness in each area. The chapter considers how the AFY's introduction prompts participants to attempt enactment of their conceptions of fairness – and consequently merit and appropriate practice – in the university's mainstream admissions and teaching spheres. Central to this question is the degree to which my participants seek to consider the AFY a part of the mainstream admissions and teaching ecosystem, or, conversely, the extent to which they seek to isolate it. The chapter first explores how some participants welcome the integration of principles and practices from the AFY into admissions practice and processes, while others oppose such permeation, before considering the same differentiation in response to issues of teaching practice. Participants' reasoning for these decisions is inevitably complex, messy and situated. For instance, some participants are vehement supporters of the AFY, and simultaneously view its compartmentalisation as wholly appropriate; others are ambivalent about the AFY's specific design but construct its integration as a valuable route to reshaping Oxford's normative admissions principles.

The strategies by which my participants attempt to enact their preferences are influenced by their specific understandings of contextualist or credentialist merit, and their construction of the AFY's meanings in light of these positions. However, they are also informed by their, and their sub-organisation's, positioning within Oxford as a social field. Participants negotiate between their own institutional habitus positionings and those of their college and/or department. As such, I interpret

these strategies of enactment as forms of institutional work – strategic action motivated by the goals actors deem appropriate, but structured and constrained by the milieu they individually work within. Further, I argue that the structures which participants negotiate in this enactment are not only their sub-organisation’s administrative topographies and narratives, but how Oxford’s doxa and institutional habituses are stabilised or upset through varying local manifestations of Oxford’s relational institutional habitus of deference and non-intervention. Building on these empirical findings, I fully describe the features of Oxford’s relational institutional habitus and its shifting nature in relation to the AFY’s introduction, and theorise its place within Bourdieu’s wider scheme of thought, in Chapter 7.

6.1: Compartmentalisation and permeation in admissions work

The first sections of this chapter explore how participants conceptualise the potential for the AFY’s guiding principles to be integrated into Oxford’s mainstream undergraduate admissions process. As Chapter 5 demonstrates, some instances of the compartmentalisation/permeation debate are founded in participants’ more abstract constructions of the concept of the AFY. For instance, recall Samantha’s assertion that some colleagues ‘profoundly believe that A level grades accurately measure something’ (section 5.2.2.1), or Adam’s active choice not to further scaffold his undergraduate teaching (section 5.2.1.4). However, this chapter focusses on the instances of compartmentalisation and permeation which stem explicitly from the AFY’s *introduction*; it explores the relationship between the practicalities of the AFY’s inception and the normative environment into which it is introduced.

6.1.1: Compartmentalising the AFY in admissions work

This section considers the mechanisms of compartmentalisation which participants strategically enact to create and maintain conceptual and practical boundaries between the AFY and the practice of the mainstream undergraduate admissions process. Drawing on a combination of interview and

observation data I consider the specific forms these strategies take, conceptualising them through the lens of institutional work.

6.1.1.1: Compartmentalisation in admissions practice: boundary shifting

Compartmentalisation of the AFY's admissions process was enacted by my participants through institutional work in a variety of ways. Here I discuss three of the most salient: college and departmental staff's policing of boundaries; the college allocation process for successful applicants; and the confirmation process after A level results were released in 2023. Academics from participating colleges and departments deployed strategies of boundary-shifting in relation to the AFY. They simultaneously distanced themselves from the development of the AFY, opting not to involve themselves in the programme's design, yet were anxious to retain decision-making capacities over areas they were particularly invested in (echoing Nicola's comments in section 5.3.1 regarding Oxford's doxa being characterised by a lack of trust). Mark describes this tension as follows:

The selection's been taking place by panels. And so like a college person, even though their college could be getting someone coming in - I mean, they can go along to the panel if they like. But...tutors don't know quite how the people are gonna be selected.

- Mark

Participants who were involved in the development of the AFY describe how this pattern of engagement from both colleges and departments operated in practice. Jason, for instance, discusses his frustration with what he perceives as his colleagues' vacillation over the choice of whether to require applicants to submit written work or complete an admissions test:

in [committee] yesterday I was sat next to [colleague] who went, 'Oh, well, there was...a [committee] paper two years ago that said, because of their background, you know, they shouldn't be given a test'...no-one engaged at that point and asked me anything more about it...my frustration is because I don't know how else [discussion] is had other than sending papers to [committee]. And then if people don't engage and discuss until they come round and go 'oh, you didn't give us a chance to do this'...

- Jason

Jason described many instances where decisions he felt had been arrived at consensually were questioned at a much later point. The paradoxical position of wishing to retain control over central decisions within the AFY's implementation while exempting themselves from consistent involvement with its development did not extend to every tutor. For instance, Christopher describes that at his college

the general feeling here with a very few exceptions was that [tutors] would rather not be involved... really admissions for foundation year and indeed foundation year generally, our relationship with the students is a bit more like the relationship we have with our graduate students in that it is a centrally run process...

- Christopher

The movement between positions of self-exemption and the demand for involvement is therefore, I argue, a purposeful strategy rather than the inevitable result of Oxford's bounding principle of tutor autonomy. At Christopher's college, tutors framed the AFY as a categorically different kind of admissions work which fell outside the doxic demand for tutor autonomy which governs undergraduate admissions decisions. This is itself, of course, a form of compartmentalisation, albeit one which presented fewer obstacles to the participants involved in the AFY's development. However, oscillation between demanding close involvement with admissions decisions and setting hard boundaries to this involvement (or simply not engaging with the invitation to do so) can also be interpreted as a more complex form of compartmentalising action. In *On Being Included*, her study of diversity work in institutions, Ahmed discusses institutional diversity documents as 'non-performatives': acts of discourse whose purpose is to fail to achieve their goals; '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.' (2012: 117, original italics). Ahmed goes on to argue that the commitments generated by such documents 'depend on work generated around the document...' 'but people don't like being told to read it', later concluding that 'A commitment might even be named not to bring it into effect' (2012: 118-119).

These observations about the nature of institutional diversity work can help us make sense of some Oxford tutors' attempts to be simultaneously in control of, and absolved of responsibility for, AFY admissions processes. If commitments to a process depend on 'the work generated around it', this work – or the avoidance of it – can be used to contain processes of institutional change. By requiring involvement in the admissions process as a condition of taking part in the AFY, but ignoring or delaying the work this involvement requires, actors create legitimacy for themselves to disengage from or weaken their support for the programme. This phenomenon is evident in my descriptions of several participant observations:

Participant 3 asks what will happen if there are no volunteers from participating colleges to conduct interviews; they explain there are definitely some people from their subject who will not volunteer.

- Observation 1, January 2023

Participant 4 reported that their attendance at [committee] was 'a waste of everyone's time'; they sat waiting until AOB, where they outlined the progress on the AFY's development, but received no engagement.

- Observation 2, January 2023

Participant 1 reports there have been no real responses from tutors for admission at participating colleges to provide interviewing help. College 1 said 'eugh', College 2 said they wanted to be involved.

- Observation 3, February 2023

These discussions pertain to some of the same subject areas as Jason's discussion of interactions with collegiate and departmental liaison meetings. The colleagues my participants refer to here are in at least one instance the same individuals who later raise the points of contention Jason describes in the quote above. Such acts of refusal and subsequent demand for involvement generate momentum to isolate the AFY from mainstream admissions processes by moving the criteria which admissions processes must meet to be acceptable in relation to Oxford's mainstream doxic framework. The simultaneous demand for tutor autonomy, and refusal to exercise it, is thus a form of disruptive institutional work which siloes the AFY. Not all instances of lack of engagement

can be interpreted in this sense; as the observation above notes, 'College 2' wished to be involved in the admissions process, but could not be accommodated for administrative reasons. However, other attempts to vary the level of engagement offered represent strategic action which operationalises and deploys Oxford's principle of tutor autonomy to disrupt legitimisation of the AFY's admissions processes in relation to mainstream admissions practice. This institutional work yielded responses from participants involved in the AFY's development process, demonstrating its effectiveness:

to some extent what [senior management] have encouraged us to do is to be very blatant...So 'you are not required as a tutor to teach these people, they will be taught centrally, we're recruiting people for it'...making sure nobody's got their nose out of joint is all very much part of what [we] are trying to do.

- Lisa

6.1.1.2: Compartmentalisation in admissions practice: college allocation

Unlike the mainstream admissions round, applicants to the AFY did not choose a college to apply to which acted as the admitting body for the scheme. Instead, once they had been made an offer of admission they were assigned to colleges. I was not able to ascertain whether every stream of the AFY used exactly the same process to allocate students to colleges; however, it appears that every stream incorporated college preferences for particular students in some way. In this section I discuss two aspects of the allocation process: the widespread acceptance by colleges of the students they were allocated, and a particular instance of institutional maintenance work which functioned as compartmentalisation.

The majority of colleges for which data is available accepted the students allocated to them without serious question. For some colleges, this process stemmed from their construction of the AFY's admissions process as a categorically different exercise to the mainstream admissions round. For instance, Christopher explains that

all of them that hadn't had tutors involved in interviewing said, 'this is a slightly meaningless exercise because we haven't got the kind of data that we would usually

have in making high quality decisions. So actually, probably next year, just trust the process. Let it run as it is.'

- Christopher

Christopher highlights that in subjects where tutors had not been part of the interview process they describe the process as 'slightly meaningless'. These tutors construct the ability to interview the candidate themselves, thereby exercising their autonomous academic judgement, as crucial to making 'high quality decisions'. As such, their contentment to 'trust the process' is rooted in the construction of the process as fundamentally different and separate to the mainstream admissions round. Significant attention was paid to ensuring interview practice for the AFY was appropriate both for the applicants' backgrounds and the purposes of effective selection – for instance, Rob describes

effectively transposing a similar idea onto the AFY admissions process...they're pretty much exactly the sorts of questions I could and would ask in a regular [subject] interview...there perhaps just needed to be a little bit more time hand holding...

- Rob

Despite this, the fact that Christopher's tutors did not interview the applicants themselves leads them to cast the college preference process as meaningless, distinguishing and separating the AFY's admissions process from the mainstream admissions round. This institutional work is consonant with the principle of tutors' academic autonomy; these tutors' acceptance of their allocated students stems from the sense that there is no way in which to materially query it, even if this might be desirable. For other colleges, the acceptance of the allocation process appears more straightforwardly uncontentious, which I discuss in section 6.1.2 below.

The second instance of compartmentalising institutional work I discuss pertains to how some subject tutors *did* choose to engage actively with the allocation process to match their requirements of the process. Jason describes how the ranking system used for college allocation could be used to ensure tutors secured the students they most wanted:

[Participant]: *we had a few subjects in colleges where a tutor only put one candidate as a preference and then were very adamant that that was their only preference....I would have liked to have been able to say to people 'well, you have to then...[explain] using these criteria why it is that you don't want to take this person' but...[pause].*

[Interviewer]: *You're just not in a position to do that right now?*

[Participant]: *No, exactly. And I think it was much more important this year that...the students who people were confident in and willing to give a place to got places.*

- Jason

By only nominating a single candidate, college tutors leveraged their awareness that a smaller number of applicants had been made offers than expected to ensure they were allocated the student they preferred. The desire to maintain the mainstream admissions process's doxic principle of academic autonomy thus extends into the AFY admissions round, subverting and compartmentalising the alternative model of selection by panel. The mainstream admissions round's relational institutional habitus (of deference to colleagues' academic autonomy and decisions) is disrupted by the introduction of collective admissions decisions through the AFY. This disruption destabilises the institutional maintenance work of non-intervention which such deference is enacted through, introducing situationally specific forms of creative and disruptive institutional work.

In this instance such institutional work manifests itself as an effort to maintain the principle of academic autonomy through subversion of the AFY's processes, with Jason strategically conceding this point. Participants involved in the AFY's development were keenly aware of the potential opposition they faced if colleges felt they were being assigned a student without due consultation and made efforts to avoid this situation arising. Adam explains that

I got some questions from college tutors just about 'what is going on, you know, what should we be doing? Please tell us that you're not going to just land some students on us'. So that was one line of anxiety...

- Adam

Adam recognises his colleagues' investment in retaining a semblance of autonomy in the admissions process, in line with the principles of the mainstream admissions round. His dialogue with tutors to assuage their 'anxieties' is therefore an attempt to ease the process of disruption which the AFY's admissions process represents.

6.1.1.3: Compartmentalisation in admissions practice: the confirmation process

The final instance of compartmentalisation in (and of) the AFY's admissions process is the confirmation process. Confirmation describes the decision-making process whereby conditional offers for both the mainstream and AFY admissions processes are converted to unconditional ones in August each year following the release of examination results. In most instances, when offer-holders have met the criteria of their offer, this is an administrative process, but when offer-holders in either admissions process narrowly miss their offer admitting tutors are asked to assess the student's performance and decide whether to grant them 'clemency'. In August 2023, a significant number of AFY offer-holders did not meet the academic conditions of their offer – some by a wide enough margin that their respective course leads chose not to admit them via clemency. A large number of tutors, both in collegiate or departmental roles and in capacities related to the AFY, raised the possibility of filling these AFY places with eligible applicants from the mainstream admissions process who had missed their offers.

the first thing that some of our tutors said was 'hang on a minute, surely now we're seeing everything together, there should be some opportunity to kind of mix, shift students from one programme to the other'.

- James

one of the reasons you may not have achieved the three As is precisely for the reasons that will cause the student to be eligible for the foundation year. So my initial response...was 'are there not students that have missed the three A offer for regular entry that are eligible?'...I think there were actually [three] across the university.

- Daniel

This did not, in practice, happen. AFY tutors in some subjects immediately began working to identify students who might fit this description and liaising with the relevant colleagues in colleges and departments:

there were certainly a couple of Band A or B, Opportunity Oxford eligible, plausibly AFY eligible students who had met or exceeded the AFY offer...ideal to transfer across...At least two of those colleges [with unfilled AFY spaces] and possibly three had said to me in the course of that day's conversations that they would be very interested in filling the places...

- Charlotte

In Charlotte's view, such offer-holders were 'ideal to transfer across'; indeed, the fact she began planning to do so illustrates the extent to which she saw this option as a natural solution (as did the colleges she liaised with). However, this work

was shut down at about seven o'clock that evening with an email from [senior university committee] that made this what I consider to be plausibly spurious legal argument.

- Charlotte

This issue was later raised in a meeting I observed:

Participant 1 highlights that there were students from widening participation backgrounds in the mainstream admissions round who had missed their offers, but who had achieved higher grades than AFY offer-holders who were being admitted. [Redacted] advised that these students could not be transferred to the AFY, and colleges with open spaces did not overrule them. Participant 4 raises concerns about the issue of leapfrogging and asks why these students were not taken. Participant 1 explains the reason given was that because this had not been advertised as a pathway into the AFY, transferring students would raise compliance issues with the Competition and Markets Authority. Participant 1 suspects this is incorrect and points out that other universities do similar things regularly. They believe the CFA allows colleges to accept such students, but that they were overruled.

- Observation 14, August 2023

I was not party to the specific details of the objection raised to transferring eligible mainstream offer-holders into the AFY. However, the contentious nature of the decision not to do so – and indeed some participants' suspicions that the university's legal obligations were being used

as a smokescreen to prevent the blurring of lines between admissions routes – highlights this episode as a key instance of the AFY’s compartmentalisation. Later, during their discussions with me, participants who did not favour transferring students between admissions routes couched their objections not in legal terms, but with regard to the potential reputational risk to the university, in terms of fairness to students, or through active distancing of the AFY and mainstream undergraduate admissions processes:

maybe not legally, but process wise...is it okay to then, you know, kind of suddenly be going 'oh well, you know, you were coming to Oxford to do a degree. Now...we're going to offer you the chance to come to Oxford to do this foundation year'?...that side of things was thinking about whether or not we wanted this narrative of 'oh, well, I was forced to do a foundation year'.

- Jason

those are not the terms of the foundation year as it's been set up and approved...when these things are set up, you know, they are set up very, very rigorously, 'these are the ways in which people can be admitted'...we can't just look at someone's UCAS form and say, 'Oh, yes, that person is or isn't eligible, there's an additional step and additional process.

- Christopher

In their construction of events, Jason and Christopher offer procedural or reputational objections to the idea of transfer between entry routes, rather than the clear legal impediment apparently received by other participants (although they do mention these issues). Moreover, there are existing mechanisms, used by many other universities, by which students can be transferred between courses even where they have differing entry requirements (for instance, the Unconditional Course Change (UCAS, 2024)). However, the participants who sought such transfer were rebuffed in legal terms. I argue that the gap between these accounts of how the decision not to transfer students between admissions routes was taken suggests the presence of active institutional work; acts of framing are undertaken with regard to the decision which underline the normative discord it represents. It is not possible to determine from my data exactly how this decision was made and explained; however, my participants’ constructions lead me to an

interpretation of the decision as an act of institutional maintenance work which sought to shore up the distinction between the two admissions routes.

This interpretation is strengthened by my subsequent discussions with participants about why the AFY had originally been designed as a separate admissions route, rather than one possible outcome of a unified admissions process. Some participants expressed deeply critical views of this separation, going so far as to deem the design 'ridiculous'. Jess discusses this issue at length below:

[we should] identify the students at [application] point who are foundation year eligible. And if and when they're not given a place on direct entry, you then ask them would you like to be considered for the foundation year instead?...we're asking students who by assumption are from disadvantaged backgrounds with not the same kind of evidence basis as maybe other students, to make a decision quite early on about whether they're going to get three Bs or not, or whether they're going to get three As or not, and therefore whether they're better off applying for direct entry or foundation year which seems kind of ridiculous to me...I don't really understand the reasons why that's not possible.

- Jess

When discussing this concern, participants who were involved in early conversations about the design of the AFY highlight that this separation was, indeed, a conscious decision. This issue is rooted in a debate about the fundamental nature of what the AFY should be. Participants such as Lee (see section 5.2.1.4) construct the AFY as valuable primarily as a route towards changing the nature of Oxford's mainstream admissions process by moving towards contextual offer-making, in line with the majority of selective universities. However, other participants view the purpose of the AFY as to reach a very specific sub-set of potential applicants without impacting the mainstream admissions and teaching ecosystem's conception of merit and its links to disadvantage. Jason, for instance, explains that

[a single assessment point] was discussed as an option. I think the idea was very much that...there should be clear water, essentially, between undergraduate application and foundation year application, especially because of the complicating matter of OpOx in the middle...Therefore, we needed to keep these things as far apart as possible.

- Jason

If the purpose of the AFY is conceived as providing a specialised entry route for profoundly disadvantaged but talented students, such separation is understandable. However, this construction also depends on a willingness to rethink the relationship between attainment and disadvantage for AFY applicants, but not for the mainstream application cohort. Furthermore, it rests upon the presupposition that teaching provision for direct-entry undergraduates is not related to issues of admissions equity – a notion which Chapter 4, as well as later sections of this chapter, call into question. As Rebecca argues,

in terms of understanding how students with lower than our current standard entry requirements could do in the standard admissions process and make it on course, I'm not sure how much the foundation year would help because all it would prove would be after a year of very intensive support, they are ready to start the standard course.

- Rebecca

The corollary of Rebecca's argument is that without considering teaching practice on 'standard' courses, the AFY cannot be used to draw conclusions about mainstream admissions decisions – in itself, perhaps an aim of the conscious separation of the admissions routes. As Chapter 5 establishes, AFY-eligible students do achieve the grades required for direct undergraduate entry, only to often find themselves uncompetitive in this gathered field of (mostly more advantaged) applicants. This creates, in practice, the system which Jess describes as 'ridiculous' and 'crazy':

there's two kinds of weird things that are implied by this. I mean, one is that we're kind of missing people who have indeed experienced a high level of disadvantage, but have done so well in overcoming that that they've got, I don't know, AAB or something, it seems kind of crazy that we wouldn't even consider those people...the other issue, of course, is that schools are differently aspirational in their predicted grades...especially with students in this kind of category, schools will often predict, you know, nearly .7 or .8 of a grade higher on average than they will actually get...on average they're not going to get three As. But the fact that they've been predicted three As, should that make them ineligible for foundation year? Again, that seems kind of crazy to me.

- Jess

I therefore argue that a variety of acts of institutional maintenance work were deployed to compartmentalise the AFY's admissions process. In Chapter 7, I discuss my theorisation of how these specific strategies of institutional work develop in relation to my Bourdieusian analysis of Oxford's admissions and teaching ecosystem.

6.1.2: Permeation of the AFY through admissions work

Conversely, some participants constructed the AFY admissions process so as to make it congruent with mainstream admissions, and sometimes even to suggest it had altered their admissions practice. It is important to recognise that constructions of the AFY's admissions process as contiguous or even overlapping with mainstream admissions do not necessarily imply permeation in the sense of incorporating AFY admissions principles into the mainstream. For instance, apart from Tom (see section 5.2.2.4) no participant suggests centralising the interview process as in AFY admissions. However, questioning the clear separation of the AFY from the mainstream admissions round, and the nature of its applicants as a wholly different kind of student, begins to highlight the tension described above of radically addressing the links between attainment and disadvantage in the AFY, but not in the mainstream admissions round. Such positionings are nascent, but there are indications that they are starting to impact undergraduate admissions practice in small ways in some colleges. Here, I discuss two aspects of this nascent permeation: first, the setting of upper bounds for AFY eligibility, and second, interviewers' assessments of interview performance compared to mainstream admissions – including how these impressions influence wider conceptualisations of admissions practice in Oxford.

6.1.2.1: Permeation in the admissions process: the upper bounds of eligibility

The point at which the upper grade boundaries for AFY eligibility were set was a point of contention in some subject streams. As Jason explains above the committees which originally designed the AFY intended to place 'clear water' between it and the mainstream admissions process. However, in practice no formal eligibility criteria was set requiring applicants to have attained below the

standard offer for mainstream entry. As a result, some applicants applied with a grade profile which would, at least theoretically, allow them to gain admission via mainstream admission. Participants expressed varying views on whether to consider such applicants eligible, which again surface the tension between compartmentalisation and permeation in the AFY admissions round. For instance, participants in one observation described

There is a negotiation about whether to retain applicants who meet the standard offer (it is clear that participants are differentiating this from the average entry tariff). There is a consensus that the team should try to include applicants who are predicted the standard mainstream offer. Participant 1 notes there might be some very desirable candidates who are predicted three As.

- Observation 2, January 2023

Lauren (who was not a participant involved in my observations) explains her reasoning on this issue thus:

*I think I was among the people that was a bit more liberal...I was very happy to interview anyone who qualified for this programme if they were predicted AAA or A*AA, you know, on the grounds that even if they're predicted AAA but actually below the modal profile for an interviewee or admissions candidate...they might qualify for an interview, [but] it would make them unlikely to get in.*

- Lauren

Lauren, and the participants involved in my observation, couch their willingness to consider mainstream-qualifying applicants as eligible in the fact that such applicants are in reality unlikely to prove competitive in the mainstream admissions process. By recognising such candidates' slim chances of admission through a mainstream application, these participants connect the AFY's central focus on the link between attainment and disadvantage to the issues of equity present in the mainstream admissions round. The decision to consider such applicants as eligible represents a disruptive form of institutional work which pushes against the separation of the AFY and the mainstream admissions round. This is further demonstrated by the response the decision produced among tutors in the wider university who were more sceptical of the programme:

the tutors who interviewed all said, 'we're interviewing people who would get placed in the normal round. So what are we doing this for?...This lot really shouldn't have been in this cohort'. That, of course, is inconsistent with the outcome, which is that the [applicants] we gave offers to missed the grades.

- Andrew

The suggestion that such students would be successful in the normal round is based in the attempt to separate the AFY from mainstream admissions: that students who were suitable for the AFY would never appear similar to mainstream applicants. As Andrew notes, these students missed their (already reduced) conditional offers; furthermore, Jason raises questions about whether such students would genuinely be competitive for offers at all:

although people would say, 'Well, look, this looks like someone who could get in anyway' it's like 'well, really? Do they look like they would get in?'. And [in one subject]...they did then come back and go, 'well, actually, yes, you're probably right. You know, looking at this again, and looking at their GCSE scores, I can see that probably they wouldn't...'

- Jason

The decision to retain applicants with mainstream-eligible attainment actively seeks to push back against the neat separation of the AFY and mainstream admissions to reflect the realities of the profiles of applicants themselves and how they are conceptualised within each process.

6.1.2.2: Permeation in the admissions process: assessment of interview performance

Interviewers' assessment of applicants' performance compared to mainstream candidates did not suggest active institutional work, but rather the passive impact of the AFY's introduction on admissions decision-makers. The majority of participants described the students they had interviewed, or who colleagues had discussed with them, as offering similar levels of interview performance to applicants who might be successful in the mainstream admissions round. This held true across several subject and college backgrounds.

Quite a number of tutors made the point that a lot of the people they saw...there wouldn't be any reason not to take them in the normal round, apart from slightly lower predicted grades...they weren't struggling any more than the normal cohort.

- Andrew

I think we were very pleasantly surprised that the people we had ranked as the best few in our shortlisting were almost as good as candidates we normally see.

- Lisa

There were some people that we interviewed who wouldn't have looked out of place in the slightest in the regular [subject] round, except for the fact that they had a slightly weaker grade profile, but their actual performance in interviews was competitive and would have been competitive in regular [subject] admissions.

- Rob

As Lisa describes, this came as a 'pleasant surprise'; even tutors involved in the AFY's design did not expect students with such markedly lower exam attainment to demonstrate similar levels of interview performance to mainstream applicants. For Adam, this is a demonstration that the AFY is targeting the right students: those with innate ability (which he sees the interview as able to discern) but whose attainment would not allow them to secure an offer in the mainstream process.

it would be exactly the candidate where, you know, you have a sort of pretty, really good, almost dazzling interview, then...you look at everything on paper, and you say, 'Well, yes, they were really impressive...but given their academic track record, given where they are on paper, they would probably struggle with the workload of the BA'...when you're having the conversation about actually finalising your offer list, they probably fall off the list, because you're worried.

- Adam

This construction of the AFY applicants in the interview process is ripe for engagement by strategies of institutional work seeking either to integrate or separate the AFY from the mainstream admissions process. It contains the obvious possibility of framing AFY applicants as similar to mainstream applicants in their raw intellectual ability. However, participants' recognition of comparable interview performance does not necessarily imply permeation into the mainstream admissions round of the AFY's highly sensitive contextualised approach to selection and offer-making. As discussed in Chapter 5, some participants are particularly concerned about the notion of the 'fig leaf' – the siloing of attempts to contextualise applicants' performance into the AFY, diluting them in the mainstream admissions process. Jess describes the situation thus:

you can see it making them look much harder for signs of academic potential in places you might not normally look for it. But you could also see it going the other

way, 'Okay, well, we have the foundation year for that stuff. So I'll just take the people getting the best grades now, or the people who are just most obviously the strongest on paper'.

- Jess

In practice, among my participants, the AFY's impact on mainstream admissions practice was very minor, but also tended towards descriptions of permeation rather than compartmentalisation. At the point I completed my data collection, the first cohort of AFY students had only been in Oxford one term, and it is perhaps therefore unsurprising that tutors who were not connected directly to the programme had not reflected deeply on its impact on their decisions. However, there were embryonic instances where participants describe the AFY impacting mainstream admissions practice. James comments that

we've had the contextual data policy, let's see now, for 15 years or so?...it's taken this long maybe to bring everyone up to kind of like, obviously this is now how we should be thinking about UK applicants to Oxford... us talking about the foundation year and talking about students who have encountered extreme disadvantage, really kind of very complicated sets of circumstances, has definitely helped to reinforce some of that.

- James

For James, the AFY does not alter perceptions in isolation, but within the broader context of an increasingly contextualised understanding of the assessment of merit and ability. This raises a crucial point: the deployment of strategies of compartmentalisation and permeation are highly local, situationally specific, and inconsistent. Just as participants are almost never wholly credentialist or contextualist in their institutional habitus leanings, they harbour nuanced, complex, and sometimes fragmented or dissonant conceptions of the desirability of integrating or separating the principles and processes of the AFY into the mainstream undergraduate ecosystem. I explore these complexities in Chapter 7 through a handful of participant case studies which highlight the unruly and overlapping realities of participants' normative leanings and policy preferences.

6.2: Compartmentalisation and permeation in teaching practices

Section 4.2.3 of Chapter 4 discusses my participants' constructions of undergraduate teaching at Oxford. My participants conceptualise Oxford's (and Cambridge's) teaching practices as significantly

more intense than even other highly selective UK universities, and often locate this intensity in not only the difficulty of the material encountered but the volume of work required of undergraduates. Previous research supports the idea that undergraduate students' workload is exceptionally (and, in some cases, inappropriately) high at Oxford (Trigwell and Ashwin, 2003; Chester and Bekhradnia, 2009). Students are expected to work independently from the beginning of their course, often with little explicit guidance about the work they are asked to complete or its alignment to what or how they are expected to learn. For instance, Lisa (while she recognises her subject as particularly time-intensive) describes the undergraduate learning environment thus:

in the main course...you generally have one day a week [where] we don't have to do so much. And when I say per week, I mean, in a seven day week. [Students in subject] here are working at least six, if not seven days in a week, not necessarily all day, but they are doing work on all those days, it's a very intense term, they don't really have proper downtime.

- Lisa

Many of my participants locate the value of Oxford's teaching in both the volume and difficulty of the work which students must produce; recall that for Adam 'the struggle is part of the point', or Mark's belief that 'in order to attract the best we have to offer the most stretching and challenging course'. Conversely, other participants dispute the valorisation of Oxford's intensive teaching system – for instance, Daniel's contention that the amount of material involved in the course leaves no room for skills development, meaning that 'it really comes down to who you have as a tutor'. As Nicola suggests in section 4.2.3, the ability to cope with such a system may be influenced by prior social and educational experiences, rendering Oxford's tutorial teaching system more accessible to more advantaged students. This section first explores how the AFY's teaching model differs from the traditional Oxford tutorial model, both in its course design and its pedagogic approaches. I then consider how participants' framing of these differences align – inevitably, messily and with complexity – with the concepts of compartmentalisation and permeation between the AFY and undergraduate teaching practices.

6.2.1: Contrasting AFY and undergraduate teaching practices

In this section I discuss three aspects of divergence between AFY and undergraduate teaching practice: course structure, pedagogy, and the question of who is appropriately qualified to provide teaching. Throughout, I make reference particularly to the constructions of my student participants. They discuss the gaps and dissonances between AFY provision and their own undergraduate learning experiences, reflecting on the nature of the distinctions which academic participants do or do not draw between the modes of learning. I carry these student reflections forward into subsequent sections where I discuss the strategies of institutional work used to integrate and separate the AFY from the undergraduate teaching arena.

6.2.1.1: *The structural design of the AFY*

To frame the following discussion, I first offer a consideration of the specific differences between the AFY and undergraduate courses with regard to pedagogical design and practice. The most obvious distinction between the AFY's course design and mainstream undergraduate courses is simply the level of intentionality which the relevant academics feel able to employ when making decisions about the shape of its courses. When discussing undergraduate courses, many participants remark on their quasi-accidental nature and the difficulty of changing them. Undergraduate courses are described as quasi-artefacts whose shape is dictated by historical decisions and the lack of time to reform them:

the course has barely changed since I did it in the in the 1990s...is that because the theory hasn't really changed? Or is that because people just keep picking it up because they're the next person in line? It's a lot of effort to write a course...I don't think teaching is [tutors'] focus. And I think there's just this mindset of 'Well, I had to study this when I was an undergraduate, so you need to do it too'.

- Daniel

By contrast, every participant involved in the design of AFY courses remarked on the unusual (and enjoyable) position of being able to design a course completely anew. Participants took this opportunity extremely seriously, with very considerable thought and effort being dedicated to even

small details of the AFY's design. For instance, this extract from Observation 12 indicates how participants in the stream I observed framed the task of designing assessments:

Participant 1 describes how one module's marks split clearly between its learning outcomes. Participant 5 explains they are thinking carefully about how to move assessment from a Level 3 [i.e. A level] to a Level 4 [i.e. first year undergraduate] standard and describes the material difference this will involve...Participant 1 remarks on the need to ensure Level 4 does not inadvertently become Level 6 [i.e. final year undergraduate] standard.

- Observation 12, June 2023

Such detailed conversations were common across my observations, contrasting with the sense that Daniel and Vicky (in section 4.2.3.1) give us of somewhat disjointed undergraduate courses which tutors lack the time or resource to reform. This difference is underlined by Harry's student participant perspective on the design of the undergraduate learning experience. He describes how, for many students, there is a sense of misalignment between their weekly work and the assessments which determine their eventual degree outcomes:

[it's] so like mystif[ying] to people and I think there's something to say as well about like, the disparity between like college teaching and how I think it aligns...students don't realise how that feeds into like the university exams that come at the end of it? And that's not really explained to anyone, which is always, why it's a surprise when students are like, 'how do I like transfer like my work from my tutorials to the context of like the university led exams?'

- Harry

Participants describe the AFY course design as attempting to avoid this situation. They see the focus of the AFY courses as being firmly on skills development, with close attention paid to the structure of the course and how students will encounter its constituent parts in real time. Daniel describes how different the experience of designing his teaching for the AFY has been compared to other aspects of his teaching practice:

I've had to think really carefully about structuring the course so that skills really develop a little bit at a time, really trying to stop and think about whether things are going to be too overwhelming, having lots of chances to kind of go back and revisit things...I've never really had very much scope to have a clean sheet, a clean slate, I can design a course from scratch and really think about what it is that we

want students to do...[it's] because of that skills based approach that we've taken...the content is just meant to be there for the skills to kind of link into.

- Daniel

The decision to explicitly consider how intelligible 'what it is we want students to do' is to the students themselves is, for some participants, a significant departure from the experience of undergraduate teaching and learning. Jack, for instance, explains that he frequently struggled to relate the actual practice of his undergraduate work to the objectives he knew he was working towards:

when I came here, I found reading so hard that it would literally take me ages to read like a single book...I would literally read it and not even come out with that actual like, 'what's the point of why I just read this?'

- Jack

Tellingly, Tom (one of my participants who is most critical of Oxford's mainstream teaching and admissions practice) therefore describes the AFY as

...making it deliberately designed to be something you can succeed at rather than something that confuses you, God forbid [smiles].

- Tom

In the excerpts above, participants discussing the AFY espouse various principles associated with constructive alignment (Biggs, 1996; Biggs and Tang, 2007). Constructive alignment as a philosophy of pedagogy seeks to ensure that teaching and learning activities are coupled firmly to the stated learning outcomes of the educational task, that learning is produced by what students undertake – what *they* actually *do* – and that their learning is assessed in the light of the stated outcomes they have been given (see Biggs and Tang, 2007: 7). In Bernstein's (1975) terms such strategies could be considered a visible pedagogy, wherein learning is perhaps more prescriptive but also more transparent, adopting stronger frames for the tasks and skills students are intended to complete and develop. I would add that it possesses the potential to act as a radical visible pedagogy (Bourne, 2004): as a way to make the *strategies of the game* – the 'academic literacies' (Lea and Street, 1998) useful for acquiring knowledge – explicit. As Loughlin et al (2021) note,

constructive alignment has been widely adopted and recognised as a core tenet of HE teaching but is often deployed under managerialist regimes which denude it of its constructivist roots and impact. Within the Oxford context, where some tutors have no formal pedagogical training, the very notion of constructive alignment was not consciously recognisable to many tutors involved in the AFY's design. Nicola describes the process of designing the AFY's course structures:

[Participant]: *the big shift, I think, is really what is the student able to do by the end of the session, by the end of this teaching block. How does that fit in with other things they're doing?...thinking about what a student does to prepare for a class, what the student does in the session, and what the student does after the session, and how that segues into the next teaching session. So creating that narrative in the teaching, not just expecting the student knows what to do, but being much more explicit about that.*

[Interviewer]: *Did it feel like that was a new idea for some people?*

[Participant]: *Yes. And I was told that, 'we don't do this normally'.*

- Nicola

Explicitly basing course design around the holistic experience of the student therefore represents a significant departure from standard undergraduate teaching practice. As Daniel explains above, this is for some tutors as much due to the lack of time and space tutors feel they have to consider course modifications as to active ideological opposition to incorporating such principles. Jason, for instance, notes that 'they might be doing [it] intuitively...they haven't necessarily thought about it in that way'. I now explore how such principles of course design translated into pedagogical practice in student interactions.

6.2.1.2: Pedagogical practice in the AFY

Participants' descriptions of the teaching practice they deploy in their AFY teaching is generally couched in relation to their conceptions of their own, and their colleagues' teaching practice for mainstream undergraduate students. In some cases, such descriptions are indicative of undergraduate teaching practices my participants view as poor:

it's quite a difficult university to find out what goes on in other people's teaching rooms, they're very private spaces...some colleagues will say, 'Oh, I've got tutorials

all afternoon, I'm just going to get my students to read out their essays for me, and I'll make some comments here or there'. For me, I can't imagine doing anything worse in a tutorial.

- Daniel

My student participants also discuss some approaches to Oxford's tutorial teaching critically.

the normal kind of mainstream way in which Oxford teaches is very much that you kind of figure out on your own what they're kind of looking for...it ends up being something that means that you can't really reflect at the first level activity that's going on in your brain in your essays because you don't really know how to.

- Jack

However, even for some participants who prided themselves on their inclusive teaching for undergraduates (and whose discussion of their pedagogy indicated relatively inclusive practice within the Oxford context), their involvement in the AFY was an opportunity to reflect on and develop their engagement with students. Both Daniel and Charlotte discuss how designing and teaching for the AFY helped them develop novel approaches they may not have used before with undergraduate students:

I'm thinking particularly about using [subject] diagrams and mathematical workings...it's a little bit like writing in a foreign language, there's a way that you structure it that makes sense to a [subject specialist]....they were just struggling to visualise what it was that I wanted them to do. So we worked through things on the board...then I also created more questions and wrote out model answers with some annotations about why different lines are important and why I was doing things [and]...saved it to the course website...

- Daniel

I was doing a 90 minute seminar, which is kind of like a lecture in terms of delivering new material, but structured as a seminar so that it was much more like class teaching, more interactive, so that I had the students, you know, much more kind of talking me through things and making sure that I was kind of progressing at a digestible speed rather than an indigestible speed.

- Charlotte

Note the contrast between Charlotte's description of 'moving at a digestible speed' and Daniel's comments in section 4.2.3.1 regarding the need to 'plough on'; the contrast in whether the value of the learning experience is located in content or skills between the AFY and undergraduate study

is particularly stark in this instance. Charlotte, in particular, continued to reflect on the areas of her practice she still wished to improve in line with notions of constructive alignment, although she did not use this term herself. Here, she describes attempting to ensure the module she was teaching was structurally consonant with the other material the students were encountering:

thematically we were jumping across and backwards a bit too much for my liking...there was kind of a week on [topic A]. Well, I'd hoped to get through the [topic A] material in one week. And it turned out it needed two weeks, but I couldn't take the next week to carry on with [topic A] because they needed to do [topic B]...

- Charlotte

Although Charlotte expresses frustration at this outcome, her recognition of the need to ensure a coherent student experience of the course remains a significant departure from some standard practice in mainstream undergraduate teaching where, as Vicky describes it, 'they go from topic to topic to topic, and there's no real kind of unity or cohesion to it'. For some tutors involved in the AFY such steps represented significant development of their teaching practice, aptly summarised by Jason thus:

suddenly someone went 'oh, so we're kind of writing teaching plans then, doing that?', and I was like 'yeah!' [smiles].

- Jason

For my student participants, this approach to teaching and learning was constructed as radically different from many of their experiences of mainstream undergraduate teaching. Jack, for instance, highlights experiences where tutors assumed a significant degree of background knowledge and competence with concepts he feels are congruent with prior social and educational advantage:

I had a tutorial and my tutorial partner was actually from Eton and our tutor was talking almost as if all of the things that he was saying only really applied to him...as a former Eton student, and not to me as a former non selective state school student. And I don't even think the tutor even realised that was the case...some principles or some ideas they just expected me to know and they didn't stop and slow down and be like, 'oh, this is what I mean when I say this' and maybe try and explain it in a way that made sense.

- Jack

The incorporation of pedagogical principles and techniques intended to be explicitly inclusive into AFY teaching therefore notably differentiates the AFY from some forms of teaching offered to undergraduate students. However, my participants generally do not consider their altered practice as stemming from a paradigmatic shift in their understanding of teaching. Instead, they see the situation as reversed, situating their development of inclusive pedagogy in the AFY (and, indeed, their involvement in it) as the result of their broad, career-long interest in pedagogy in general, coupled with the opportunity to implement such innovative teaching techniques in the Oxford context. I interpret this to be a result of my sampling method and data collection period. Working with participants who had chosen to be involved with the AFY's development, before most tutors had had contact with AFY-educated students, is likely to have produced a corpus of data which represent the views of more pedagogically progressive members of the Oxford teaching community. Nonetheless, there are significant differences in how even these participants conceptualise the broad role of pedagogy in the Oxford context. As discussed in section 4.2.3, Adam reflexively considered incorporating AFY-style scaffolding into his undergraduate teaching provision, but decided against it on the grounds that 'the struggle is part of the point'. Unpacking this point further, he explains that

The point is that you and they are participating in exactly the same disciplinary task...the idea of a significant gap between you and the students where you are helping them to understand something that you already understand, is antithetical to one model of what the tutorial system is...It partly is [that]. But there's an important bit of it where what you're giving them is the chance to kind of partner with you, and...the lower your expectations are of what they will be able to achieve just with the reading list by themselves, the more you lose of that system.

- Adam

Adam casts the core of tutorial teaching as engagement between academic peers who, despite asymmetrical knowledge and experience base, have equal claim to a position on the topic in question. As such, he is reluctant to introduce what he sees as excessive support into his mainstream undergraduate teaching to avoid upsetting what he understands as the equitable epistemic relationship between 'student' and 'tutor'. The AFY is positioned as a categorically

separate form of learning wherein the students involved do not have the skills necessary to engage in this inherently asymmetrical but ultimately equitable dialogue. Although Adam acknowledges that undergraduate students enter the first year of their degree with differing levels of prior knowledge and skill, which may be mediated by social and educational background, he believes that through dint of having been selected through the undergraduate admissions process, such students are in a *sufficiently* equitable epistemic position to engage in such learning. Conversely, Jess offers a different interpretation of the nature of the tutorial teaching environment:

it's easy for us to say, 'Oh, we don't want to be prescriptive' when in fact, there's been prescriptive education that some have had earlier, and others haven't...of course, progress amounts to being confused in different ways. And there'll never be a kind of straightforward, easy answer that we want to screen for. Of course, all of that's true. But I also think the current system kind of does allow certain sorts of students to just sort of persistently fail without them really understanding why. And that more kind of explicit instruction, like 'OK, this is just like, how you write an essay', you know, earlier on, would have benefited them.

- Jess

For Jess, the admissions process does not provide an adequate screen to ensure all undergraduates can enter an equitable discourse within the tutorial system as it stands; instead, the most disadvantaged students, whether socially or educationally, can sometimes 'persistently fail without understanding why'. As a result, she is more supportive of integrating some of the AFY's teaching principles into undergraduate provision, as discussed in the following sections. Jack's comments above on the inaccessible nature of some tutorial teaching foreshadow the overwhelming view of my student participants, discussed in Chapter 7, that such integration would be welcomed. I now discuss the strategies of compartmentalisation and permeation which my participants deploy.

6.2.2: Compartmentalisation in AFY course design and teaching practice

This section explores the strategies of institutional work by which participants and their colleague seek to silo the teaching principles and techniques deployed in the AFY. It is first important to make clear that the roles my participants hold and the period of data collection within the AFY's lifecycle shape the data I produced pertaining to these processes of enactment significantly. Because the

teams designing and teaching AFY courses were relatively small, only a small number of possible participants existed who had both taught or designed teaching for AFY students and also for undergraduates. Likewise, no AFY students had entered undergraduate teaching by the time my data collection period ended, and awareness of the AFY's teaching strategies among participants not involved with its design or admission was limited. This meant that the participants who had had the opportunity to directly enact either compartmentalisation or permeation of the AFY's teaching principles in their undergraduate teaching were overwhelmingly those who had designed or taught AFY courses.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, with the exception of Adam these participants were in favour of incorporating teaching techniques from the AFY into their undergraduate teaching, and as a result there is significantly more direct evidence of strategies of permeation than compartmentalisation in my data. Nonetheless, it is possible to identify constructions of the AFY's teaching congruent with the desire to ensure the AFY's teaching principles are not adopted in the undergraduate teaching sphere. While such constructions generally do not constitute institutional work in the traditional sense, they do represent discursive efforts to frame the AFY's teaching as either categorically different to undergraduate teaching, or detrimental to it. I discuss three such conceptualisations below: compartmentalisation as necessary for the efficacy of teaching, institutional inertia, and compartmentalisation as protecting the integrity of the tutorial teaching system.

6.2.2.1: Compartmentalisation of AFY teaching: ensuring efficacy

Some participants described the likelihood of AFY principles such as slower paced introductions and smaller volumes of work being introduced to undergraduate teaching as low, on the simple basis of pedagogic efficacy. For these participants such techniques are acceptable in the specific context of a preparatory course such as the AFY, but in a multi-year undergraduate course would lead to significant increases in failure rates.

we know a university where it happened. They thought the transition at the beginning of university was too steep...they made their first year gentler as a

transition year...the fail rate at second year leapt through the roof...when asked the students said, 'We expected a big change at the beginning of the first year and it didn't happen. So we were totally shocked by the big change that started the second year...'

- Ian

Ian constructs the student response to changes in the difficulty of courses as key to this position; he suspects that without the immediate pressure to complete a challenging course, students would not develop the working practices necessary to navigate the later, harder stages of the undergraduate journey. He supports the AFY because he views it as a chance to develop and secure a knowledge base in his subject which students have not had the opportunity to acquire at school which will enable them to access university-level study.

[there was] a statement made by a senior tutor in a committee meeting that...the drop of a grade at A level is like, a 10th of the [course] material...if I come to you and say, 'I'll give you a year to teach bright students a tenth of an A level', you know, it's not a challenge...

- Ian

This construction of the AFY appears to be discipline-specific, although it does not match the conceptions of other tutors in the same AFY stream who conceive of the AFY as focussed on skills development as well as knowledge. For other tutors, this desire to ensure the efficacy of the course transcends compartmentalisation of the AFY's teaching and strays into the attempt to permeate the principles of *mainstream* teaching into the AFY:

I found it hard to see what they would be being taught in the foundation year...maybe interpreting texts, possibly help in writing essays, I couldn't see why they weren't doing that at the same time as they're doing the [subject] degree course...

- Richard

Adam describes his colleagues' objections to the teaching practices outlined to them at departmental meetings:

the other argument is that the reading lists are just not onerous enough, that they are too short, that they will not adequately prepare candidates...we pushed back a

little bit...what is crucial is that we teach the foundation year students, you know, how to work with a single source in the most efficient way. And once you've done that, you can kind of build up to the longer reading lists.

- Adam

This intervention and Adam's response (themselves forms of institutional work) demonstrate the extent of tutors' concerns regarding the lack of control over AFY teaching, a phenomenon Nicola ascribes in Chater 5 to 'fundamentally a lack of trust'. When the AFY is constructed in this sense, compartmentalisation is a logical conclusion: it is seeking to achieve a separate goal to undergraduate courses, and as such its principles cannot be transferred into undergraduate teaching.

6.2.2.2: Compartmentalisation of AFY teaching: institutional inertia

Several participants explained that whatever their personal convictions on whether undergraduate teaching *should* learn lessons from the AFY, they suspected the institutional will was lacking to implement such changes. I return here to Ahmed, who discusses the institutional will as a form of *continuation*: 'the institutional will is willing that is continuous with what has already been willed' (2012: 129). This formulation of institutional will, not as 'political will' to do something different but as habit, the continuation of the same, is comparable to the conceptions of the institutional habitus offered by its early proponents (e.g. Reay, 1998a). Indeed, Ahmed acknowledges her work's relationship with Bourdieu's (2012: 198). Reading the institutional will as habit helps us interpret the observations of participants who lacked faith that there was sufficient impetus to achieve change in teaching:

I think it's possible, but not likely...when [departments] are designing courses, I think that broadly speaking, what they're trying to do is think 'what is the most demanding course that we could create at - reasonably - at undergraduate level?'...I think that is the benchmark that departments consciously or unconsciously use...'if we start shaping our courses to make them more accessible socially, that sort of defeats the point of what we are'.

- Christopher

Christopher, who discusses elsewhere that undergraduate student attainment is a matter of concern for him, positions the ‘conscious or unconscious’ desire to make undergraduate study as difficult as possible as an institutional norm or habit. It is ‘what we are’ – a question of embodied, normative worldview, as much as pedagogical policy. The habitual institutional will to maintain extremely challenging expectations for undergraduates is compounded by both the practical difficulty of reforming courses at Oxford, and what some participants view as their unnecessarily rigidity:

there are a lot of extraordinarily good universities that are less, you know, less obstructive, and difficult and inflexible around the way they're structured...

we've got a huge attainment gap for disability. And I think a lot of that is because the programme is, is very, very inflexible...when push comes to shove, and you have a student who has a very acute and very intense particular need that doesn't mean you need to change their assessment, it's amazing what it is possible to do. But that's tiny little bits at the ends, at the edges.

- Paul

For Paul, Oxford’s ‘obstructive’ course designs are in extreme cases mitigated for through additional ad hoc support for students, echoing the use of exceptionalist reasoning to avoid reform discussed in section 4.3.3. The effects on students of a lack of institutional will to reform courses, as discussed by Vicky in Chapter 4, are buffered by actions outside the standard schema of teaching ‘*when push comes to shove*’. However, this means that participants like Christopher and Paul deem it unlikely that learnings from the AFY will be integrated into undergraduate teaching in any systematic way.

6.2.2.3: Compartmentalisation of AFY teaching: protecting the integrity of tutorial teaching

The motivation for compartmentalisation which cuts closest to the central issues of my research, however, concerns participants’ desire to protect what they understand as the essential nature of the tutorial teaching system. This viewpoint is the one espoused by Adam in his construction of the role of pedagogy in the tutorial teaching system. However, while Adam supports the AFY because he conceives of it as operating separately to undergraduate teaching, some participants oppose the

AFY on the grounds that it represents the thin end of the wedge of pedagogical reform. As Jess describes, some of her colleagues worry that

if we have this really nice kind of, you know, scaffolded introduction to the practice of doing [subject], which is much more prescriptive than what we do for the current first years, then people might start thinking, 'Well, why aren't you doing that with other students'...a kind of Trojan horse for broader reforms to the way we deliver education at the university level.

- Jess

The participant who espouses this view most clearly and strongly is Kevin. We have encountered Kevin at three points so far: advocating for the use of an attainment baseline equivalent to AAA at A level in section 4.1.1; tempering this position by arguing that rarely, for acutely disadvantaged candidates, this requirement should be waived through academic discretion (in section 4.3.3); and reaffirming his belief that nonetheless, the lion's share of widening admissions work should be through the recruitment and selection of high-attaining students from state-maintained schools (in section 5.2.2.4). Kevin's opposition to the AFY as an admissions route draws on his conviction that most suitable applicants, even those from moderately disadvantaged backgrounds, can achieve Oxford's standard offer, together with the view that through tutors' academic judgement and discretion the small number of applicants whose circumstances genuinely prevent this can still secure a place. However, he also objects to the scheme on similar pedagogic grounds to Adam – the need to preserve the tutorial system as a specific mode of learning.

I do worry about the extent to which we're not confident that a system where students can grow for themselves and acquire those skills autodidactically can work...I want there to be a place in higher education where it's alright for educators and students to share that expectation.

- Kevin

Kevin is concerned that the AFY will be used as a pretext to reform undergraduate teaching towards a more prescriptive and uniform model, stripped of the personalised and challenging interaction between student and tutor which makes this system of learning valuable. While Adam (and indeed, Christopher and Paul) see this prospect as unlikely, Kevin finds it sufficiently alarming to object to

the premise of the AFY altogether. However, despite Kevin's opposition to the AFY, he has already adopted in his teaching some of the principles it deploys. For instance, he describes how

I have modified my pedagogy to some extent. So I don't get the first years to write essays...I get them to do comprehension questions. I take them through the same material. What I haven't done is make the material that they read any less challenging.

- Kevin

It is important to recognise that Kevin's practice does not provide as much scaffolding, or as gentle an introduction, as the AFY does for its students. However, he does demonstrate a willingness to adapt some elements of the tutorial system to help students, particularly in their first year, navigate difficult, challenging material. Ultimately, I argue that Kevin's opposition to the AFY, and his concern about its integration into undergraduate teaching, stems from the fact that he is already taking significant steps to make his own teaching inclusive and personalised. As such, for him the AFY appears both redundant and reductive; it represents a threat to his ability to exercise the pedagogic discretion and judgement necessary to provide genuinely personalised teaching. However, as Daniel's comments in section 6.2.1.2 demonstrate, the same commitment to inclusive, thoughtful teaching cannot be assumed for every tutor – and the principle of academic autonomy makes scrutiny of such practices nigh-impossible. From my student participants' perspectives, the impact of unscaffolded tutorial teaching when thought has not been given to how students experience the learning process is detrimental:

at Oxford it's like, 'we've got it right and everyone else is like catching up' and they don't often think about like 'maybe we should change the way that we do stuff' if that makes sense...

Everyone finds it hard. And like, I just don't see who it's benefiting. Like, yeah, like you now are really good at handing in essays on time, but like they're not...I just got really good at handing in things, not actually spending time on them and like, there was one essay that I did over Christmas and my tutor was like 'this is the best thing you've ever written!' and she was like, 'oh, I just think because you, like, spent your time on it'. And I was like, 'because you gave me time to spend on it. You didn't set my essay a week before it was due'.

- Samuel

6.2.2.4: Compartmentalisation of AFY teaching: instances of enactment

Finally, I discuss two instances of the enactment of compartmentalisation: of the AFY's principles of course design, and of the programme physically within the space of the university. The participants I observed during AFY planning and development meetings went to significant lengths to consider the similarities and differences between mainstream admissions processes and those appropriate for the AFY. For instance, the following excerpt describes a discussion pertaining to the progression hurdles which AFY students would need to pass for admission to the corresponding mainstream degree course (as a preliminary discussion, they do not represent the eventual position adopted):

Participants discuss that AFY students can resit a module if they've failed, but not just to improve a grade...Participant 2 suggests resits should be capped at 40% - this would mean students would need to perform really well in their other papers to average 60% and pass. Participant 2 is worried that if students could repeatedly resit to improve grades, this might damage perceptions of the AFY...Participant 2 explains concerns about the progression boundary being perceived as too lenient. The group then discusses that the current proposals are less lenient than prelims [first year exam progression requirements]...

- Observation 10, May 2023

As the excerpt demonstrates, there was significant concern among these participants to avoid the perception of the AFY providing an unduly easy route into undergraduate study at Oxford. This position is rooted both in attempting to overcome credentialist objections related to lower grade boundaries, but also colleges' pragmatic concerns that they will become responsible for students who cannot cope with undergraduate study. When the progression criteria were presented to a departmental meeting, some colleagues still raised serious objections to them. For instance, the participants I observed described one colleague who maintained that

[their college, in the mainstream admissions process] would never admit someone who wasn't on for a 2.1 everywhere [i.e. across each of their modules].

- Reported in Observation 12, June 2023

This was the case despite other colleagues pointing out that most mainstream undergraduate students did not in fact attain a 2.1 in every module at the end of their first year (Observation 11,

June 2023). By arguing for a significantly more stringent progression requirement for the AFY compared to first year undergraduates, my participants' colleague sets it apart from the mainstream undergraduate process. The level of relative attainment AFY students are required to reach is comparatively higher than mainstream undergraduates, casting the programme as a categorically different type of learning as opposed to a less advanced but contiguous form of skill development.

The second instance of compartmentalisation refers to one college's attempts to ensure that the AFY's planning team did not use any college resources, including resources in-kind, such as room bookings, in order to complete the design of the AFY. The college adopted the viewpoint that as a central scheme the AFY should be entirely supported and provisioned for by the university, resisting the entanglement of college and university arrangements which often characterise teaching provision in practice at Oxford. During an observation, I describe the following exchange:

Participant 1 observes that [college's] senior tutor is very heavily against AFY students using any college resources at all, including in-kind, as a point of principle. They explain this is because their view is that the university made this happen and should therefore fund it. Participant 3 backs this up.

- Observation 16, September 2023

This position is unusual in Oxford terms, where shared affiliations between multiple colleges often lead to the informal use of space. Indeed, Lisa describes how another college which was not taking part in the AFY has been very accepting of her informal use of college spaces:

[College] has just informally been being great when I've had stresses about teaching rooms...I have been kind of pulling a few favours saying 'would you mind if we booked a room?'. And everyone's like, 'yeah, of course, nice to support it, you know.'

- Lisa

The refusal of one college to allow the AFY to utilise its spaces can therefore be interpreted as a compartmentalisation strategy. In this instance, the aim was not to separate the AFY from

mainstream undergraduate practice, but from the college itself specifically, in order to place the onus to support the AFY on the central university.

6.2.3: Permeation of AFY course design and teaching practice

While many participants either wish to compartmentalise the AFY or believe this is inevitable, there is as yet comparatively little enactment of this desire through institutional work. This does not hold true for those participants who wish to see the principles of teaching which inform the AFY integrated into undergraduate teaching practice. Many participants involved in the design or delivery of the AFY not only expressed support for the adoption of the AFY's principles in undergraduate teaching but have begun implementing them in their own practice. The final sections of this chapter discuss these forms of institutional work and examine how participants frame them.

6.2.3.1: Permeation of AFY teaching: the adoption of pedagogy

The most straightforward way in which institutional work to integrate the AFY's teaching principles is enacted is simply by tutors who support this principle instituting it in their own teaching. Several participants describe adopting pedagogic techniques with their undergraduate students inspired by their reflection on what has worked effectively for AFY students. For instance, Daniel describes transferring a method of modelling effective tutorial work from his AFY teaching into his undergraduate practice:

I give them handwritten answers that are the total model answer along with annotation about why I've set things out in a certain way...they've really enjoyed that. And that was an idea that kind of came across from the foundation teaching...my answers will say things like...'I've kept my side working separate from my main maths working so that you can see really clearly what I'm doing. Look, I've not forgotten my units. Have a look at my diagram, every single line is labelled.'...kind of giving them a much more visual idea about what it is that they're aiming for...there's no reason why first years, just because they've done well at school, it doesn't mean they know what academic writing really looks like...

- Daniel

Here, Daniel positions AFY students and first year undergraduates as similarly unaware of the disciplinary conventions and expectations of the work they are expected to complete. Furthermore, he constructs understanding such conventions as necessary not only as tools to help students better communicate innate ability but as foundational in *developing* students' ability to produce high-quality work. After describing his increased use of modelling borrowed from the AFY, he relays an anecdote wherein a lecturer on the undergraduate course he tutors changed the material at the last minute. Daniel, who had not reviewed the new material for over two decades, sat in his college's library and worked through the material as an undergraduate student would, employing strong adherence to the working practice he advocates to learn new material. He describes a student's response upon learning of the situation:

he was like, 'oh!', and I kind of realised in that moment that they almost thought that I was this kind of like all-knowing god about all things [subject]...I started by saying, like, 'I have just done this reading myself, for the first time in 21 years, I think you'll find chapter 10 and chapter 11 quite helpful, I think you can ignore 11.5. But you need to tell me if it doesn't work for you. And if you find something else that's better, I need to know'. And then I shared with them a screenshot of my first attempt at the tutorial sheet, which was mostly crossings out...it was a really interesting moment, because they could see that learning is messy, and that learning is hard.

- Daniel

Daniel's modelling of effective working practice for dealing with new material, borrowed from the AFY, represents institutional work of integration which could be considered both creative and disruptive. By troubling his students' conception of the role of 'tutor', Daniel both subverts the tutorial relationship as it is enacted by his less pedagogically engaged colleagues and creates a new working dynamic between himself and his students. Ironically, this working relationship approximates closely to Adam and Kevin's conception of the ideal of the tutorial space, wherein tutor and student are equitable if not equal peers. Lisa, too, describes how her involvement with the AFY has impacted her undergraduate teaching:

It's made me more aware of doing that with my own students. And so I was able, on feedback to a student from [college] earlier this term, to write that I can now see him...developing a train of thought which actually encompasses about five or six

points, his level of analysis is improving dramatically. So you can now pull together multiple things...I'm starting to see that. So it's great to be able to give him that feedback. I don't think I'd ever have thought of saying that before.

- Lisa

Here, Lisa explicitly discusses not just her undergraduate student's grasp of the material, but how his deployment and treatment of it is improving his analysis. Such explicitly skill-focussed teaching and feedback reflects a shift in her understanding of how her students interpret the purpose of the tasks they are set:

I've realised it's a way of getting them to understand what skill they've got to have...My worldview has totally changed by doing the foundation year, because now I know that's what we're meant to be doing at degree level, they should be able to solve things in an unexpected context. So now it's really important for me that I say to them openly... '...stop thinking about "I've got to learn this, this, this, this this", start analysing, "what can I use, what can I use?" every single time', and it's made them a bit more relaxed about it.

- Lisa

Lisa's institutional work here appears creative rather than disruptive – it represents a tweak, an augmentation, to the existing tutorial model, rather than the outright reform which Kevin is anxious about.

6.2.3.2: Permeation of AFY teaching: similarities with undergraduate student needs

As with the enactment of compartmentalisation, most participants had not yet had the opportunity at the time of data production to enact strategies of institutional work aimed at permeation. However, several offer comparisons between AFY and undergraduate student needs and behaviours which can be interpreted as *discursive* acts of institutional work, disrupting the boundary which other participants seek to construct between the AFY and undergraduate study.

a student I've got in first year, [they] just got [their] three As by the skin of [their] teeth to get in...you know, characteristics wise, if you put them in a room with the foundation students and have a chat with them, you wouldn't have noticed much difference when they were in the first few weeks of first year at all.

- Daniel

For Daniel, the academic performance of the first-year undergraduate student he describes was nigh-indistinguishable from AFY students during their first weeks at Oxford. Although he stresses that this student is part of a strong, tight-knit cohort who have helped them adjust, his highlighting of this similarity represents his position that there is a 'Venn diagram' overlap between some mainstream undergraduates and some AFY students' working practices. He makes clear that this is not the case for all AFY students – 'two individuals in particular need additional support' – yet his blurring of the boundary between the two schemes subtly subverts the strong distinction which the compartmentalising institutional work of other participants attempts to establish. Daniel suggests this overlap may be related to his college's tradition of seeking to admit students from less advantaged backgrounds and its subsequent provision of extensive study support.

Other participants are more proactive in making the case for similarities between AFY and undergraduate students. For instance, Neil makes a conscious effort to disseminate this view widely:

One of the things that I have said repeatedly in various contexts is these are completely normal students...we are so used to seeing perhaps such a narrow tranche of the student body in this country in this sector, that what to me looks actually completely normal doesn't appear so to the rest of university...are our [undergraduate] students with the rampant impostor syndrome, and the perfectionism and the pressure, able to articulate some of the things that our foundation year students are almost expected to and given channels to?...anything that doesn't fit that, all those sort of centuries of what the Oxford student is supposed to be, isn't visible and is assumed not to be there...I'm not sure there's space to see it...but we can with the foundation year.

- Neil

Neil believes that many undergraduate students would benefit from the more inclusive approach to learning which is being deployed in the AFY, but that undergraduate students lack the appropriate medium to communicate their learning needs to their tutors, departments and colleges so as to achieve fundamental shifts in practice. He therefore 'repeatedly' and 'in various contexts' argues that AFY students should not be framed as a different category of student, as doing so masks what he perceives as the need to reform undergraduate teaching practices more broadly. This

institutional work, as with Daniel's renegotiation for his students of tutorial work, both disrupts the compartmentalising narrative and creates a new way of framing the relationship between being 'an AFY student' and being 'an Oxford undergraduate'. Importantly, Neil's framing of the usefulness of inclusive teaching techniques is consistent with my student participants' constructions of the AFY. While this is not germane to the current analysis, I revisit this finding in Chapters 7 and 8.

6.2.3.3: Permeation of AFY teaching: Shifting institutional narratives

Finally, some participants conceptualise the permeation of AFY teaching practices not only as valuable in its own right, but as a route by which Oxford might move towards a more fully contextualised undergraduate admissions system. For instance, Lee argues that

tutors get[ting] used to the idea that a certain proportion of the students they're admitting are students from non-traditional backgrounds, who are not accustomed to the style of education Oxford provides, who need certain kinds of support to flourish in this environment, and then will flourish...Just doing that...will over a few years transform the way in which tutors think about undergraduates and teaching undergraduates that will make a genuinely fair admission system - which for me is contextualised admissions - make that more politically, diplomatically, educationally palatable in an Oxford context.

- Lee

Lee explains that it was partially on these grounds that he argued for the AFY to be adopted within his subject and college. Although he has serious critiques of its design, he adopts a pragmatic stance to the AFY's development which recognises the normative context into which it is introduced and the broad set of interpretations and meanings attached to it. In the light of the AFY's potential to cultivate a greater degree of comfort with admitting students who have not attained Oxford's standard entry requirements for contextual reasons, he explains that because he believes the AFY is likely to lead to cultural change,

it seems to me, and this is an argument I believe in very profoundly, that it doesn't matter whether the foundation year is the best of all possible schemes for diversifying Oxford's intake. It doesn't even really matter whether it's a good one...

- Lee

As such, Lee's enthusiasm for the embedding of AFY-style 'support' for undergraduate students in accessing Oxford's teaching stems from his conception of the AFY as a fundamental challenge to tutors whose normative credentialist leanings make them wary of greater contextualisation. In this sense *all* of Lee's actions regarding the AFY, including his decision to advocate for its adoption, could be interpreted as a form of disruptive and creative institutional work; in adopting this stance, he is working towards making contextualised offer-making 'diplomatically and educationally palatable'.

6.3: Charlotte's story

In the final discursive section of this chapter, I analyse an extended excerpt from my discussion with Charlotte which brings into relief the debates concerning the compartmentalisation of teaching and hence admissions practice which this chapter has explored. Charlotte described her own journey through undergraduate education as an illustrative example of the importance of prior social and education context in relation to interaction with teaching in highly selective HE environments:

I always had teachers that understood the [subject] they were teaching well enough to be able to teach me without causing me confusion. And so for me this worked kind of perfectly, and I got very high marks at GCSE and very high marks at A level...I got those nice letters that you get from the exam board that tells you that you were in the top one or two marks in whatever. So as good as you could get in the state sector in terms of the [subject] teaching and learning. And then I went to [Oxbridge], and there were all these boys sitting in the front row with their [extracurricular subject competition] T-shirts, who'd been to schools like Westminster and Winchester. And what I didn't fully realise until a couple of years later, was that when I'd been doing in my year 13...they'd been doing university level [content] for a couple of years already...There was this great big leap, and that was the point at which I lost that chain, I lost that step, step, step, step, step...by my third year as an undergraduate, I had cracked 'how do I teach this to myself because no one's giving it to me on a plate', I needed to learn and study and teach it for myself. And also, by that point, we had gone beyond what these Westminster boys were already familiar with...[I] realised that actually [in first year], they'd already done...enough of the kind of the style and level of the first year work to just be in a completely different position from the rest of us...I had the best you could get in the non-selective state sector. And for me, there was that massive gulf between year 13 and first-year undergrad. And now imagine if I hadn't had the best you could get in the non-selective state sector. Imagine if some of my [subject] teachers had just not even understood [what] they were teaching me.

- Charlotte

Charlotte's narrative of her undergraduate experience highlights the centrality of how my participants conceptualise credentialist and contextualist merit and their relationship to both the admissions and teaching practices employed in the Oxford context. Despite her exceptional attainment in the context of what she characterises as excellent maintained sector teaching, and subsequent admission to Oxbridge, she highlights the degree to which she struggled to adapt to the demands of her university's undergraduate study – the invisible pedagogy of 'how do I teach this to myself?'. She positions the 'Westminster boys' she encountered as possessing a familiarity with the 'style' of learning expected in this setting, as well as supercurricular subject engagement, which enabled them to immediately thrive. Her own exceptional attainment, while sufficient to secure a place, did not afford her this familiarity. She goes on to suggest that the fact that superlatively credentialed students such as herself who 'had the best you could get in the non-selective state sector' struggle with such transitions demonstrates the need to consider how less advantaged state-education students might experience the transition to undergraduate study at 'Oxbridge'.

Charlotte's story exemplifies the importance of stakeholder constructions of merit, context, 'teachability' and pedagogy in understandings admissions to both undergraduate study and the AFY at Oxford. The dichotomy she presents between state-maintained and independent sector provision is a simplification of the nature of relative educational advantage which she deploys for narrative purposes (albeit one which many of my participants, both academic and student, use as a cipher for prior preparation for Oxford admissions and the tutorial system). Charlotte makes clear elsewhere in our discussions that she is aware of such nuances. Yet the broader point is her strong conviction that such prior preparation is a key factor in early transitional success in Oxford's highly demanding undergraduate courses. As such, for Charlotte, the (careful and thoughtful) integration of the AFY's principles is in the Bourdieusian sense 'sensible' – understandable on the level of practice and practical experience. Tutors who conceptualise the challenges she describes as an integral part of the learning process at Oxford, such as Adam, conversely view

compartmentalisation as necessary to protect the value students (perhaps particularly disadvantaged students) gain from their undergraduate study.

Given my findings that tutors' expectations of how applicants might cope with the tutorial teaching model at Oxford, we might add to this concern how such students experience – and are conceptualised in – the admissions process. For students who do not demonstrate Charlotte's exceptional attainment at the point of selection, and who do not possess sufficient understanding of such invisible pedagogy or supercurricular course engagement to assure tutors of their ability to cope, their ability to 'catch up' may be immaterial if they are not successful in admission. This point is reflected in some student participants' conceptions of their interview experiences.

I think the same way that private school people can get better grades or can get better grades easier, they can do well in the interview easier because like you have practice interviews, you have training...They've got so much more coaching and their dad went to Oxford, their friend went to Oxford...you're more familiar with what the interview is.

- Ellie

Similarly, during a discussion about the relevance of social and educational background to the admissions process, Jack describes struggling during a second set of interviews at a college which did not admit him:

I didn't understand what was being said. Like I didn't feel like I was in a place to respond, and I knew. I think I left those interviews feeling really upset because I knew that wasn't a true representation of my academic potential...[my friend] was telling me about, like, the questions that she got questioned in her interviews as well with the same tutors...if I had been asked that when I was like applying to the University for [subject], I genuinely would have like, crumbled and been like I don't know what to say.

- Jack

Both Ellie and Jack highlight the nature of the interview process as highly contingent and also inflected by applicant background. Jack's comment that 'I knew that wasn't a true representation of my academic potential' highlights the epistemically fraught nature of the use of autonomous academic judgement in Oxford's admissions – although he gained a place at another college and is

doing well academically, he feels he would have 'crumbled' under different interview circumstances which took less account of his prior educational experiences and social background.

6.4: Conclusions: Institutional work and the relational institutional habitus

This chapter has explored how participants seek to enact their specific constructions of fairness, and hence merit, through the negotiation and management of the boundaries and overlaps between mainstream admissions and teaching spaces and the AFY. I have interpreted these enactments through the lens of institutional work, as strategic and self-aware action which is nonetheless situational and structurally constrained. For instance, while individual participants generally felt empowered to integrate the AFY's principles into their practice or not, as they saw fit, the AFY's design teams were clearly conscious of their colleagues' potential objections to the scheme and took action to ensure its design was acceptable to them. Recognising the significance of the institutional work undertaken in light of the AFY requires us to articulate the institutional work present before its introduction. I argue that the principle of deference and non-intervention between the competing norms of credentialist and contextualist merit can be understood as a strategy of institutional maintenance work, prompting actors to behave with equanimity towards conceptions of fairness and merit which conflict with their own. While actors recognise that decisions may be made which do not align with their own constructions of these concepts, they accept the broad *legitimacy* of such decisions within the doxa of autonomous academic judgement. This institutional maintenance work stabilises and smooths the potential ruptures which tensioned norms of merit continually present as a possibility.

Conversely, the acts of institutional work undertaken to both compartmentalise and integrate aspects of the AFY into mainstream undergraduate admissions and teaching practices can be read as both creative and disruptive. They do not seek to maintain the principle of deference; instead, they present radically differing conceptions of what Oxford's admissions and teaching processes should be. These strategies of institutional work include, variously, selective engagement

with sympathetic colleagues across the university (as, for instance, when Darren describes his role in persuading colleagues to take part); strategic design choices, as when progression requirements were discussed at length to ensure their acceptability; the use of oscillating levels of engagement as a compartmentalising tactic; and using the normalisation of high degrees of autonomy over teaching and admissions practice to integrate learnings from the AFY. In Chapter 7, I explore how these creative and disruptive forms of institutional work can be interpreted through my Bourdieusian analysis of the relationship between the AFY's introduction and the mainstream admissions and teaching ecosystem. In particular, I discuss the relevance of the complex, situated and contradictory nature of participants' identities as 'contextualist' or 'credentialist', 'for' or 'against' the AFY, or straightforwardly supportive of integration or compartmentalisation. Participants' views of these issues are nuanced, sometimes exhibiting internal coherence-making which challenges simplistic readings of the alignment between possible constructions of different aspects of admissions and teaching at Oxford. Some participants' views are also fragmented or even contradictory, containing inherent inconsistencies which themselves highlight the tensions at the heart of the AFY's introduction. How they construct and defend their messy and complex viewpoints forms the final section of my analysis, which draws together findings from across Chapters 4, 5 and 6 and presents a theoretical interpretation which captures the central tensions of the study.

Chapter 7: Theorising the Astrophoria Foundation Year's introduction

This chapter synthesises the empirical analyses from Chapters 4, 5 and 6, drawing them together and offering a conceptual and theoretical account of my interpretation of their meaning. I first articulate my theorisation of the mainstream undergraduate admissions process and its relationship to undergraduate teaching practices. This section addresses RQ1. I then consider how participant conceptions of the AFY allow us to interpret the meaning of their constructions of it in light of my theorisation of the mainstream undergraduate admissions and teaching ecosystem. Specifically, I argue that the AFY subverts the doxic principle of autonomous academic judgement which bounds this ecosystem, and hence also disrupts the relational institutional habitus which stabilises and maintains the tensioned institutional habituses within it. As such, how participants seek to enact their constructions of fairness and merit in the absence of an established mode of praxis helps us understand the complex interplay of norms – and normative disruption – which the AFY's introduction generates and surfaces.

In particular, I trouble the neatness of the dichotomies (of credentialist versus contextualist merit, or compartmentalisation versus integration) which I have presented in previous chapters. Although useful ciphers to understand the spectrum of normative positions participants adopt, the reality of participants' constructions of these issues are multifaceted and I have sought to represent this complexity in Chapters 4, 5 and 6. Here, rather than exploring participants' viewpoints solely through the lens of my RQs, I offer an in-depth analysis of a handful of participants who exemplify this complexity, discussing the internal logics of their normative positions and the actions and decisions this prompts with regard to the AFY's introduction. As with Chapters 5 and 6, I therefore address RQs 2 and 3 concurrently; my theorisation of these participants' views inherently connects their conceptions of the AFY's meaning, and their attempts to enact their own constructions of fairness. In this analysis, I consider the structural position of each of these participants and their practical ability to enact these constructions (in Bourdieusian terms, their political capital). In doing

so, I present a portrait of the normative positionings which structure conceptions of the interaction of fairness, merit and disadvantage in admissions and teaching practices at Oxford, and the role the AFY plays in clarifying the tensioned nuances of such positions. Finally, I consider the epistemological and axiological consequences of my findings for admissions and teaching practices both in the AFY, and in the broader undergraduate ecosystem at Oxford.

7.1: Theorising the mainstream admissions and teaching ecosystem

The first theoretical breakthrough I made when analysing the data I produced was to recognise that the social field of the undergraduate admissions ecosystem at Oxford might contain plural sets of practices and inclinations which constituted institutional habituses. The notion of institutional habitus is generally treated in the literature as a singular phenomenon which, while not enacted uniformly by all institutional actors, is guided by similar normative conceptions; indeed, it is this tendency which has drawn critiques of it as a homogenising concept (Atkinson, 2011). Yet my participants exhibited and discussed institutionally informed practices and inclinations regarding admissions which hold the potential for radically different enactments of ‘fairness’. I began to consider how different institutional habituses might be theorised within the same institution, and what conceptions of them might be required to render this analysis theoretically coherent. I argue, echoing Morrison (2009), that in some circumstances an institutional field’s doxa can accommodate multiple institutional habituses, albeit that they require an additional concept – the relational institutional habitus – to stabilise and maintain the tensions this raises.

I first discuss how my academic participants conceptualise the boundaries of possible action in the field of Oxford’s undergraduate admissions (and, by extension, undergraduate teaching practices). I argue that the principle which is common to almost all academic participants, regardless of their stance on how the interrelated concepts merit and fairness should be conceived, is an adherence to the centrality of *autonomous academic judgement*. I then explore how the particularities of this doxa inherently maintain space for a plurality of institutional habituses

regarding admissions and, to a less stark extent, teaching practice. In Chapter 4 I discussed these institutional habituses as characterised by more or less strict adherence to multiple conceptions of credentialism or contextualism in understanding fairness and merit in admissions. Here, I highlight the nuanced nature of such stances. While recognising the usefulness of the credentialist/contextualist dichotomy to broadly conceptualise participants' constructions, I emphasise that very few participants are straightforwardly 'credentialists' or 'contextualists', and that recognising this is crucial to interpreting their constructions and actions in relation to the AFY. Finally, I fully articulate the notion of the relational institutional habitus. I suggest that this new addition to the Bourdieusian toolkit is necessary to make sense of how institutional habitus contradictions within social fields are maintained and stabilised – and that recognising its presence in the mainstream admissions process helps us understand the impact of its absence in the introduction of the AFY.

7.1.1: The doxic principle of autonomous academic judgement

Doxa is primarily characterised by its misrecognition by those whose social worlds it shapes. It is invisible, acting as the edge of the social map; it defines not what is considered advisable or desirable within a field, but simply what can be done, what is conceivable. In Oxford's undergraduate admissions and teaching practices, the central doxic principle is autonomous academic judgement: the idea that (within certain predefined but negotiable rules) individual tutors should make decisions about which students they admit and how they teach them. As I discuss in Chapter 2 I do not adopt the strictest possible understanding of any of Bourdieu's concepts. To do so is to ossify them, rendering his frameworks static and determinist and thus to retreat to dogmatism (Winzler, 2021). However, I suggest that the adherence of my participants to the doxa of autonomous academic judgement is most often visible by what is *not* said – the unspoken and firm assumptions upon which their description of practice is based.

The vast majority of academic participants do not refer directly to the incontrovertible nature of the principle of autonomous academic judgement. Yet through their descriptions of the practice of selecting candidates, it is discernible as the structuring idea which guides their understanding of how the admission process should – perhaps must – run. Participants across a wide range of colleges, subject backgrounds, and stances on the AFY highlight what they see as the critical opportunity to interpret the academic and contextual information they receive about applicants (including their interpretation of interview performances) in order to make ‘good’ admissions decisions:

...some of my colleagues in other subjects are extremely cynical, sceptical about A level marking generally, and trust their own judgement more and say, 'We should just completely ignore the A levels they get, take every student that we give an offer to regardless...'

- Jess

Is there a minimum requirement at AS-level?

No. Where applicants, schools or colleges provide AS module results (grades or marks) within the UCAS application, this information will be considered as part of the overall record of the candidate's academic attainment to date. This may be used by Admissions Tutors as evidence of an applicant's suitability to study at Oxford, although this will be not used in a mechanistic way to shortlist for interview, or determine which candidates receive an offer.

- Balliol College, Oxford: ‘Frequently Asked Admissions Questions’ webpage

Contained within the data above are demonstrations of the doxic nature of autonomous academic judgement. Jess’s colleagues value their own judgement highly enough that they (hypothetically) suggest disregarding attainment data altogether. Balliol College’s admissions webpages for undergraduate applicants highlight the refusal to engage in ‘mechanistic’ decision making, instead emphasising the importance of Admissions Tutors’ assessment of applicants’ suitability. While autonomous academic judgement is thus recognised as the mechanism by which decisions are made, it is the strong rejection of alternative logics of decision-making which mark the principle as doxic. In discussing his college’s admissions policy, Andrew explains that

I cannot go to Governing Body and say the college policy is X, Y, and Z because they'll turn around and say the college policy is what we decide it's going to be...I can do it on a kind of diplomatic level, but local and low key, but I would never, ever try and do it on a systematic policymaking resolution, it would be insane to try and do that.

- Andrew

Andrew's use of 'insane' is telling. Although the theoretical possibility of setting admissions principles through centralised directives is raised, it is immediately dismissed as beyond the bounds of the comprehensible according to the terms of the field of Oxford's admissions process. Similarly, recall Julie's interpretation that

Ultimately, academic judgement, you know, is not itself challengeable. So tell me what the academic judgement is, what the academic basis is for the decision, and we will go with your judgement.

- Julie

To grasp the doxic nature of autonomous academic judgement it is useful here to briefly compare my participants' framing of it to Bourdieu's description of the concept:

...a perfectly closed world...a world which has no place for opinion as liberal ideology understands it, i.e. as one of the different and equally legitimate answers which can be given to an explicit question about the established political order; and nothing is further from the correlative notion of the majority than the unanimity of doxa...

Bourdieu, 1977: 167-168

While there are a tiny minority of participants who do question (or indeed reject) the doxic nature of autonomous academic judgement, they do so for good reason: they all exhibit extremely weak *illusio* (Threadgold, 2018), or belief in the value of the doxic principle. For instance, Peter suggests that

...we spend far too much time and effort on...very fine-tuned selection from among a group of very bright people...But I have no confidence at all in my ability to persuade most of my colleagues of that.

- Peter

The majority of such participants had spent significant amounts of time at different types of HE institutions before arriving in Oxford. Experiencing different fields may have contributed to their

recognition of the doxa of autonomous academic judgement as non-inevitable as, as Bourdieu (1977: 168) describes it, arbitrary.

Lastly, it is important to highlight that the doxa of autonomous academic judgement extends beyond the admissions sphere to encompass undergraduate teaching. The tutorial system, wherein tutors deliver intense, personalised teaching to groups as small as an individual student, necessitates a significant degree of professional autonomy over how such teaching is delivered. There is therefore a symbiotic relationship between autonomy in admissions and teaching practice; as Simon explains

In the end, I mean, that's the whole premise of how we do admissions, that's the reason why admissions is college based. It's the reason why it's basically the people who will be teaching these students...who are responsible for admitting them, means we have to take responsibility and take the consequences of the decisions that we make.

- Simon

This means that teaching environments at Oxford are, as Daniel describes in the previous chapter, 'very private spaces' in which centralised directives – or, sometimes, even guidance – are often viewed with scepticism. Jess sees this view as fundamentally entwined with tutors' conceptions of what university-level teaching means. She describes, with reference to her colleagues,

a kind of pluralist instinct...that leads some people to be, yeah, to think of university education as much more flexible, much more kind of, led by the student or...I guess led by the organic relationship that evolves between students and tutor rather than as defined by some kind of central body.

- Jess

As I discuss in the final section of this chapter, this conception, while valuable and well-intentioned, holds the potential to lead to inequitable outcomes when the prior social and educational experiences of undergraduate students are not carefully considered.

Grasping the principle of autonomous academic judgement as not merely a favoured mechanism of decision-making and teaching, but one which fundamentally cannot be contravened, is crucial to understanding both the functioning of multiple institutional habituses and the

disruptive impact of the AFY's introduction. In the following section, I discuss how this doxic principle creates space for multiple, varied practices of admission which are most fruitfully construed as institutional habituses.

7.1.2: A plurality of institutional habituses

Concluding Chapter 4, I argued that the tensioned normative positions which structure participants' conceptions of merit and fairness in admissions practice should be interpreted as institutional habituses. In this section I justify this interpretation by exploring participants' constructions of (the varying forms of) credentialist and contextualist merit as embedded *dispositions* which they enact, rather than solely as rational strategic moves. I then discuss how the doxa of autonomous academic judgement enables such tensioned positions to coexist, fully articulating the concept of the relational institutional habitus I introduce in Chapter 1.

Why should we consider credentialist and contextualist conceptions of merit as forms of institutional habitus, as opposed to strictly functionalist solutions to the problem of who to admit to Oxford? As I argue in Chapter 4, in the context of Oxford's highly competitive and high-stakes admissions system, most conceptions of fairness are inextricably linked with 'merit'. While participants couch these linkages as rational means to identify the applicants best suited to Oxford's learning environment, they also demonstrate adherence to norms of credentialist or contextualist merit through affect and embedded practice. Such norms are both articulated as sensible ways of achieving the institution's ends, and simultaneously as deeply ingrained convictions about what Oxford is and should do.

...it's an institution with a huge amount of history. And to get change is incredibly difficult. And it's almost like, you know, the British constitution being unwritten...with Oxford, not everything is always written down. So it becomes this default, that 'oh, that's the way we've always done it. And that's because it's Oxford'. And so there is this notion, this default notion of, 'well, that's the way it's always been done', to almost avoid change, rather than thinking, 'Well, if that's the way it's always been done, is that still the right way now that we're in 2022?'

- Darren

Darren, who adopts a strong contextualist stance regarding merit, positions Oxford's historical and cultural position as an institution as central to the creation of 'default' behaviours and attitudes on the part of its members when acting on its behalf. The sense of 'avoiding change' is highly consonant with the orthodox conception of habitus as a self-reinforcing disposition. This macro-level interpretation of the formation of attitudes towards admissions is supported by Tom's description of the specific positions which tutors within his college adopt:

In theory [we look for] potential, like I said, but I think there's also still a lot of an attitude of 'I want students who I like, or I want students who I can relate to' which in my opinion tends to mean students who look or think like me.

- Tom

Tom later describes tutors who 'I don't think really think about these things', demonstrating the extent to which my participants conceive of some colleagues as performing their conceptions of merit as unconscious practices. Similarly, some participants describe embedded conceptions of contextualist merit which form default expectations of the 'right' kind of behaviour in admissions practice. For instance, Rebecca, whose college is typically viewed as progressive, explains that

it's just in the culture of the college now, it's in the ethos of it, it's just a given that we will take access very seriously as part of the standard admissions process. Like there's no, there's no question about it, there's no discussion about it.

- Rebecca

Participants also describe a strong affective dimension to how norms of both credentialist and contextualist merit are constructed. Participants describe the significant emotional response which such norms (or their subversion) elicit. Recall, for instance, Jason's description of the reaction to the LMH foundation year:

there was a lot of, you know, 'how dare you have done this? How dare you bring in people who are lower than the average grades, how dare you have?'

- Jason

The same notion of affect also extends to contextualist norms of merit. Julie describes her palpable frustration when her departmental colleagues expressed credentialist objections to taking part in the AFY:

'if they couldn't do it, they couldn't do it'. As though nobody's ever capable of learning. It annoys me. We back ourselves to be able to teach school leavers to be research ready in four years, but somehow we think we're incapable of taking someone whose [subject skill] is a bit shoddy and over a year, getting to the point where they can start that journey themselves. Just crap.

- Julie

Crucially for the construction of credentialist and contextualist merits as institutional habitus positionings, they inflect the practice of admissions decisions through not only explicit decision-making, but through semi-articulated feelings of what 'should' be done. Rob describes this through reference to what he perceives as a

Nascent institutional conservatism...that sense of 'oh, this is dangerous, or it's risky' and all that, those sorts of descriptions of people who are a bit different as a risk, it is slightly disturbing.

- Rob

Rob's description of such students as not only risky decisions but 'dangerous' highlights the affective power of credentialist norms as an institutional habitus; similarly, Susan describes her contextualist viewpoint as necessarily involving 'liking students and liking teaching and realising that you're gonna have to do some sometimes'. The affective qualities of such norms impact admissions choices: as Julie describes in Chapter 4,

I have also talked to [colleagues] who say, 'Well, I would, sort of, maybe this person with the rather modest record would do well, but I couldn't bring myself to reject the person with the rather better record, you know, who we think can be relied upon to at least do okay'.

- Julie

As such, although tutors are often aware that they are operating from a standpoint of credentialist or contextualist meritocratic norms, there are also embedded cultural and affective dimensions to such positions. Such an interpretation is conceptually compatible with the use of

habitus, which, while defined through reference to a 'probable, "upcoming" future' (Bourdieu, 1990: 53)

may be accompanied by a strategic calculation tending to perform in a conscious mode the operation that the habitus performs quite differently, namely an estimation of chances presupposing transformation of the past effect into an expected objective.

- Bourdieu, 2000: 53

Habitus – and institutional habitus may co-exist with more conscious strategic choices which produce the same results. Yet it remains an embedded, embodied affective disposition, a *sens pratique*, by which agents within the field navigate the appropriate yet heterogeneous choices available to them. Within the field of Oxford's undergraduate admissions, this is the most productive way to understand the norms of credentialist and contextualist meritocratic selection I interpret from my data.

7.1.3: Maintaining plural institutional habituses: the relational institutional habitus

In Bourdieu's classical configuration of habitus' relationship to doxa, the sensed but unrecognised doxic principles which delineate the nature of the socially possible inform habitus practices. Actors intuit the propriety of actions based on how the field's doxa structures their social world, and as such habitus (and institutional habitus) is presumed to exhibit relative uniformity across a field or institution. Yet in Oxford's undergraduate admissions and teaching practices, the doxa of autonomous academic judgement delineates not what is or is not possible, but *the way in which things can be* possible. The doxa does not reify any specific practice beyond the sanctity of academics making decisions about their subject as they see fit. There are, of course, notional limits to this principle which tutors must respect; for instance, the central university in conjunction with departments imposes minimum academic standards for conditional offers, and offers must be made on the basis of academic rather than social or personal characteristics. In practice tutors have discretion to bend these rules significantly; small numbers of students are routinely admitted having missed the conditions of their academic offer if there are considered to be mitigating circumstances

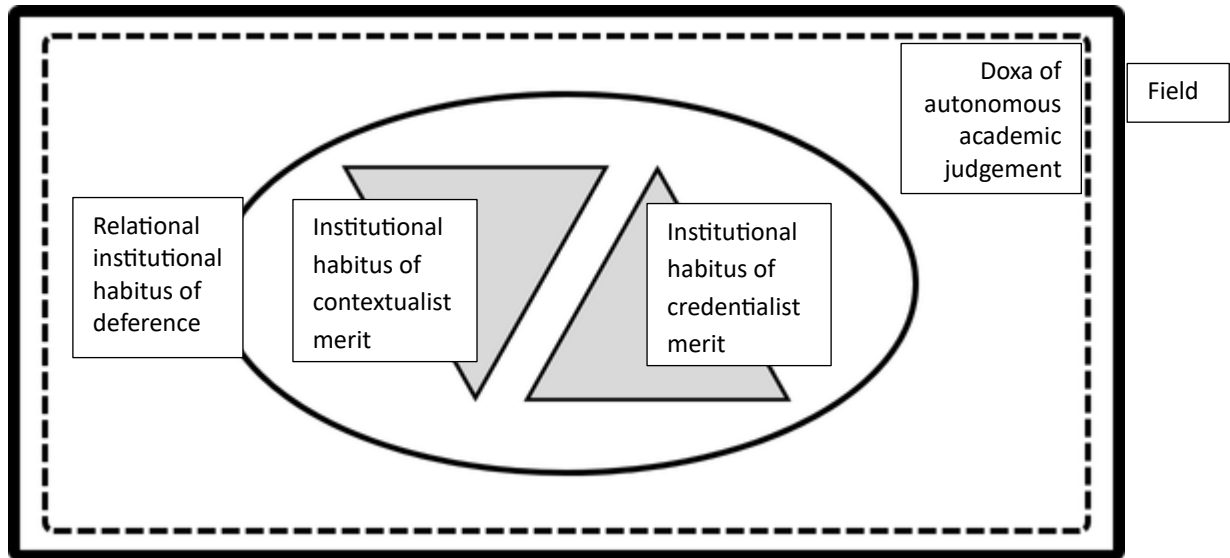
justifying this (which are largely interpreted and defined by the tutors themselves). Yet more importantly, the doxa of autonomous academic judgement leaves a large degree of leeway to tutors in terms of the practical action they take with regard to admissions (and teaching) decisions. It is therefore the specific doxa operant within the field which enables the forms of institutional habitus I have described to coexist.

Nonetheless, it does not follow that such institutional habituses automatically share the space of the field happily. The protection afforded to autonomous academic judgement creates space for radically different understandings of fairness, sometimes cleaving to strongly credentialist or contextualist understandings of merit. Such institutional habituses are, as explored above, highly affective and imbued with deeply held convictions about the nature of appropriate and just action with the context of Oxford's admissions. I therefore argue that conceptual innovation is required to understand how such radically different institutional habituses are maintained and stabilised within the same field. I suggest that this is achieved through what I term the *relational institutional habitus* (see Penn, 2024).

The relational institutional habitus describes not what actors within an institution do, but *how* they do what they do in relation to what others do within the institution, and the institution's place within its broader sector. My conceptualisation of the relational institutional habitus thus differs from Çelik's (2021) in that it recognises the importance of relationality within institutions as well as within macro-level fields. Where only one institutional habitus is present, the relational institutional habitus would hold little salience as a concept; it would simply be congruent with the institutional habitus itself. However, in an institutional setting with more than one institutional habitus – as in the Oxford setting of credentialist and contextualist interpretations of merit – the relational institutional habitus signifies a mode of behaviour and relationality which enables the stabilisation and co-existence of multiple legitimate but conflicting institutional habituses. In the context of Oxford's admissions and teaching practices, I argue the relational institutional habitus is

characterised by *deference*. Individuals recognise each other's positions as legitimate within the broader Oxford doxa, yet also as potentially conflicting with their own; the management of these tensions is therefore not unconscious and apolitical but instead a recognition of spheres of disciplinary autonomy in which intervention is not acceptable.

Figure 7: Diagrammatic representation of the role of relational institutional habitus



Thus, while academic participants may disagree with the interpretation of merit which their colleagues employ, they conceptualise their colleagues' decisions as beyond the bounds of intervention apart from in the specific setting of their subject within their college. Where colleagues disagree in such situations, Andrew explains that decisions are made based on the specific situation at hand:

Depends how the meetings, decision meetings are handled. In some subjects, you've got a team of seven or eight people. Not all of whom will have seen every candidate...you can't give a student five or six interviews, that would wear them out. So you have to trust the views of people who have seen them.

- Andrew

This view is consonant with Zimdars' (2007: 293) finding that strong feelings about candidates generated through interviewing tended to carry decisions. The practice of non-intervention is strong enough that it extends to colleagues' decisions within the same subject but a different

college context. Even when applicants are being assessed against the same criteria for the same course, tutors arrive at different decisions – and crucially, the prospect of challenging these decisions is not entertained. In discussing shortlisting for the AFY Lauren explains that

there was at least one instance where one of the three of us did not want to interview on the ground that this person would qualify at their college for an ordinary interview. And the other two colleges had to explain that actually, at those two, that person would not actually be interviewed as against the applicant pool. And it became very clear that there were different decision-making procedures in place there.

- Lauren

Despite the fact that this difference in practice potentially contravenes the CFA (University of Oxford, 2006: d), the strength of the relational institutional habitus in regulating interactions between more credentialist and more contextualist norms of selection means Lauren did not comment on this discovery as problematic. The relational institutional habitus of deference thus enables the stabilisation and maintenance of an otherwise potentially unstable system, facilitating the existence of tensioned conceptions of fairness through merit within a system predicated upon autonomous academic judgement.

7.1.4: Ambivalence and reconciliation in institutional habituses

Before exploring how the introduction of the AFY impacts the theorisation offered above, I finally discuss the ambiguities of the institutional habituses of credentialist and contextualist meritocratic selection. Although I explore the nuances in these positions in Chapter 4, here I recap them briefly to frame their relevance for how the AFY's construction and implementation is refracted through these nuanced positions. In doing so I explore a handful of participants' positions in detail, offering pen portraits of the complexities of their institutional habitus as a lens by which to understand the wider complexities of credentialist and contextualist positionings. I have selected these participants as paradigmatic examples of the positions they adopt, but I also highlight other participants who exhibit comparable institutional habituses.

7.1.4.1: *The spectre of outright credentialism*

As I note in Chapter 3, my academic participants are not a representative sample of Oxford's admissions decision-makers. In particular, the absence of strict credentialists is notable, although they are routinely referred to as a group by my other participants. These stakeholders were generally less involved in, or aware of, the AFY's introduction; moreover, they are likely to be less sympathetic to the aims of the AFY than potential participants with more contextualist institutional habituses. As such, they appear in the study only as an image constructed by others, framing the discussion but not fully present in it. The regularity with which many participants refer to such tutors leaves little doubt that some individuals hold such views. However, it is not possible to adequately analyse the nuances of their positionings, as the data the study produced on them is not a representation of their own views. The participant who comes closest to this position is, perhaps, Mark, who comments in Chapter 4 that

we have taken people who really, we wouldn't have taken were it not for all the pressures we have to lower, to widen participation and stuff. And they struggle.

- Mark

Mark constructs relatively strict attainment requirements as a necessity for academic success in Oxford's highly demanding academic environment. Yet even he recognises the necessity of considering context in assessing applicants' performance in the admissions process, particularly in the interview. Nonetheless, the prevalence of outright credentialism as a normative position in my participants' constructions of their colleagues is striking. Andrew, Tom, Rebecca, Samantha, Darren, Jason and Nicola, representing a variety of subject backgrounds, collegiate affiliations and roles, all explicitly describe adherence to outright credentialism among admissions and teaching staff. Holding strict forms of credentialism in mind, despite their ephemeral representation in the data, is therefore crucial as we consider constructions of and responses to the AFY.

7.1.4.2: *Credentialed attainment as the route to widening participation: Paul*

Some participants whose institutional habitus I interpret as primarily credentialist construct widening participation as ideally achieved through raising attainment and aspiration among more disadvantaged applicants, and hence credentialist understandings of merit as correct as a recognition of innate talent whose development has been properly fostered. This conception of the credentialist institutional habitus is most evident in my discussion with Paul, who troubles the orthodox conception of credentialism as limiting equity in the pursuit of attainment. This is exhibited through his comments in Chapter 5 regarding his college's preference for widening participation through raising attainment. However, it is also demonstrated by his significant scepticism towards Oxford's complex admissions system. Throughout our interview, Paul questions what he describes as the 'Byzantine selection processes' Oxford deploys – the combination of 'tests, prior attainment, interviews, and the submission of written work' interpreted through autonomous academic judgement, instead promoting a simplified admissions system which relied more heavily on attainment data as the fairest option:

... exactly the people that all of that is meant to help are exactly the sort of people that are most likely to be put off, or marginalised or excluded, because we're doing something different and complicated, that needs a huge amount of work...

*...why aren't we thinking about things like clearing...why aren't you looking at that end of the pipeline? Because, you know, one thing we know is that people from very disadvantaged backgrounds can get five A*s at A level, and they absolutely do and they are out there.*

- Paul

Paul situates the highly holistic nature of Oxford's admissions process as a barrier to attracting more disadvantaged applicants both through their unusual nature in the wider HE sector, and through their efficacy. This view mirrors previous research on Oxford's interview process (Zimdars, 2007; Nahai, 2013) which casts the interview process as a site of homologous selection, in contrast to the majority of my participants who see interviews as a way to discern 'innate' talent regardless of prior attainment. The implication of this position is that by reverting to a more credentialised system of admissions aligned to other institutions, Oxford would be able to attract a

wider pool of disadvantaged but high-attaining applicants. Other participants, such as Kevin, also highlight their interpretation that the majority of widening participation work should stem from the admission of greater numbers of disadvantaged applicants who nonetheless meet the minimum attainment standard for mainstream entry. This position is evident, too, in Peter's position that relaxing minimum entry grades for disadvantaged students would represent a lowering of academic standards, despite his strong commitment to widening participation and the AFY. His construction of the AFY as serving qualitatively different kinds of students to the mainstream admissions round reconciles the apparent contradiction between these stances.

However (and as an aside), illustrating the fragmented nature of many participants' accounts of fairness and merit, Paul also advocates for the use of contextual offers, a rare position among my participants:

I guess the obvious thing that we never talk about that I've always thought we should is just contextual offer making more generally...it's always felt to me that that's something we should consider, but it's never been considered in my time, it's always been one of those sorts of taboos.

- Paul

I interpret Paul's potentially fragmented stance here as a rejection of the necessity of such fine-tuned decisions for fairness. While he argues that in the current admissions system autonomous academic judgement is crucial to separate similarly credentialled applicants, he suggests that broader reforms to Oxford's admissions system, which might have both credentialist and contextualist elements, might have significant impact. In this sense, perversely, his position strays close to Lee's, the study's most outright contextualist. However, recognising the 'taboo' nature of radical contextualism, he maintains a broad adherence to credentialist principles in the Oxford admissions system *as it stands* on the grounds of ensuring fairness.

7.1.4.3: Credentialism as a qualified preference: Vicky

The final incarnation of credentialist institutional habitus I discuss is the construction of a blended view in which both contextual and credential consideration are important, but in which credentialism is prioritised. This view is the most common credentialist institutional habitus exhibited by my participants and is demonstrated well by Vicky. In discussing selection in her subject, Vicky extensively notes her efforts to contextualise applicants' achievements prior to the interview but makes clear the importance of a 'baseline' of attainment below which candidates are inadmissible. She explains that during the interview process she prioritises applicants

who want to do [subject], and people who seem like they'll be kind of interested in [subject]. And what I mean by that is that there's a way of approaching a question where it feels like you're kind of open to some uncertainty and to some, like, back and forth, and some sort of objections.

- Vicky

This objective mirrors most participants' conceptions of the interview; Vicky looks for applicants who are comfortable with ambiguity and are willing to persevere through questions which deeply challenge them. Nonetheless, she then explains that

the baseline is more important than the way of thinking thing...like if I had to...I'd rather good students who are not interested in [subject] than bad students who are kind of [interested in subject].

- Vicky

Although admissions decisions are rarely this stark, and despite her strong interest in contextualised assessment, Vicky identifies 'being a good student', demonstrated through credentialised attainment, as the most important aspect of selection. The concept of a credentialist baseline is echoed by other participants, most prominently Kevin, for whom it forms the basis of his conception of fairness in admissions and desirable widening admissions practice. Sarah, Emma and James all highlight the importance of an adequate knowledge base to succeed on course, particularly in the sciences, while Claire (although she does not clearly prioritise credentialist merit) emphasises that

some levels of attainment are simply too low to allow applicants to flourish in undergraduate study at Oxford.

7.1.4.4: Outright contextualism: Lee

While outright credentialists – those for whom social and educational background should simply not be considered – are not directly represented among my participants, there are a handful of academic participants who exhibit a strong contextualist institutional habitus, the most prominent of whom is Lee. Lee stridently advocates for the adoption of not just contextual consideration but contextual offering policies, a position Paul describes above as ‘taboo’ (despite his hypothetical support for it):

where we ought to be in five to 10 years’ time is contextualised offers, because that’s where, as I understand it, the educational research points as being the single most effective way of getting to a fair admissions round.

- Lee

Lee is unusual among my participants in referring to academic research on equity in selective university admissions practices. He recognises Oxford’s refusal to consider contextual offers as unusual compared to other highly selective UK universities, a view echoed by other participants who exhibit strongly contextualist institutional habituses such as Neil. Lee conceptualises the idea of the attainment baseline as a necessary psychological ‘anchor’ for tutors given the requirement to make decisions which are by their nature heuristic judgements, but which are subjected to scrutiny, avoiding the potential for the process to be interpreted as overly subjective. Other participants nascently question the decision not to engage in contextual offer-making; Jason, for instance, suggests that Oxford should ‘buck up [its] ideas around its entry criteria’. Notably though, Lee and Paul are the only academic participants who overtly call for the introduction of contextual offer-making below the current standard offer.

7.1.4.5: Contextual admissions, non-contextual teaching: Adam

Adam's stance on the use of contextual assessment is not directly articulated by other participants but is indicative of one of the central tensions of the study. Adam makes clear that he does not believe ability during the admissions process can be assessed independently of context, constructing contextual assessment as a vital part of discerning 'innate' merit:

It might be that there's a degree of inability that is context independent. So if you have somebody who, for whatever reason, is sort of cognitively unable to do certain things that you need to do...then context may make no difference at all...you might have people at the other extreme, who absolutely, regardless of their existing social contexts, education, and opportunity, are just sort of outstanding logical reasoners in you know, the way that you might have some kind of native genius...But in general, those two are intertwined, right, that you can assess somebody's capacities in the light of the opportunities that they've had. Because what you're interested in is what they will do with the opportunity of being here.

- Adam

Adam is thus a moderate contextualist in admissions terms; while suggesting the likelihood of outliers for whom context is irrelevant, he perceives contextual assessment as the general rule by which applicants should be selected. While the credentialist-contextualist spectrum does not map neatly onto the sphere of undergraduate teaching, some participants, such as Nicola, Charlotte and Daniel, interpret social and education context as also impacting the extent to which students are readily able to engage in Oxford's fast-paced tutorial teaching. For instance, in section 4.2.3.2 Daniel describes a talented student who attained exceptionally highly yet needed significant support and scaffolding to access the first-year undergraduate course.

Adam rejects this view. As discussed in Chapters 4, 5 and 6, he perceives alterations to mainstream undergraduate students' teaching to account for context as compromising the value of the tutorial teaching environment, noting the value of 'struggle' in students' academic development. While he believes auxiliary additional support should be available to students from disadvantaged backgrounds,

the people who are teaching them the subjects, shouldn't be sort of pitching what they're teaching to their own perception of where the student comes from. I think that's kind of defeating the purpose of them being here to some extent.

- Adam

Adam's views on the relevance of context to teaching practice are complemented by some more credentialist participants; Mark, for instance, explains that 'I think our system is fine. I wouldn't want to change it', advocating for the benefits of difficult tasks in the tutorial space even where there is no space for scaffolding; Simon, from a different disciplinary background, offers a similar conception. Kevin, not straightforwardly either a contextualist or credentialist, also exhibits a weaker conception of this approach, arguing for the maintenance of the integrity of the tutorial system by ensuring his students engage with challenging material, although he does adapt the tasks he sets for his first-year undergraduates.

7.1.4.6: Defensive contextualism: Michael

Defensive contextualism as a variant of the contextualist institutional habitus refers to the sense that hard-won progress for contextual assessment in the mainstream admissions process is threatened by the introduction of the AFY. This view is captured most completely by Michael, who argues that almost every applicant who could attain the minimum standard offer could cope with the demands of Oxford's undergraduate courses. This view questions what some participants view as the fetishisation of the Oxford admissions process, whereby increasingly fine distinctions are required in order to identify candidates who will succeed academically. Michael does subscribe to the logic of fine distinctions within the Oxford admissions process but does so in order to promote his conception of fairness rather than to mitigate against the risk of academic failure.

I think the good decision is where one's quite clearly aware of the context out of which the student has reached the point they've reached where they're sitting in front of you...students who come from a school where they've been very well taught, where they're in a cohort where success is easy, they need to be really good.

- Michael

For a decision to be 'good', Michael considers the issue of contextual assessment central. He believes that such contextual assessment should apply 'upwards' as well as 'downwards', with requirements for more advantaged applicants being set higher than the standard expectation, as well as (in exceptional circumstances) lower for more disadvantaged applicants. The notion of 'upward' contextual offering is also espoused by Jason and Lee. Michael highlights the slow and difficult work it has required for his college to make progress on widening participation through contextual consideration, including through overcoming the scepticism of colleagues elsewhere within the university. He expresses concern that the advent of the AFY has the potential to disrupt smaller but wider-spread usages of context in the mainstream admissions process:

I don't think the foundation year is going to do as much good to social mobility as [college] has done for the last 20 years of just chipping away at a state school...

there's not actually much to say about it, you know, it's not at all romantic, it's not at all...take more students, give the benefit of the doubt and don't call students risks when you take them...Go looking.

- Michael

Michael's construction of his college's more incrementalist approach as 'not at all romantic' exemplifies his concern that the AFY, as a higher-profile initiative, might displace existing efforts to widen participation. Although Michael advocates contextual assessment, his subscription to the 'leapfrog critique' described in Chapter 4 also highlights another important aspect of his contextualism. While he strongly favours contextual assessment, he incorporates within this position a sense of the importance of credentialist fairness given the credentialist requirements of the mainstream admissions round. Michael suspects that reserving undergraduate spaces for AFY students is likely to mean that fewer offers are extended to the most disadvantaged direct-entry applicants, rather than to their more privileged peers. As such, he is concerned that the net benefit of the AFY in terms of diversifying student intake may be negligible, while also unfairly impacting students who are also disadvantaged, but have attained highly enough to make direct undergraduate applications. This position is perhaps the one which enjoys the broadest support across my academic participants – individuals who are invested in contextual assessment in the

mainstream admissions process, but for whom the AFY represents a potential injustice. Sarah, Rebecca, Christopher, Richard and Vicky, drawn from a variety of colleges and subject backgrounds, all discuss their concerns in this regard.

7.2: Theorising the response to the AFY

The second section of this chapter considers the impact of the AFY's development and implementation on the theorised model of the mainstream admissions and teaching process offered above. I argue that the AFY's introduction into Oxford's social field threatens to subvert the doxa of autonomous academic judgement. This disrupts the relational institutional habitus of deference which in mainstream admissions and teaching maintains the stability of the field's tensioned institutional habituses. I first explore the specific elements of the AFY which disrupt this stabilisation.

I then consider the implications of this disruption. I argue that while the relational institutional habitus of deference produces primarily institutional *maintenance* work in the mainstream admissions and teaching process, its lack of coherence in relation to the AFY creates a proliferation of more varied forms of institutional work. The strategies range from creative attempts to embed the AFY's practices into the mainstream, to efforts to maintain the boundaries between the AFY and the undergraduate process. *Disruptive* strategies of institutional work occur both towards this boundary itself and in attempts to subvert it. I argue that in the absence of a salient relational institutional habitus which governs practices between individuals' institutional habituses, my participants select their strategies of institutional work in accordance with the specific variant of credentialist or contextualist institutional habitus they exhibit, together with the enabling or constraining structures of the sub-organisations they inhabit within Oxford.

7.2.1: Subverting doxa, destabilising institutional habitus relations

The AFY's introduction poses challenges to the doxa of autonomous academic judgement due to specific elements of its design. In this section I outline these challenges, drawing on the responses of participants.

7.2.1.1: *The AFY's grade requirements*

The most obvious doxic subversion the AFY generates is through its unilateral lowering of the level of academic attainment required of its applicants. This challenges both the credentialist and contextualist institutional habituses of some participants, as discussed in Chapter 5. However, more than this, it represents a challenge to the negotiated settlement which the mainstream undergraduate offer level represents. As many participants point out, Oxford's common standard offers of AAA or A*AA at A level or equivalent are lower than cognate courses at other highly selective UK universities (although as Lauren discusses, the real level of attainment usually required for a competitive application is significantly higher). I argue that the positioning of the standard undergraduate offer at this point represents a compromise driven by Oxford's doxa in admissions. By setting the standard offer at a relatively lower level, the door is left open to contextualists to select applicants with relatively modest attainment, while credentialists remain free to select applicants who have attained extremely highly. This point is illustrated by Jess and James' comments on this issue below:

...what we see ourselves as doing, for the most part is admitting the best people according to the admissions criteria, which are both at the same time, you know, very, very clear and helpful, but also allow some flexibility, because we're allowed to search for people who have the potential for excellence...

- Jess

*three As now in the context of A*s isn't, yeah, it isn't actually that difficult to meet... for most people, they will say that a three A offer for most of our humanities and objects is an access offer. Yeah.*

- James

Jess emphasises the importance of the standard offer for flexible decision-making, while James makes clear that offers to applicants not predicted in excess of the standard offer are often considered 'access' decisions. As such, the further significant reduction in the grades required for the AFY trouble the doxic compromise which the standard offer level represents. This interpretation is supported by Jason's observations about the similar response which the LMH foundation year exhibited: 'How dare you bring in people who are lower than the average grades?'

7.2.1.2: The AFY's admissions process

More directly, the AFY's admissions processes unsettles the principle of autonomous academic judgement because it breaks the link between individual tutors' admissions decisions and the students they eventually teach. As Simon explains earlier in the chapter this link is crucial; in a highly personalised teaching system, tutors' desire to retain control over admissions decisions is strong. However, because AFY students are selected through centralised interviews, tutors are faced with the prospect of teaching undergraduate students they have not selected themselves, threatening the doxic expectation which governs the mainstream admissions round. Mark notes the disquiet this causes in Chapter 6; Andrew, too, describes the strength of feeling attached to interviewing applicants personally at his college:

most of our tutors wanted to be actually present for the interviewing of people that they might end up taking. Now, that's not straightforward in some cases where you've got quite a lot of applicants...But nonetheless, it was clear that all our tutors wanted - put it this way, they didn't want to be given students that they had not seen.

- Andrew

As Andrew notes this is 'not straightforward'; the potential number of tutors who might receive a particular AFY student far exceeded the numbers practical to include in the interview process. This means that the admissions process for the AFY inherently jars with the doxic norms which govern mainstream admissions practice.

7.2.1.3: Teaching in the AFY

The final major challenge the AFY poses to autonomous academic judgement is through its teaching principles and practices. The purchase of the principle in admissions stems from the highly personalised undergraduate teaching model deployed in Oxford, and tutors' corresponding freedom to determine their own teaching materials, practices and strategies. The centralisation of the AFY's teaching creates dissonance with this doxic principle in two ways. First, some academic participants exhibit concern that the teaching staff and practices deployed in the AFY may not adequately prepare students for undergraduate study; recall, for instance, Ian and Richard's concerns in section 6.2.2.1. Where they would normally shape their first-year undergraduate's learning experiences to a significant degree, the lack of control over AFY teaching is disconcerting, leading to institutional work strategies which attempt to compartmentalise the more centrally determined teaching model it adopts, or more substantially in the case of Adam's colleagues, to reshape it in accordance with the principles of mainstream undergraduate teaching.

the other argument is that the reading lists are just not onerous enough, that they are too short, that they will not adequately prepare candidates...we pushed back a little bit...what is crucial is that we teach the foundation year students, you know, how to work with a single source in the most efficient way. And once you've done that, you can kind of build up to the longer reading lists.

- Adam

This institutional work demonstrates the strength of the doxic principle of autonomous academic judgement and its uneven application to the AFY. Even in the context of a programme with a structurally different aim to first-year undergraduate teaching as it currently exists, some tutors wish to implement the model of undergraduate teaching they see as appropriate within their personal teaching practice.

Some participants also raise a deeper issue demonstrating the extent of the challenge to doxa the AFY presents: that its model threatens to distort the nature of the tutorial relationship and teaching model, a concern articulated fully in section 6.2.2.3. For these participants, Kevin in

particular, the doxic principle of autonomous academic judgement protects what is most valuable about Oxford's teaching model, the flexibility to teach according to tutors' individual sense of what students need. As such they demonstrate a staunch desire to ensure the AFY's principles are not adopted within mainstream teaching, a concern Jess describes as its use as a 'Trojan horse'. Although the resulting institutional work is similar, it is important to distinguish between the normative bases of these objections. While concerns around teaching efficacy position the AFY as disruptive through threatening students' ability to cope in mainstream tutorial teaching, the objection of distortion of the tutorial teaching model stems from deeper concerns about the AFY as a threat to the supposedly dialogic and collegial nature of tutorial teaching itself.

7.2.1.4: Doxic and relational institutional habitus responses

How do these challenges impact the doxa of autonomous academic judgement and its accompanying relational institutional habitus of deference? I argue that the impact on the wider doxic principles present in the mainstream admissions round appear minimal. None of the interview data generated with my participants suggests a significant shift in their fundamental pre-existing positions on the importance of autonomous academic judgement in undergraduate admissions or teaching practices. This is unsurprising; doxa is, by its nature, the boundary of the possible, misrecognised as natural and therefore unquestionable. This is not to say that my participants universally subscribe to this doxa. While the majority of academic participants endorse the importance of academic autonomy, a handful actively question its usefulness and supposed neutrality. However, these participants generally already exhibited a weak adherence, or *illusio* (Threadgold, 2018; 2020), to Oxford's admissions and teaching doxa. Their presence in Oxford's strong social field was accompanied by a recognition of the normative principles governing the field through an awareness of their culturally arbitrary nature.

[Foundation years] have been standard, and I've worked with them at other universities for a while. I think there's this, you know, sort of this narrative we tell ourselves that 'well, our students shouldn't need this'. And if they do, if they're struggling, they're weak students, and it's very pathologizing...I'm hoping it might

raise some light, some insight, so we can sort of say, we can see the University afresh through their eyes and actually think 'why is it the way it is and does it need to be?', if it's causing problems or barriers or we're missing out on potential and diversity.

- Neil

Neil's description of 'seeing the university afresh' describes the kind of fundamental questioning of doxa which, for Bourdieu, is extremely rare. While several participants do describe making changes on the basis of their experience with the AFY (such as Rachel, Daniel and Charlotte, in Chapter 6), such changes are generally small alterations to existing behaviours. The potential impact of such changes on issues of equity in admissions and teaching should not be underestimated, but they do not amount to an overturning of the doxic order; they are changes to these participants' own autonomous practices. For the large majority of participants, then, the doxa of autonomous academic judgement remains intact. The AFY is generally positioned as a separate if linked endeavour which, conceptualised thus, does not raise potentially troubling lines of debate regarding the relationship between merit and context in mainstream admissions and teaching.

However, the same cannot be said for the relational institutional habitus of deference. While most supporters of the AFY, including participants who worked directly on its development, subscribe to the 'tweaking' of practice described above, there is a perception that the principles of the AFY *may* come to influence mainstream undergraduate practices. For some participants this threatens the doxic bounds of Oxford's admissions and teaching ecosystem, dissolving the relational institutional habitus which stabilises the various tensioned institutional habituses present in the mainstream admissions arena. In contrast to the undergraduate sphere, where colleagues' decisions about admissions or teaching are not questioned, the AFY's disruptive nature means it becomes a site of contestation through the various strategies of institutional work outlined in Chapter 6. In the absence of a relational institutional habitus mediating their interactions with opposing views, participants attempt to enact the institutional work which most aligns with the specific manifestation of credentialist or contextualist merit they most subscribe to, in tandem with

the normative constraints which their structural position within Oxford's sub-fields impose upon them.

7.2.2: Institutional habitus responses and institutional work

This section explores the links between such specific forms of institutional habitus and the types of institutional work undertaken regarding the AFY through considering the institutional work of specific participants who exhibit particularly nuanced forms of contextualist institutional habitus. These vignettes are not intended to be a comprehensive overview of institutional work strategies towards the AFY, but instead an illustration of the interplay between institutional habituses under tensioned field conditions, participants' situated positions within the institution, and the institutional work they produce.

7.2.2.1: *Contextualist compartmentalisation: Michael and Adam*

As previous chapters explore, Michael's and Adam's institutional habituses are among the more complex displayed by my participants. Both participants support (to varying degrees, and with caveats) the AFY, but engage in institutional work to compartmentalise different aspects of it. Michael is a contextualist in the sense that he favours identifying disadvantaged applicants with potential among the cohort who have attained at or close to the standard offer. He is willing to actively select for these students, mitigating the credentialist tendency noted by other applicants to make offers primarily to applicants who far exceed the standard (and relatively lower) offer the university requires. Michael is also an exponent of the 'leapfrog' and 'fig leaf' critiques of the AFY; he is concerned about the implications for fairness of not admitting AFY-eligible mainstream applicants in favour of lower-attaining AFY applicants, and about the potential that the AFY might displace equity concerns in the mainstream round.

However, Michael's college is also considered to be progressive in terms of admissions policy. Like Rachel in section 5.3.2.2, he therefore does not believe it is tenable for his college not to participate in the AFY. I argue that the combination of Michael's specific contextualist institutional

habitus, and his positioning in regard to the wider Oxford field, produce the compartmentalising institutional work he engages in. For instance, Michael conceptualises the majority of AFY applicants' performance as

Significantly less strong...in relation to [mainstream] WP [widening participation] candidates...Not having read very much, not being very able to kind of run with something that was familiar to them...kind of not really able to make much progress.

- Michael

This interpretation might be read as simply a reflection of the strength of the applicants Michael interviewed. However, the majority of participants who interviewed AFY applicants argued that several candidates who were made offers produced very similar performances at interview to successful mainstream applicants. Furthermore, the sole applicant to whom Michael made an offer had experienced what he described as 'just terrible personal circumstances':

I think it's likely the candidate won't get three As...if I'd seen that candidate in the ordinary admissions round, I would have taken them and made them a lower offer...I didn't think that they needed a year, but I think they really deserved to be taken. Some of the other candidates that I saw, I just thought were just miles off.

- Michael

Michael's description of this applicant thus sets them apart from many of the constructions of students at whom the AFY is targeted. Unlike the other candidates who were 'miles off', the successful applicant is positioned as being unable to meet the credentialist requirements of the mainstream admissions round as solely a result of an acute set of personal circumstances, rather than with consequent problems with their academic practice. Michael does not 'think that they needed a year', positioning the successful applicant as more akin to a mainstream offer-holder. However, through this construction, the applicant is exceptionalised as Jason discusses in Chapter 4 – indeed, Michael goes on to describe that 'all the people who were given places were sort of extraordinary in different ways'. The effect of this exceptionalisation is to discourage the adoption of the AFY's principles in the mainstream admissions process. The successful applicant's lower

attainment is explained in terms of acute personal trauma, necessitating not a wholesale rethinking of how cumulative disadvantage can be assessed or mitigated for in undergraduate provision, but instead only the exercise of academic discretion by an admitting tutor. Situating the student he chose to make an offer to in this way protects what he perceives as the integrity of (progressive elements of) the mainstream admissions process from potential undermining.

Adam, too, exhibits a contextualist institutional habitus in the mainstream admissions process, but one which is circumscribed by the need for a baseline level of attainment. He recognises the salience of the 'leapfrog' critique, but positions this as a question of the AFY's non-contiguous position in relation to Opportunity Oxford and mainstream admissions, rather than its inherent concept. His compartmentalising institutional work takes the form of discursive action to conceptually separate its teaching processes from undergraduate teaching. As discussed in previous chapters Adam opposes the idea of altering undergraduate teaching to account for social or education background. He therefore conceptualises the AFY as a wholly different form of teaching (and therefore admissions) practice to the undergraduate sphere:

If somebody has a pattern of very low attainment, let's say in English...you think, 'Well, do we want to say that in a year's time this candidate is going to be given, you know, [a large amount] to read?...No'. But whereas with the foundation year, because there is the opportunity to bridge those gaps, I wouldn't really see any grade as disqualifying.

- Adam

This perception is exemplified through his undergraduate teaching practice, where he actively opts not to scaffold work for students because, as he sees it, 'the struggle is part of the point'. This construction of undergraduate study at Oxford, which necessitates taking account of social background through contextual admissions but not through a culturally critical view of teaching practice, helps us situate Adam's attitude to the AFY admissions process. He is unwilling to disregard academic attainment he perceives as lower than the requisite baseline in mainstream admissions; however, in the AFY's admissions process he is happy to do so because it provides 'an

opportunity to bridge those gaps'. This interpretation is rooted in the view that Oxford's teaching practice is universally valuable regardless of students' background. The point of the AFY, for Adam, is to bring students to the point where they can meaningfully engage with Oxford's undergraduate teaching *as it is*. For Adam the combination of his support for the AFY and his belief in the rectitude of Oxford's mainstream undergraduate teaching leads to a conception of the AFY's admissions and teaching processes which keep them discrete from the mainstream round. Much as Michael's treatment of his successful applicant serves to exceptionalise them, Adam's construction of the AFY emphasises the exceptional nature of the *programme* within Oxford, establishing the legitimacy of different principles of admission. Other participants who engage in compartmentalising institutional work from a contextualist standpoint include Rebecca, who argues that the AFY demonstrates only that disadvantaged students with comparatively lower attainment might succeed with the additional intensive bridging it provides, rather than more broadly for the use of contextual offers. Kevin (although not straightforwardly a contextualist) also advocates for the use of contextual assessment in the mainstream admissions process, but also to maintain a distinction between it and the AFY.

7.2.2.2: Contextualist permeation: Neil and Lisa

Participants who demonstrate forms of contextualist institutional habitus which extend to the teaching sphere, conversely, were more likely to undertake forms of institutional work which sought to integrate the AFY's processes into their mainstream admissions and teaching practice. Neil, one of my participants who is most outspokenly critical of non-contextual teaching, emphasises that

One of the things that I have said repeatedly in various contexts is these are completely normal students...

- Neil

He seeks to break the conceptual distinction between AFY students and undergraduates, advocating for the use of AFY teaching processes (and, hence, admissions practices) in the mainstream undergraduate sphere. Similarly Lisa, in Chapter 6, explains how she has actively sought to integrate

AFY teaching practices into their undergraduate teaching. Lisa highlights the importance of both contextual assessment in mainstream admissions but also the need to critically reflect on how the structure and delivery of undergraduate teaching differentially affect groups of students (in the extract below, specifically women):

we need to be careful about how we run their first tutorial because women in [subject] in Oxford get demoralised...You're not in a class with a teacher going 'yes, you're right' all the time...it's more about the overall feedback and you trying to educate yourself.

- Lisa

Lisa's recognition of the tutorial environment as a socially and culturally inflected space, together with her commitment to contextual assessment, mean she is more willing to enact institutional work strategies aimed at integration of the AFY's principles. It is important to note that such integration is once again qualified and partial, marked by her positionality within the Oxford field. She stresses in Chapter 6, for example, the importance of 'making sure that nobody's got their nose out of joint' to ensure the AFY is diplomatically acceptable to less enthusiastic colleagues. Nonetheless, Lisa's more holistic contextualist institutional habitus here leads to institutional work with more integrative aims than Michael and Adam's. Charlotte, Rachel, Daniel and Jason also all argue for or exhibit the integration of the AFY's teaching principles into mainstream practice (although in Jason's case, in a more selective and limited fashion, demonstrating the situated position he argues from in attempting to balance the implementation of the AFY with the opposition of some colleagues).

7.2.2.3: Ethical boundaries in the discussion of institutional work

Before moving on to the final section of this chapter, I briefly discuss the *absence* of analysis of one instance of institutional work present in my data. As noted in Chapter 3 discussion of my observations presents particular challenges regarding the protection of participant identity due to the highly specific nature of the events they detail, and as such I have not attributed the interactions I discuss to participants to prevent possible triangulation through reference to their interview

quotes. In one observation a participant whose objections to the AFY were rooted in the leapfrog critique engaged in efforts to compartmentalise the AFY through reference to credentialist norms. However, it was not possible to discuss the links between this participant's institutional work during the observation and their institutional habitus as interpreted through their interview data without an unacceptable level of triangulation occurring. I deemed it likely that the specific institutional habitus this participant espoused would be identifiable to colleagues with knowledge of the AFY's development. As such, although discussion of how (partially) credentialist institutional habitus inflects compartmentalising institutional work would be valuable, I have opted not to include it here. This illustrates the complex and sometimes fraught nature of institutional case studies – and, indeed, the strength and salience of the norms and principles at play.

7.3: Implications for admissions and teaching processes at the University of Oxford

The final section of this chapter considers what the findings above might mean for undergraduate admissions and teaching at Oxford, both in the AFY and the undergraduate ecosystem. I begin with a discussion of the epistemic and axiological ramifications of my findings, particularly with regard to the centrality of academic autonomy (in the practical rather than the doxic sense) in admissions and teaching practice. In this section I draw more fully on the voices of my student participants. While they were largely removed from discussions of the AFY's design and implementation – itself a telling form of compartmentalisation - their experiences of undergraduate admissions and teaching provide crucial insight in understanding the practical consequences of the tensions I discuss. Building on this discussion, I then consider the consequences of my findings for admissions and teaching practice, broadly defined, at Oxford. As Rob discusses below, these questions speak to the heart of not only what 'Oxford' does, but what it is for.

7.3.1: The double-edged nature of academic autonomy

It is important to reiterate at the outset of this section that none of my participants, regardless of their institutional habitus, dismiss fairness as a concern in admissions practice. Just as more

contextually inclined participants do not see themselves as attempting to dilute academic standards, more credentialist stakeholders do not see their prioritisation of high attainment as exclusionary. Instead, almost all participants situate fairness and merit as relational concepts which mutually inform each other. For many participants with broadly credentialist leanings the design and practice of Oxford's undergraduate teaching is a significant factor in their admissions decisions; the lack of time and space available in the undergraduate teaching schedule makes them wary of admitting students who may struggle to adapt quickly:

The fact is, if you can't do [subject], you get zero...One of our, one of my big concerns, taking on students from disadvantaged backgrounds in the sciences, is actually...we have to have some confidence that they are going to survive...

- [I have agreed not to attribute this quote to the participant's pseudonym in order to prevent triangulation]

7.3.1.1: The epistemology of merit in admissions practice

This viewpoint is voiced by many participants who oppose the AFY, including some who display more contextualist institutional habitus leanings. Regardless of the conception of merit they hold, such participants often offer the argument that the contextualisation which already takes place in the mainstream admissions round renders the AFY redundant. Applicants with relatively lower attainment who meet the 'baseline' of the standard offer, and who tutors feel have the capacity to cope with Oxford's teaching methods are already selected, and sometimes even accepted with lower grades at confirmation.

However, this raises two crucial problems. First, many participants' discussions highlight that not all tutors engage in this careful contextual assessment; the 'spectre of outright credentialism' is the tacitly acknowledged background against which debates play out. For such outright credentialists, we might infer that credentialism itself is the conception of fairness which they subscribe to, a view already much-critiqued from both equity and social mobility perspectives (Bills, 2019; Brown, 2022). Yet there is also an epistemic dimension to the issue relating to equity and justice, centred on whether it is possible for admissions tutors to accurately and substantively

discern academic potential – and the capacity to cope with Oxford’s demands – through their autonomous academic judgement. For some participants, such as Adam, even the smallest distinctions between candidates are intrinsically meaningful:

...the difference between number 250 and 251 might be very thin. But there has to be a difference to legitimate the distinction...there will be something on paper or an interview or something...it's not a reason with an enormous amount of weight, but it's sufficient to tip the balance because you're right on that edge. And that's fine.

- Adam

Others call such a strict rationalist view into question, arguing that in practice such thin distinctions are arbitrary fluctuations in performance which have no bearing on candidates’ intrinsic ability:

...you can't say that the 200th candidate is really better than the 201st candidate. So at some point, it comes down to luck. But I think we do a pretty good job actually in [subject] at getting that right.

- Sarah

The key point is that while Adam and Sarah disagree about the exactitude of the selection process, both trust the ability of tutors to discern minute differences in applicants’ holistic performance in order to award places. This is the most common position my academic participants adopt, demonstrating the strength of the doxic principle of autonomous academic judgement. However, the handful of participants who are openly critical of Oxford’s doxa, those whose *illusio* is weakest, are sceptical that it is possible to know with sufficient reliability which applicants are demonstrating ‘innate’ talent, and which are simply demonstrating the fruits of prior social and educational advantage:

...I think a lot of people are thinking, we just want the best students. But the best students are the best students because they've had access to certain privileges.

- Darren

...what I saw is, 'oh, shit, this person has read tonnes of stuff and is really engaged with it. Surprise, surprise, they went to a school where teachers have the time to...', you know, so that's the thing we're struggling with.

- Rachel

Such participants had often spent time working in other HE providers or occupied roles which facilitated their engagement with HE policy and practice in the rest of the sector. The quotes above illustrate the central difficulty of the use of autonomous academic judgement in the mainstream admissions process. While most tutors discuss their ability to ‘see through’ the confidence imparted by more privileged backgrounds, Darren and Rachel argue that the impact of such privilege extends not just to applicants’ comfort level during the admissions process, but to their *actual level of performance* at the point of selection. Jess notes in section 4.1.3 that there is debate between tutors as to whether applicants with the stronger performance at the point of selection, or those with the greatest perceived intellectual potential (whether or not this will be reached within the space of the undergraduate degree) should be prioritised for admission. However, I suggest this difference in views extends beyond the goals which tutors prioritise in their admissions decisions to encompass distinctions in their innate beliefs concerning how we can know what ‘ability’ or ‘merit’ are. Such differing views raise questions about the nature of just selection in an admissions process shaped by autonomous academic judgement about extremely fine distinctions which are reflected in some student participants’ views of the process, particularly admissions interviews – for instance in section 6.3. Autonomous academic judgement is thus ‘double-edged’ in the sense that its impact regarding social justice concerns in admissions is dependent on the institutional habitus alignment, and consequent practice, of the specific tutors involved in a decision. It creates the space for admissions decisions which reach beyond mechanical credentialism – yet it also minimises the opportunity for questioning and oversight of admissions decisions to ensure the systematic consideration of context.

7.3.1.2: The axiolog(ies) of effective undergraduate teaching practice

As previous chapters discuss, my academic participants offer different conceptualisations of what is valuable in the Oxford tutorial system. While participants like Adam see the value of the system in promoting learning through often puzzling and ambiguous engagement with material (and consequently decide against scaffolding for their tutees), others such as Jess question the

usefulness of this approach, arguing that it allows some students to ‘persistently fail without understanding why’. There is considerably greater consensus regarding the importance of the tutorial teaching system than on the correct approach to conceptualising merit in the admissions process. I argue that there is an implicit assumption among many participants that attempts to systematise minor changes to tutorial teaching practice are either aimed at, or would result in, the wholesale jettisoning of the tutorial teaching system. Kevin’s autonomous revision of his own teaching practice, while rejecting the AFY and the centralised reform he believes it represents, is an obvious example of this phenomenon. Such assumptions are also entangled with participants’ recognition that significant changes to undergraduate course structures are time-intensive and difficult to achieve. Yet a minority of participants – unsurprisingly, those who are supportive of the AFY – argue that there is significant value in reframing and refocussing the practice of the tutorial system, rather than abandoning it.

I would be loathe for us to lose that undergraduate [tutorial] teaching here...it's probably slightly more about the... 'are they thinking about what's happening in that hours' time, is it a joined up set of tutorials that are happening? And then also at the department level?'. Well [if not], you know, why are you doing that?

I actually think what it shows is that we should be doing more training of all of our tutors.

- Jason

Such a model of tutorial reform aligns to the institutional work of integration and permeation which participants involved in the AFY have begun to implement in their undergraduate teaching. My student participants’ constructions of the tutorial teaching space suggest that the traditional model of tutorial teaching, wherein students are expected to independently develop an understanding of the practices and skills expected of them, can erect significant barriers to learning rooted in prior social and educational disadvantage.

...everyone's always like, 'oh, I'm so tired. I've got so much work to do', that kind of thing. And like, when I first came to Oxford, I like met the second years...They basically said like 'you will never feel like you're on top of everything. You will always

kind of be struggling. You will always be drowning in work... '...if you're someone who's got a lot of stuff going on at home or like in your life, that might be even harder to deal with than if you're someone who has all these struggles at university but...you can maybe just go home and relax. Or I mean, there's like a more secure, more security in other parts of your life.

- Samuel

literally, like, the hardest thing I read [before Oxford] was like, Great Expectations...I used to take so long just to get through like one paper that I was reading, like absolutely ages, just because the language was a bit less accessible to me or like the sentences were a bit longer, and like, by the time I get to the end of this, what did they say in the beginning again?...And if all your time is spending on like the evidence and like getting sort of the pieces of the puzzle to put your essay together, then you kind of don't have as much time to think critically or even if you're struggling to understand evidence, how can you think critically about it?

- Jack

Although a minority of students considered whether the workload and approach to problem solving within the tutorial system might be ultimately beneficial, they were ambivalent about this possibility, with most student participants viewing it as inhibitory to their academic progress. In discussing the AFY's skills-led teaching model, there was considerable enthusiasm for integrating its principles into undergraduate teaching practice:

I think everyone could probably do with that prep, I would like someone to teach me skills as someone that's been here one and a half years now...

- Emily

for me personally what I would have loved last year in my freshers week was an hour with like a talk from a tutor on how to write an essay...just kind of like the basic layout of how what notes you should make in lectures, what notes you should make from a book, and how to write an essay...

- Samuel

This calls into question such reticence in considering the minor reforms through tutors' autonomous personal practice which integration of the AFY's principles has led to so far.

7.3.1.3: What is rigour at Oxford?

The AFY's introduction, and the institutional work which occurs between it and the mainstream admissions and teaching spheres, thus highlight the tensions for the implementation of equitable admissions practices inherent in my theorisation of Oxford's standard practices. While some tutors

clearly engage in reflexive reform and reworking of their admissions and teaching practice, the doxic principle of autonomous academic judgement means there is no systematic mechanism to ensure this. In a system in which tutors' judgement is final, and in which some tutors exhibit highly credentialist leanings, this inevitably means that a significant number of admissions decisions are made in favour of more privileged applicants who appear more meritorious (or able to 'cope' with tutorial teaching) at the point of selection, to the detriment of less privileged applicants who may have greater potential. The defence of the principle of academic autonomy, both in teaching practice and hence admissions practice, is at the heart of the unsettling caused by the AFY's introduction. Yet it points to crucial issues in the experiences and outcomes of disadvantaged students applying to and studying at the University of Oxford. Chloe characterises her tutors as 'old' and 'young', perhaps a heuristic proxy for tutors who are more or less interested in pedagogical reform:

Old tutors are so like 'hand in your work on time. Like I want you to like, deliver it to my office. And I'm gonna give you one line of feedback. I'm gonna like be so mad if you don't hand it in'...I think, you know, they do want to keep this like, Oxford as being like a very rigorous place, but I don't think Oxford being rigorous is why people come out of it doing like great things afterwards...everyone is so smart and I just think like half the time, they're not even using their brains...like no one's ever gonna write a good essay at 3am. But it's just like the fear of not handing it in. So yeah, I do like, I think it's silly, the workload here...I always think like if I went to a different uni I'd be doing a lot better.

- Chloe

Chloe finds that what her 'old' tutors conceptualise as rigour is actively hindering her academic development; the learning practices put in place to ensure intellectual engagement are perversely experienced as inhibiting it. Eight of my 11 student participants espoused similar sentiments regarding Oxford's workload and teaching practices. The gulf between student perceptions of workload and the navigation of Oxford's invisible pedagogy and (some) tutors' understandings of these issues thus highlights the axiological challenges which autonomous academic judgement, in its most unfettered state, can generate for teaching and hence admissions practice.

Chapter 8: Conclusions, contributions, implications

The final chapter of the thesis reviews its key findings and considers what they might mean for further sociological research in elite university admission and for admissions and teaching practice at the University of Oxford. I first review my RQs and summarise how the study answers them. I then outline the study's contributions in two key avenues: empirical understandings of undergraduate admissions and teaching practices in both the Oxford undergraduate sphere and the AFY, and the relationship(s) between them; and theoretical advancements in Bourdieusian thought, particularly concerning the relationship between doxa and plural institutional habituses. I discuss the limitations of the study, both in its design choices and in the empirical avenues of interest I was unable to explore fully due to the study's scope and time limitations. These include my participant sample, the data produced regarding undergraduate teaching practices, thematic considerations such as disciplinary differences in conceptualising merit and fairness, and practical areas of contestation such as the financial cost of the AFY.

I then consider the implications of the study for admissions and teaching practice at Oxford. I suggest that greater awareness and training surrounding the experiences of disadvantaged students in the tutorial teaching system has the potential for significant equity impact in both admissions and teaching practice. Additionally, I consider the potential implications of the study for understandings of equity in admissions contexts beyond Oxford in other highly selective UK universities. I then outline valuable future research directions which would contribute to achieving the impacts above. This includes a focus on how members of institutions with plural institutional habituses might come to embody a particular form of institutional habitus; further research on how students from different social and educational backgrounds experience the tutorial teaching system; and how the epistemology of merit is conceptualised in different disciplines. Finally, I conclude my thesis through reference to an extended excerpt from an interview with Charlotte,

whose description of her own undergraduate journey to Oxbridge illustrates the central issues at stake in the study.

8.1: Review of research questions and findings

This section revisits my RQs and offers a brief summary of how my findings address them. The study sought to understand how the introduction of the AFY surfaces and highlights tensions in the mainstream admissions process, and how constructions of and responses to it help us interpret the normative meanings at play within admissions at the University of Oxford. My RQs approached this problem in three stages, considering participants' constructions of the mainstream admissions process, the AFY as a concept, and the actions they took in response to its introduction to negotiate the spaces, links and boundaries between the AFY and mainstream admissions practice.

- 1) How do AFY stakeholders construct fairness within Oxford's mainstream undergraduate admissions process?

Chapter 4 demonstrates that for almost all my academic participants, fairness and academic merit are intertwined and mutually deterministic. In the social field of Oxford admissions, an applicant must demonstrate academic merit for their admission to be considered fair; equally, participants exhibit differing conceptions of fairness in assessment which inflect how applicants' academic merit is conceptualised. Unlike previous comparable studies (Zimdars, 2007; Nahai, 2013) which find a dominant norm of credentialist merit, my findings show that academic participants involved in admissions construct merit in both credentialist and contextualist terms and incorporate a variety of nuanced conceptions of these norms into their admissions practice. This finding significantly updates existing research findings which conceptualise Oxford's admissions practice as primarily credentialist, opening valuable avenues for future research and policy focus on the impact of regulatory imperatives concerning contextual admissions policies and improved contextual data. Academic participants describe a spectrum of normative practice ranging from outright credentialism to moderate contextualism; few participants describe themselves or their colleagues

as operating at the extreme ends of this spectrum, with most occupying gradated positions incorporating aspects of both norms, with a strong inclination towards one or the other. For instance, several participants construct positions advocating for contextual assessment above a credentialist 'baseline' for prior attainment.

These conceptions are also linked to participants' constructions of the undergraduate teaching environment at Oxford. Recognition of Oxford's highly demanding workload and intensive tutorial teaching practices generate a sense of risk aversion in participants who espouse more credentialist conceptions of merit, encouraging the selection of applicants whose previous record of attainment suggests they will cope well with these demands. Conversely, more contextually inclined participants highlight the potential for the tutorial teaching environment to develop applicants' academic performance. Ultimately some participants tie these interpretations of the tutorial teaching environment to academics' conceptions of what their role in students' development is, suggesting that those who do not see teaching as a priority are more likely to lean towards credentialist interpretations of merit. The links between admissions and teaching practice are not straightforward or mechanistic – Adam, for instance, describes a contextual approach to admissions married with a non-scaffolded and autodidactic approach to teaching. Teaching practice is therefore not a direct focus of my RQs but is an inescapable and crucial aspect of their answers. Chapter 7 theorises these positions as plural institutional habituses, semi-conscious and affective practices exercised by institutionally situated agents on behalf of the institution and inflected by their normative conceptions of it.

- 2) How do such constructions of fairness interact with stakeholders' conceptualisation of and engagement with the AFY?

Research question 2 explored how participants construct the AFY and how they made the decision whether to participate in it. My findings show that the AFY is conceptualised in relation to both Opportunity Oxford, the university's bridging programme for disadvantaged incoming

undergraduates, and the LMH foundation year. Participants discuss the comparatively inflexible nature of the AFY as a source of friction as set against Opportunity Oxford, highlighting the importance of tutors' autonomous academic judgement in matters of admissions broadly defined. Participants also position the latent credentialism inherent in oppositions to the LMH foundation year as extending to constructions of the AFY. The AFY is a normatively contested site wherein participants' specific institutional habituses inform their conceptions of the programme; beyond practical issues such as regulatory expectation or the cost of the programme, participants situate their support or objection to the AFY in these nuanced normative frameworks. For instance, supportive participants conceptualise the AFY as a necessity due to social justice concerns (including by positioning AFY-eligible students as inherently different from mainstream applicants) or as a route to introducing stronger contextual admissions practice. Equally, those opposing it deploy a variety of credentialist and contextualist arguments, ranging from outright meritocratic objection to concern about the displacement of contextual assessment in the mainstream admissions process. Crucially for my analysis, many objections are also rooted in adherence to the doxic principle of autonomous academic judgement in admissions, regardless of participants' institutional habitus leanings. This finding demonstrates the centrality of doxa, as well as the more typically deployed concepts of habitus and capitals, for the study of selective universities' admissions practices, advancing the case for doxa to be considered *in tandem* with Bourdieu's other central concepts in future sociological studies of widening admissions practice.

Participation decisions were governed in large part by this principle; colleges generally allowed individual tutors to advocate for participation or non-participation, with departmental discussion run through more consensus-driven discussion. Participation at college or departmental level was often contingent on a combination of the institutional habituses of their members together with latent or active forms of institutional work; participants describe, variously, the desire to either be involved in decisions or to 'wait and see' how successful the AFY was. Individual relationships and persuasion, too, were a key aspect of some colleges and departments

participating, highlighting the influence of the doxic principles of autonomy and the need to negotiate it diplomatically rather than coercively. This principle is most obvious in the fact that at most participating colleges some tutors opted not to accept AFY students; although their colleges and departments were willing to participate, the ultimate decision rested with individual tutors.

- 3) How do AFY stakeholders interact with one another within the AFY and the mainstream admissions process to enact their constructions of fairness?

Research question 3 addresses how participants attempt to enact their constructions of fairness and, consequently, merit in light of the AFY's development and implementation. I find that the strategic actions participants engage in can be interpreted as efforts to either compartmentalise the AFY's admissions and teaching principles and practices, separating them from the mainstream admissions and teaching ecosystem, or to integrate them to varying degrees into this sphere. Such strategic action includes discursive positioning of the AFY over the course of its development – for instance, Peter's positioning of AFY-eligible students' backgrounds as allowing them no chance of gaining mainstream entry, or Neil's questioning of the distinction between mainstream and AFY students. It is also evident in participants', and their descriptions of their colleagues' actions: in the integration of AFY teaching strategies into undergraduate teaching, the description of an increased awareness of the importance of context in admissions practice at some colleges, or in a committee member's questioning of the AFY's progression requirements. Lastly, it is present in what is *not* done – for instance, in Jason's description of tutors' reluctance to engage in decision-making and subsequent questioning of the AFY's structures. I theorise this strategic action as institutional work, informed by the specific institutional habituses of my participants. As Chapter 7 details, these institutional habituses are variegated and do not reflect neat positions on the spectrum of credentialist and contextualist merit, leading to the wide variety of institutional work strategies I discuss.

8.2: Contributions of the study

In this project I make several important contributions to understandings of admissions practice at the University of Oxford, the implementation of admissions reform in this context, and Bourdieusian sociological thought. First, I offer a significant and substantial update to existing understandings of the normative positions which underpin selection in Oxford's undergraduate admissions process. Large qualitative studies of the process, despite their discursive resonance for public understanding of fairness at elite UK universities, are rare. Recent studies of the Oxbridge admissions process either focus solely on specific aspects of the process, are quantitative in nature, or focus solely on student experience and preparation (Weston, 2021; Lenkeit et al, 2019; Stenhouse and Ingram, 2024). The only quasi-comparable study I am aware of is Zimdars' (2007) doctoral research and subsequent research outputs (Zimdars, 2010; Mountford-Zimdars, 2016), which took place under a significantly different regulatory regime and with considerably fewer and less specific contextual data available to admissions tutors. In contrast to Zimdars and Nahai (2013), my findings of an influential norm of contextual meritocratic selection provide valuable evidence of the growing relevance of the OfS' emphasis on the use of contextual data at the University of Oxford. This contribution has relevance for sociologists and higher education researchers examining the use of contextual data in selective university admissions, national and local policymakers, teachers and schools, and most crucially applicants themselves.

Second, my findings highlight the crucial role of academic selectors' conceptions of learning and teaching at Oxford in the decisions they make. Zimdars (2007) notes the importance of applicants' 'teachability' and willingness to work hard in securing a place. However, her study does not consider how her participants' admissions decisions might be inflected by their conceptions of whether pedagogy should be 'visible or 'invisible' (Bernstein, 1975) in the tutorial space (or, indeed, their conception of pedagogy as a culturally and socially informed practice at all). The pedagogically classed nature of the tutorial teaching space, and its impact on students' understandings of their performance, is demonstrated by the data produced with my student participants. My findings

suggest the need to focus further on how tutors at Oxford conceive of students' ability to improve once on course, and their own role within this process, to understand potential links to the willingness to select for potential as well as actualised merit in the admissions process. More research is clearly needed to further explicate this issue, as I describe in section 8.5. However, surfacing this link for the first time represents an important step in understanding the underlying epistemologies of learning and ability which inform the Oxford admissions process.

Third, my research represents the first large-scale study of the introduction of foundation year programmes in the Oxbridge context. While smaller studies (Kettley and Murphy, 2021; Pryce, 2024) offer valuable contributions to this space my work is unique in exploring the relationship between mainstream undergraduate admissions practices at Oxford or Cambridge and the construction of the meaning of foundation years in these highly specific contexts. My findings demonstrate the crucial nature of understanding such local and specific field dynamics in successfully implementing potentially disruptive admissions programmes in HE settings, particularly highly scrutinised and contested ones such as Oxford. Given the ongoing research focus on contextual admissions routes at selective universities, including foundation years, this contribution is likely to be of particular interest to senior decision-makers at universities, researchers, and policymakers.

My remaining contributions are theoretical in nature. First, I have introduced the concept of the "relational institutional habitus". This concept allows us to theorise how plural institutional habituses can be stabilised and maintained when supported by the same institutional doxa. Through interpolating a mode of interaction between tensioned but legitimised institutional habituses, the relational institutional habitus of deference enables the 'maintenance of contradiction'; it provides a viable means to facilitate the cooperative interaction between potentially conflicting institutional habituses which the field's doxa requires. The relational institutional habitus thus provides a novel response to one of the foremost critiques of the concept

of institutional habitus: that it homogenises the individual habituses of an institution's members. Conceptualising institutional habitus as action taken on the basis of the institution's doxic norms, as therefore potentially pluralistic, and as mediated by a relational institutional habitus, overcomes this objection. The relational institutional habitus has the potential to prove fruitful in other research settings where competing institutional narratives and norms exist in tension with each other.

Second, I have offered a synthesis of Bourdieu's theoretical toolkit with the concept of institutional work. Although Lawrence and Suddaby's (2006) theorisation of institutional work acknowledges its links to Bourdieu's intellectual project, the links between (institutional) habitus and institutional work have not been explicitly articulated. By reconciling the embodied and practice-led nature of habitus with the conscious strategic action of institutional work, I offer a theorisation of how situated actors' habitus inclinations, and their conscious assessment and action regarding the field, might be understood through the use of institutional work. These theoretical contributions will be of interest to Bourdieusian scholars, particularly in the sociology of education, as well as organisational theorists.

8.3: Limitations

This section acknowledges and discusses the limitations of the study. The most obvious limitation is the sample of academic participants I was able to recruit. First, my participants' discussion highlights that outright credentialism which seeks to prioritise prior academic attainment and performance at the point of assessment, rather than potential, remains a recognisable normative position among Oxford's admissions selectors. However, only one of my 39 academic participants, Mark, might be argued to approximate this position, and even he recognises the importance of contextual assessment in passing. As such, although I interviewed a handful of moderate credentialists, my academic participant sample features a heavy skew towards varying formations of contextual institutional habitus. This is unsurprising for two reasons. First, participants who opted

to involve themselves in the development of the AFY, either directly or tangentially through participation decisions, are generally more contextualist in their leanings. They have a prior interest in issues of equity in access to selective HE and had often been substantially involved in other forms of widening admissions work. The focus of my study therefore necessarily led to a focus on such participants.

I also approached stakeholders who I had informally learned held more credentialist views. However, they generally either ignored my requests or were unwilling to enter a dialogue concerning participation. I interpreted such decisions as based in an awareness of their views as heavily critiqued in educational research literature, and as partially incongruent with the university's stated aims concerning admissions policy and practice. For instance, one potential participant asked to view my interview questions in advance and subsequently declined to participate. This limitation means that while it is possible to draw conclusions regarding strong credentialist norms on the Oxford admissions process they are inevitably less complete and rich than the articulations of contextualist views which I discuss. This presents an ongoing methodological challenge for qualitative researchers in this area. I offer my considerations for future research and practice on this challenge in the following sections.

The second limitation of the study concerns the breadth of my student participant sample. I initially expected the AFY to occupy a much larger role in the undergraduate discursive space than proved to be the case; for example, I discuss in Chapter 3 my expectations of observing JCR committee meetings. As such, my purposive sampling for student participants focussed on students with a representative role concerning access work or social class; I expected such students to offer the best insight into how the AFY was inflecting conversations about widening admissions at Oxford. In practice, my student participants universally reported that there had been very little normative discussion of the AFY among the undergraduates they represented. The discussion which had occurred had focussed on inclusion and representation of AFY students within the student body,

rather than whether the programme was normatively desirable. My student participants therefore ultimately fulfilled a role I did not expect in my research – as co-producers of data concerning the student experience of undergraduate admissions and teaching practice. Their interpretations of my academic participants' views, particularly concerning tutorial teaching environments, have been invaluable. Nonetheless, my student participants are drawn from a relatively narrow tranche of the student body. 10 of my 11 student participants had attended state schools or identified as working class (the remaining student did not disclose details of their background); some had taken part in Opportunity Oxford or other widening participation schemes. As such, their experience of the admissions and teaching practices at Oxford, while useful in understanding the perspectives of non-traditional students in this context, do not allow us to reliably infer whether such experiences are universal or differentiated by background (although my participants largely construct them as being so). To more fully investigate the nascent links I have drawn between student background, tutorial experience and admissions experience, more research with a more diverse group of student participants is necessary.

The third limitation of the study is that it does not include an analysis of disciplinary differences in how merit is constructed and the role of these constructions in admissions and teaching practice. The reasons for this are twofold and interlinked. First, my participants were drawn from a broad range of backgrounds, with at least 16 disciplines represented across my sample of 50. As such, the number of participants represented from most disciplines is too small to draw any firm conclusions about the epistemic nature of merit within the discipline. Indeed, even within such small disciplinary groups, fundamental differences between such conceptions were observable. As a result of the small sample size from any one specific discipline, the risk of identifying participants through detailed discussion of their discipline would increase significantly. As such I opted not to attempt an analysis of disciplinary differences in constructions of merit, fairness, or the AFY, and excluded participants' disciplinary background wherever possible; where it is mentioned, it is in the

broadest possible terms. Existing work (Weston, 2022; Kandiko Howon et al, 2022) suggest this may still be a fruitful area for further research, as discussed in section 8.4.

The final limitation of the study is that it does not include direct observation of admissions interviews or decision meetings for either the mainstream undergraduate admissions process or the AFY. Such methods have proved fruitful in similar research (Zimdars, 2007) and have been highlighted as a useful methodological approach for research in this area (Zimdars, 2010). I did not attempt to include such observations in my study because I deemed it unlikely that I would be able to gain participant approval to undertake them, and that requesting to do so could jeopardise the methods of data production I did include. The politically sensitive nature of the AFY in the context of the field of Oxford means that many potential participants are conscious of scrutiny of their actions, and interviews and decision meetings are one of the points in these processes where such concerns are most heightened. While academic and student participants' descriptions of these spaces facilitate an analysis of their dynamics, observational data supplemented with referential interviews would have allowed a greater triangulation of the specific mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion which my participants broadly describe.

8.4: Implications for practice and future research directions

In this section I discuss the potential implications for admissions and teaching practice at Oxford, broadly defined, which my research points to. First, recognising the dissonance my findings demonstrate between some academic participants' conceptions of the tutorial teaching environment and non-traditional students' descriptions of their learning, I suggest that there is a continued need for greater dialogue between the undergraduate student body and the university on how students from different backgrounds experience and navigate the pedagogic practice of the tutorial system. This work is taking place in a variety of forms in Oxford already, for instance through the Diversity of Student Experience research project (University of Oxford, 2025a). Building upon the foundational principles established by this project (Rahman and Schulte, 2023), I propose that

future research should seek to establish how undergraduate students at Oxford from a variety of schooling and social backgrounds experience the tutorial teaching system, and that the results of such research should be actively disseminated and discussed with staff involved in admissions and teaching practice at the University of Oxford. Given the doxa of autonomous academic judgement which pervades practice at Oxford, this task will likely require methodologically innovative approaches. I suggest that work on the use of participatory co-analysis, stemming from ‘diffractive’ analysis (Barad, 2007; Mazzei, 2014; Bozalek and Zembylas, 2018; see Rahman et al, 2024 for an empirical example) offers in this context the potential to situate differing accounts of the same social space together, troubling and disrupting the reproduction of normative understandings of what that space – in this case the tutorial teaching system – means. By facilitating uneasy and disruptive conversations between tutors, students and professional service staff, we might hope to surface the incoherences and misalignments of experience inherent in learning and teaching practice at Oxford.

Connected to this implication is the need to incorporate the learnings from such co-analysis into admissions practice. If co-analysis proves successful in highlighting the disjuncture between (some) students’ experience of the tutorial teaching system and (some) tutors’ perception of the value of ‘struggle’ in the same space, the implications for how such tutors conceptualise potential and the ability to thrive in undergraduate environments like Oxford’s could have significant impact on how admissions decisions are made. This impact might require new or additional training for admissions staff and the reviewing of admissions processes (akin to the reviews taking place in the Close the Gap project on graduate admissions at the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge (University of Oxford, 2025b)). This task is, again, unlikely to be easy or straightforward. My findings suggest that such interventions require small, strategic interventions with colleagues who are willing to consider changing their practice. To facilitate such work it is likely that the direct observation of admissions practices I was unable to undertake would prove useful. While a small number of research studies and journalistic accounts examining comparable spaces do exist

(Zimdars, 2007; Vasagar, 2012; Rusbridger, 2015; Weston, 2021; Weston, 2022; Weston and Tranekjær, 2023) research specific to individual institutional and temporal contexts is likely to be vital.

Furthermore, more foundational new research focussing on the epistemic foundations of how merit is conceptualised within disciplinary contexts may be required to reach colleagues who are less inclined to engage immediately in changes to their practice. There are emergent research findings (Weston, 2022; Kandiko Howson et al, 2022) which suggest that STEM subjects may operate from a more static understanding of the knowledge and skills required to succeed in highly demanding undergraduate environments. Further investigating the bases of these beliefs, and other specific disciplinary constructions, may provide an avenue to consider the implications of such epistemic positionings and the challenges they pose for the continued progress of equity-driven admissions in selective UK HE.

Fourth, I suggest the need for further research on the issue Rob raises at the end of Chapter 7: how the widening admissions agenda fits into wider issues of what universities like Oxford are for. In their discussion of how academic identities inflect admissions decisions, Jones et al (2018: 933) highlight the tension between academics' identities as "academic managers" as opposed to those of "managed academics" in the context of the ever-increasing neo-liberalisation of HE. Oxford's doxa of autonomous academic judgement occupies the extremity of the 'managed academics' ideal, 'align[ing] with more traditional notions of collegiality, independence and academic freedom (Henkel, 2005; Rustin, 2016)'. Yet as Chapter 7 explores, such a conception cuts both ways for issues of admissions equity, promoting credentialist or contextualist practices according to the specific inclinations of the individuals involved. Jones et al's research context at a non-Oxbridge university demonstrates that this issue extends beyond the Oxbridge paradigm. The need to theorise how the value of heuristic academic judgement in moving past mechanistic narratives of merit can be squared with the sometimes regressive admissions decisions it produces

is thus likely a problem facing selective universities in the UK more broadly. This tension requires further work to conceptualise and delineate the axiological stakes at play for both admissions work, and HE more generally.

Finally, participants frequently mentioned two areas which broadly fell outside the scope of the study, but which they considered relevant in forming their broader view of the AFY's development. These were its relatively high cost per student, and the administrative challenges of developing, implementing and staffing a new programme. I briefly discuss the potential normative assumptions related to cost in Chapter 5, and some aspects of my participants' conceptions of these administrative challenges could bear tangential relations to governing norms in Oxford admissions construed broadly. However, unlike undergraduate teaching practice, I deemed these avenues too remotely connected to my tight conceptual focus to consider here. However, they represent productive areas for future research with a more explicitly evaluative focus.

8.6: Concluding remarks

I began this thesis with an interest in how the University of Oxford conceptualised its' new foundation year's introduction, given the highly credentialised conceptions of merit which previous research focussed on Oxford's admissions process have found. While I have answered this question, my findings highlight that Oxford's mainstream admissions practices in 2025 are considerably more normatively varied than such research suggests. The inception of more reliable contextual data, and a more proactive HE regulator in England, have inculcated an admissions ecosystem which accommodates significant contextualisation at the point of assessment, if not at the point of offer-making. Such contextualist norms remain, for the most part, meritocratically driven and governed by doxic principles of autonomous academic judgement, extending not only to admissions practice but also to undergraduate teaching. Undergraduate teaching, while not a core focus of my case study, is nevertheless a constant backdrop against which my academic participants' constructions of fairness, merit, ability and the potential to thrive at Oxford play(ed) out. For my student

participants, too, the sometimes obtuse and inaccessible nature of tutorial teaching forms a central element of their conceptions of the experiences of disadvantaged students at Oxford.

The relevance of teaching and student experience, as well as admissions policy, is increasingly reflected in regulatory policy which urges institutions to focus on student success as well as participation (OfS, 2022). Yet this is occurring against an increasingly strident if well-worn media narrative which situates any attempt to reform or increase the accessibility of teaching at universities, particularly at Oxford and Cambridge, as ‘dumbing down’ – an ill-advised attempt at social engineering which risks academic integrity (Jones, 2022). Indeed, an article published in The Times exactly a month before I write this sentence discusses anonymous Oxford admissions tutors who view even the Opportunity Oxford scheme as ‘undercut[ing] standards’ (Brown, 2024). The issues in academic practice they raise are, incidentally, ones I have encountered while teaching mainstream entry undergraduate students and are not confined solely to the beneficiaries of widening participation schemes. Yet the deficit discourse such articles stem from highlights the need to continue centring issues of equity in teaching and admissions, and the insoluble links between them.

The competing discourses I have outlined in this thesis concerning the nature of undergraduate education and hence admissions norms at Oxford hold potential salience beyond the specific areas of practice they are enacted in. For one participant, Rob, they speak to how my participants, and their colleagues, conceptualise the nature of an institution like Oxford and its broader social role:

...what are we doing? What is Oxford University in the 21st century? Do we want to become a private research institute? Some probably would say yes. Or do we want to recognise that education is a core principle, indeed an asset of the university in its research goals, and that we need to invest more in who we educate? And that would be my view, obviously, but we'll have to see what others think.

- Rob

Oxford (or perhaps more broadly, Oxbridge) is a lightning rod. It acts as a focal point for public, policy and media discussions of fairness and equity in access to higher education, and as such is (perhaps fairly) criticised for occupying an outsized role in this discourse (Finn, 2018; Leach and Bagshaw, 2017). Yet, because of this, it is also a weathervane, signalling the priorities of the sector more broadly regarding widening participation and student success. Simply put, when Oxford does something despite its complex, tensioned and disputed normative topography, it is because that thing has begun to matter in the sector. Researching Oxford, and the norms and narratives which gain purchase within it, is thus valuable both intrinsically due to the impact it can have on individual trajectories of social mobility, but also for our understanding of what matters in UK HE more systemically. This thesis has made its contributions between these two poles, considering the institution itself and its constituent agents. As policymakers, as educators, as admissions decision-makers, it is these agents' responsibility to demonstrate adequate imagination of the transformative potential of HE to ensure students of all backgrounds are able to thrive as well as survive in our most selective institutions. My hope is that, in the thinking to come which Rob describes above, this thesis can inform their practice.

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List of Appendices

I have included the following appendices:

Appendix 1: AFY eligibility criteria

Appendix 2: Participant context sheet

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Appendix 6: CUREC 1A form (ethical approval)

Appendix 1: AFY eligibility criteria

All information is taken from the AFY information pages on the University of Oxford's website, as it stood at the beginning of the project.

Entry requirements

In order to be eligible to apply to the foundation year courses, applicants must have or be projected to meet the academic entry criteria.

Please see the relevant foundation year course pages for more information:

Course	A levels
A levels	Standard offers will range from AAB to BBB depending on the course.
Scottish Highers and Advanced Highers	Standard offers for Highers will be BBBBB (supplemented by two or more Advanced Highers). Standard offers for Advanced Highers will be BB/BBC.
IB	Standard offers will range from 35 to 37 (including core points) with between 555 and 665 at Higher Level depending on the course.
Astrophoria Foundation Year: PPE	Standard offers for BTEC Level 3 National Extended Diploma will range from MMM to DDM depending on the course. Standard offers for BTEC Level 3 National Diploma will range from MM to DD plus B/A at A level depending on the course. Standard offers for BTEC Level 3 National Subsidiary Diploma will range from M to D plus BB/AB at A level depending on the course.
Access to HE Diploma	Standard offers will be for completion of Access to HE Diploma with all the level 3 credits taken at Merit, and A or B grades in any A levels taken, depending on the course.

Eligibility criteria

The aim of Oxford's Astrophoria Foundation Year is to mitigate the education attainment gap associated with an individual student's background and circumstances. This makes it particularly important that we can contextualise a student's grades in relation to their background.

Offers on Oxford's Astrophoria Foundation Year courses are awarded on academic suitability, and applicants must also meet the eligibility criteria relating to socio-economic and educational disadvantage. The foundation year is designed to address the education attainment gap associated with factors relating to socio-economic and educational disadvantage experienced by eligible applicants. The Astrophoria Foundation Year will make academic offers specific to this one year of intensive study, and the offers will take into account the educational disruption experienced by these students. The courses aim to provide a year of academic study that will help support successful students transition to their chosen undergraduate course.

Currently the programme is open to UK state school students who are ordinarily resident in the UK (home fees status) and meet the academic and eligibility criteria.

Evidence of meeting the eligibility criteria is required during the application process and can be supplied by applicants via the Foundation Year Additional Application Questionnaire. This will be accessible through the foundation year webpages in due course. There will also be a full guide to assist in the completion of the questionnaire.

There are four categories of eligibility criteria:

- Category 1: Socio-Economic indicators
- Category 2: School/College characteristics
- Category 3: Individual experience
- Category 4: Care experience

Checking your Eligibility

Applicants should be a state school educated student who is ordinarily resident in the UK (with home fees status) and would usually:

- meet either the criteria outlined in categories 1,2 **and** 3
- or meet the criterion of category 4

Category 1: Socio-Economic indicators	
	Your home postcode (where you live the majority of the time) should fall into POLAR4 Quintile 1
You must meet at least one of the criteria in Category 1	Your home postcode (where you live the majority of the time) should fall into ACORN category 4 or 5

	Being eligible for Free School Meals (FSM) at any point in the last six years (also known as Ever 6 FSM)
Category 2: School/College Characteristics	
You must meet the criterion in Category 2	Attended, normally for all secondary education, non-selective state-funded schools with a high percentage (e.g. above or near to the national average) of students eligible for Free School Meals (FSM)
Category 3: Individual experience. A verified individual level measure of socio-economic disadvantaged background and/or experienced a disrupted education which may include:	
You must meet at least one of the criteria in Category 3	being eligible for Free School Meals (FSM) any point in the last six years (also known as Ever 6 FSM)
	having refugee status or humanitarian protection
	being a child in need
	having care responsibilities for a sustained period of time
	being pregnant or having parental responsibilities whilst in education
	having a medical or health issue that has resulted in long absences from school or college (more than six months)
	being from a Gypsy, Traveller, Roma, Showman or Boater background
	being a child of a military family
	being a service leaver or veteran
	being from a household with an income of less than £25,000

	experiencing bereavement of a close family member during secondary education
	being an estranged student
	becoming homeless whilst in education
	having experienced time out of secondary school or college education (over one year)
	having a late diagnosis of Special Educational Needs (within the past two academic years)
<p>Category 4: Care Experience (State educated applicants with experience of being in care are automatically eligible. You do not need to meet the criteria in categories 1, 2 or 3, but you may wish to provide us with information in those other categories so that we have a comprehensive understanding of your educational experiences.)</p>	
If you meet this criterion in category 4 you are automatically eligible	You have spent any length of time in local authority care and have been at UK state schools

Note: Exceptions to these criteria may be made where there is university specific activity.

A full eligibility criteria guide will be available here in June 2022 and this will provide further guidance and information on how to check your eligibility.

Check if you are eligible before starting your application.

Appendix 2: Participant context sheet (arranged alphabetically)

Adam	Adam is an academic whose department is participating in the AFY.
Andrew	Andrew is an academic whose college is participating in the AFY.
Anthony	Anthony is an academic whose involvement with the AFY is primarily through a university role.
Benjamin	Benjamin is a student whose college is not participating in the AFY.
Charlotte	Charlotte is an academic whose department is participating in the AFY.
Chloe	Chloe is a student whose college is not participating in the AFY.
Christopher	Christopher is an academic whose college is participating in the AFY.
Claire	Claire is an academic whose department is not participating in the AFY.
Daniel	Daniel is an academic whose department is not participating in the AFY.
Darren	Darren is an academic whose involvement with the AFY is through a university role.
David	David is an academic whose college is not participating in the AFY.
Ellie	Ellie is a student whose college is not participating in the AFY.
Emily	Emily is a student whose college is participating in the AFY.
Emma	Emma is an academic whose department is participating in the AFY.
Gemma	Gemma is an academic whose college is participating in the AFY.
Harry	Harry is a student representative involved in campaigning on admissions issues.
Ian	Ian is an academic whose department is participating in the AFY.
Jack	Jack is a student whose college is participating in the AFY.
James	James is an academia-adjacent professional whose college is participating in the AFY.
Jason	Jason is an academic whose involvement with the AFY is through a university role.
Jess	Jess is an academic whose department is participating in the AFY.
Joshua	Joshua is a student whose college is not participating in the AFY.
Kevin	Kevin is an academic whose college is participating in the AFY.
Laura	Laura is an academic whose college is participating in the AFY.
Lauren	Lauren is an academic whose college is participating in the AFY.
Lee	Lee is an academic whose department is participating in the AFY.
Lisa	Lisa is an academic whose department is participating in the AFY.
Mark	Mark is an academic whose department is not participating in the AFY.
Matthew	Matthew is an academic whose department is participating in the AFY.
Michael	Michael is an academic whose college is participating in the AFY.
Neil	Neil is an academia-adjacent professional whose involvement in the AFY is through a university role.
Nicola	Nicola is an HE professional working within the university.
Olivia	Olivia is a student whose college is not participating in the AFY.

Paul	Paul is an academia-adjacent professional whose college is not participating in the AFY.
Peter	Peter is an academic whose involvement with the AFY is through a university role.
Rachel	Rachel is an academic whose department is participating in the AFY.
Rebecca	Rebecca is an academia-adjacent professional whose college is participating in the AFY.
Richard	Richard is an academic whose college is participating in the AFY.
Rob	Rob is an academic whose department is participating in the AFY.
Samantha	Samantha is an academic whose department is participating in the AFY.
Samuel	Samuel is a student whose college is not participating in the AFY.
Sarah	Sarah is an academic whose college is not participating in the AFY.
Simon	Simon is an academic whose department is participating in the AFY.
Sophie	Sophie is a student whose college is participating in the AFY.
Stephen	Stephen is an academic whose college is participating in the AFY.
Susan	Susan is an academic whose college is not participating in the AFY.
Tom	Tom is an academic whose college is not participating in the AFY.
Vicky	Vicky is an academic whose department is participating in the AFY.
Will	Will is a student whose college is not participating in the AFY.

Appendix 3: Participant recruitment email

Dear [participant name],

My name is Ed Penn and I am a DPhil student at the Department of Education. I am looking for volunteers to take part in research for my DPhil project about the Astrophoria Foundation Year.

I am approaching specific participants whose role at the University of Oxford means they may have a particular interest in the Astrophoria Foundation Year. I have attached an information sheet which explains what participating in the project would involve, but there is a brief summary below:

- I would ask you to take part in up to three interviews, conducted in Oxford, during the academic year 2022-2023 (each interview would take between 45 and 90 minutes)
- I may ask to observe you at events which relate to the Astrophoria Foundation Year, if you attend any which are relevant to the project
- I may ask you to help me identify other people who might be interested in participating

If you are interested and would like more information, please contact me by emailing Edward.penn@education.ox.ac.uk. There is no obligation to take part.

Thank you!

Ed Penn

Appendix 4: Participant information sheet

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Central University Research Ethics Committee Approval Reference: [CIA-22TT-121]

Introductory paragraph

You are being invited to take part in a research project. Before you decide it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask me if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether you wish to take part.

Why is this research being conducted?

Higher education in the UK is highly stratified, meaning that different higher education providers have varied entry requirements, different levels of prestige associated with them, and differing outcomes for their graduates. This means that the university student goes to matters to their life chances, but this is also affected by their personal and social background. Poorer students, students from poorly performing schools, and students with disrupted educational experiences are all less likely to attend 'elite', highly selective universities.

The University of Oxford, which is considered such a university, is launching a Foundation Year scheme to help students from these backgrounds gain places. The scheme will provide a small number of students from these groups a year's free tuition on a specially designed course which, if they pass, will allow them access to undergraduate degrees at Oxford with lower grades than they would normally need. However, this process challenges one of the central concepts of Oxford's admissions system, academic meritocracy, which states that the limited places available should go to the applicants with the best academic performance, regardless of background. The purpose of the research is therefore to investigate how the Foundation Year is reconciled with the wider principle of meritocracy in Oxford through the ways its stakeholders construct it.

The research aims firstly to explore how different stakeholders involved in the Foundation Year understand their relationship to dominant narratives of meritocracy in Oxford, and how these understandings influence their views and actions towards the Foundation Year's implementation in the year before its first cohort arrives. It also aims to understand how the establishment of the Foundation Year, and individual stakeholders' actions surrounding it, affect the existing meritocratic principle which is influential within Oxford.

Why have I been invited to take part?

You have been invited to take part because your role as a student representative, academic involved in admissions, or central admissions administrator in the academic year 2022-23 means you are a stakeholder in the final year of the Foundation Year's development, which is the inclusion criteria for participation. Overall, 20-30 participants in similar positions across the university, mostly from colleges which will offer the Foundation Year in 2023, will be recruited.

Do I have to take part?

No. It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. You can withdraw yourself from the study, without giving a reason, and without negative consequences, by advising me of this decision. The deadline by which you can withdraw any information you have contributed to the research is 31st December 2024. If you decide to withdraw, any analysis based on your data will be rewritten to exclude it, and your primary data itself will be deleted.

What will happen to me if I take part in the research?

- The research period will last from September 2022 to August 2023.
- You will be asked to participate in the project in two ways:
 - You will be asked to take part in three interviews. The interviews will cover your journey to each your current role at Oxford; your conceptions of Oxford's culture and dominant narratives; your conceptions of the Foundation Year and other widening participation work; the interactions you have had with how the Foundation Year is being implemented; and how your views of the Foundation year have or have not changed over the course of the academic year 2022-23. With your consent, I would like to audio record our conversation so I have an accurate record of it.
 - You may also be asked for permission for me to observe you alongside other stakeholders during activities which relate to the Foundation Year, such as meetings or public events. With your permission, I may ask to take photos of public events to help convey their setting in the research.
- The research will take place either in Oxford or at events outside Oxford intended to promote the Foundation Year. It will involve a variety of settings, which will include:
 - Settings of your choosing for interviews; this could be communal areas of your college, your or my department building, or a quiet public space.
 - Settings which host events relevant for observation; this could include college or university buildings, or external venues which are being used for events related to the Foundation Year.
- The interviews will take place between September and November 2022 (Interview 1), February and April 2023 (Interview 2) and June and August 2023 (Interview 3). Each will last between 45 and 90 minutes and can take place at a time and place which is convenient for you. Observations will take place throughout the year as events which are relevant to the project occur, but you will always be given prior warning if I will be observing an event.
- Consent for participation in interviews and observations will be obtained on an opt-in basis. You will be asked to sign a consent form in which you give your permission for your data to be used in the research project.
- Consent for participation in observation alone (if you are not taking part in the interview series) will be obtained on an opt-in basis where this is possible (for example, at pre-scheduled meetings with a defined attendance list). You will be sent an email copy of the consent form before the event and asked to return it.

- There will be some ethnographic observations where obtaining consent beforehand is not possible (for instance, large or transient events where the attendees at a given time cannot be known). In these instances, consent will be opt-out. Posters will be prominently displayed advertising that ethnographic observation is taking place, giving details of the project and explaining how to contact me should attendees wish to opt out of their data being included in the research. These events will only be public events where there is not a reasonable expectation of privacy.
- You will be able to pause any interview activity at any time, or stop it entirely, without giving a reason. During any observation activity, you can let me know you do not wish to be observed temporarily or for the duration of the event, and I will not record any data concerning you.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks in taking part?

It is possible you may feel uncomfortable discussing issues of inequality relating to admissions at Oxford and what you understand Oxford's dominant culture to be.

Are there any benefits in taking part?

Any benefits to the participants that can reasonably be expected should be stated. However, where there is no intended benefit to the participant from taking part in the project this should be explained. It is important not to exaggerate the possible benefits to the particular participant during the course of the project, this could be seen as coercive. Note that reimbursement should be mentioned in the [following section](#) rather than here.

While there are no immediate benefits for those people participating in the project, it is hoped that this research will lead to better understandings of how the interaction between dominant cultures and individual stakeholder conceptions influence processes of change which relate to equality and equity at elite universities.

Expenses and payments

There will be no payment for taking part in this study.

What information will be collected and why is the collection of this information relevant for achieving the research objectives?

I will collect the following data from you:

- Your name, college, and the position which makes you eligible to participate in the research (e.g. JCR Access Officer, Admissions Tutor)
- Your University of Oxford email address
- Consent forms and opt-out forms
- Audio recordings of interviews, which will be transcribed
- Field notes from ethnographic observation
- Photographs from ethnographic observation

This data will be stored using Nexus 365 OneDrive for Business, which is the University of Oxford's cloud-based storage facility. Any physical or local data will be digitised and uploaded the day it is collected, and physical and local copies of the data will be deleted or destroyed. Nexus 365 OneDrive for Business is a password-protected, two-factor authentication cloud service. Local digitised data will always be stored on a password-protected device before being uploaded. Physical data will be kept on my person or in locked premises before being digitised and uploaded. Identifiable data will be retained for at least three years after the end of the project. Pseudonymised data will be retained indefinitely unless there is a requirement for it to be deleted.

Only I will have access to the data.

I would like your permission to use this data in future studies. I will attempt to ensure that individuals cannot be identified from the data retained by giving each participant a unique term which they will be referred to by (e.g. JCR Access Officer 1, Admissions Tutor 2). I will also not include any identifying details about individual participants, such as their college or data which could otherwise help determine their identity, unless it is crucial to understanding the meaning of the research. In cases such as these, where a detail is important to the analysis of the data, I will obtain specific permission from the participant before including the detail. Even with these measures, it is not possible to say with complete certainty that it will not be possible to identify individuals from the final written research outputs. By consenting to participate, you acknowledge this possibility.

Will the research be published? Could I be identified from any publications or other research outputs?

The findings from the research will be written up in my doctoral thesis, and may be published in other formats such as academic publications, conference presentations, reports for funders or external organisations, or website or video content. As described above, every effort will be made to ensure that participants are not identifiable from details include in publications, and where there is a significant risk of this, participants will be contacted beforehand for their express permission to include the relevant details. However, it is not possible to guarantee with complete certainty that participants will not be identifiable.

I would like your permission to use direct quotations, but without identifying you, in any research outputs.

A copy of my thesis will be deposited both in print and online in the [Oxford University Research Archive](#) where it will be publicly available to facilitate its use in future research.

Data Protection

The University of Oxford is the data controller with respect to your personal data, and as such will determine how your personal data is used in the study. The University will process your personal data for the purpose of the research outlined above. Research is a task that is performed in the public interest. Further information about your rights with respect to your personal data is available at <https://compliance.admin.ox.ac.uk/individual-rights>.

Who is funding the research?

The research is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council [grant number ES/P000649/1].

Who has reviewed this study?

This study has received ethics approval from a subcommittee of the University of Oxford Central University Research Ethics Committee. (Ethics reference: **CIA-22TT-121**).

Who do I contact if I have a concern about the research or I wish to complain?

If you have a concern about any aspect of this study, please contact Ed Penn (Edward.penn@education.ox.ac.uk) or Dr James Robson (james.robson@education.ox.ac.uk), and we will do our best to answer your query. I will acknowledge your concern within 10 working days and give you an indication of how it will be dealt with. If you remain unhappy or wish to make a formal complaint, please contact the Chair of the Research Ethics Committee at the University of Oxford who will seek to resolve the matter as soon as possible:

The Chair, Education Department Research Ethics Committee

Email: student.curec@education.ox.ac.uk; Address: Department of Education, University of Oxford, 15 Norham Gardens, Oxford OX2 6PY

Further Information and Contact Details

You should give the participant a contact point for further information. This can be your name, address and telephone number or that of another researcher in the project. If this is a supervised-student project, the student and supervisor should discuss whether to include the student's contact details as well as those of the student's supervisor. The use of personal phone numbers and email addresses should be avoided.

If you would like to discuss the research with someone beforehand (or if you have questions afterwards), please contact:

Dr James Robson

Department of Education

Department of Education, University of Oxford, 15 Norham Gardens, Oxford OX2 6PY

University email: james.robson@education.ox.ac.uk

Appendix 5: Interview schedules

As I used semi-structured interviews, these schedules reflect the broad topics and questions covered rather than the specific wording of questions in individual interviews. Individual interviews necessarily involved digressions and specificities depending on the participant in question, the inclusion of which is a feature of the research design.

Academic participants, Round 1

What's your current role at Oxford, and what does it involve? How does it relate to undergraduate admissions?

What philosophical or conceptual stances do you think guide undergraduate admissions at Oxford?

- Are they the right ones?
- Does everyone agree?
- How are they related to Oxford's status as an 'elite' university?
- How do these play out in the admissions process itself?

What involvement with the AFY have you had within your role at Oxford?

What's your opinion of the AFY? Why?

How did your college/department decide to take part or not take part in the AFY?

What internal discussions are taking place now?

What (if any) implications do you think the AFY has for how academic ability is understood at Oxford?

Are there further implications for:

- Widening participation and access work?
- The mainstream undergraduate admissions process?
- Mainstream undergraduate teaching?
- 'Oxford' as a place, or even an idea? An imaginary? And who for?

Academic participants, round 2

I adapted the wording and use of these questions depending on the specific role each participant held in relation to the AFY.

Can you explain your relationship to the the AFY admissions process?

- How does it relate to your previous experience of mainstream admissions?
- What discussions have taken place at your college or department about it?

How was the AFY admissions round different to the mainstream admissions round?

- How were decisions on what data to use made?
- How did students interact with interview questions?

- How did decision meetings work compared to the standard process?

How did admitting tutors at colleges respond to the candidates selected?
or

What is your view from a departmental/collegiate perspective of the candidates selected?

- What kind of conversations have taken place in relation to them?
- Was there anything which surprised them or concerned you?
- How has college autonomy concerning admissions played into the process?
- What, if any, implications for admissions and teaching do you foresee?

What kinds of interactions have you had with groups or committees within the University regarding AFY admissions?

Looking forward, what kinds of communication are you anticipating between colleges, departments and the central University before AFY students arrive in Oxford?

Academic participants, round 3

I adapted the wording and use of these questions depending on the specific role each participant held in relation to the AFY.

What kinds of interaction or communication have taken place between departments, colleges and the central University about the AFY and its students during Michaelmas term?

Has there been any discussion among your college/department about the AFY now that students are in place?

- If so, what kinds of discussions have taken place and in what fora?

[I have redacted one set of questions asked to a small number of participants whose relationship to the AFY is highly specific in order to maintain their anonymity. Including this question would triangulate their identity/ies to an unacceptably small number of people within Oxford (n=<5).]

Has the experience of the past year affected discussions at your department or college around widening participation through admissions more generally? If so, how?

What is your impression of the AFY's course design and pedagogical principles?

Do you see the AFY as a separate entry route to Oxford, or part of a broader continuum of admissions practices?

Student participants, round 1

Can you explain your role at college/department/within the university?

How do students at your college feel about access and widening admissions work?

How do they conceive of what it means? What narratives do they employ?

Are undergraduate admissions to Oxford meritocratic?

How should we conceive of academic merit in relation to admissions at selective universities like Oxford?

Should admissions at universities like Oxford take account of school background or social disadvantage? Why? How?

How does your college engage with students on matters relating to access and widening admissions?

What's your view of the AFY?

Are students at your college aware of the AFY? Has there been any dialogue with your college about it?

How do they think about it? What narratives do they employ?

Some academics have described AFY students as those who would never be able to access Oxford without a scheme like the AFY. How do you interpret this?

- Does this view matter for widening admissions more generally? What about for whether the scheme should take place?

What do you think the foundation year means for access and widening admissions at Oxford?

Student participants, round 2

Have you had any communication from your college about the AFY?

Has the level of awareness of the AFY changed now students completing it are in Oxford?

What's your view of the course design and teaching principles of the AFY? How does this compare to mainstream undergraduate teaching?

How do you view the relationship between mainstream undergraduate teaching and the mainstream undergraduate admissions process?

When A level results were released, a decision was made not to consider offer-holders who were eligible for the AFY, but had missed their mainstream undergraduate offer, for transfer onto it. What's your view of this decision?

Appendix 6: CUREC 1A form

Section A: Filter for CUREC 2 application		
This section determines whether the application for ethics review should be made using this form (CUREC 1A) or the CUREC 2 form (for research with more complex ethical issues).		
Please indicate with an 'X'.	Yes	No
1. Does the research involve the deception of participants?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
2. Are the research participants vulnerable in the context of the research, or classed as people whose ability to give free and informed consent is in question ? For example, <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participants aged 16 or under (also answer question A5); • Participants aged 16 – 18 (refer to competent youths for guidance); • adults at risk; Note the University's Safeguarding Guidance and Code of Practice and its implications for researchers involving young people or adults at risk.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
3. By taking part in the research, will participants be at risk of criminal prosecution or significant harm?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
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? Best Practice Guidance 07 on the Prevent Duty provides further guidance.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
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 ?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
If yes, list the CUREC Approved Procedure(s) you will follow		
If you have answered ' No ' to all questions 1-4, go on to Section B . If you answered ' Yes ' to ANY of questions 1-4, and answered ' No ' to question 5, stop completing this form and do not submit it for ethical review. You will instead need to submit a CUREC 2 application form . If you answered ' Yes ' to any of questions 1-4, and your project is covered by an Approved Procedure, go on to Section B . If more than one Approved Procedure applies, contact the SSH IDREC or your DREC for advice on whether a CUREC 2 form should be submitted instead.		

Section B: Researchers	
1. Name of Principal Investigator or student's supervisor	Dr James Robson
2. Department or Institute	Department of Education
3. University of Oxford email address	James.Robson@education.ox.ac.uk
Copy and paste the following six rows as necessary to complete for each additional researcher who will be involved in this study, including student(s) and those external to the University.	
4. Name of researcher or student	Edward Penn
5. Department or Institute	Department of Education
6. University of Oxford email address	Edward.Penn@education.ox.ac.uk

7. Role in research	Student		
8. Degree programme, if student research	DPhil Education		
The whole research team			
9. Have the researchers undertaken research ethics and integrity training?	Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>	
10. Please provide details of any research ethics and integrity training undertaken, including the dates of the training. Alternatively state relevant research experience.	Research integrity - core course. 95% (14/02/2022) Introduction to Research Ethics. (09/02/2022) Supplementary Research Integrity Training – Conflicts of Interest. 100% (16/02/2022) Supplementary Research Integrity Training – Research Involving Human Participants. 100% (16/02/2022)		
11. State any conflicts of interest and explain how these will be addressed.	None.		

Section C: The research project

1. Title of the research project

Doxa, habitus and institutional work: how stakeholder constructions of meritocracy, disadvantage and elitism impact the University of Oxford's Foundation Year.

2. Anticipated start date of the aspect of the research project involving human participants and/ or personal data (dd/mm/yy).

The project will begin once ethical approval is obtained.

3. Anticipated research end date (dd/mm/yy).

30th April 2025.

4. Provide a brief lay summary of the aims and objectives of the research. This should cover the questions it will answer and any potential benefits. (max 300 words)

The research will explore how stakeholders in the University of Oxford's Astrophoria Foundation Year (AFY) programme perceive the AFY and enact these constructions through their practice towards it. Using a case study approach, my project will seek to understand the impact of institutional doxa and habitus on how stakeholders at an elite university construct ideas of meritocracy and elitism and social mobility and how these ideas impact their actions towards progressive widening participation schemes such as the AFY.

Within the UK's stratified higher education sector, highly selective universities justify their elite positioning through references to discourses of meritocracy, demonstrated through prior academic achievement. These discourses, although prevalent in public policy, have little basis in educational research. Such discourses also sit uneasily with the increasing use of Foundation Year schemes which, in seeking to increase diversity of intake, allow admission to selective courses with lower grades than usually required. The introduction of the AFY therefore represents an ideologically disruptive event in 'Oxford'. My study will focus on how stakeholders' structural position and institutional habitus interacts with the 'Oxford' institutional doxa to inform their constructions of and actions towards the AFY.

<p>Research questions:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) How is the journey of the AFY's production constructed by its stakeholders? 2) How, and for whom, does the creation of the AFY generate support, disruption, accommodation or co-option within the wider 'Oxford' field? 3) How do these strategies and actions relate to existing narratives of meritocracy, elitism and social mobility? <p>The research will contribute to understandings of how elite stakeholders maintain or challenge institutional doxa through institutional work, and how progressive widening participation initiatives at elite universities are advanced or limited by their stakeholders. It will also provide a new empirical case study for the theoretical synthesis of institutional habitus and institutional doxa with institutional work.</p>	
<p>5. Please indicate the methods to be used (indicate with an 'X'):</p>	
Analysis of existing records	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Snowball sampling (recruiting through contacts of existing participants)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Use of casual or local workers e.g. interpreters (refer to guidance in BPG 01: Researcher safety)	<input type="checkbox"/>
Participant observation	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Covert observation	<input type="checkbox"/>
Observation of specific organisational practices	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Participant completes questionnaire in hard copy	<input type="checkbox"/>
Participant completes online questionnaire or other online task (refer to guidance in BPG 06: Internet-mediated research)	<input type="checkbox"/>
Using social media to recruit or interact with participants (refer to guidance in BPG 06: Internet-mediated research)	<input type="checkbox"/>
Participant performs paper and pencil task	<input type="checkbox"/>
Participant performs verbal or aural task (e.g. for linguistic study)	<input type="checkbox"/>
Focus group	<input type="checkbox"/>
Interview (refer to guidance in BPG 10: Conducting research interviews)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Audio _____ recording of participant (you will generally need specific consent from participants for this)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Video _____ recording of participant (you will generally need specific consent from participants for this)	<input type="checkbox"/>
Photography of participant (you will generally need specific consent from participants for this)	<input type="checkbox"/>
Others (please specify below)	<input type="checkbox"/>
<p>6. Provide a brief summary of the research design and methods. What will research participants be asked to do? (max 300 words) Please also submit a copy of the questions participants will be asked, if applicable, or some information about the sorts of topics that will be covered.</p>	

The project uses a case study research design, combining three complementary methods to gather data about the ways participants construct their identities and interact with dominant narratives. Case study methods encourage the use of multiple methods of data collection, which is inherently valuable when working within a constructivist paradigm concerned with complex, contradictory and holistic meaning-making; incorporating multiple data collection methods helps highlight and draw out potential tensions in meaning-making. Case study methodologies are also particularly well-suited to projects which focus on a particular phenomenon or process situated within a wider context which influences it. The AFY matches such criteria, embedded in the narratives and policy context of widening participation at elite universities but forming a new initiative and process in its own right.

I will use semi-structured interviews, participant observation and discourse analysis to produce my data. I will ask participants to complete three semi-structured interviews spread across the academic year 2022-23. Each interview will last approximately 45-60 minutes; proposed topics are covered in Appendix 5, attached. I will also observe situations relevant to the analysis of the AFY, such as meetings of its management committee; collegiate meetings where college involvement with the AFY is discussed; meetings where student representatives discuss the AFY and its implications at both university and college level; and public events where the AFY is discussed with potential students, their parents, and schools and colleges. Such observations are likely to last between 10-30 minutes and several hours depending on the nature of the event. Finally, I will analyse the presentation and framing of my key concepts in textual materials and speech. Such materials could include in regulatory documents such as Access and Participation Plans, digital resources such as web pages, speeches given at public events, or resources provided at recruitment events such as open days.

7. List the location(s) where the research will be conducted, including any other countries.	Oxford, United Kingdom. Other locations in the United Kingdom where promotion events may take place such as state-maintained school.						
8. Clarify which parts of the research will be conducted in-person and which will take place remotely, e.g. online .	The research will take place almost entirely in person. The only aspect which will take place online is the collection of material published online for discourse analysis.						
9. If your research involves fieldwork or travel and your department requires a travel risk assessment, will you have completed and returned a risk assessment form beforehand? Please indicate with an 'X'. (This must be approved by your department before you travel. If you are travelling overseas, you are advised to take out University travel insurance .) Refer to guidance available from your Department, the Safety Office , the Social Sciences Division , and the Humanities Division , and on travel for University business .	<table border="1"> <tr> <td>Yes</td> <td><input checked="" type="checkbox"/></td> </tr> <tr> <td>No</td> <td><input type="checkbox"/></td> </tr> <tr> <td>Not required in this instance</td> <td><input type="checkbox"/></td> </tr> </table>	Yes	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	No	<input type="checkbox"/>	Not required in this instance	<input type="checkbox"/>
Yes	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>						
No	<input type="checkbox"/>						
Not required in this instance	<input type="checkbox"/>						
10. In the case of international or collaborative research, explain how you will address any ethical issues specific to the local context. Please provide details of the local review, approval or permission obtained or required. Refer to the BPG 16: Social science research conducted outside the UK . If there will be no local review, explain why not. Please mention any stakeholder or community engagement that has been/ will be undertaken in relation to the research. Please also address any physical or psychological risks for Oxford researchers and local fieldworkers in Section G .							

Not applicable.	
11. Name of departmental/ peer reviewer (if applicable)	Not applicable.
12. External organisation funding the research and grant reference (if applicable)	Economic and Social Research Council [grant number ES/P000649/1]
13. Please refer to the CUREC Best Practice Guidance and list any that have been used to develop your research.	BPG 01 Researcher safety BPG 02 Ethnographic and other types of qualitative research BPG 03 Elite and expert interviewing BPG 06 Internet-mediated research BPG 09 Data collection, protection and management BPG 10 Conducting research interviews

Section D: Recruitment of research participants	
1. Number of participants	20-30
2. How was the number of participants decided?	The number of participants was decided with reference to the literature concerning numbers of participants in qualitative studies involving interviews. Specifically, I refer to Forsey's (2008) discussion of the likely number of participants necessary to allow themes to emerge from qualitative research as 15 ± 10 . As such, given the three broad groups represented in the research (academics, senior administrators and students representatives), 20-30 participants broadly divided between these groups is an appropriate and manageable sample size. This sample size will also allow me to include participants representing a variety of participating colleges, as well as the potential to include participants from colleges which chose not to participate, ensuring the sample includes data produced by participants in a variety of structural positions.
3. Age range of participants	18 and over.
4. Inclusion criteria	Participants must be a stakeholder in the FO programme's development or delivery (for instance, a senior administrator or policy maker, an admissions tutor, or a student

	representative for access and widening participation).
5. Exclusion criteria	Not applicable.
6. Indicate with an 'X' all intended recruitment methods Please submit copies of the recruitment material that will be used, e.g. advertisement text, introductory email text.	Poster advert <input type="checkbox"/>
	Flyer <input type="checkbox"/>
	Email circulation <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
	Social media (e.g. Twitter, Facebook) <input type="checkbox"/>
	Website <input type="checkbox"/>
	In-person approach <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
	Snowball sampling <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
	Recruitment sites (e.g. Mechanical Turk) <input type="checkbox"/>
	Existing contacts or volunteer database <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
	Other (please specify): <input type="checkbox"/> Email circulation will be directly targeted at the stakeholders pre-identified as fitting the criteria for the study.
7. How will potential participants be identified and approached?	<p>I will map the membership of the AFY management committee and identify the most relevant members to invite to participate. Gatekeeper access will be important for this task; I have an existing relationship with the AFY Coordinator through a previous research project and have made contact with her to conduct initial discussions about securing access to central participants.</p> <p>I will also approach admissions tutors and Junior Common Room Access Officers from participating colleges, as well as access representatives from Oxford University Student Union. I may also approach participants in similar positions at non-participating colleges should my initial data generation suggest this might prove useful.</p>
8. Will informed consent be obtained from the research participants or their parents/guardians? If not, please explain why not.	Informed consent will be obtained from all interview participants on an opt-in basis. For individuals who are present during ethnographic observation, but who are not primary participants, consent will be obtained on an opt-out basis; the fact that ethnographic observation is being conducted will be advertised either at the start of the event (for smaller, private events) or through visual communication such as posters (for larger, public events). My contact details will be shared; anyone present who does not wish their data to be used in the project will be able

	to contact me and any data recorded about them will be deleted.
<p>9. For each activity or group of participants, explain how informed consent will be obtained from the participants themselves and/ or their parents/ guardians, if applicable. How will their consent be recorded?</p> <p>Please submit copies of all participant-facing materials for review. E.g.:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recruitment material (e.g. emails, posters) • 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. <p>Further guidance and templates.</p>	<p>Participants will receive an information sheet explaining the background, purpose and aims of the research, why they have been asked to take part, what they will be asked to do, and how their data will be stored, used and retained. The information sheet also explains the steps which will be taken to protect their privacy and the possible risks of identification of individuals the project entails. They will then be asked to sign a consent form indicating that they have read and understood the information sheet, had the opportunity to ask any questions they wish to, and consent to each specific aspect of the research project.</p> <p>Every primary participant will sign a consent form. However, there may be individuals who are not taking part in the interview series as primary participants but who are present at events where I am conducting ethnographic observation. Where possible, at pre-scheduled events with a defined membership, consent forms will be sent to participants before such events take place. However, it will not be practical to gather opt-in consent through a written form from such individuals at some events, such as open days, as they are large and transient, meaning who is present at any one time cannot be known. In these cases, it will be publicly advertised through posters that ethnographic data collection is taking place, with information on how to contact me should individuals wish their data to be deleted. This will only take place in public forums where there is not a reasonable expectation of privacy.</p> <p>Both the information sheet and the consent form explain that participants do not have to take part, and that they can withdraw their consent to participate in the project at any time and without giving a reason. They also communicate the final date at which participants can withdraw their consent or ask for their data to be amended.</p> <p>Examples of the information sheet to be provided to participants, the written consent</p>

	<p>form, the public poster, and recruitment emails are attached as appendices to this document.</p>
<p>10. Provide details of any payments and incentives and the rationale for providing these. Further guidance in Best Practice Guidance: 05 Payments and incentives in research.</p>	<p>None.</p>
<p>11. Describe how participants</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • may withdraw from the study • may withdraw any personal information they have provided from the study <p>State any limits to withdrawal, for example once the data has been anonymised or at some other specified stage prior to publication. Make sure participants are aware of any withdrawal limits.</p>	<p>Participants may withdraw from the study by contacting me through my University email address and requesting to withdraw. They will not be asked to provide a reason for their withdrawal.</p> <p>Candidates can withdraw any personal information they have provided, including research data, by emailing me through my University email address and specifying the data they wish to withdraw from the study.</p> <p>In both cases, both the raw data concerned and any reference to it or the participant in question in research outputs will be deleted and rewritten immediately.</p> <p>Participants can withdraw from the study up until 31/12/2024, which is the date up to which my research is funded. This withdrawal limit is advertised in both the information sheet and the consent form.</p>

Section E: Research data

All information provided by participants is considered research data for the purpose of this form. 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, either directly or via a third party, must comply with the requirements of the UK General Data Protection Regulation (UK 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](#) and [Data Protection Screening Assessment](#) and whether, for higher-risk data

processing, a separate [Data Protection Impact Assessment](#) may also be required for the research. Advice on research data management and security is available from [Research Data Oxford](#) and your local IT department. Advice on data protection is available from the [Information Compliance team](#).

For guidance on conducting internet-mediated research, refer to CUREC's [Best Practice Guidance 06: Internet-mediated research](#).

1. What data will be collected? (Indicate with an 'X')			
Screening documents	<input type="checkbox"/>	Task results (e.g. questionnaires, diaries)	<input type="checkbox"/>
Consent records (e.g., written consent forms, audio-recorded consent, assent forms)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	IP addresses (refer to Best Practice Guidance 09: Data collection, protection and management for guidance)	<input type="checkbox"/>
Contact details for the purpose of this research only	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Field notes	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Contact details for future use (guidance)	<input type="checkbox"/>	Photographs	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Opt-out forms	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Information about the health of the participant (including mental health)	<input type="checkbox"/>
Audio recordings	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Previously collected (secondary) data	<input type="checkbox"/>
Video recordings	<input type="checkbox"/>	Data already in the public domain. Specify the source of the data: Published text relating to the AFY, and the transcripts of speeches or talks given in the public domain which relate to the AFY, will primarily be collected from the university of Oxford's website and from documents published on it. Supplementary data may also be gathered from other public sources such as the Office for Students' website, press publications, or the websites of organisations connected to the University of Oxford or the HE sector such as Oxford University Student Union, the Higher Education Policy Institute, WonkHE, or other widening participation organisations.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Transcript of audio/ video recordings	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Other, please specify: It is possible that, if appropriate consent can be obtained, that some documents not in the public domain are also used for Critical Discourse Analysis. This could include, for example minutes of meetings related to the AFY. However, this is unlikely.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>

<p>2. During the course of the research, where will each type of research data be stored?</p>	<p>Consent forms, contact details (where not in the public domain) and opt-out forms will be collected using Microsoft Forms, provided via the University of Oxford's student Microsoft account. Downloaded copies will be stored on Nexus 365 OneDrive for Business, again provided via the University of Oxford. Local and physical copies will not be kept for increased security.</p> <p>Audio recordings will be collected on an audio recorder and uploaded to Nexus 365 OneDrive for Business the day they are recorded via my personal laptop, with local copies being deleted after upload.</p> <p>Transcripts of audio recordings will be completed on my personal laptop and will only be saved on Nexus 365 OneDrive for Business.</p> <p>Field notes will be made either by hand or on my personal laptop. They will be transcribed the day they are made and then saved on Nexus 365 OneDrive for Business. Local copies will be destroyed or deleted once transcripts are uploaded.</p> <p>Photographs will be taken using my personal phone and uploaded to Nexus 365 OneDrive for Business the same day. Local copies will be deleted once they are uploaded.</p> <p>File shredding technology will be used to delete local digital copies of research data; local copies will be stored in separate folders to facilitate ease of deletion. Physical copies of research data will be physically shredded once digitised and uploaded.</p>		
<p>3. Who will have access to the research data during the project?</p>	<p>Only I will have access to the data generated. Unique participant numbers (which will each be assigned a pseudonym for the purposes of writing up) will be used to identify participants. It is possible that individuals will still be identifiable from the data, given the small pool of possible participants and the visible positions they occupy with relation to the AFY. This possibility will be explained to participants. The need to protect the identity of participants in case study research must be balanced against the need to preserve the reality of the case. I will therefore explain to participants that while their structural positions in relation to the AFY do not need to be stated precisely in research outputs, it will need to be approximately noted to make meaning from the data generated. Participants will then be able to grant informed consent should they wish to take part in the research.</p>		
<p>4. Please complete this section if your research involves the use of secondary (i.e. previously collected) data.</p>	<p>Please indicated with an 'X'.</p>	<p>Yes</p>	<p>No</p>
	<p>Are data access agreements in place for access to and use of this secondary data? (If so, please attach these.)</p>	<p><input type="checkbox"/></p>	<p><input type="checkbox"/></p>
	<p>Did the individuals agree that their data could be used for this purpose?</p>	<p><input type="checkbox"/></p>	<p><input type="checkbox"/></p>
	<p>Could anyone (including members of the research team) link the data back to an individual or individuals? If this is a possibility, please explain how the associated ethical issues will be addressed:</p>	<p><input type="checkbox"/></p>	<p><input type="checkbox"/></p>

5. How do you intend to share the research data at the end of the project?	Depositing in a specialist data centre or archive	<input type="checkbox"/>	
	Submitting to a journal to support a publication	<input type="checkbox"/>	
	Depositing in an institutional repository	<input type="checkbox"/>	
	Dissemination via a project or institutional website	<input type="checkbox"/>	
	No plans to share the data	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
	Other (please specify): The raw data will not be shared.	<input type="checkbox"/>	
6. How do you intend to report and disseminate the results of the research? (Indicate with an 'X')	Thesis publication	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
	Publication in a peer reviewed journal	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
	Publicly available report	<input type="checkbox"/>	
	Conference presentation	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
	Publication on a website	<input type="checkbox"/>	
	Pre-registration	<input type="checkbox"/>	
	Report to a research funder	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
	Providing participants with a lay summary of the results	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
	Submission for academic assessment	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
	Other (please specify):	<input type="checkbox"/>	
7. Explain what will happen to the data at the end of the research project. This question must be answered for each type of data, including completed consent forms.			
<p>All data will be stored using Nexus 365 OneDrive for Business for three years after the project's completion. Unless it is required for further research to which participants have consented, it will then be destroyed using file-shredding technology. If I leave the University of Oxford before the end of this period, the data will be encrypted using password-protected files and then destroyed by deleting the files using a file-shredding service. All physical copies of data will be destroyed by shredding once they are digitised.</p> <p>The data will not be made available for re-use because it would not be possible to retain meaningful context without an unacceptable compromise of participant privacy. This is in line with current guidance from the Doctoral Training Partnership; should this change the data will be stripped of any possible identifying features before publication.</p> <p>Participant contact details will not be retained for contact regarding future study.</p>			

Section F: Protection of research participants and their personal data

1. How identifiable will the participants be from the research outputs ?	Directly identifiable from the information included	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Pseudonymised / indirectly identifiable	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
	Not identifiable – data is anonymous	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Other, please specify:	

(Indicate with an 'X')		<input type="checkbox"/>
2. To what extent will the data be de-identified ? How identifiable will any individuals be from the research data? Describe any measures you will take towards assuring confidentiality , potential risks to confidentiality.	<p>Participants will be randomly assigned a unique identifying number and an appropriate pseudonymised reference title (e.g. Admissions Tutor 1, Student Representative 2). Colleges will also be assigned random numbers rather than being named. Subjects will be referred to in broad groupings (e.g. 'Physical Sciences, 'Arts and Humanities') unless it is necessary in generating meaning to specify them. Similarly, identifying features such as age or location of colleges, other positions held or details of life histories will not be reported unless specifically necessary to generate meaning.</p> <p>Participants will be informed of the measures being taken to preserve anonymity. They will also be made aware of the potential for the to be identified should their data provide details of their identity which proves meaningful in analysis. In such an instance, I inform participants and provide them with an opportunity to rephrase their data or withdraw their consent for the specific details which risk identification.</p>	
3. How will you ensure that third parties (e.g., interpreters and transcribers) are aware of and adhere to the measures described in this form?	Not applicable.	

Section G: Risks and benefits of the research

1. Will the research involve topics that could be considered [sensitive](#)? If so:
 - a. Please provide more detail or supporting information (such as the interview questions) to show the range of questions;
 - b. Explain what steps will be taken to reduce risk of distress;
 - c. Consider seeking advice from within your Department or from the ethics committee including whether the application might benefit from additional ethics review (e.g., via a CUREC 2 application).

The research does not involve topics which would be considered sensitive under the definition provided in the University's research ethics glossary.

2. Describe any additional burden or risks to the participants and the steps you will take to address these.

Not applicable.
3. Describe any physical or psychological risks to the researcher(s) (including local fieldworkers or research assistants) and the steps you will take to address these.
There are no physical risks to participants. There is a small chance that participation could induce vicarious trauma related to experience of severe deprivation in relation to educational opportunities. Participants will be signposted towards the University's staff and student welfare services in their information sheets (as appropriate) and will be reminded that they can pause or end their participation in the interview at any time.
4. Describe any benefits of the research, both to participants and to others.
Participants may benefit from the research through the opportunity to reflect on their structural relationship to the University of Oxford and its widening participation initiatives, most specifically the AFY. The wider public, including other members of the university, are likely to benefit from the research through a better understanding of how elite stakeholders manage processes of disruption and change designed to improve equitable access to elite spaces, specifically elite higher education. This research may lead to more effective processes of change management in these settings in the future.
5. Give details of any other ethical issues or relevant information.
Not applicable.

Section H: Professional guidelines		
Please indicate with an 'X' at least one set of professional guidelines you will follow.		
Research specialism/ methodology	Association and guidance	
Anthropology	Association of Social Anthropologists of the UK	<input type="checkbox"/>
Computer Science	ACM Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct	<input type="checkbox"/>
Criminology	British Society of Criminology Statement of Ethics	<input type="checkbox"/>
Education	British Educational Research Association Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Geography	American Association of Geographers Statement on Professional Ethics	<input type="checkbox"/>
History	Oral History Society of the UK Ethical Guidelines	<input type="checkbox"/>
Internet-mediated research	Association of Internet Researchers Ethical Guidelines British Psychological Society: Ethics Guidelines for internet-mediated research	<input type="checkbox"/>

	Association for Computing Machinery Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct	
Management	Academy of Management Code of Ethics	<input type="checkbox"/>
Political Science	American Political Science Association (APSA) Guide to Professional Ethics in Political Science	<input type="checkbox"/>
Politics	Political Studies Association. Guidelines for Good Professional Conduct	<input type="checkbox"/>
Psychology	British Psychological Society Code of Ethics and Conduct	<input type="checkbox"/>
Social research	Social Research Association: Ethical Guidelines	<input type="checkbox"/>
Socio-legal studies	Socio-Legal Studies Association: Statement of Principles of Ethical Research Practice	<input type="checkbox"/>
Sociology	The British Sociological Association: Statement of Ethical Practice	<input type="checkbox"/>
Visual research	ESRC National Centre for Research Methods Review Paper: Visual Ethics: Ethical Issues in Visual Research	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other professional guidelines		<input type="checkbox"/>

Section I: Endorsements and signatures

Please ensure this form is endorsed by the [Principal Investigator](#) (or student's supervisor), the Head of Department (or nominee) and, if student research, by the student themselves.

The SSH IDREC Secretariat accepts either option below. If you have a [DREC](#), check which signature option it prefers.

- **Option 1: direct email endorsements**
Each of the signatories should submit an email from a University of Oxford email address, indicating their acceptance of the responsibilities listed below.
- **Option 2: signatures**
Please scan the signed form and email it to us as a PDF. Pasted images of signatures cannot be accepted.

Endorsement by the Principal Investigator/ student supervisor and student, if applicable

I/ we the researchers understand my/ our responsibilities as Principal Investigator (and student, if applicable) as outlined in the guidance on the CUREC website. I/ we declare that the answers above accurately describe the research as presently designed, and that the ethics committee will be informed of any changes to the project which affect the answers to this form.

I/ we will inform the relevant IDREC if the Principal Investigator changes.

Name of Principal Investigator	
Principal Investigator's signature	Instead of a signature, endorsement may be provided by an email confirming the points above.
Date	
Name of student (if applicable)	

Student's signature	Instead of a signature, endorsement may be provided by an email confirming the points above.
Date	

<p>Departmental endorsement – from the Head of Department or nominee (Another senior member of the department may sign where the head of department is the Principal Investigator, or where the Head of Department has appointed a nominee. Example nominees include Deputy Head of Department, Director of Research, or Director of Graduate/ Undergraduate Studies.)</p>	
<p>On the basis of the information available to me, I confirm that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I am aware of the research proposed and have read this application; • To the best of my knowledge, the proposed design and scientific methodology do not raise ethical concerns; • I support this research in principle, subject to ethical and other necessary reviews. 	
Signature	Instead of a signature, endorsement may be provided by an email confirming the points above.
Name	
Role	
Date	

AK Aliya Khalid
 To: Edward Penn
 Cc: Student CUREC

Mon 25/07/2022 08:00

You replied on Tue 24/01/2023 13:36

Dear Ed,

Thanks for making the changes.

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, then, 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 continue to follow all current guidance issued by CUREC during the pandemic, notably COVID-19: CUREC guidance on research involving human participants, <https://researchsupport.admin.ox.ac.uk/governance/ethics/coronavirus>

If relevant please also check the CUREC website for their best practice research guides, these can be very useful in refining the writing up of ethical considerations in your research - see <https://researchsupport.admin.ox.ac.uk/governance/ethics/resources/bng>

Good luck with your research study,
 Best wishes,
 Aliya