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The dreams and promises of the university

Narratives of first-generation students in doctoral education



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Abstract

For those who are the first in their family to undertake higher education imaginings about what the university is, and what it may promise, can be of great importance. In the absence of access to university experience via these individuals' parents and sometimes wider social networks, these imaginings may underpin these students' aspirations, choices and plans as they seek a higher education. Moreover, these often hopeful, university imaginings can have particular resonance and stay with individuals even after they have spent considerable time in higher education. This study takes seriously the role of student imaginings and considers why first-generation students continue to invest in higher education through until doctoral study, especially in "the new times of contemporary academia" (Archer, 2008, p. 265) marked by neoliberalism and its concomitant high levels of individualism, competition and precariousness. This question is central to this research and underpins my efforts to trace the stories of first-generation students so as to gain insights into their higher education choices and pathways.

In this study I drew on a variety of data collection methods including focus groups and interviews with 15 first-generation students studying for doctorates in Education. I also utilised autoethnographic and duo-ethnographic data and undertook narrative analysis of two cultural texts to understand the ways the university and the doctorate is imagined and understood by these students and in the wider cultural domain. In examining the student accounts gathered in this thesis I identify the role of a number of established social imaginaries including the *Ivory tower*, *Liberal university*, *Hollywood pop culture university* and *Neoliberal university* imaginaries in shaping these students' university understandings. These imaginaries, in different ways, position the university as a site of learning, opportunity and privilege. I also identify the significance of the mainstream discourses of meritocracy and social mobility. I argue that through taking up these discourses the first-generation individuals in this study were able to develop a sense of belonging and entitlement in the relatively elite space of doctoral education. In combination, these discourses and the identified university imaginaries hailed these students into place within doctoral education with, for many, the goal of becoming academics. However, I argue that these imaginaries also function as 'regimes of truth' (Foucault, 1980) that can disorient or mislead these students, encouraging them to pursue their hoped for university worlds that may not exist in the ways they imagine. An important contribution to knowledge is made through this study's identification of the reasoning and aspirations for first-generation students' pursuit of doctoral education. Its contribution also lies in its apprehension of the significance of students' university imaginings and the key discursive formations that circulate around and through them.

Dedication

I dedicate this thesis to two people.

Firstly, to my father, James Mitchell. I wish you could have been here with us to see me realize my doctoral dream. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to gain the education you could not. I hope my efforts make you proud.

And, secondly, to my dear sister, Nathalie Mitchell. I know a dedication doesn't begin to acknowledge all of your efforts supporting me on my PhD pathway. Nevertheless, it is to you I also wish dedicate this work. You are a blessing in my life.

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Table of contents

Abstract	i
Dedication	ii
Acknowledgements – Me te mihinui	iii
Table of contents	iv
A Prelude: Autoethnographic reflections	1
Chapter One. Introduction: Hopeful arrivals	13
Chapter Two. The importance of being first: A review of the literature on first-generation students in doctoral education	37
Chapter Three. Methodological considerations	67
Interlude I. Filmic figurations: Educating Rita (1983) and non-traditional students' entries into the university	99
Chapter Four. The university and the promise of meritocracy and mobility	111
Interlude II. Filmic figurations: The university of memory, myth and dreams in <i>Brideshead Revisited</i> (1981)	144
Chapter Five. Dreaming the university: Exploring student imaginings	154
Chapter Six. Closing arguments: Opening-up spaces of opportunity	187
References	203
Coda. Duoethnographic explorations of the idea of the university and academic becomings	231
Appendices	239

A Prelude: Autoethnographic reflections

To begin this thesis, I offer my pepeha¹, which is a story of myself that grounds and facilitates the other kinds of stories I tell in this work:

Ko Taranaki te Maunga
Ko Kurahaupo te Waka
Ko Taranaki te Iwi
Ko Oanui te Awa
Ko Ngatitara te Hapu
Ko Kuini Horo te Tipuna I te taha o toku mama
No reira,
Ko Catherine Mitchell toku ingoa

My pepeha precedes any story of my engagement with the university, but is a foundation of who I am and a basis for understanding the identity I bring to my university experience. It is also a story that has genesis in the people and places of Aotearoa stretching across time and through the generations. A pepeha can be understood in a variety of ways, many of which I do not fully understand given the depth and complexity of mātauranga Māori around notions of identity and whakapapa. However, I find within its construction a sense of belonging and identity that underpins my determination to seek my ambitions such as finding a place within the academy. At the same time my pepeha serves as a reference point, a truth about who I am and what matters which is located in other spaces and places outside of the Western university.

As my pepeha suggests, my people are from Taranaki² and, although my mother was raised there for the first nine years of her life, she along with her parents and siblings moved to the city as part of the urban drift of many Māori of the 1960s and 1970s in search of opportunity and employment. I was born outside my tribal area and raised in a town that sits next to a small city, some three hours by car, from Auckland. I grew up in Mt Maunganui and began my formal

¹ In brief terms, a pepeha is a statement “of tribal identity” (Moorfield & Johnston, 2004, p. 41) that identifies kinship links. It typically includes reference to mountains, rivers, canoes, tribes, sub-tribes, marae, ancestors that the individual is connected to.

² The Taranaki region is located on the western side of the North Island of New Zealand. The region’s largest city is New Plymouth (approximately five hours drive south-west of Auckland).

education there. I would like to now tell some stories of my academic becoming. By telling these stories I hope “to rehearse a constellation of themes” (Jones, 2006, p. 11) that will be explored in different ways, and through different voices, across this thesis.

First glimpses

My mother recalls my excitement as a six or seven-year-old on discovering that there was somewhere else after school, another kind of school, where I could go to continue learning. Apparently, I had gotten home after my school day and told her all about it. I had, in her telling, discovered that in addition to primary and secondary school there was this place called the university. Apparently, I was very excited and expressed a firm desire to go. I have no recollection of this event, but my mother regularly tells this story as though my journey into higher education was somehow determined in that moment of discovery when an enthusiastic child found out more about her world. I like this story about my childhood self and enjoy her reminding me of it, but I am aware how the difficult and sometimes fraught nature of my journey into the university is effaced and made neat in its telling. Nonetheless, this short conversation, remembered across the decades perhaps provides a glimpse into my future. It speaks of a love of learning that began early and would carry me through my secondary school years and into higher education as the first person in my family to go to university.



I am just a couple of years younger than the age I begin my university story at. I am the squirmy child standing next to my father.

Figure one. My family in front of my childhood home.

Growing up, my family's economic circumstances, despite my parents' hard work, were often limited. Economic pressures meant that there was little spare money or time to indulge fantastic notions; common sense and practicality defined how we were raised. My mother typically worked part-time outside of the home as well as looking after my two sisters and me. My father worked interminably long hours across tides, in fair and rough seas, as a shipmaster at the local port. We lived in Arataki, a working-class area of our seaside town. Our plain 1970's 'bungalow' sat at the top of our quarter-acre section in a quiet cul-de-sac filled with other similar homes and young families. Neither of my parents had any higher education: in fact, my father had finished school at fourteen and my mother sat School Certificate³ (Year 11), but finished her formal education at this point. My father was a son of a Welsh coalmining immigrant who had few opportunities for study or training, like his father, mother and family before him. Over the years, my father worked on farms, on building sites, in factories, on wharves, and at sea. He had, across his life and mine, worked tirelessly. Both my parents believed in the value of hard work and the necessity for it, demonstrating these ideas as well as articulating them.

Like many working-class children of my generation, we were brought up in this context of practicality and common sense to behave; to do what we were told and 'be good'. Our parents firmly inculcated in us a respect for authority and resolutely pursued this value. There was little space for any other kind of childhood performances. For me 'being good' easily translated into 'being good at school' which meant being a good, that is, high-achieving student, as well as being appropriately responsive to adults. This seems like a straightforward relationship and it brought, thinking about it now, a degree of positive attention and a degree of invisibility, both of which I enjoyed. Those in authority such as teachers and my parents could praise my efforts for doing well on tests and the like, and then to some extent I would no longer be a focus of their concern, which furnished me with space outside of close adult surveillance. I also remember, that 'it was good to be smart', pretty much in those exact terms. It made sense, it was somehow easier to do well, and besides I loved learning more about my world. I am sure, in an earlier

³ School Certificate was the qualification students earned in year 11 before the shift to National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NZCEA) in New Zealand in 2002 (Ministry of Education, 2017).

historical moment, a working-class girl's efforts may not have always been so freely directed towards her school studies, but in the early 1980s the mantra, of course, was 'girls could do anything'. And, while I may not have been fully convinced of this (could I be an All Black? I knew that by virtue of my gender I could not)⁴, I saw no reason why I couldn't achieve well at school.

I continued on this path of doing well throughout my schooling based on my desire to find out about my world and my habit of reading a lot. Doing well though was largely a solo endeavour. My parents understood that I was 'good at school', and therefore I did not require their involvement in my learning as I was in no danger of not passing or falling behind. Being 'good' at school became something that was normal and I look back now to realise that I had, quite early on, acquired an academic identity. This academic identity was a significant element in my overall place within the family and how I understood myself. It also contributed to my interest in going to university. My own memories of the idea of the university don't stretch back to my early childhood years as they do in my mother's mind. My home memories don't include any particular conversations or discussions about going to university or a pathway onto further study. Like so many others from similar backgrounds, I did not have much of a basis to imagine going to university as I began to move through my schooling years. No, I only remember beginning to imagine the university as a teenager dreaming, as teenagers do, about what my future life might be.

Serendipitous encounters with the university

In my teenage years the university really came to me through film and television. The earliest and most striking memory for me was found in British productions that depicted the university in all its mythic fineness. Episode one of *Brideshead Revisited* showed me what a university was and it represented so many things I found appealing. It was a world of gentle sunny skies, beautiful gardens, grand classical buildings and scholarly spaces. I examine this university imaginary later in this thesis, but it provided me with important insights into the university that

⁴ Admittedly, this is also true given my spectacular lack of speed, strength and ball skills.

stood in direct contrast with my small town, modernist and working-class world. In the medium of film and television, higher education was constructed within a potent aesthetic which foregrounded privilege and opportunity.

And, although it seemed so far from home, I felt compelled to seek it out. I now identify the fading shadow of British cultural imperialism in the filmic stories I encountered and how these images of this 'better' Britain bore connections to New Zealand history as a former dominion, and how the impact of these narratives was tied with my own British heritage. The places depicted in these films were where 'things happened' which is to say where culture was located and where legitimate knowledge with its powerful genealogies came from. My teenage self could not locate such fine stories in my own ordinary world. It is possible to identify a kind of cultural romance story here. Though it is not a kind of Cinderella story that young girls are often drawn to, but another kind of story that was differently seductive. I do wonder, looking back, why this version of the 'good life' was so deeply appealing to me and why I formed an attachment to this particular university imaginary. This thesis provides a space to think about the role of class, gender and race in higher education through the prism of first-generation status I reflect on this question.

The glamour of the mythic university provided a platform for my persistence in study. But it was not my only source of motivation. I sought freedom and independence in my life and that was what the university ultimately represented. Although, I had a limited grasp of what a university was and how higher education operated, outside of what I had cobbled together from film, TV and school, I understood the university was a place that was 'better'; it was filled with pretty buildings and peopled by extremely intelligent and privileged individuals. It was also a place where you could learn interesting things. And, lastly, and perhaps, crucially, it seemed to be a place that provided a means to a good life primarily through access to good jobs. All of these things fostered my academic efforts to keep going.

Growing up in a working-class world we lived with a seemingly ever-present anxiety about money, I knew I did not want to live like this an adult. I wanted the freedom to support myself and believed that employment in low-paid and poor-quality work would not deliver me that freedom. I also feared the drudgery of physical labour and long hours I'd seen my Dad undertake. I thought that gaining an education would mean I could have a different and better life. I, too, was familiar with long hours and long weeks in work. So, I kept going, as many others did not. In my largely working-class high school I noticed how many of my Māori friends began to disappear in significant numbers around the year of School Certificate. I did not really understand the exodus, but I noticed that high school at the higher levels definitely got whiter. Even then, I thought about the massive waste of talent from educational contexts and worried about what these early departures might mean for my Māori classmates, but, perhaps through drawing on my Pākēhā cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986)⁵, I kept going.

Future imaginings

The understandings of the university that I had woven together via film and television became a key site for my imaginative engagement with a possible future self. I imagined that the university would be a place where I would learn interesting things, where I would find answers to questions I had about the world and perhaps, discover new questions. I also imagined what my life could be like if I could support myself and make my own decisions. For me, this involved imagining that I would own a small home (not owned by the bank!) and a reliable car. As I write this I wish I had had less mundane dreams for myself, and yet I deeply hoped for a future where I simply, was not 'broke', and this was a freedom higher education seemed to promise. I

⁵ According to Pierre Bourdieu, cultural capital represents forms of knowledge, skills and education a person possesses. Reference to cultural capital appears regularly in scholarly texts (Grayson, 2011; D Reay, 2004). Bourdieu's original articulation of cultural capital emphasized high culture in terms of access and familiarity with 'high culture' through such cultural forms as 'fine art', classical music, and 'good' literature. Other writers in the area of education have extended his idea of cultural capital to include any values and dispositions that may predispose individuals to the successful navigation of the educational system (Grayson, 2011). In my context, having significant Pākēhā cultural connections provided me with knowledge and understandings that contributed to my success within the Aotearoa/New Zealand education system though I may have had limited access to 'high culture' in the strictest sense. This education system, similar to others in Western contexts, has worked to exclude and marginalise indigenous individuals and communities. Theodore and colleagues (2016) for instance, identify the longstanding recognition of the "profound educational disadvantage of indigenous peoples" (p. 605) in their discussion of Māori participation in higher education.

was so firmly motivated by these aspirations that I kept going when more and more of my friends disappeared from my school's higher ranks.

I kept going despite working six nights a week in our family fish'n'chip shop. Working as much as this across my high school years taught me how much I did not want to work in a shop for the rest of my life. I guess, in this way, going to university was an escape from a future I felt could easily be mine and I quietly wished for more than what appeared to be on offer in my home settings. Though doubting whether I could actually make it, I could scarcely believe that I was talented enough such was my estimation of the level of intellectual ability that I thought was needed for university study. I believed I was capable, but that I had far from the level of brilliance that I thought it was necessary to be a student. In this imagining, I identify the spectre of the 'always-already' student (Johnson, Lee, & Green, 2000), an individual who was familiar with the dispositions, practices and knowledge needed for higher study. As I talk about later in this thesis I was not the kind of student who possessed a great deal of these type of resources. Despite my lack of knowledge about the university, somehow, I recognised this particular student subjectivity and I also understood how I did not measure up to it.

Nonetheless, however unlikely or remote the dream of going to university actually was, I just kept going. I didn't talk to my teachers about my plans for university, I didn't really imagine anyone would be interested, and I certainly did not ask my parents for help or input. I just kept going, doing enough to achieve well, or thereabouts, without much of a plan about how to make university happen. I suppose I was lucky – while I was not necessarily topping the school in every subject - I could do my academic work to a reasonable standard around my other commitments. My aspirations, though loose and uncertain, motivated me to continue to pursue the promise of a university education.

Solo endeavours

All of these struggles, and also my successes, were largely my own concern. Everyone in our family was working hard, so my success, although appreciated by my parents, was not a matter

of day-to-day concern. As I reached the sixth form (Year 12) I had already gained more formal education than my elder sister and parents, aunts and uncles, and grandparents before me. To my family, I was already successful, and everything else could be seen as a bonus. There was also no expectation that I would continue studying and my parents placed no pressure on me for grades, or qualifications, nor did they require me to take certain subjects. While some greater encouragement and guidance would have been helpful as I struggled with my schoolwork and worried about the future, I had space and choice. I was given the precious gift of intellectual freedom and autonomy for which I am so grateful. This freedom and lack of parental expectation provided me with precious liberation from any real fear of failure. My parents had given me the room to follow my interests and my strengths, and follow a course of study out of genuine interest. There were though pressing constraints on my sense of choice in terms of the realities of my working-class world which meant my higher study decisions were powerfully configured by economic concerns and my desire to be able to financially support myself.

As seventh form (Year 13) progressed, I began to think about the process of getting to university without a real sense that I could actually go. I also had little idea about what I should study. I knew my strengths lay more in the arts and social science areas of the curriculum, but what to do? Despite choosing business subjects alongside history and English throughout secondary school, I knew I couldn't stomach any more accounting. So, I thought hard about what university courses would relate to my strengths, but also could mean I might be able to get a decent paying job. I contemplated this problem alone, outside of one slightly disappointing conversation with a teacher-turned-career advisor who embarrassed me by asking me about what kind of bursary did I think I'd get. How did I know? It would be so *whakahihi* (to show-off) to say that I'd get an A, and then what if I didn't, after saying so – to a teacher? I felt very uncomfortable with this line of questioning from a male teacher I didn't know at all, and whom I suspected had very little interest in me, or my future. Needless to say, that lone conversation in seventh form did little to help me plan for a university future.

By the end of that year I had not identified any kind of university pathway - but after a one-off afternoon visit by a university liaison - I decided that I'd study law. That was the extent of the planning, conversations and research, one afternoon visit from a university rep and I made this major life choice. I then simply moved on to the work of 'getting in'. I wasn't really sure about how I should go about the application process and remember well struggling over the application forms at the end of the dining room table, taking hours to complete them. I also remember joking with my parents that completing the application forms (by hand!) was like another entry test and that if you got through them successfully you were almost guaranteed a degree. In the end, I applied to a small number of law schools and upon acceptance from them all I decided on the law school nearest to where I lived.

Going to university – No place like home

Arriving at the University of Waikato to study for my law degree was exciting, but it was an excitement that was often swallowed up by my unease and lack of knowledge about how to 'do university'. Still, I loved sitting in a large lecture theatre and learning about the world outside of the ways I had thought about it to that point. Across the years, I remember those striking moments when my thinking shifted or expanded, or when I was taken to new places and spaces, by the academics that lectured me. I remember well, one of my law lecturers who was little short of a Shakespearean actor, albeit one with a thick New York accent, and how she wove intricate legal tales as she invited us into the world of the 'reasonable person' in her frenetic and engaging way.

I also remember a philosophy lecturer who taught on the blandly named 'Introduction to sociology' course (SOC 101) who had a long dark-brown beard that extended down mid-chest level and how this impressive beard sat against his black t-shirt and black jeans that he wore as a uniform. This man introduced me to ideas from Descartes to Weber, Marx, Heidegger, C. Wright Mills and more with such skill that academic theory felt easy. A key memory from my SOC 101 course still remains powerfully with me - I remember finding out about the often/sometimes predatory relationship between the developed and developing world, that till

then I had rather naively assumed to be far more benign - this kind of knowledge has stayed with me across my lifetime.

I loved finding new ways to understand the world. I know now it was probably one of those huge courses many academics don't enjoy teaching on, but I valued the broad range of perspectives I was being introduced to. I especially loved having some of my experiences of being a bicultural girl from the working-class examined, validated and enriched particularly by the feminist scholars I engaged with. And, I found in those moments the different world I was seeking, one that allowed me to think more, question more, and sometimes understand more. And, yet, as much as I sought to break the constraints of my small-town world, I am not sure how much my educational story is really captured within an escape narrative. I reflect on this now, knowing how connected to whānau I was, and am, and how much I sought to share whatever I had learned with others from home.

Complex trajectories

Despite my happiness about studying, I was under pressure simply by being in the university environment. I found it difficult to know how to be a student, organise my studies and manage my time. And my concerns about money and what I would do after studying was often paralysing. Worst of all - even from a relatively early point in my legal studies - I simply couldn't imagine myself as a lawyer. The more I learned about lawyers and the legal world, the more I couldn't see myself in this context, or taking up a legal professional personhood. This realisation was thoroughly destabilising as I simultaneously tried both to think through this problem and to ignore it, the result of which meant I pursued my law degree in a scattered and half-hearted way, despite the fact that I really enjoyed learning about the law. As I wrestled with this biting concern I progressed through my degree and, though I was relatively successful, I got to the end of law school without any sense of what I could do with myself.

I then moved onto my professional studies course by which time the economic effects of so much time at university really began to make themselves present. I lived in cold, damp flats as

unfortunately is the norm for many, or even most, students in Aotearoa/ New Zealand, and with minimal possessions. My mother told me out of concern on one of my rare trips home during this time, that my clothes were threadbare and smelt of damp. I had for so long necessarily lived very cheaply, despite sometimes working three jobs at a time. And, although I did not mind living carefully, this lack of resources was wearing and left me vulnerable to persistent colds and flu's in the winter chilliness of Hamilton. It also contributed to my sense of deepening uncertainty about what lay ahead for me.

At the end of my studies, I took my legal professionals exam even though I didn't really think I could be a lawyer and then worked a lot of jobs and took random courses as I equivocated about what to do. The awareness of my ever-expanding student loan sat quietly and fretfully in the back of my mind. By this time, it was more than obvious to me that earning a degree did not mean my economic circumstances were transformed in any positive sense. If anything, I was significantly worse off in material terms than if I hadn't gone to university in the first place. Still, I largely didn't regret my time, having loved so much about being at university. At this juncture, after completing my undergraduate and professional studies, I was pretty much at a loss about what I should do, and I just couldn't figure a path for myself. I am sure, though much time has passed between then and now, that I thought I'd love to be an academic in sociology or history but that seemed both too lofty and amazing, and frankly, impossible for me, especially given my rather modest academic performance at law school. It was an academic dream that I couldn't conjure, not on my own at least.

Finding my way

After this time, I moved around, travelled, and took up a range of administrative jobs. I ended up working at the University of Auckland Library and it was here I began to make some kind of path for myself. There were two things that were critical to this process, my joining of Te Rōpu Kaimahi Māori (TRKM) at the library and my beginning a master's degree while there. With TRKM I found support, fun and a shared pride in things Māori and, through this group, I was uplifted. The second critical factor was the impact of being mentored and supported by two

very special women, one in an informal and the other in a formal way. Both women had a good deal more experience of the university than me and I was encouraged to think more was possible than I had to then let myself imagine. They also possessed practical ‘real’ knowledge about how to navigate the university. Through their mentoring, the information and support they shared, I made the transition to higher education teaching, a role I knew I wanted to take up. This was life changing, not that these words used so commonly do justice to how much this change impacted on my life. I will be forever grateful. It also was in these mentoring relationships that the idea of the doctorate was initially raised and, some years after I began tertiary teaching, I began the process of enrolling for a PhD in higher education. Something that had been, simply, beyond my imagination. It was a dream that I hadn’t really dared to dream, and it was coming true ...

My hopeful engagement with doctoral education has consciously, and I suspect unconsciously, underpinned numerous aspects of this study. This thesis represents my dreams for myself as a first-generation student and also for others, like me, who seek new and different horizons beyond what we might first imagine is possible.

Chapter One. Introduction: Hopeful arrivals

*A college education is a chance to begin afresh and get 'somenwhere' in life.
Where is this somenwhere for first-generation students?
(Jehangir, 2010, p. 534).*

Introduction

Hope, aspiration, the desire for a different and better life can provide the impetus for people from varied social settings to seek out university study. For individuals, like those that are first-generation, hope can be the driving force for a move into unfamiliar higher education arenas (Mitchell, 2013). First-generation students may aspire to achieve an undergraduate qualification or, as in the case of students within the present research, hope can underpin their ongoing engagements with higher education through to doctoral study. This thesis explores the promise of advanced academic study for first-generation individuals and examines their experiences of the university and of doctoral education. First-generation students, in simple terms, are individuals who are from the first-generation of their family to go to university. This means, by definition, that neither parent of a first-generation student undertook university study and, as such, these students are the first in their families to enter the educational and social territory of the university. First-generation students are described in various ways within the research literature and they are often labelled as being diverse (Jehangir, 2010) from lower socio-economic backgrounds (Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nora, 1996), and are sometimes referred to as being 'new' (Terenzini et al., 1996) or 'non-traditional' university students (see Leathwood & O'Connell, 2003; Trowler, 2015). As part of the massification of higher education, particularly over the last 20-30 years, significant numbers of first-generation individuals have entered universities (Pike & Kuh, 2005; Terenzini et al., 1996).

A growing body of international research about these 'new' students suggests that they are less likely to feel like they belong at university (Stebbleton, Soria, & Huesman, 2014), achieve lower grades, have lower degree completion rates (Ishitani, 2006; Pike & Kuh, 2005) and go on to postgraduate study in smaller proportions when compared to continuing-generation⁶ students (Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998). Although a significant number of studies have focused on first-generation students within undergraduate education, only limited research

⁶ This category of student has been described in various ways in the educational literature. However, it is commonly defined as those students with at least one parent with some post-secondary education (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005).

has examined first-generation students' experiences in postgraduate education. The present research seeks to add to this literature, with its focus on first-generation students who have persevered within higher education to enter doctoral programmes.

In taking up doctoral studies, first-generation students find themselves entering a higher education arena that is marked by change (Kelly, 2017a), contestation (Boud & Lee, 2009) and uncertainty (Rothblatt, 2012). Academics have written extensively on issues facing universities in the current era of neoliberalism and the mounting pressures on higher education institutions that are increasingly being transformed into corporate form at the same time as facing reductions in governmental financial support (Bartley & Webber, 2009; Marginson & Considine, 2000). In this environment, concerns about doctoral education proliferate. These are manifested in debates about the value and structures of the doctorate and doctoral graduates' role as 'knowledge workers' within the global economy (Tennant, 2004). There are also general concerns about doctoral employment outcomes, or a lack thereof, for graduates (Cuthbert & Molla, 2015), especially those interested in academic careers. These concerns are repeated in diverse ways and in a variety of forums both within and outside of the university.

As the university's highest qualification, the doctorate represents a significant challenge for students. It is a major life investment for any individual across a range of dimensions from meeting the academic demands of higher study to the significant economic costs of doctoral education through to the sometimes high, personal costs associated with study for an extended period. In light of the multifaceted challenges, and perhaps, dwindling rewards associated with doctoral study, it is no surprise that some call into question the wisdom of choosing to enrol in a doctoral programme. Writing in the *Times Higher Education*, Holly Else (2014) asked, "who would do a PhD?"(para. 1). As she says:

Who would willingly submit to spending endless hours, over three or four years, in the laboratory or library, racked by self-doubt and money worries, in preparation for a career for which vacancies were never more oversubscribed? (para. 1)

Her comments identify a number of critical tensions in relation to doctoral student experiences and the ability of the doctorate, a degree that is understood to be the pathway into academic careers, to provide access to lecturing and research positions in ways previously possible for doctoral graduates. And, yet, as Else goes on to rightly point out, student participation in doctoral programmes has not declined. In fact, far from falling in the context of what some may see as shrinking opportunities, postgraduate and doctoral

enrolments have expanded significantly around the globe in recent times (Green, 2009; McCulloch & Thomas, 2013), suggesting the sustained or even growing appeal of the doctorate.

Research questions

Given the significant investments of individuals and institutions in doctoral education, it can be argued that the doctorate has become a heavily freighted object, with various groups – government, policy makers, universities, academics and students – possessing different kinds of investments in the idea of the doctorate. This leads me back to Else’s comments, where I ask a similar question: why would a first-generation student choose to study for a doctorate? This issue lies at the heart of this thesis and underpins my efforts to trace narratives of first-generation students to gain insights into their higher education pathways, the ways they understand the promise of the university and of doctoral education, and, for many, their dreams and aspirations for continued work within academia. Specifically, this study is animated by the following research question:

What are the dreams and promises of doctoral education for first-generation students?

A number of specific sub-questions are connected to this main question, including:

- What discourses most profoundly influence first-generation students ongoing engagements with the university and their doctoral identities?
- What are the impacts of these discourses on these students’ understandings of, and aspirations for, their doctoral studies and their post-doctoral lives?
- What imaginaries of the university shape first-generation students’ understandings of this institution and especially doctoral study?

To seek insights into this overarching question and the theoretically informed sub-questions that spring from it, I have utilised focus groups and interviews to gather data from 15 first-generation students currently studying for doctorates in the area of Education. Along with the inclusion of some autoethnographic and duoethnographic writing, I also undertake analysis of literary and filmic texts to contextualise the students’ hopes and dreams in relation to broader social imaginaries of the university.

First-generation student arrivals

The student narratives gathered together in this thesis originate in diverse places across the globe and speak to some of the major events and circumstances shaping world history as they effect the lived experiences of individuals and their families across generations. For example, this study includes students whose parents were sent to rural villages as forced labour during China's Cultural Revolution and were thereby prevented from undertaking higher education of any sort. It also includes stories like the one shared by a student from Africa whose parents lacked experience not only of higher education, but of formal schooling in general. Other stories make apparent the class and cultural differences experienced by students from lower socio-economic origins, including Māori (indigenous New Zealanders) and Pacific people. In combination, the diverse global narratives of first-generation students in this thesis can be read as a series of educational arrival stories.

Thinking about the first-generation student experience through the concept of 'arrival' enables this thesis to contemplate how first-generation students have 'arrived' at doctoral education, undertaking academic journeys that their parents, and perhaps, wider family and friends, have not experienced. This focus leads to a consideration of how these students have succeeded in their university studies when many from their home settings did not. In addition to exploring the impact of their higher education engagements on these individual's lives and relationships with families and friends from their home contexts, my research questions focus on the kinds of challenges they have overcome, how first-generation student academic identities are formed and defined within the contemporary university, and how these students imagine the university and their post-doctoral futures.

At a broad level, this research is undertaken to provide understandings about the experiences of a group of students that up until relatively recently has been largely overlooked by scholars. This study also offers a new perspective on first-generation students compared with earlier literature and will challenge a prior location of first-generation students largely within a deficit discourse, where these students are described commonly as disadvantaged, 'at risk' and less successful in terms of academic outcomes when compared with continuing-generation students (see Ishitani, 2003; Lundberg, Schriener, Hovaguimian, & Slavin Miller, 2007; Mullen, Goyette, & Soares, 2003; Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004; Pike & Kuh, 2005; Seay, Lifton, Wuensch, Bradshaw, & McDowelle, 2008). While this study will identify the challenges and difficulties experienced by first-generation doctoral students, it is strongly focused on these students' hopes, dreams

and successes. This is a worthwhile undertaking, as Gardner and Holley (2011) point out, because “studies documenting the successful achievements of these [first-generation] students particularly beyond access to college are few in number” (pp. 78-79).

Furthermore, this research seeks to offer understandings about the process of academic identity formation for first-generation students as they undertake their doctoral journeys. Identity formation is recognised as being as central to the successful achievement of a doctorate as knowledge production (Green, 2005). It is hoped that this research will identify some of the particular pleasures and rewards for students associated with doctoral study that may stand against, or at least contextualise, what Hughes (2011) identifies as a “passion for despair that dominates our understanding of being a doctoral student” (p. 622). It is hoped that, by enhancing understandings of traditionally under-represented groups such as first-generation students, this research may help doctoral programmes to better support these individuals.

Extending the current knowledge about the experiences of first-generation students within doctoral education may also be useful in providing insights for educational providers in terms of how to enhance the general student experience for all doctoral candidates. Arguably, this research may be particularly valuable given the persistently high levels of student attrition across doctoral programmes within Aotearoa/New Zealand (Ministry of Education, 2010). Lastly, this study can be seen as providing contrast and adding depth to the earlier research on first-generation students that has generally been undertaken within the United States (US) context, focused on the undergraduate experience, and typically relied on quantitative approaches (Orbe, 2008). In the following section, I provide the reasons for my attention to the place of the imagination in relation to first-generation students’ navigation of the university.

The place of the university in the imagination

A central premise in my investigation of first-generation students’ engagement with the university and the doctorate relates to the imagination of the higher education space, both at the individual and collective levels. Much of my research proceeds from the idea that how individuals experience, understand *and* imagine the different parts of their lives, including in this case, the university and the doctorate, is important. The ways individuals understand the university pathways open to them, what education offers and how to

navigate higher education are notions that, I argue, necessarily exist within an individual student's imagination. Therefore, exploring students' imagining is relevant to any examination of student engagement in higher education. Barnett (2013) takes a similar view and explains that focusing on how we imagine the university is a valid undertaking because:

a university is both an institution (involving complex sets of processes) *and* a set of ideas. Both as an institution and as a set of ideas, the university may be understood to inhabit spaces (institutional spaces, conceptual and discursive spaces, and imaginative spaces). And both as institution and as a set of ideas the university may be understood as caught in networks (of institutions and communicative systems, and of ideas, visions, aspirations and values). It follows that the university lives (partly) in the imagination, in the ideas, sentiments, values and beliefs that individuals hold in relation to the university. (p. 41)

Here Barnett (2013) articulates how the university can be experienced as an institution, but also how it lives within our imaginations. In this way imaginings of the university can connect to values, sentiments and aspirations both for individuals and groups in society. Focusing on how the university is imagined can lead to knowledge about the university's perceived role in contemporary social life and, I contend, in the way imaginings and aspirations are bound to individuals' academic identities. Johnson, Lee and Green (2000) maintain it is necessary to recognise the role of fantasies about the university and the doctorate to explain the "deep investments in and attachments to the structures of the PhD" (p. 136). While I employ different terminology, I too suggest that dreams and imaginings of the university play a key role in shaping our investments in and attachments to the doctorate. Moreover, as Kelly (2017a) suggests, "ideas about the PhD are inextricable from those about the university" (p. 3). Thus, this thesis possesses a dual focus in that it examines first-generation students' higher education engagements with both the university and with doctoral education specifically. To further these discussions, I provide a brief history of the doctorate followed by an overview of contemporary doctoral education in Aotearoa/New Zealand.

The doctorate – *A brief history*

Scholars such as Park (2005) identify the origins of the doctorate in the European medieval university of the 13th century, where a doctorate was a license to teach. Its most common contemporary form, the PhD or Doctor of Philosophy, however, was not established until relatively recently, alongside the development of the research university in Germany in the early 19th century. Historians make specific connection to the establishment of the PhD

within the development of scientific education that emerged alongside the founding of the University of Berlin in 1810 (Middleton, 2001; Park, 2005). Following this, the PhD was adopted in the US and arrived in the United Kingdom (UK) after World War I (Middleton, 2001). Despite discussions about the establishment of a PhD degree in Aotearoa/New Zealand as early as 1906, it was introduced in 1922 for only four years, before being reintroduced permanently more than 20 years later in 1948 (Middleton, 2001, 2007). In the first 50 years of doctoral study in New Zealand, 183 Education PhDs were awarded (Middleton, 2001).

For most of the last 200 years, participation in doctoral programmes was typically for individuals from more privileged sections of society (Boud & Lee, 2009) with few students from lower socio-economic backgrounds entering the doctoral arena. Only small numbers of students undertook postgraduate study through to doctoral level and in general the doctoral student of the past was “white, male, young and middle-class” (Petersen, 2014, p. 823). Doctoral study during most of this period was primarily understood as preparation for an academic career where the receipt of a doctoral qualification would lead to an academic position (Neumann & Tan, 2011).

However, during the last part the 20th century, particularly after World War II, higher education expanded (Barcan, 2013), with more students attending university⁷. This growth represented a move from a focus on serving elite groups in the early part of the 20th century to the development of a massified system by the turn of the millennium (Leach, 2015). A flow-on effect of the expansion in undergraduate study was that doctoral student numbers began to grow (Brennan & Naidoo, 2008), leading to a more diverse population of doctoral students (Pearson, Cumming, Evans, Macauley, & Ryland, 2011). Nonetheless, participation in doctoral study in the contemporary context may still be more likely for individuals from families with greater economic and social resources. For example, a study in the UK by the Higher Education Policy Institute (2010) concluded that “participation in postgraduate study, especially research degrees, does appear to be heavily skewed towards those from higher socio-economic backgrounds” (p. 20).

⁷ From the mid-1990s the numbers of students enrolled in higher education around the globe has more than doubled from 76 million individuals to 179 million by 2009 (Brown, 2013a).

Growing political and scholarly interest

Over the last 20-30 years the doctorate has garnered more social and political attention than ever before. Governments and policymakers have demonstrated increasing interest in the roles and purposes of doctoral education. Boud and Lee (2009) note that the doctorate has now become a highly scrutinised area of higher education:

The domain of academic practice that was traditionally thought of as most characteristically the purview of universities, the research doctorate, is now the focus of public policy and the gaze of governments. In different countries, in different ways, the doctorate has become a site of contestation. (p. 1)

This attention to the doctorate arose particularly from governments increased focus on research and its connection to the global economy (Leonard & Becker, 2009).

Mirroring governmental interest, or perhaps underpinned by that, there has also been increased attention paid to the doctorate within the university itself. This degree has become the required qualification for academic staff in stricter terms than previously, and in most instances, those who aspire to academic roles will need to possess doctoral qualifications before being considered for an academic appointment. In addition, a number of already tenured university staff, particularly in creative or professionally-focused disciplines like Education, have been required to upgrade their qualifications to keep their positions. There have also been major developments in terms of the establishment of different kinds of doctoral programmes, as witnessed in the creation of professional doctorates (such as the Doctorate in Education, the EdD), the growth in interdisciplinary doctoral research, and new ways to structure theses, as in the case of the doctorate by publication. These changes, as aforementioned, are tied to increasing governmental oversight over doctoral education practices and growing university policy development around doctoral learning processes (Grant & Pearson, 2007).

Doctoral education in the local context

In line with international trends, doctoral education in Aotearoa/New Zealand has expanded significantly in the last two to three decades. Ministry of Education (2011) figures demonstrate that from 1999 to 2009 doctoral enrolments more than doubled, rising from 3447 to 7409 students, reducing slightly to 7050 doctoral students in 2015 (Ministry of Education, 2016). Growth in the numbers of international and Māori students have been identified as a significant contribution to this expansion (Education Counts, 2011; Ministry

of Education, 2016; Scott, 2003). To date, however, there are no statistics available that capture first-generation student enrolments within doctoral education in New Zealand. Research by Hoffer et al. (2003) indicates that first-generation doctoral enrolments in the US are significant, identifying that 37% of all US doctoral recipients in 2002. Based on evidence of the growing numbers of Māori in doctoral education, who are often first-generation students, and research from other educational settings, it may be possible to speculate about the growth in numbers of first-generation individuals taking up doctoral studies. However, Pearson et al. (2011) note that the relationship between growth in student numbers in higher education and diversity is not straightforward, despite a common assumption that “exponential growth of doctoral populations in many parts of the world in past decades has led to increased diversity in the doctoral population and in doctoral programs” (p. 528).

The Aotearoa/New Zealand publicly funded higher education setting currently includes eight universities, 20 polytechnic institutions and three wānanga (Māori tertiary education institutions). Of these, ten can award doctoral degrees, including one wānanga and one polytechnic (New Zealand Qualifications Authority, 2016). The University of Auckland, the site of this present study, is Aotearoa/New Zealand’s largest university, with over 41,000 enrolled students in 2016 (University of Auckland, n.d.). As one of the oldest universities in the country, the University of Auckland has an established reputation for both teaching and research⁴. Postgraduate student enrolments, including masters and doctoral students, represent approximately 19% of total enrolments. This number has been growing, rising from 6679 postgraduate enrolments in 2010 to 7851 in 2016 (University of Auckland Planning and Information Office, n.d.). The total number of doctoral candidates is not publicly available, but 338 students graduated with a doctorate in 2016 (University of Auckland Planning and Information Office, n.d.).

Doctoral students are required to invest a significant amount of time and commitment towards the goal of making an original contribution to knowledge. A full-time PhD student in the local context completing a thesis-only programme would normally be expected to finish their doctoral studies within three to four years, although many students take longer than this to complete (Brailsford, 2010). The University of Auckland’s Statute for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy (University of Auckland, 2016) outlines four key criteria upon which examiners can make an award of the PhD degree, the first being the requirement that the student’s research represents “an original contribution to knowledge or

understanding in its field” (Guideline, 4e) through the production of a significant piece of work in the form of a thesis.

The doctoral education process has been understood traditionally as a type of apprenticeship, which involves “a formalized induction into advanced academic work” (McKinley, Grant, Middleton, Irwin, & Williams, 2011, p. 117). Viewing doctoral education as an apprenticeship is especially apt given the application of a British model of doctoral education in Aotearoa/New Zealand universities, whereby doctoral degrees are awarded on the basis of a thesis examination only, without any formal course work (McKinley et al., 2011). In current practice, students are often assigned two supervisors, with one normally taking the lead role in the supervision process, although there can be some variation across institutions and disciplines with different divisions of supervision responsibilities. For example, a student could have a main supervisor and a co-supervisor, or a main supervisor and an advisory committee, or three supervisors could be put in place, one having administrative responsibilities (Grant & Pearson, 2007). To enrol in a doctoral programme, students normally have had to achieve significant success in their academic studies. In general, this means an applicant needs to have earned a B+ average or above across their masters study⁶.

The first-generation students who took part in the present study were undertaking Education doctorates and studying for either the traditional Doctor of Philosophy or PhD, or the newer EdD. Since the mid-1990s professional doctorates have been in place in a number of disciplines, including Education (Maxwell & Shanahan, 2001). The professional Doctor of Education or EdD is currently offered at five universities in Aotearoa/New Zealand, (Lee, 2016). The EdD is provided to students who possess an interest in undertaking a research degree that is strongly focused on their professional role. In the present study, two students were enrolled in an EdD programme.

Why focus on first-generation students within Education?

A variety of reasons underpinned my decision to focus on first-generation students studying for a doctorate within Education. Chief amongst these was my recognition of how Education has often been attractive historically to ‘non-traditional’ students, like first-generation students, and how it has provided a space from which these students have

achieved social mobility with the vocational opportunities allied with such programmes. Moreover, as Middleton (2001) has suggested, “Education as a university subject is of particular interest because of its historically ambivalent classification – both as a traditional liberal arts subject and as an adjunct to professional training” (p. 2). I also saw value in focusing on first-generation students from one discipline, meaning I could develop insights that were more specific to a group of students than would be the case if students came from a variety of disciplines. Finally, on a pragmatic level, I was attracted to studying in this area because of my familiarity with the student experience of doctoral study within the discipline, experience I hoped would be valuable in the execution of my research design and processes. In the next section of this chapter I introduce some of the key theoretical considerations shaping my research. I then address the place of narrative within this thesis.

Theoretical orientations: Locating a post-critical analysis

Identifying the research space relevant to a particular study is key to understanding the researcher’s values and views about what constitutes knowledge and understandings about the nature of reality (Giddings & Grant, 2009). Moreover, when taken together, “paradigmatic assumptions and beliefs not only guide the choice of methodology, methods and the nature of the researcher-researched relationship, but also the ways in which the validity of the research is assessed and ensured” (Giddings & Grant, 2009, p. 120). As a starting point for this discussion, I want to acknowledge the complexity of the language and nomenclature in this area. Reference to the theories discussed here is undertaken with the knowledge that divisions between critical and postmodern or poststructuralist perspectives are slippery and each possess a number of different forms (Gibson, 2016). For example, the term post-structuralist is often applied to the body of ideas drawn from the works of important theorists like Derrida, Baudrillard, Foucault and Lyotard; however, scholars sometimes refer to the work of these writers as being as post-modernist (Beasley, 1999) or even refer, as du Gay and colleagues (2000) do, to the work of these theorists as employing a “subject of language approach” (p. 15). Moreover, within this space there are arguments about the different meanings of these ‘paradigm’ names and disagreement about the scope of the theoretical constructs entailed.

Bearing these complexities in mind, I have chosen to employ the term ‘post-critical’ to refer to the theoretical framing of my study. In doing so, I acknowledge importance of post-

structural theory in shaping my analysis but I have chosen to describe my work as being post-critical in orientation. This is because this term provides a generous theoretical location to work from, indicating space to refer to other post-theories (that is post-colonialism or post-feminism for example), and to emphasise the fact that critical notions are not jettisoned in this project, but instead provide an important basis for thinking and analysis. Whilst I do not intend to draw neat borders around the theoretical frames of post-critical theory, post-structural theory or, indeed critical theory, as to do so would be antithetical to the understandings about the shifting nature of truth and the commitment to dynamism and openness drawn from the ‘post’ theoretical frames (Gibson, 2016), I, nonetheless seek to explain in more detail about what a post-critical approach encompasses in what follows to provide a sound theoretical foundation for this study.

I also wish to acknowledge that scholars from a variety of discipline locations have taken-up post-critical theoretical ideas to frame their research. As Gibson (2016) suggests, post-critical approaches are now found in every field of inquiry from the arts and literature to sociology and Education. For example, McKenzie (2005), an environmental Education scholar, describes her use of the term post-critical to articulate the theoretical positioning of her work, by which she means that she draws upon “post-structural theories to problematize dominant discourses which oppress various human and more-than human Others” (p. 455). McKenzie’s description of post-critical work is similar to my own as she emphasises the need for attention to dominance and oppression, but for this attention to be grounded in the context of discourse as a key constituting force of the self and society. I now turn to explore my own understandings of what a post-critical standpoint involves drawn from both critical and post-structuralist perspectives.

Firstly, I position my work in this space because post-critical analyses are grounded in critical theory which recognises some individuals in society are systematically advantaged or disadvantaged by virtue of their group membership. This social inequity is recognised as occurring along the “predictable social lines of gender, ethnicity, class, age, sexual orientation and so on” (Grant & Giddings, 2002, p. 18). At its core, critical theory focuses on power and the social interactions of different groups of people, which are often marked by privilege and oppression (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011). Critical theorists are interested in social justice and take the view that research should involve an examination of existing power

structures with the goal to transform the lives of those who are oppressed by these structures (Savin-Baden & Howell Major, 2013). As such, this research is undertaken with a view to identifying power relations in the context of doctoral education and to challenging unjust social structures for first-generation students within the university.

I have also chosen to draw heavily upon post-structural thought, particularly Foucauldian analyses, in response to some of the identified limitations of critical theory. Critics view the work of critical theory scholars, like Bourdieu, as being overly deterministic (Lee & Kramer, 2013) and identify the limited space in critical theory for individual actors' agency outside of the rigid social structures within which they live. Similarly, post-structural scholars point to the broad nature of critical theory and suggest critical theorists rely on 'grand narratives' that are understood as accounting for an individual's experience of the world simply because of the social groupings they belong to and the related social structures they necessarily engage with. Instead, the focus in post-structural work is on the local, subjective, partial or even contradictory (Giddings & Grant, 2009; Hardy, 2012) which means post-structuralist approaches can better recognise the complex experiences of diverse individuals. Moreover, drawing on post-structural writing enables this research to resist the idea that researchers can construct universal truths about the social world because meanings are multiple and shifting rather than fixed, and highly contextual (Beasley, 1999; Crowe, 1998). Taking these insights into my study means I have sought to avoid essentialist generalisations of the first-generation student experience because they may fail to take account of specific situations or problems connected with the contemporary doctoral study. Before proceeding, I will outline my understandings of some of the central theoretical ideas of post-structural analysis including discourse, power and identity.

The place of language and discourse

Post-structural theorists identify language as a primary determinant of how we see our world, ourselves and others (Crowe, 1998). A post-structural orientation understands language as lacking essential meanings; instead, words are understood to work as a pre-determined system for the allocation of meaning. Language is used in particular ways, and takes on particular meanings, in relation to its use by dominant social groups. The use of language by dominant groups becomes the 'language of authority' which is then reproduced by individuals in society employing this language to demonstrate their alignment with the values of authority (Crowe, 1998). The concept of discourse is pivotal to understanding the place

of language in post-structural analyses. As a central concern of post-structural theorisation, discourse is understood as being tightly connected to knowledge, forms of subjectivity and power relations (Weedon, 1997). Discourses from a poststructuralist standpoint can be understood as sociohistorical systems of meaning that enable or constrain the way that individuals can think, write, or speak at particular times in history (Grant 2005; McHoul & Grace, 1998).

For Foucault, discourses “interwine with power [to] create speaking-acting subjects” (1974, p. 47). In other words, language is more than representational: it is understood as being deeply implicated in power relations as it works to create that which it seems to describe (MacLure, 2003). Britzman (2000) gives a concise account of how discourse works to form subjects highlighting the ways in which discourse can be both inclusive and exclusive at the same time. She says:

every discourse constitutes, even as it mobilizes and shuts out, imaginary communities, identity investments and discursive practices ... they produce relations of power, and communities of consent and dissent, and thus discursive boundaries are always being redrawn around what constitutes the desirable and undesirable. (p. 36)

Discourse in these ways can be understood as “practices for producing meaning, forming subjects and regulating conduct within particular societies, and institutions at particular historical times” (Britzman, 2000, p. 36). As discourses shape the ways in which meaning making occurs through language and practices, discourses are also constitutive of different social imaginaries (through language and practices which involve power relations).

Moreover, the process of competing for authority involves discourses competing with each other, with different social groups attempting to reflect or defend their values through language, something which ultimately operates as a source of power (Crowe, 1998). As Edwards (2008) explains, “discourses are powerful and some are more powerful than others” (p. 30). In the case of this research, it is possible to identify different discourses of the university, such as the neoliberal discourse which shape students’ understandings of higher education and produces particular doctoral student subjectivities. The discourse of neoliberalism is arguably one of the most significant in shaping contemporary education and, in fact, in shaping other discourses (Fitzsimons, 2000). In sum, it is my understanding that discourses not only delineate what it is possible to know, say and do, they also “establish

what kind of person one is entitled or obliged to ‘be’” (MacLure, 2003, p. 176). In other words, discourse produces subjects and, as such, discourses are invested with power.

Power

As Foucault suggests, the notions of discourse and power are tightly connected. He explains “there are manifold relations of power which permeate, characterise and constitute the social body, and these relations of power cannot themselves be established, consolidated nor implemented without the production, accumulation, circulation and functioning of a discourse” (Foucault, 1980, p. 93). Moreover, Foucault (1995) repudiates a negative understanding of power and instead maintains that power is productive in nature. He argues that “power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth” (p. 194), and it is not something that can be possessed, but exists when it is exercised. In the simplest terms, Foucault (1982) describes “power as a set of actions upon other actions” (p. 789). In this way, power can be recognised as guiding the possibility of conduct of others or in shaping the field of possibilities of others. This kind of power creates relations between groups or individuals.

Moreover, in his discussion of power, Foucault describes the totalising and individualising forms of power of the state which work to produce subjects. Foucault’s analysis of power shifted from the relations of the production of power to a focus on power relations. His analysis positions the subject in power relations that are rooted deeply in the social nexus rather than being located somewhere “above” society as a supplementary structure. For the present study, this involves paying attention to the way first-generation students within doctoral education are involved in complex power relations within the university and their specific discipline of Education, as well as within their families and communities. These power relations impact on how these students take up their doctoral student identities and navigate their academic pathways.

Conceptualising identity

The issue of identity formation and its significance in the doctoral journey has been explored by a number of authors such as Green (2005), Kamler and Thomson (2004) and McAlpine and Lucas (2011). The literature in this area is complex, with the concept of identity being understood in varied ways across diverse research traditions and paradigms. As du Gay, Evans and Redman (2000) explain, the understanding of identity “takes on different

connotations depending on the context in which it is deployed” (p. 1). As such, the concept of identity and its use within research requires careful consideration and analysis.

In everyday usage, the concept of identity seems relatively simple. Certainly, dictionary definitions outline the meaning of identity in fairly common-sense terms. For example, identity is defined as, “who or what a person or thing is; a distinct impression of a single person or thing presented to or perceived by others” and “the quality or condition of being the same in substance, composition, nature, properties”(Oxford English Dictionary, 2012). These definitions clearly focus on two key senses of identity: identity as being something unique to the individual; and identity as a recognition of aspects of the individual which connect with others. I can apply this definition in a straightforward manner – an individual is a unique human being who is located with, or connected to, others in terms of aspects of their identity. Thus, someone may be connected to others through their culture or class background, or through their engagement in doctoral work, and so on.

However, closer thought about identity leads to questions about how an individual may choose or claim different aspects of identity in different contexts, and how fixed or dynamic one’s identity may be. These questions and others have been explored by theorists in what Hall (1996) has described as a “veritable discursive explosion in recent years around the concept of identity” (p. 1). In response to the idea of an “integral, ordinary and unified identity” (Hall, 1996, p. 2), scholars have written about it as being “more contingent, fragile, and incomplete and thus more amenable to reconstitution than was previously thought possible” (du Gay et al., 2000, p. 2). The following discussion draws heavily on poststructuralist theoretical orientations to articulate a post-critical understanding of identity.

Post-critical understandings of identity

Post-structuralist thinkers emphasise the importance of language and discourse in locating individuals in the social world. As described earlier, Foucault identifies the self as being produced by, and constructed through, discourse (Foucault, 1983; McHoul & Grace, 1998). This attention to language and the individual’s position within discourse involves issues of power specifically in terms of how power operates through language to construct the individual’s subjectivity as being both subject to and a subject of power. Hall (1996) argues that “precisely because identities are constructed within, not outside, discourse, we

need to understand them as produced in specific historical and institutional sites within specific discursive formations and practices, by specific enunciative strategies” (p. 4). In this study, doctoral student identities are understood to be shaped by a variety of discourses including the language and practices about, and of, the university, about who successful doctoral students are, and the ways they conduct themselves.

Moreover, post-structuralist theory “makes it possible to see multiple discourses in which we are inevitably and contradictorily caught up” (Davies, 1994, p. 2). The subject’s positioning in discourse is understood as being relatively fluid, occurring ‘moment to moment’ as individuals interact with their social world (Davies, 1994). Alongside neoliberalism, there are other discourses that operate in higher education to shape student identities, meritocracy and social mobility discourses that I explore in this thesis, for example, that can act together to effect the way students may understand themselves and the possibilities they envision for their futures. Post-structuralist thinkers understand an individual’s experiences as being structured through discourse shaping “his/her readings of the world and the ways in which s/he is positioned in that structure” (Caraballo, 2011, p. 161).

Hall’s (1996) understanding of identity is thoroughly grounded in post-structural precepts and it is his understanding I follow here, to understand identity as a kind of:

meeting point: the point of suture, between on the one hand the discourses and practices which attempt to ‘interpellate’, speak to us, or hail us into place as the social subjects of particular discourses and, on the other hand, the processes which produce subjectivities. (Hall, 1996, pp. 5–6)

Hall (1996) understands identity as being located in points of temporary attachment which discourses have constructed or facilitated. These points of attachment can be characterised as a kind of ‘chaining’ of a subject to discourse. Further, power is tightly connected to the economy of discourses that may operate to shape a student’s identity. As Hall (1996) explains, identities “emerge within specific modalities of power” (p. 4). Those who have dominant roles or positions in society, like the government or the university institution itself, may, through the marshalling of an economy of discourses (for example, through policy, rules and regulations), actively seek to shape doctoral student identities to exercise power over the ways in which students pursue their doctoral studies and form aspirations for their post-doctoral futures. In this conceptualisation, and as I have mentioned above, power is not seen as negative: instead it operates positively to *produce* doctoral student identities.

Telling post-critical tales

In trying to understand first-generation doctoral identities, I have taken up a post-critical approach to narrative research. A first step in understanding post-critical narrative approaches involves recognising the powerful role of the researcher/writer's authorship in constructing stories, not only in gathering the narrative data but also in the telling of the stories of others. Through the constructive practices of selection, organisation and writing, the stories of the students appear on the pages of this thesis as singular narratives interwoven with my commentary and a number of theoretical constructs drawn from relevant literature. The gathered stories also represent, to some extent, my own story as a writer and also as a fellow first-generation student on a doctoral pathway, and are "complicated by the push and pull of how stories are told" (Britzman, 2000, p. 77). As MacLure (2003) maintains, "educational research is unavoidably a rhetorical affair. Like any other texts, research texts ... are 'fabrications'. Their truth and findings are put together – that is built or woven to achieve particular effects or structures" (p. 80). The stories are written in organised prose that, "may seem framed, concrete and stable" (Britzman, 2003, p. 75) but they can only portray students' lives through their recollections captured at a particular moment, and are inevitably partial and subjective.

The narratives gathered together in this thesis reflect the public, and sometimes private, moments of the students as they experienced the university and doctoral education. However, there are many more moments that are "elusive, chaotic and unaccounted [for]" (Britzman, 2003, p. 75) that do not appear directly in this narrative. Instead of presenting a fixed and determined reality of these first-generation students, what I hope to reveal is the ways that these students, including me, are caught up in multiple and conflicting stories that enfold disruptions and competing truths in the retelling of their diverse and complex journeys within higher education. Ultimately, the goal of post-structural research is to investigate the ways through which discourse produces subjects and to expand the number of available discourses and possible subject positions. The work of a post-structural researcher involves close readings of text, often in highly intensive ways, to unpack assumptions, identify conflicts and contradictions within them. This is the search for the 'undecidable' (Derrida as cited in Agger, 1991) so it is possible to understand the ways subjects are constructed through discourse. Following this, the texts in this study, including interview transcripts, but also written text and images gathered within focus groups (as examples of discursive forms), have been subject to close

readings and deconstructive interpretive practices explained in more detail in the textual analysis section in Methodology chapter of this thesis. In the final part of this chapter, I extend my discussion of storytelling and narrative to articulate the ways in which narrative is employed within this thesis.

Narrative orientations

Narrative is woven through this thesis in a variety of ways. An autoethnographic narrative opens this work as a means to locate the researcher's own positioning in the telling of first-generation stories but also as a way to invite readers into this large academic text. Narrative is then used as a method to explore first-generation student engagements with higher education to gain insights into why this group of 'non-traditional' students have pursued doctoral study in the contemporary academic context. In this way, I hope to "reveal some hidden meanings, the said and the unsaid, the multiple competing perspectives" (Britzman, 2003, p. 76) attendant within these diverse narratives, and to speak to the "discursive ideological terrains" that first-generation doctoral students experience in higher education. Ultimately, these stories will reflect some of the students' processes of 'becoming' within the doctorate, and the academy, in relation to their own imagined futures and their progress from doctoral studies into potentially uncertain post-doctoral circumstances. A number of literary devices are deployed within this writing, including metaphor. Well-chosen metaphors can be highly illustrative and can provide access to a range of meanings about a particular subject, offering different ways of thinking about a topic (Hughes & Tight, 2013). Within this study, metaphors figure heavily in the students' own descriptions of the university and their understanding of it, so it seems appropriate to draw on some carefully selected metaphors to add to the richness of the student narratives included within this text.

In addition to the participants' stories, I also examine two cultural texts to explore how the university is represented in narrative. An analysis of *Educating Rita* (1983) and *Brideshead Revisited* (1980) was undertaken to contemplate the kinds of messages film and television texts may contribute to understandings of the university in the cultural imagination. Filmic, television and literary texts can provide rich insights into worlds that may not have been experienced first-hand, as in the case of many first-generation students before they enter the university, and thus can help shape students' knowledge and expectations about the university. This approach understands ideas about the university and the doctorate are "culturally determined and understood ... and informed in sites within and beyond the

context of the university” (Kelly, 2017a, p. 1). Through taking a broad view of both the students’ own imaginings and significant textual portrayals of the university, it is possible to gain deeper understandings of notions of the university and the way individuals engage with it as a key social institution.

Finally, in this thesis, as the Coda, I include a duoethnography. This text is a further kind of narrative, one that captures the experiences of my fellow doctoral colleague, Seamus (SB) and me. Here we share our journeys of ‘academic becoming’, positioned at similar points in our doctoral journey. The text brings into view some stark contrasts between us as first-generation and continuing-generation students and it embodies a variety of key themes of this study revealing the ways in which an individual’s class or social location can have major impacts on they imagine, understand and navigate higher education. It is presented without analysis so that readers may draw their own conclusions about the various university pathways shared by the protagonists and reflect on their own imaginings about the university and their higher education experiences. Overall, this research seeks to draw attention to the experiences of first-generation students within doctoral education through examining their narratives of becoming. As Kniffin’s suggests (2007) first-generation students are a group that has been traditionally underserved by higher education, and thus placing this group of students at the forefront of consideration seems to be a valuable undertaking.

The thesis narrative

This thesis is organised into six chapters that are interwoven with a series of four short pieces: an autoethnographic Prelude, two Interludes, and a Coda. In my analytic chapters, (Chapters 4-5), I draw on data from my interviews, focus groups and the duoethnography to examine first-generation students’ engagements with meritocracy and social mobility discourses and explore their university imaginings. In the Interludes, I undertake a different kind of work through analysing two cultural texts to explore how the university is constructed in cultural discourse. The work of the Interludes is based on the understanding that the university exists both in real or physical terms but also within discourses that set the imaginative parameters for the university. As Kelly (2017a) suggests in relation to the PhD, it is an “idea formed in sites *within* and *beyond* the context of the university” (p. 1, original emphasis). My analytic work on *Educating Rita* (1983) and *Brideshead Revisited* (1981) seeks to gain greater understanding of the meaning and importance of the university as located in cultural objects such as novels, film and television. As well as analysis, I include a significant

amount of description in my writing about the chosen cultural works with a view to evoking the university worlds portrayed within the texts. I see the unique value of the Interludes in demonstrating the power of cultural texts to reinscribe and re-articulate arguably mythic and outdated notions of the university and what it promises to students.

In what follows I provide an outline of each section of the thesis:

Prelude. Autoethnographic reflections

I open this thesis with an autoethnographic narrative account of my university pathway as the first member of my family to go to university. In this piece, I describe my first encounters with the idea of the university, my early school experiences and how I began to aspire to the university without having any close-up experience of higher education until I entered the university. I then reflect on my undergraduate university years and the ways in which I moved, somewhat serendipitously, into doctoral work with the uncertain hope of joining the academy.

Chapter One. Introduction: Hopeful arrivals

In this first chapter I provide an overview of the research project and identify the central questions I respond to in this study. I begin this writing by examining the current state of doctoral education and offer a rationale for the research of first-generation doctoral students within the contemporary university. I also introduce the central arguments of this thesis and identify the significance of the imagination in relation to understanding students' engagements with higher education. In the last part of this introduction chapter I articulate the post-critical theoretical positioning of this study and outline the place of narrative within this thesis.

Chapter Two. The importance of being first: A review of the literature on first-generation students within doctoral education

In the second chapter of this thesis I examine a significant body of literature about first-generation students within the context of the university and doctoral education and begin to trace some of the key conceptual notions important in this project, including the meritocracy and social mobility. This chapter also includes reference to research undertaken in the field of higher education that draws upon post-critical theoretical orientations as a means to ground the analysis undertaken across this thesis.

Chapter Three. Methodological considerations

This chapter describes the study's methodological approach and includes a discussion of my researcher standpoint, an explanation of the study's methodological positioning, and an account of the data collection and analysis methods used. I also explore the key issues of trustworthiness and ethical considerations relevant to this study.

Interlude I. Filmic figurations: Educating Rita (1983) and the mythic university

In the first of the interludes, I offer an analytical reading of the British film *Educating Rita* (Russell, 1983), one of the earliest and most well-known mainstream films about the experiences of a working-class, female, and first-generation student within the university. This analysis is undertaken with a view to providing different entry points into the imaginings, hopes and promises associated with being a student in the university which is central to consideration in this research.

Chapter Four. The university and the promise of meritocracy and mobility

This chapter presents an analysis of the research data to examine notions of meritocracy and conceptions of the meritocratic university. I identify some of the first-generation students' optimistic attachments to this view of the university and how these students engaged with meritocracy discourse to enable them to take up their doctoral student subjectivities. I then examine the concept of social mobility in relation to first-generation students and offer a particular conception of social mobility that is less about escape from a first-generation individual's background and more about connection, return and reciprocity. Finally, I seek to contextualise the social mobility of first-generation students, drawing attention to the complex web of mobilities that can define the contemporary first-generation student experience within doctoral education.

Interlude II. Filmic figurations: The University within Brideshead Revisited (1981)

In this second interlude, Episode One of the British television series *Brideshead Revisited* (Lindsay-Hogg & Sturridge, 1981) is analysed to examine the idea of the university as a means of reflecting on aspirations, understandings and dreams about the university in the broader social and cultural domain. I identify the way in which the television text discursively constructs the university as an elite ivory tower through the production's engagements with memory, place and character.

Chapter Five. Dreaming the university: Tracing student imaginings

In this final data analysis chapter, I explore the students' imaginings of the university and doctorate and their hopes for their post-doctoral futures. I identify four established social imaginaries of the university and I also suggest that the students' imaginings, as informed by broader social imaginaries, underscore their ongoing investments in the doctorate and the promise it represents for an academic good life. I draw attention to a new imaginative space of the university - one that is deeply connected to Māori ways of knowing and being - and further confirm the importance of identity in any consideration of student engagement with the university.

Chapter Six. Closing thoughts and the opening up of spaces of possibility

The final chapter draws together the key arguments made across the thesis. It identifies the contribution to knowledge that is made by this study and the significance of this knowledge. Following this discussion, limitations of the study are identified. The chapter discussion then explores some of the learning that I have gained through the research process. The thesis is drawn to a close with some considerations of the questions that have been opened up as a result of this research work.

Coda. Duoethnographic explorations of the idea of the university

In the Coda, I provide a transcript of a duoethnographic conversation⁸ between a fellow PhD candidate and me which captures a range of articulations of our imagining of the university, located as we are at a similar point in our PhD work and as we contemplate our academic futures. It is included to provide insights into the differences that can exist between first-generation students in contrast with continuing-generation students in terms of the way we understand and approach the university, the choices we make and the kinds of academic identities we take up. The text represents a minimally edited transcription of our duoethnographic conversation, which was prompted by the question, 'how did we come to know the university?'. While this piece is referred to in other parts of this thesis, in line with the methodological underpinnings of duoethnography (Norris & Sawyer, 2012) our narratives of academic 'becomings' are offered alone, unaccompanied by analysis. No particular analytical narrative is privileged by me as writer/researcher. In this way, readers

⁸ This duoethnographic text is the basis of an article accepted for publication: Burford, J., & Mitchell, C., (2019). Varied starting points and pathways: A duoethnographic exploration of 'diverse' students' capacities to aspire to doctoral education. *Reconceptualising Educational Research Methodologies*. 10(1), 28-44. <https://doi.org/10.7577/term.3242>

are invited to construct their own meanings and contemplate their own imaginings of the university and academic becoming, outside of this initial overview.

Chapter Two. The importance of being first: A review of the literature on first-generation students in doctoral education

Introduction

In this chapter I seek to map the research landscape relating to first-generation students by examining the literature about the experiences of these individuals within doctoral education. The review considers two simple questions: who are first-generation students? And, how have we come to know them? In contemplating these questions close attention is paid to understanding how the category of first-generation students is understood within educational writing, how these students have experienced the university and what is known about why these students have ‘arrived’ in doctoral education. To locate this discussion, I begin this chapter by providing an overview of the contemporary university context. I then explore some of the literature on meritocracy and social mobility as key discourses informing the ways in which individuals make sense of higher education. My focus then turns to student experiences of higher education and what the literature tells us about contemporary ‘non-traditional’ or diverse students before narrowing my discussion to the current research on first-generation students in particular. As identified in *Chapter One*, I will argue that first-generation students are located within a deficit discourse. This deficit discourse is evident in the research through the common description of this cohort of students both as ‘not fitting in’ and being “at risk” (Terenzini et al., 1996, p. 20). In the last part of the review, I explore some writing on postgraduate and doctoral education which utilises post-critical perspectives. This literature draws attention to the complex workings of power within postgraduate supervision relations and illustrates the way supervision pedagogical practices are based on assumptions about traditional students. It also provides powerful insights into the workings of widening participation discourse that positions ‘non-traditional’ students within deficit constructions.

Overall, I have engaged with a wide literature including research from the American, British and Australasian settings to provide a detailed consideration of the experiences of first-generation students. Although my focus here is specifically on the first-generation students within doctoral education, I have drawn on writing that examines the contemporary university setting, ‘non-traditional’ students access to university and undergraduate

experiences, along with research that has examined first-generation undergraduate experiences. I have explored these different bodies of writing with a view to providing context to the experiences of the students focused upon in this study. This broad collection of work is particularly valuable given the current paucity of research on first-generation students within doctoral education. As I mentioned above, I also draw attention to the work of post-structural or post-critical writers given the importance of this analytic perspective in this study. My review of this body of literature leads me to suggest that there is a lack of agreement in the research about the effects of first-generation status on student outcomes in relation to postgraduate or doctoral study and limited knowledge about the experiences of students who are first-generation within doctoral education.

An analysis of the current research indicates that there is burgeoning interest in first-generation students aligned with increasing interest in doctoral education. Certainly, the body of literature focused on doctoral education has expanded significantly in recent times (Green, 2005). With this increased attention, there has been greater scrutiny of the nature and delivery of doctoral education (Boud & Lee, 2009). Authors from a range of higher education settings almost unanimously describe it in terms of being a time of transition and many point to a range of problems or challenges (Cuthbert & Molla, 2015; Green, 2009; McAlpine, 2017). A few writers go further than this to explicitly state that many aspects of current doctoral practices are deeply problematic. Indeed, Shulman, Golde, Conklin Busechel and Garabedian (2006), for example, borrow terminology from the medical vernacular, likening the state of doctoral education to that of an individual facing serious disease. They claim when discussing the American Education doctorate that:

The problems of the education doctorate are not *acute*. To call them such would suggest that they are new and potentially of short duration. In fact, the problems are *chronic* and *crippling*. Unless we face these issues squarely and with purposeful action, schools of education risk becoming increasingly impotent in carrying out their primary mission. (emphasis added, p. 25)

These sentiments while specifically focused on one discipline and context indicate a high level of concern about doctoral education from some commentators. From an assessment of the educational writing there appears to be a number of key issues underpinning these concerns. Critical questions are being asked about the purpose(s) of doctoral education and the type of skills and knowledge being developed by students within doctoral programmes (see Barrie et al., 2016; McCulloch & Stokes, 2007; Platow, 2012; Stracke & Kumar, 2014). Secondly, the completion time of students, typically much longer than universities or governments are seeking to achieve, is regularly highlighted within the literature (Fletcher,

Gies, & Hodge, 2011), and lastly, there is a great deal of discussion from a variety of stakeholders about the high rates of doctoral student attrition (Boud & Lee, 2009; Golde, 2006; Lovitts, 2001). Bearing in mind some concerns about the accuracy of record keeping in relation to doctoral student numbers, estimates from within the last twenty years, point to a consistent 30-60% rate of non-completion across a range of higher education settings around the world⁹. This percentage is made all the more significant with the large growth in the numbers of students within doctoral education over the last two decades (Boud & Lee, 2009).

In recent work Cuthbert and Molla (2015) suggest, the concerns about the completion times and the high levels of attrition also seem “to have transformed and crystalized in urgent concern with the relevance of the PhD as manifest in graduate employability”(p. 36). This is something these authors connect to political concerns about national economic competitiveness framed within notions of “inefficiency, deficiency and excess in doctoral education” (p. 35). In Aotearoa/New Zealand, like other contexts, it is difficult to ascertain the specific number of students who fail to complete. As Brailsford (2010) points out, the fact that significant numbers of students shift from full-time to part-time study (and back), and likewise take breaks from their doctoral programmes to later return, makes it difficult to clearly identify the number of completions in relation to enrolment. Taking this into account, research by the Ministry of Education (2010) indicates that a significant proportion of students fail to complete doctoral programmes. According to the Ministry’s figures 62% of doctoral students enrolled in 2001 had completed their PhD’s by the end of 2008, revealing that after eight years more than one in three candidates had not yet completed their doctoral programmes. Clearly, the costs associated with more than one out of three students taking an extended period to complete, or failing to complete their studies, is significant both at the personal level and beyond, at the institutional and governmental contexts. The high levels of non-completion provide a strong rationale for the examination of doctoral education practices and the doctoral student experience.

The highlighted concerns about completion times, and student attrition in particular, have led to growing discussion about doctoral practices and increased awareness that the doctoral

⁹ Lovitts’ (2001) major study of doctoral attrition in the US and Canada identified an overall doctoral non-completion rate of 30-50%. In Aotearoa/New Zealand, recent Ministry of Education (2010) statistics identify an overall non-completion rate of approximately 38%. In Australia, a study by Martin, McLachlan and Karmel (1999) indicated that 47% of doctoral students did not complete their programme of studies across a 7-year period.

student body “contains sub-populations who have common and distinct retention concerns” (Seay et al., 2008, p. 11). This awareness of the different experiences of particular groups of doctoral students is framed within a context of a developing focus on the concept of privilege which has over the last 10-15 years been employed “to enlighten educators to the small, but significant, ways in which majority group members benefit from existing social, organisational, and societal structures” (Orbe, 2004, p. 146). These factors have underpinned the increasing attention paid to first-generation students by researchers (Pascarella et al., 2004). Significantly though, the experiences of students within doctoral programmes, let alone the experiences of first-generation students within doctoral education, have not been examined in depth. As Leonard and Becker (2009) observe in their review of the British literature about doctoral education, “relatively little empirical work includes the perspective of students”. They argue that doctoral students are in fact, “increasingly seen as cogs in the system and not ‘key stakeholders’” (p. 71).

The university and the rise of neoliberalism

To undertake this discussion about first-generation students within doctoral education, it is important to consider the wider context of doctoral study within the university through some of its historical, political and social dimensions. Traditionally, the Western university focused on the intellectual pursuit of knowledge, largely for its own sake, and the provision of education to a small group of relatively privileged individuals (Johnson et al., 2000; Munro, 2011; Ward, 2007). However, the university nowadays has become an increasingly complex site tasked with a variety of sometimes competing roles and obligations (Brewer, Gates, & Goldman, 2002) including the provision of education, credentials and certification for access to careers, research and social critique (Bartley & Webber, 2009). There has been major expansion across the higher education sector leading to widening levels of participation (Burke, 2012) and a growing number of performance imperatives for universities to reach arising from a neoliberal agenda that seeks “greater competition, efficiency, responsiveness and accountability” (Barrow & Grant, 2016, p. 592).

Alongside these expansionary developments there has been, from the 1980s onwards, increasing application of private sector management approaches within the public sector including within higher education informed by neoliberalism (Cupples & Pawson, 2012). Neoliberalism can be described as being “united by three broad beliefs: the benevolence of the free market, minimal state intervention and regulation of the economy and the individual

as a rational economic actor”(Saunders, 2010, p. 45). It is an ideology that has been the dominant in the political and economic sphere in Western contexts for the past 25 years (McMaster, 2013) and is achieved through the complex connections of institutional arrangements, ideologies and discourses that promote self-investment (Bazzul, 2016). At its core, neoliberal theory suggests that the role of the state in society should be eschewed in favour of the marketplace because the market is understood as being a more efficient and effective means of meeting social needs (McMaster, 2013). This logic provides the rationale for the redistribution of wealth through taxation and the reduction in public spending to fund health, welfare and education. Marginson and Considine (2000) also argue that neoliberal ideas have led to the rearticulation of higher education as a business to be managed like any other. In line with this business focus, in Aotearoa/New Zealand as in many other countries, “cultural activities such as education have become appropriated as economic transactions” (Fitzsimons, 2000, p. 14).

Further, neoliberalism understands individuals as economic subjects or as ‘human capital’ where the human subject is primarily, and narrowly, understood in terms of competitive economic self-interest. Foucault names this neoliberal subject as *homo economicus* (Foucault, 2008) and argues that within neoliberalism individual subjectivity is defined by competition. Within this framing, individuals become “creatures whose tendency to compete must be fostered” (Read, 2009, p. 28) and thereby individuals strive to be entrepreneurial, self-investing and responsible for their own success (Bazzul, 2016). In addition, this perspective frames doctoral students as highly trained knowledge workers fit for the professional marketplace and aids the repositioning of knowledge-related research activities to be “increasingly driven by commerce and regulated through economic policies and practices” (Bansel, 2011, p. 547). Moreover, as Read (2009) suggests, the discourse of neoliberalism is deeply implicated in power relations and the formation of certain kinds of subjects, as neoliberalism is “not just a manner of governing states or economies, but is intimately tied to the government of the individual, to a manner of living” (p. 27).

The centrality of economic rationalism within higher education and the impacts of “increasingly constrained budgets” (Bartley & Webber, 2009, p. 71) in the context of growing student populations has had powerful effects on doctoral education. Samson and Comer (2010), for example, identify an expansion of doctoral student numbers in the local Aotearoa/New Zealand context, with an approximately 32% growth in the number of doctoral student enrolments between the years 2000 to 2008. They also identify how this

expansion has not been matched with a similar increase in supervision resources. Due to the fact that approximately the same number of academic staff supervise a greater number of students, there has been a significant increase in these staff members' postgraduate workloads. This increased academic staff workload and reduction in the unit of resource available to students has been paired with other forms of intensification of academic work (Barcan, 2013). For example, this intensification may also be identified in the establishment of the Performance-Based Research Fund (PBRF) in Aotearoa/New Zealand, which requires institutions to compete for a limited pool of funding for research, something which may further impact on the teaching resources available for students and added publication pressures for both students and supervisors given the PBRF's requirements for research outputs (Findsen, 2004; Smith, 2005). Findsen (2004) describes the PBRF as having "raised the bar on the academic goalposts" (p. 61). He contends in light of greater publication pressures that, "regardless the rhetoric regarding the importance of teaching, the strong likelihood is that academics will give acceptable minimal effort towards their teaching while endeavouring to improve research outputs" (p. 61).

In addition, the effects of neoliberal policy imperatives can be recognised in the changes to doctoral programmes across a number of higher education arenas particularly in terms of an increased focus on employability and skill development. According to McCulloch and Stokes (2007) the impetus for the 'skills agenda' in the UK was driven by key stakeholders outside of the university arena itself. They suggest there was in fact, "little evidence of student or university demand for these developments" (p. 44). Changes associated with shifts in doctoral education policies included increased regulation through mechanisms of milestone reporting, annual reports, the incorporation of timely completion statistics and measures of research activity. Stracke and Kumar (2014) also argue that doctoral graduate attributes¹⁰ are largely in place to meet employers' expectations that graduates will have a range of skills that go beyond discipline-based knowledge. Similarly, Platow (2012) maintains that the production of employable graduates has in fact, progressively become "the *raison d'être* for continued university education" (p. 103). In combination, the role of doctoral education may be seen as having shifted to become more focused on the

¹⁰ The University of Auckland doctoral graduate profile currently available from the University website (as at 15 January 2018) that doctoral graduates will possess: specialist knowledge, effective communication skills, general intellectual skills, independence, creativity and learning skills, ethical and social understanding. This profile is available from: <https://cdn.auckland.ac.nz/assets/central/about/teaching-and-learning/teaching-and-learning-principles/documents/2009-graduate-profiles-doctoral.pdf>

production of a trained researcher fit for the workforce, than on the production of the thesis (Bansel, 2011).

It is necessary to acknowledge in any discussion of the dominance of neoliberalism that it is not a monolithic concept. Rather, as Shamir (2008) maintains neoliberalism is not a fixed set of ideas and beliefs, but rather is “a complex, often incoherent, unstable and even contradictory set of practices that are organized around a certain imagination of the ‘market’” (p. 3). Despite the instability of the term and how it is often applied in broad and sometimes loose ways (Ball, 2012), it is nonetheless a powerful force shaping the contemporary university and much of governmental policy. In fact, Fitzsimons (2000), argues that neoliberal discourse needs to be recognised as being not just one among many; instead he believes, “it has become a master discourse, or what Lyotard (1984) calls a ‘metanarrative’ to which all developments in the policy sphere must adhere” (p. 14). Barnett (2013) takes a similar view in relation to higher education, explaining how, “the conceptual space of the idea of the university is tilted – towards ideas of competition, global ‘excellence’, contribution to the global economy and of the market itself” (p. 58).

The work of neoliberal discourse within higher education and, in this case, doctoral education can be seen as underpinning a particular kind of imaginary where subjects, as rational economic actors, pursue higher education in an effort to become ‘enterprising selves’ and develop skills and competencies useful in the marketplace. This contrasts with earlier forms of student subjectivities including doctoral student subjectivities that cast those seeking doctoral education as ‘autonomous students’ (Tennant, 2004, p. 431). The ‘autonomous’ doctoral student subjectivity is less associated with employability and market driven norms and more defined in terms of the notion of the independent scholar working to produce original knowledge, often abstract or theoretical, in a self-directed and largely unaided way.

However, neoliberalism’s dominance in contemporary political and social life does not mean that it fully shapes our understandings about the role and purposes of higher education. As Barcan (2013) contends, despite the major changes within the university brought by the marketisation of higher education, “other ideas and values nonetheless persist” (p. 42). Earlier social imaginaries of the university continue to be at play such that a number of different university imaginaries are circulating together and informing our collective understandings of higher education (Barnett, 2013). In Barcan’s thoughtful discussion about

academic life, she describes the university as ‘palimpsestic’. This metaphor of the palimpsestic university identifies a layering of different imaginaries, where earlier values, ideas and ideals are not completely erased despite the discourse, in this case neoliberalism, that is most clearly identifiable. One of the oldest imaginaries within this palimpsest is the university as an ‘ivory tower’. This ‘ivory tower university’ can still be easily identified in a variety of cultural and media spaces including film and television. Its familiar conceptualisation is magnificently articulated in Evelyn Waugh’s (1945) novel *Brideshead Revisited: The sacred and profane memories of Captain Charles Ryder* and in its filmic rendition, as I discuss in a later Interlude. This form of the British university (often described as being exemplified by the Oxbridge universities) extends beyond the European context with its mirror reflections in the Ivy League institutions of the US, the sandstone universities of Australia and, to some extent, in the original university colleges of Aotearoa/ New Zealand.

Other significant university imaginaries can also be identified such as the liberal-humanist or civic university imaginaries most notably articulated in the 19th Century work of Cardinal Newman¹¹, and the American university of popular culture often depicted in mainstream Hollywood cinema. Despite the fluctuating importance of different imaginaries in social life, all of them exert some force over the ways students understand themselves, their programmes and the university. Scholars like Barnett (2013) and Hey and Morley (2011) identify the importance of university imaginaries, both having produced work that seeks to contribute to alternative imaginaries to challenge and broaden the scope of current perspectives on the role of the university in social life. For Hey and Morley (2011), the main rationale for their work was to articulate their desire “to imagine the future cohabitation of equity and universities, in the light of the present, continuing and compounding of persistent inequalities” (p. 165), inequalities they identify in relation to ‘non-traditional’ individuals like those that are first-generation. I will examine some of the key imaginaries of the university identified in the narratives of the first-generation students within this study in more detail in later chapters of this thesis. To continue to locate the first-generation student experience in doctoral education I now turn to discussing the place of meritocracy and social mobility discourses in shaping contemporary understandings of the role and purposes of a university education.

¹¹ Cardinal John Henry Newman’s famous work *The idea of a university* was first published in 1852. Newman wrote the book in two parts. The first part is made up of a series of discourses he gave in Dublin in 1852 and the second part was comprised of a series of writings for lectures and essays he prepared between 1854-1858 (Turner, 1996).

Meritocracy, social mobility and higher education

Meritocracy and social mobility are topics of significant interest to scholars. This interest can be seen as arising from, as Payne (2017) suggests, “issues of inequality in individual’s opportunities to use their talents ... the fairness and legitimacy of the status quo and the effective use of a country’s most basic resource: its people” (p. vi). Although the term meritocracy is relatively new, in the case of social mobility, the literature extends back at least to the mid-twentieth century¹². A meritocracy, in simple terms, is a system where people can acquire social status and reward through their effort and achievement, and thereby become upwardly mobile. Conversely, of course, following the same logic, failing to demonstrate merit may result in an individual experiencing downward social mobility. In line with this, the concept of social mobility has been defined in various ways but can be understood as “the way that, or the extent to which, people move or fail to move from one position in society to another – up or down the social hierarchy” (Payne, 2017, p. vi). Despite their different histories and focus, these terms possess shared conceptual ground with writers and scholars often deploying them together.

Certainly, these terms are widely invoked in policy and political arenas (Bathmaker, Ingram, & Waller, 2013; Payne, 2017; Reay, 2013a). Commonly, in these contexts (and beyond) the notion of a meritocratic social system is one that is generally advocated for in positive terms. As Littler (2013) points out, “the concept of meritocracy is largely normalised as wholly beneficial” (p. 53). This is similarly true of political discussions of social mobility: as Friedman (2014) suggests, “mainstream political discourse frames mobility as an unequivocally progressive force” (p. 352). Both of these terms are often invoked in contemporary discussions about the role and place of education (Bathmaker et al., 2016). Higher education, in particular, is seen as a primary means of achieving social mobility, through allowing an individual to demonstrate merit with a view to improved life chances and therefore the opportunity to move up the ‘social hierarchy’. As McNamee and Miller (2009) observe in relation to the American setting, education is seen as “the ‘engine’ of meritocracy” (p. 107). Moreover, as Bathmaker and colleagues (2016) explain, “increasingly, parents believe that their children need a university education to get on in life, and middle-class parents over the past decades have become fearful that without a degree their children will be in danger of downward social mobility” (p. 2).

¹² Payne (2017) identifies two early British studies: Chapman and Marquis (1912) and Chapman and Abbott (1913) in this area. However, he says these writers did not employ the term ‘social mobility’. Instead Payne points to the text *Social Mobility in Britain* Glass and Jerzy (1954) as being the first ‘proper’ major social mobility study of its kind.

Littler (2013) observes, however, despite the seemingly positive nature of meritocracy or its apparent innocuousness, numerous scholars have drawn explicit attention to the problems associated with meritocratic systems (see Burke, 2012; Littler, 2013; Liu, 2011; McNamee & Miller, 2009; Reay, 2013; Śliwa & Johansson, 2014). Burke (2012) contends that the:

notion of meritocracy does not address the differential social positions that individuals occupy, providing some privileged groups with the valuable cultural and material resources necessary to ‘play the game’ and succeed. A lack of attention to how some groups have unfair access to the cultural tools needed to get ahead tends to individualise ‘failure’. (p. 121)

In Littler’s (2013) view, meritocracy “has become a key ideological means by which plutocracy – or government by a wealthy elite – perpetuates itself through neoliberal culture” (p. 53). There is now a significant number of studies exposing the limitations of social mobility and identifying continuing patterns of privilege (Bathmaker et al., 2016). One such study was undertaken by Ashley and colleagues (2015) who investigated the backgrounds of staff at elite accounting and law firms in England and Scotland. These authors found that the firms “continue to be heavily dominated at entry level by people from privileged socioeconomic backgrounds” (p. 6). Although it is true that there remain complex issues around determining the extent and types of social mobility in different contexts (Payne, 2017), Reay (2013) argues that “the promise of mobility allows capitalist societies ... to maintain a system of firmly entrenched inequalities” (p. 664). Both meritocracy and social mobility can be identified from a post-critical perspective as powerful discursive constructs which have subjectivity-forming effects, shaping the kinds of investments individuals make in higher education including doctoral education. I discuss the significance of merit and mobility discourses more in *Chapter Four* of this thesis, along with the ways in which these ‘sister’ discourses are taken up by the first-generation students in this study. In the next section of this review, I move to examining some of the key literature that explores the experiences of ‘non-traditional’ students within higher education.

The experiences of ‘non-traditional’ or diverse students

There is a large and growing literature devoted to the experiences of ‘non-traditional’ or diverse students within higher education. A brief survey of this literature identifies the ways class and social difference are experienced by ‘non-traditional’ students and the feelings of exclusion they encounter within the culture of the university. Read, Archer and Leathwood (2003), for example, identify the challenges of ‘academic culture’ for ‘non-traditional’ students at elite universities in terms of the pedagogical and epistemological practices,

academic conventions and the size and complexity of tertiary institutions. Similarly, Reay's (2009, 2010) scholarly work demonstrates the continuing salience of class in shaping the experiences of students within British higher education. For example, Reay (2010) identifies the important differences in participation by social class in relation to the different types of British university, with the majority of working-class and diverse students attending 'newer' post-1992 universities while only a very small percentage study at more established or elite universities. These latter universities continue to be dominated by the traditional university constituency – the middle-class.

The economic challenges for 'non-traditional' students are also clearly identified by researchers (see Archer et al., 2003; Bradley, Noonan, & Scales, 2008; Munro, 2011). An Australian study by Munro (2011), for instance, points to the major financial constraints associated with higher education for 'non-traditional' students and the workload many of these students have outside of the university to fund their education. A review of the higher education context by Bradley and colleagues (2008) in the same setting found that students who had to 'survive' on their work incomes while studying, especially those that worked more than 20 hours per week, faced negative impacts on their academic studies as well their university experiences overall. Munro (2011) suggests that aspirational language around widening participation and the encouragement of 'non-traditional' students to undertake university study remains problematic and misleading unless these students are supported by the provision of greater material resources.

Archer and colleagues (2003) work on class and widening participation in the UK is also notable. Writing from a position between modernism and post-modernism, the scholars point to the persistent underrepresentation of working-class individuals and communities in higher education. The authors explore educational inequalities, especially in relation to class, and point to the ways in which the university is not only a site for educational opportunity but is also implicated in reproducing inequalities related to social class. Hutchings (2003) argues that working-class individuals may be disadvantaged because they do not possess the same cultural capital as their middle-class colleagues in terms of access to information, or the ability to draw on the higher education experiences of those around them. Moreover, Archer (2003) asserts that participation in university study does not represent as good 'value' an investment for individuals from the working-class because "they are disproportionately disadvantaged by the high risks and costs associated with higher education participation" (p. 126). Archer (2003) also argues that identity is central to the differential ways in which

working-class and middle-class individuals navigate educational systems suggesting that “notions of identity impact upon the educational routes that working-class people may perceive to be accessible, worthwhile and desirable and assumptions on the behalf of middle-class professionals may underpin the forms of ... guidance made available to working-class groups” (p. 115).

Research by Burke (2012, 2013) and Burke and colleagues (2016) provides further insights into widening participation discourses and their impact on student subjectivities. Burke, in *The right to higher education: Beyond widening participation* (2012), draws on feminist, critical and post-structural perspectives to investigate the contemporary higher education setting and the widening participation policy imperatives that continue to shape this arena. In her writing, Burke traces the history of widening participation discourse and links contemporary widening participation discourses to neoliberal globalisation. She also identifies an array of complex assumptions, values and viewpoints underscoring the widening participation agenda and problematises the ways it goes about achieving its central focus, that is, to redress the underrepresentation of individuals from certain social groups.

Moreover, Burke makes connections between widening participation discourses and the complex ways that inequalities and misrecognitions play out drawing particular attention to the structural and material inequalities experienced by ‘non-traditional’ students. Burke’s (2012) text draws on four different studies and provides compelling insights into the ways in which diversity and difference can operate within higher education and how, in line with this, ‘non-traditional’ students are both included and excluded in the context of widening participation in higher education. Burke and colleagues (2016) later extended this work by exploring the dimensions of equity in higher education and deconstructing the concept of capability in relation to diverse students’ sense of belonging. These authors point to the assumption underpinning many widening participation policy agendas that all “students with the *potential* to benefit from higher education should have fair access” (p. 6). This conception of capability or potential is a culturally constructed notion and is, as they explain, far from straightforwardly identified. Burke and colleagues also identify how capability can be seen by university educators and how students’ “dispositions to learning, time management and willingness to work” (p. 8) can be misrecognised and lead to a student being seen as lacking capability.

Overall, this brief exploration of the literature on diverse or ‘non-traditional’ students highlights a number of issues experienced by these students in relation to class, culture and material challenges. However, this body of research does not specifically examine first-generation students and largely focuses on access to university and the undergraduate experience (McCulloch & Thomas, 2013). With this in mind, I now move to narrowing my discussion from the more general focus of research on ‘non-traditional’ students to look more closely at the first-generation student experience both at undergraduate level and beyond. Such an undertaking requires engagement with the concept or category of first-generation students to establish some of the complexities of the term and to make clear how I employ it within this study.

Focusing on first-generation students

In this examination of first-generation student experiences, I have had to think carefully about the ways the category of ‘first-generation student’ is articulated within the scholarly literature. An important aspect of the current research on first-generation students lies in the different ways first-generation status is identified. The term ‘first-generation student’ is commonly defined within educational writing in reference to an individual’s parents’ level of university experience across two main dimensions. A narrow definition of first-generation status identifies first-generation students as those students whose parents had no tertiary education whatsoever. This definition, that is, those individuals whose parents did not attend university or college¹³, has been applied in a number of research studies (Choy, 2001; Ishitani, 2006; Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; Pascarella et al., 2004; Terenzini et al., 1996). The second, broader definition of first-generation status also includes students whose parents have some university or college education but did not complete an undergraduate degree. This description is also regularly applied by researchers and captures those students whose parents may have undertaken some vocational education or studied at a university for a limited period (Davis, 2010; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Próspero & Vohra-Gupta, 2007).

It appears that only a small amount of research has closely examined the distinctions between these two definitional approaches in determining first-generation status, despite the potential differences between these categories of students. Arguably, there might be some

¹³ The term college has been included in reference to the American context, although in the Australasian context the term university is more commonly applied to degree-granting research institutions.

meaningful differences between those individuals whose parent, or parents, studied at university perhaps for a considerable period of time, but did not complete the required credits for the award of a degree (or who may also have studied for a diploma or certificate) compared to those whose parents did not attend university at all. In fact, in this case it is conceivable that individuals with parents with some experience of higher education might share more characteristics with continuing-generation students than those whose parents have not participated in university study despite the lack of a completed degree.

A US quantitative study that does consider these definitional issues was undertaken by Ishitani (2006) who investigated attrition levels of first-generation students. Ishitani (2006) categorised students into a number of different groups including first-generation students with parents who had not attended university and those students whose parents had some college experience. The study also compared these two groups to students with one or two parents who had university degrees. The results of the study showed that there were differences between the students whose parents who had some university education and those that had no university experience; students with parents having no college experience being 1.3 times more likely to depart from university study compared to their continuing-generation counterparts. The students with parents with some college experience had a lower departure rate in comparison to continuing-generation students than first-generation students; these students being .99 times more likely to leave study before degree completion compared to continuing-generation students.

A further complicating factor for definitional purposes, certainly in relation to the narrower definition of first-generation status, is found in the focus on the university as the relevant institution in determining first-generation status. This institutional focus does not take account the nature of the tertiary education context in Aotearoa/New Zealand where people may attend a vocational institution such as a polytechnic or institute of technology and earn a degree. Another issue to consider in terms of defining first-generation status which also identifies some limitations with this frame is the way that the category of first-generation student is defined in relation to parental status rather than including reference to the wider family such as aunts or uncles or grandparents. As such, all of these different factors shaping first-generation status highlight the complexity and arguably troublesome nature of defining this category of student and warrant closer critical examination than has been undertaken to date.

Bearing in mind the complexities of determining first-generation status, for the purposes of this present study, I employ the narrower definition of first-generation status in which I define first-generation students as students whose parents who did not attend university¹⁴. For the participants in this research the issue of a parent possessing a degree from a non-university higher education institution did not arise. Furthermore, for the sake of clarity, it is useful to emphasise that the term ‘first-generation student’ in my research is used to refer to educational levels across one generation, that is, parent to child, therefore a first-generation student does not necessarily have to be the very first within their generation within a family to go to university; an individual’s sibling may have already studied at tertiary level. Both siblings in such a scenario would accurately be described as first-generation provided that their parents had not attended university. Similarly, one generation only is relevant, earlier generations (grandparents or beyond) educational levels are not part of determining first-generation status. This single generation focus, although common to first-generation research, has its limitations as it can be seen as relying on Western ideas of the centrality of the nuclear family, potentially ignoring the roles different family members may play for an individual across the generations in terms of access to and success within higher education.

It is also useful to recognise that while this first-generation cohort is defined in relation to the level of parental education, it is a term that speaks to a range of other socio-economic factors that are commonly associated with these individuals. First-generation students have been identified as often being from low income backgrounds, more likely to be female (OECD, 2015), enrolled part-time, ethnically diverse and older than traditional students when entering higher education (Chen, 2005; Terenzini et al., 1996). As Jehangir (2010) points out, “students who are the first in their family to attend college are a diverse group who juggle numerous life roles and identities” (p. 534). Lohfink and Paulsen (2005) in relation to this diversity, identify first-generation students as “inhabiting intersecting sites of oppression based on race, class and ethnicity” (p. 411).

The language of intersections: Working-class, diverse and ‘non-traditional’ students

A further salient matter in understanding the research on first-generation students lies in recognising the different ways researchers name students within their work. The naming of

¹⁴ In one instance, a parent of a first-generation student began tertiary study after their child had completed their bachelor’s degree. My definition of first-generation student therefore is bounded in terms of first-generation students having parents who did not undertake university study before their child.

categories of students according to different definitional structures is shaped by different research contexts and histories and to some extent a researcher's own interests or preferences. An example of this is found in the use of the term 'working-class students' often employed within the British context. This term is used in a large variety of academic scholarship in this setting, reflecting a longstanding interest in class matters by educational academics in the UK. Studies on working-class individuals would likely largely be made up of a significant number of first-generation students, as historically, attending university has not been available to many from the working-class. Despite the likely strong connections between these groups the category of working-class student cannot be assumed to be identical to students who are first-generation.

Moreover, there is a large body of research about students that are from low socio-economic backgrounds, or are referred to as 'non-traditional' or 'diverse students' by education scholars that again may capture significant numbers of first-generation students depending on the setting in which it is deployed. This category of literature is loosely defined and can be seen as including work on first-generation students, but also may include a focus on indigenous, minority, mature students, students with disabilities and lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, intersex and transgender (LGBTI) students. It can also refer to work that examines the experiences of women and gender in particular contexts within higher education. Trowler (2015) identifies the broad nature of this category of student and suggests that the loose use of the term 'non-traditional student' is a longstanding feature of educational writing. She says that the term "has been used uncritically in the literature for several decades, often as a shorthand marker for those seen as the intended beneficiaries of widening participation-type policies" (p. 298). It is true that many first-generation students can often be accurately described as being 'non-traditional' and therefore it is valuable to engage with this literature. However, as Spiegler and Bednarek (2013) point out, this term cannot be used interchangeably with first-generation status as the category of 'non-traditional' students is often deployed within the scholarly writing with an emphasis on age, study-work relations, family status and income level, and therefore only partially overlaps with first-generation status. Whilst there are clearly intersections between first-generation students and working-class and 'non-traditional' student categories they cannot be read as identical or commensurate, a fact that needs to be borne in mind when utilising the educational research.

The presence of first-generation students within the university

With the expansion of higher education around the world over the last two or three decades, there has been growth in numbers of students from diverse backgrounds (Biggs, 2003; Morris, 2009). As mentioned earlier, identifying the precise number of students who are first-generation is difficult based on the kinds of statistical data kept by higher education institutions, the particular national context, and the varied definitions employed by researchers. Despite this, American research indicates that the expansion in higher education has included significant numbers of students who are first-generation (Choy, 2001; Pascarella et al., 2004). Engle and Tinto (2008) for instance, point to a large population of first-generation, low-income students in post-secondary education in the US, totalling some 4.5 million students, which they estimate to represent 24% of the overall undergraduate student body.

Writing in the European context, Spiegler and Bednarek (2013) also identify the variability of the measurements used in first-generation student research, which makes comparisons between countries or regions difficult. Nonetheless, they use data from the *Eurostudent IV report* (Orr, Gwosc, & Netz, 2008) to estimate the proportion of first-generation students across 24 European countries. They identify the share of first-generation students as ranging from 21-76% of the tertiary student population in the 24 European countries studied. Given the wide range in levels of representation across Europe these writers divided the countries into three broad groupings with a lower-mid range of first-generation students being found in Scandinavian and Northern European countries¹⁵, the midrange levels of representation being found in Western Europe and the higher share of first-generation students being found in Eastern or Southern European countries.

In contrast to the estimates available from the US and European contexts, information about first-generation students in Aotearoa/New Zealand is limited. Educational statistics, particularly those that capture information about ethnicity and school decile information, are collected within Aotearoa/New Zealand. These statistics identify students from low-income areas, who are likely to be first-generation; however, as mentioned earlier, data that specifically quantify numbers of first-generation status individuals undertaking university study are not collected. This lack of clear information about first-generation individuals is

¹⁵ According to Spiegler and Bednarek's (2013) analysis, countries with the lower share of FGS at 20-40% include Denmark, Germany and Norway. The middle group of countries include (41-60%), include France, Switzerland, England/Wales and Austria. The countries with the highest share of FGS (61-80%) are from Eastern Europe.

not an uncommon problem for first-generation researchers, as Orbe (2004), citing Padron (1992), makes the point that conducting research on first-generation students can be especially challenging because of “incomplete data regarding the number of first-generation students within tertiary education” (p. 131). He also identifies a “great heterogeneity associated with this group” (p.131) as a further complicating factor for researchers to grapple with.

In recent decades, the gaze of researchers has increasingly turned to the experiences of first-generation students. Although much work in the British context has been undertaken on students in terms of social class rather than with a specific focus on first-generation students (as discussed earlier), there have been some significant studies undertaken by British scholars. Thomas and Quinn (2007), for example, in their book *First-generation student entry into higher education* provide a detailed analysis of first-generation student experiences in the UK. These authors found that first-generation students were relatively unprepared for the university experience and that they lacked a sense of entitlement about their place in higher education. Another significant study by Stuart (2012b) also traced the experiences of first-generation students within higher education, though this research was largely focused on the social mobility of first-generation individuals after undergraduate study.

In the US context there is a large body of writing about first-generation students. In this literature there is significant consensus about the effects of first-generation status on students' access into and initial pathways through higher education. For example, an early large scale study (3840 students in the study's first phase and 2685 in its second phase) by Terenzini (1996) gathered a range of demographic information about students, as well as information about the students' aspirations for, and expectations of, university drawn from a National Survey of Student Learning. Alongside this survey, the students also undertook academic proficiency tests to gauge their academic skills in the areas of reading comprehension, maths and critical thinking at the outset of their university studies and after they had completed their first-year. Terenzini and colleagues (1996) found that, in comparison to their non-first-generation peers, first-generation students were more likely to be from low-income families, to have weaker cognitive skills and lower degree aspirations. They also reported studying fewer hours, having more dependent children, reported receiving less encouragement from their families and worked more hours off-campus, and were less likely to perceive faculty as being concerned about students and teaching. The study's authors suggest that their research painted “a portrait of first-generation students as

they enter college that differs in a number of ways from that of their traditional peers” (p. 16).

Pike and Kuh (2005), in their large-scale quantitative study (3000 students), sought to compare first-generation students’ level of engagement and intellectual development to that of continuing-generation students through asking students to report the frequency with which they engaged in certain activities that represent good study practices related to positive learning outcomes. They found that across some of the key indicators of university success “first-generation students did not compare favourably with their peers from families where at least one parent graduated from college” (p. 289). In particular, these authors found that first-generation students were less engaged overall and less likely to successfully integrate diverse university experiences, less likely to perceive the university environment as being supportive and reported making less learning and development progress compared to other students. Lundberg and colleagues (2007) concurred with this finding; their study found first-generation students to be less likely to be involved in college experiences such as joining clubs or student associations and more likely to have higher levels of paid employment and family responsibilities. Engle and Tinto (2008) also suggested that “low-income and first-generation students are less likely to be engaged in the academic and social experiences that foster success in college such as studying in groups, interacting with faculty and other students, participating in extra-curricular activities and using support services” (p. 3).

Furthermore, according to the research literature, first-generation students are more likely: to have breaks in their pursuit of university degrees (Goldrick-Rab, 2006)¹⁶, face more challenges to meet the competing demands of work and family responsibilities while studying (Stebleton et al., 2014), describe feeling a lower sense of belonging on campus (Rodriguez, 2001; Stebleton et al., 2014) and are less likely to graduate (Pike & Kuh, 2005; Rood, 2009). For example, in a large-scale quantitative study based on national survey data of 4427 students, Ishitani (2006) investigated first-generation students timely completion rates and their longitudinal persistence behaviour. He found that overall first-generation students are less likely to complete their programmes in a timely manner compared to continuing-education students, and as identified earlier, were 1.3 times more likely to leave

¹⁶ In Goldrick-Rab’s (2006) study parental education was determined as those parents who did not possess a bachelor’s degree. This aspect of a student’s background was linked to income and occupation with students being categorised into low, middle and high social background groupings. The results “support the contention that socio-economically disadvantaged students attend college differently from advantaged students ... the ability to change schools while maintaining enrolment appears to depend partly on whether one’s parents went to college and have high incomes” (p. 73).

university than students with university-educated parents. Chen (2005) and Nunez and Cuccaro-Alamin (1998) found in their studies that independent of their ethnicity, family income level and gender, first-generation students who do complete their undergraduate degrees also go on to graduate or doctoral education in disproportionately lower numbers than their continuing-education counterparts (Choy, 2001; Mullen et al., 2003). In sum, it is clear as Spiegler and Bednarek (2013) observe, the research at least in the case of undergraduate first-generation students identifies these students as being “less prepared and less likely to succeed” (p. 329). As first-generation students are commonly from lower socio-economic backgrounds it is relevant here too to take note of OECD research which suggests the higher the socio-economic background of an individual the more likely they are to be educationally successful. Data from a range of international contexts confirms this pattern with only minor variations (OECD, 2012).

First-generation students ‘at risk’

The body of literature about first-generation students often identifies these individuals as being disadvantaged when compared to their continuing-generation peers or as being ‘at risk’ within the university (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Harackiewicz et al., 2014). A description of the status of first-generation students was articulated in some of the earliest and most well-known research on first-generation individuals. Terenzini and colleagues (1996)¹⁷ stated:

first-generation students differ in many educationally important ways from the student higher education has traditionally served. Because of these different characteristics and experiences, they are a group at risk. (p. 20)

This view of first-generation students, even in the face of significant time and further research, continues to persist (Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013). Much of the literature identifies first-generation students as ‘not fitting in’ to university as well as others, and places them in a ‘deficit discourse’ (Gogue, 2016; Tate et al., 2015). While it is necessary to recognise the potentially negative ways these students experience the university and to seek to address disadvantage, it is important to be wary of how this discourse can locate the ‘lack of fit’ with first-generation students themselves, rather than looking at wider structural or social issues within the university. Moreover, despite the fact that first-generation status seems to be a significant independent factor that provides insight into the different educational pathways

¹⁷ The article by Terenzini, et al. (1996) “First-generation college students: Characteristics, experiences, and cognitive development” has been cited 1237 times as of 2018 indicating its impact on research on first-generation students. See the reference list for full details.

of these students compared to others (AuClair et al., 2008), it is necessary to recognise the considerable variation within the first-generation student cohort. One of the aspects of this diversity can be found in the different levels of parental education, the effects of which may be seen as existing along a continuum (Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013). Spiegler and Bednarek (2013) suggest that it is too simplistic to take a dichotomous view of first-generation versus continuing-generation students and simply identify the first-generation students as being at risk within the university. Lee, Sax, Kim and Hagedorn (2004), for example, showed that different levels of parental education¹⁸ of first-generation students and non-first-generation students had significant effects on the experiences and views of the students within their study.

Another issue to consider when thinking about first-generation students as being ‘at risk’ is the weight of research focused on first-generation entrants to higher education or at the undergraduate level. Although the current research establishes that the cohort of first-generation students going into postgraduate or doctoral education becomes relatively smaller than its continuing-generation counterpart, there is limited research available that provides insights into the experiences of these students at postgraduate level and how this ‘at risk’ discourse identifies or misidentifies first-generation students’ experiences within the university. Such limitations within the extant literature provides impetus to examine doctoral education and the experiences of first-generation students within research education.

An expanding body of doctoral education scholarship

An examination of the literature reveals considerable scholarly attention now paid to doctoral education. As Tomasz and Denicolo (2013) suggest, much work on the doctorate, at least the work on the doctoral student experience, has been undertaken since the turn of the millennium. A recent search of one of the largest education databases, Education Research Complete (EBSCO*Host*) using the search term ‘doctoral education’ for example, revealed the breadth of peer reviewed writing now available, returning over 8000 articles containing this search term. Limiting the search to publications from the year 2000 onwards resulted in a small reduction in the total number of publications by a little less than 20%, showing that around 80% of the literature available via this database was published in the last two

¹⁸ In Lee et al.’s (2004) study different levels of parental education were used within their analysis including parents with: Junior high school education’s or less, high school, community college, four-year college and graduate school.

decades. A catalogue search of the University of Auckland Library also returned 110 items under the heading Doctor of Philosophy. This broad body of knowledge about doctoral education has emanated from a number of contexts including the US, the UK and Australia. In the US setting, there has been a sustained focus on doctoral education over the last 20 years (Gopaul, 2015). Researchers have examined a number of critical issues in doctoral education including socialisation (Austin, 2002; Gardner, 2007) especially in regards to supervision (Barnes & Austin, 2009), attrition (Ali & Kohun, 2007; Lovitts, 2001) and financial issues associated with doctoral study (Begun & Carter, 2017; Cefaratti et al., 2007; June, 2014). More recently, there has been a focus on doctoral processes from the viewpoints of doctoral students to further understand how many of these critical issues are experienced (Gardner & Holley, 2011; Gardner, 2007). Within this growing literature, there has been a mixture of qualitative and quantitative approaches utilised; however, Gopaul (2015) suggests a feature of this body of research is the limited use of theoretical frameworks to inform much of the scholarship. Of the work that does have a clear theoretical orientation, the most common frame utilised is found in the application of Bourdieusian conceptualisation of capital¹⁹ (Gardner & Holley, 2011; Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005; Pascarella et al., 2004). Gardner and Holley (2011) for instance identify different forms of social and cultural capital that may operate as gate-keeping mechanisms for doctoral education making it difficult for first-generation students to access. For example, they point to differences in discursive capital or legitimate academic language, aesthetic-cultural capital such as knowledge of the humanities and arts, cognitive capital (a type of attitude similar to self-assurance), along with differences in temporal capital, that is, the amount of time these students have to devote to academic work.

¹⁹ Bourdieu identifies a number of kinds of capital that an individual or social actor can possess. Firstly, Bourdieu recognises economic capital, which is determined by an individual's control over economic resources such as the ownership of property or income. In addition, prominent in his work are the notions of cultural, social and symbolic capital. According to Bourdieu, cultural capital represents forms of knowledge, skills and education a person possesses. It has been understood in terms of access and familiarity. Those who have experience with these cultural forms "are more likely to have come from privileged classes and as a result of their familiarity with highbrow culture, to understand more of the educational system" (Grayson, 2011). Another type of capital for Bourdieu is social capital which is described as the resources available to an individual by virtue of their group membership or social network. Lastly, Bourdieu identifies symbolic capital, which refers to the degree of accumulated prestige or honour a person possesses. This form of capital can be understood as cultural and social "capital made visible and meaningful through the recognition of others" (Posecznick, 2013, p. 3). Bourdieu's cultural reproduction theory utilises the notion of capital to demonstrate how educational systems systematically limit the successful participation of children from lower socio-economic backgrounds based their lack of cultural, social and economic capital (Bourdieu, 1986).

Likewise, in the British context, there has been a significant amount of research undertaken on doctoral education. A systematic review of the literature by Leonard, Metcalfe, Becker and Evans (2006), identified a number of themes such as the major focus of researchers on doctoral pedagogy, particularly on doctoral supervision which was the focus of one third of all studies these reviewers located. They also identified significant interest in peer support and, lastly, they estimated that approximately a third of the studies focused on outcomes such as completion times and rates, and employment patterns. Leonard and colleagues claimed that the majority of the research employed a qualitative approach and was not founded on clearly identifiable theoretical frameworks. They also found that much of the research concentrated on the social sciences and Education and, generally, did not include much of a focus on students' perspectives on the doctoral experience. Tomasz and Denicolo (2013) built on Leonard and colleagues' analysis to identify the developments in doctoral scholarship post-2005. They concluded from their assessment of the literature (mostly from the UK) that there has been growth in writing that focuses on a variety of disciplinary contexts, on the experience of internationalisation of higher education, the publication of a large amount of 'how to' books aimed at supervisors or doctoral students and an increasing focus on doctoral students' experiences. These authors also pointed to the need for more research in a number of areas including work that looks at student mobility and the ways that internationality in research is being facilitated in the context of increased multi-culturalism within doctoral education.

Finally, and of particular relevance to this study, a smaller body of literature has examined doctoral education within the Australasian context. A search of peer-reviewed articles on the doctorate in Australia, for example, returned 112 academic journal articles from the Education Research Complete database and six books from the University of Auckland Library catalogue with the subject heading 'Doctor of Philosophy-Australia'. Within this literature, a range of topics were identified including a significant focus on supervision or pedagogy, the experiences of international doctoral students, doctoral writing, doctoral completions and doctoral assessment. Further, there exists a small, but growing body of writing about 'Doctoral Education-New Zealand': 45 peer-reviewed academic journal articles from Education Research Complete and eight books with the subject heading Doctor of Philosophy-New Zealand) were identified. Within this largely qualitatively-focused research, attention has been paid to doctoral supervision, doctoral assessment, doctoral writing and the experiences of Māori students within doctoral education (see the

work of McKinley, Grant, Middleton, Irwin, & Williams, 2009, 2011; McKinley & Middleton, 2010).

Some key research undertaken by McKinley and colleagues focused particularly on the supervision experiences of Māori doctoral students (see McKinley et al., 2009, 2011). Amongst the aims of their research was the goal to identify some of the distinctive issues arising with the supervision of these students, for example, the tensions between Western and Māori epistemologies, a wide variety of supervision arrangements, the importance of cultural advice and the ways that “research projects often come from the core of these students lives” (McKinley et al., 2009, p. 5). In identifying these distinctive aspects of supervising Māori students, most of whom were first-generation, McKinley and colleagues sought to enhance the teaching and learning process for students and supervisors particularly in terms of the importance of culture in Aotearoa/New Zealand. This examination of the literature across a range of settings offers evidence of the growing scholarly attention to doctoral education, and a sharpening interest in the experience of particular groups of students.

Post-critical perspectives on doctoral education

Within this expansion of the scholarly literature, there has been significant interest from researchers with post-structuralist or post-critical orientations, particularly since the 1990s (Manathunga, 2014). Researchers within this theoretical area have brought to bear a variety of theories and theoretical lenses within the broader ‘post’ paradigm including examinations of research education (including postgraduate and doctoral education) that have drawn on feminist, critical and post-colonial theories. Catherine Manathunga’s (2014) work is important here because of her examination of the doctoral supervision experience from a feminist, post-colonial, and post-structuralist perspective. In her analysis of intercultural postgraduate supervision (2014), she argued that far greater attention needs to be paid to the issue of culture in research education given the increasing numbers of academics supervising students from different cultural backgrounds. Through her significant empirical and theoretical work, Manathunga (2014) has demonstrated the need to reimagine time, place and knowledge to open up space for knowledge outside of dominant Western/Northern knowledge and how assimilationist supervision pedagogies can have a “potentially devastating effect” (p. 174) on the supervision experience of culturally diverse students.

Another notable text edited by Cole and Gunther (2010) includes writers that have examined their own doctoral experience through employing critical, feminist, post-colonial and post-structural theories. In this collection, six academic women identify in different ways the complexities and challenges associated with doctoral study as “mature women returners” (Cole & Gunter, 2010, p. 2) and how they have impacted on their academic journeys. For example, Mirza (2010), Lavia (2010) and Gordon (2010) examine their own gendered and racialised experiences of higher education in the context of a post-colonial world. Gunter (2010) also writes evocatively about the educational opportunities she found difficult to access as a working-class women from the northern United Kingdom in the 1970s. She identified how through changes in broader educational policy and practices along with her own studious efforts she managed to gain her A-levels and apply for university study despite, as she describes, her limited chances of making it to university, let alone to doctoral education. Burke (2010) also offered a compelling analysis of her journey as a ‘non-traditional’ student into the university at a time when the widening participation agenda was powerfully reshaping higher education. In her text, she deconstructed the meanings associated with being a subject of widening participation discourse and highlighted some of the ways in which the demands of family and the university can be complex, contradictory and troublesome.

Petersen’s (2014) work is especially relevant to this study in that it used post-structural theorising to examine subjectivity formation in relation to doctoral supervision of two ‘non-traditional’ doctoral students. In this study, Petersen (2014) pointed to the increasing massification of post-graduate education arguing that it has led to a diversification of the doctoral student population incorporating far larger numbers of ‘non-traditional’ students than in previous periods. She argued that this diversification “poses a whole set of pedagogical challenges for supervisors ... because traditional supervisory pedagogy was based on the assumption of the traditional student” (Petersen, 2014, pp. 823–824). As such, she argues there is a pressing need to examine the experiences of ‘non-traditional’ students to gain knowledge about their supervision experiences and the ways that supervision pedagogies may need to evolve to better contribute to the doctoral process. Her call for further research is one this study seeks to respond to.

Grant (see 2003, 2005; 2005) has also brought a post-structural, and particularly, a Foucauldian lens to postgraduate supervision. Her work draws attention to the workings of power with postgraduate, and arguably doctoral, supervision relationships and, in particular,

teases out the dynamic relations between three active and changing agencies: supervisor, student and the curriculum qua thesis. In her analysis, the view that supervision is simply a ‘top down’ power relationship between supervisor and student is thoroughly challenged. Her work also locates contemporary postgraduate supervision as a deeply uncertain practice, something Grant identifies as being directly attributable to the multiple competing and contradictory discourses that provide different frames for making sense of supervision.

First-generation students and doctoral education

As evidenced in this review, there is a significant amount of international research available about first-generation students that investigates their access to college and the undergraduate experience. There has also been, in recent times, the development of a large body of literature about doctoral education; however, there are few studies that investigate the intersection of these two areas, namely the experiences of first-generation students within doctoral education. As Gardner and Holley (2011) observed in their exploratory study on first-generation doctoral students, this cohort is currently under-examined. Investigations to date about the characteristics of first-generation doctoral students within the Aotearoa/New Zealand higher education setting confirms this, as no data or research has been located about their participation or experiences within doctoral education. However, consistent with the research on undergraduate first-generation students, researchers have found that first-generation doctoral students in the United States are more likely to: be female, ethnically diverse, have attended community college and report higher levels of debt on degree completion (Hoffer et al., 2003).

An exploration of the current literature on first-generation students within the doctoral arena reveals a lack of knowledge about the first-generation student experience and certainly a lack of agreement about the effects of first-generation status on student success. As identified earlier, most researchers agree that first-generation students are disadvantaged within higher education by their background at the undergraduate level; however, there is no clear consensus about the effects of first-generation status on postgraduate education. American research that has explored first-generation student participation in graduate, including doctoral, education demonstrates this divergence of opinion. For example, an early quantitative study by Mare (1980) showed that a student’s social background had no noticeable effect on their progress into graduate school. Mare (1980) claimed that, “for college graduates, the influence of social origins on their decisions to pursue further

schooling is virtually nil” (p. 301). Nearly a decade and a half later, Stolzenberg (1994) went on to largely confirm Mare’s findings concluding that graduation from college nullifies any effects of parental education from that juncture. As Mullen et al. (2003) explain “these researchers suggested that the higher one goes in the educational system, the further one is removed from one’s social roots and the closer one approaches the meritocratic ideal” (p. 144). Likewise, the work of Ethington and Smart (1986) identified no direct effects arising from parental education or family income on persistence after college graduation. However, in contrast to Mare (1980) and Stolzenberg (1994), they did identify an influence of family background on students’ educational decision making connected with students’ social and academic integration within their institutions, albeit an indirect influence only.

These studies put in question Bourdieu’s (1977) social reproduction theory which suggests an expanded system of higher education becomes more exclusive at its peak. The findings of these studies also seem to conflict with general understandings about the nature of social privilege and arguably some of the obvious benefits students from high socio-economic backgrounds have, particularly in terms of access to greater cultural and material resources than are likely available to students from different social settings. Furthermore, researchers have pointed to the role of social background in terms of parental expectations. Parental expectations of students, shaped by their parents’ own educational experiences, are seen as influencing the children’s expectations of themselves either positively or negatively (Mullen et al., 2003). As Mullen et al. (2003) claim, “parents who have been to graduate school may expect the same for their children” (p. 145). Of course, individuals having completed a bachelor’s degree are typically some time past their childhoods; however parental expectations relating to graduate or doctoral study may well be foundational and continue to influence their goals and aspirations within higher education.

Mare’s (1980), Ethington and Smart’s (1986) and Stolzenberg’s (1994) findings also seem to contradict numerous personal reflections in the literature of many first-generation, working-class academics. These personal reflections commonly the many describe ‘extra’ challenges these academics had to overcome as doctoral students to succeed within a foreign and culturally-specific university environment. For example, the accounts found in *Those winter Sundays* (Welsch, 2005) reveal a profound sense of difference felt by working-class women in the academy. Indeed, Welsch (2005) in her introduction to the collection of fifteen accounts, describes the texts as being “reflections on the journeys of women from working-

class homelands to the foreign country of the academe where hope and promise are the expected prizes”(p. xv). She says:

I am reminded of many of our forebears who came to this country as immigrants in peculiar clothing carrying treasured possessions in satchels. Although we didn't travel here from foreign lands or have to surrender names, extended families, traditional dress, customs or foods, we too have left home and crossed boundaries into foreign territory. (p. xv)

Brothe (2005) in her reflection in the edited collection, pointedly describes feeling like an ‘anomaly’ at university. She speaks of what she calls, ‘covert strategies’ she undertook to hide her working-class status. Gorzelsky (2005) emphasises the psychology of class and conflicted social experiences, describing her time as a graduate student of one of alienation and inadequacy arising from a combination of both family dynamics and class. These brief references to several academics’ reflections demonstrate the significance of the women’s working class and first-generation status on their student experiences through to the doctoral level; yet as noted earlier, they stand in stark contrast with the findings of early statistical studies in this area.

Researchers Mullen and colleagues (2003), intrigued by the results of these first studies into the impact of parental education on graduate school attendance, undertook a large scale quantitative study to look at the effects of parental education within the American context based on data gained from the Baccalaureate and Beyond Longitudinal Study. Different from the identified earlier studies, Mullen et al. (2003) also decided to disaggregate graduate programmes by type. This process of disaggregation yielded significantly different results contrasting with the earlier studies. Mullen et al. (2003) found that there was no effect of parental education on student entry into MBA programmes and only a small influence on entry into masters programmes. However, they identified a strong effect of parental education on entry into first-professional²⁰ and doctoral programmes. This research demonstrated that first-generation students were significantly less likely to enter these programmes in comparison to continuing-generation students showing that for study at the highest level, there is “an enduring influence of parental education on their offspring’s educational attainment” (Mullen et al., 2003, p. 159). These findings, as the authors point out, suggest “that a college degree does not equalize opportunities to attend graduate school among those of different family backgrounds” (Mullen et al., 2003, p. 159).

²⁰ First professional degrees in the United States include dentistry, medicine, optometry, osteopathic medicine, pharmacy, podiatry, veterinary medicine, chiropractic medicine, law and theology (Mullen et al., 2003, p. 143).

Seay et al.'s (2008) study aligns with the results of Mullen et al. (2003) giving more impetus to the view that first-generation status continues to impact on students' experience of higher education at the doctoral level. Their research investigated the number of students who were the first-generation within one particular graduate school (22%). They then surveyed these students and analysed the results of the survey in relation to an attrition risk index for undergraduates²¹. Their analysis of the survey results revealed that the first-generation students possessed a greater attrition risk than their non first-generation peers. Given the small number of studies identified and the divergence of findings, more attention to first-generation access to doctoral study and their experiences within it is warranted to identify the impact of first-generation status on doctoral student achievement.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have reviewed the literature about first-generation students within doctoral education and revealed the significant scholarly interest in doctoral education within the context of the neoliberal university of the present. I have drawn attention to doctoral education as a space that is increasingly focused on by policymakers and scholars given the concerns about doctoral completion rates, time taken to completion and employability of doctoral graduates. This review also identifies burgeoning interest in the experiences of 'non-traditional' students and examined work undertaken in higher education research using post-structural or post-critical perspectives. In addition, a large body of mostly American research has been examined which specifically identifies the different experiences of first-generation individuals as compared to their continuing-generation counterparts in terms of access to university, achievement in undergraduate study and progression to postgraduate and doctoral education. My analysis of the literature also identifies a number of significant gaps: in particular, there appears to be a lack of knowledge about first-generation students beyond the undergraduate level that speaks to educational contexts outside of the US, is qualitatively focused and/or utilises post-critical approaches to understand first-generation student experiences. In this way, this chapter demonstrates the need for further research which this thesis seeks to address through its close attention to the lived experiences of first-

²¹ Seay et al. (2008) employed an attrition risk index in their study which was based on the work of Horn, L., & Premo, M. (1995). *Profile of undergraduates in U.S. postsecondary educational institutions: 1992-93* (Report. NCES 96-237). Retrieved from: <http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=96237>

generation students in doctoral education – a group that may well represent significant numbers of students within doctoral education programmes²² - now and into the future.

²² There is no statistical information available on the numbers of first-generation doctoral students in Aotearoa/New Zealand. A study by Hoffer (2002) found that in the US 37% of doctoral recipients were from families where neither parent had a university degree.

Chapter three. Methodological considerations

*Ma te huruhuru, ka rere te manu
With the right feathers, the bird is able to soar*

Introduction

In this chapter I seek to demonstrate the range of paradigmatic and methodological considerations that have been brought to bear on this project with a view to drawing together the ‘right feathers’, that is, the concepts and understandings necessary so this research project can metaphorically ‘fly’. To achieve this undertaking, I offer an explanation of the theoretical location of this research and provide an overview of the methodology and methods employed within the study. I also offer my rationale for undertaking this research using narrative inquiry and the related methodologies of autoethnography, duoethnography and textual inquiry. I have woven together these methodologies as I examined stories of self, stories of others and public or cultural narratives of studenthood, with a particular focus on first-generation student identities within the context of doctoral education. Further, I provide information about how I involved participants in this study and the methods I used to analyse the gathered data. Lastly, I explore the issues relating to trustworthiness of the research findings and examine some key ethical issues relevant to this research project. Notably, I have sought to acknowledge the complex process of the research in the writing that follows as the actual practice of this research was non-linear and informed by my different engagements with participants, the process of data gathering itself and the various theoretical and methodological approaches that have come to inform this study. This is important given the way the presentation of the research processes laid out in this chapter suggests a neatly structured, tidy practice rather than one which is deeply implicated in complex and evolving meaning-making processes.

The research paradigm: Locating a post-critical analysis

As I identified in *Chapter One* of this thesis I position this study in a post-critical theoretical space. This theoretical location provides a generous space for a researcher to draw from both post-structural and critical perspectives. As I explained in detail earlier, my work is based on critical theory which understands that some individuals or groups in society are systematically advantaged or disadvantaged due to their group membership. This inequity arises from social categories such as class, ethnicity and gender for example. Critical

theorists are interested in addressing social inequalities and are committed to contributing to social justice through their work. This perspective is relevant to this study as I am interested in identifying unjust social structures within doctoral education with a view to developing knowledge that can be used to improve the experiences of first-generation students within doctoral study. I also draw on post-structural theory, particularly Foucauldian analyses, to attend to the complex, shifting and diverse experiences of first-generation students which are, from my perspective, specific, local and not able to be simply identified in any singular or grand narrative. As such, I seek to avoid essentialist generalisations of these students' experiences. This frame also relies on understanding the significance of language and discourse in shaping our understandings of our world, others and ourselves (Crowe, 1998). Discourses are understood in line with Foucauldian theory as sociohistorical systems involving language, practices and power and constitute an individual's subjectivity. This attention to language and its power seems appropriate within a study which employs a narrative focus. For a fuller discussion of this study's post-critical theoretical position and an articulation of my understanding of discourse, power and identity within this frame see *Chapter One* of this thesis. Before I describe the various methodological approaches I drew on in this study I will seek to identify my own positioning in relation to the work of this thesis.

The researcher's standpoint

My approach as a researcher and thus my choice of research questions, methodology and methods is shaped by my stance in relation to this research. As described in the Prelude at the beginning of this thesis, I, like my research participants, am a first-generation student undertaking doctoral study. This aspect of my identity provides a significant basis for my interest in this area. At this juncture, I can reflect on nearly 20 years of experience within higher education, from my time as a school leaver entering law school in the mid-1990s as the first person in my family/whānau to go to university, through a range of transitions in my university career leading to my current doctoral work in education. Sitting alongside this experience is my interest in 'quiet' stories, those that are less visible, or perhaps, even overlooked within educational contexts that are nonetheless significant, particularly to those that experience them. The first-generation experience in doctoral education in Aotearoa/New Zealand can be seen in this light.

Furthermore, my approach to this study is also shaped by experiences of being a woman from a working-class background who is of bicultural origins (Māori/Pākēhā) living in a post-colonial society. These aspects of my identity add further impetus to investigate the first-generation experience as many first-generation students are from lower-socio economic backgrounds and from culturally diverse contexts. While I have not positioned this study firmly within a feminist framework, I am deeply interested in women's issues and experiences and draw on feminist writing within this thesis. Moreover, my orientation to this study also connects with my choice of methodology in that storying is an important aspect of Māori culture (Bishop, 1996). Certainly, a variety of significant customary forms of communication such as whakatauki (proverb), waiata (song), moteatea (poetry), pakiwaitara and pūrakau (moralistic tales) are strongly underpinned by narrative. As Bishop (1996) observes "story was one of the common ways of imparting knowledge" (p. 25) in traditional Māori society. Thus, for me the choice of a narrative methodology felt particularly appropriate as I sought to gain knowledge about first-generation students within doctoral education in Aotearoa/New Zealand.

Identifying aspects of my own biography is also valuable beyond locating my interest in first-generation student experiences as it helps in understanding my multiple positionalities in relation to my role as researcher. My work as a post-critical researcher necessarily involves my recognition of knowledge construction as being partial, situated and shaped by my positionality. The notions of insider, outsider and 'inbetweenness' (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009) can be relevant here in the sense that this study can be understood as falling into the category of insider research as I share many background traits with the research participants in this study. Being an 'insider' means I can draw upon my shared group membership within the research and bring a depth of understanding of some of the issues facing this group of students. However, it is necessary to acknowledge that being an insider can also impede a research study, for example, a researcher may make assumptions of similarity and therefore not fully inquire into the participants' experiences based on these assumptions. It may also be possible that a researcher's own experiences as an insider, may lead them to conclusions about participants that do not connect to the research participants' experiences, because of the fact that there are always differences in context between different people even within a shared social category (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). An obvious source of difference in this study, despite our shared first-generation status, can be found in relation to the cultural backgrounds of the participants many of which are very different to my own.

However, it is also valuable to recognise that there can be different degrees of similarity of experience between a researcher and those they study, and ways in which a researcher by virtue of different identity category groupings is an outsider to the experiences of participants. This is true in my research and so I identify my positionality in terms of ‘inbetweenness’: even though I may share many similarities in experience with the research participants in my study, as a first-generation student, I am not necessarily of the same gender, socio-economic background or culture, meaning I am sometimes an insider sharing group membership with a research participant, and sometimes not. In Hopkins’ words (2009), “I see myself as occupying a space of inbetweenness ... I am simultaneously positioned in a number of different social category groups that place me at various levels of similarity and difference with the research participants” (p. 6).

Notably, there can be difficulty as a researcher in claiming a full insider status in any regard. Indeed, a researcher may “be closer to the insider position or closer to the outsider position, but because our perspective is shaped by our position as a researcher (which includes having read much literature on a topic), we cannot fully occupy one or the other of those positions” (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009, p. 61). Similarly, being part of a group does not denote complete sameness within that group, just as not being a member of a group, does not denote complete difference. What is of most importance is not insider or outsider status, but attention to the researcher’s space in-between (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). Like many others, Dwyer and Buckle (2009) identify the central importance of self-reflexivity to qualitative work. According to Savin-Baden and Howell Major (2013) reflexivity can be understood as involving “self-critical, sympathetic introspection and the self-conscious analytical scrutiny of the self as researcher” (p.76). Savin-Baden and Howell Major (2013) further articulate the notion of reflexivity in terms of researchers entering a liminal space, one that can be likened to an in-between researcher positionality, a space that is ‘betwixt and between’ that opens up opportunities for engagement with uncertainties and “prompts explorations of researcher beliefs, values and identity” (p. 69).

Adopting a reflexive stance has meant asking questions of myself as I have worked through each part of the research process. The different positionalities I occupy, or subjectivities I have, have raised some important methodological questions as I have undertaken knowledge construction:

- What are the assumptions I bring about first-generation students? What are they based on?

- How can I pay attention to the students' stories closely and carefully as I explore first-generation experiences both similar and different to my own?
- How do I utilise my knowledge of being a first-generation student while at the same time occupy a position of 'unknowingness' to fully engage with first-generation students?

To engage with these questions and capture my reflections on my research practice I utilised a field diary to record concerns or issues that arose in relation to how I was undertaking the research process. This diary became a space for me to explore some of my uncertainties and led to conversations with supervisors or further reading and research to refine my research practice. Through this field diary and the conversations that flowed from it I was able to hold a reflexive stance towards my research that allowed me to scrutinise my perspective and underpinning values and beliefs based on my multiple positionalities. However, as Rose (1997) suggests, even with great attention to reflexivity, researchers need to be aware that the “negotiations that are part of the research process are not fully knowable” (p. 317) Hopkins (2009) explains further: researchers “will never be fully aware of our positionalities, how they have manifested during the research process, how others have interpreted them, and how they influenced the research participants” (p. 6). This is not to mean that a researcher should not bother taking a reflective stance, rather awareness of how our identity and experiences shape our work encourages an even stronger focus on the importance of positionality and the significance of occupying an in-between space.

Methodological orientations

In this study four different but related methodologies have been drawn together. As Denzin and Lincoln (2011) suggest employing a variety of approaches is valuable as “different interpretive practices make the world visible in different ways. Hence, there is frequently a commitment to using more than one interpretive practice in any study” (p.4). In the following paragraphs, I explain in more detail the four methodologies of narrative inquiry, auto-ethnography, duoethnography and textual inquiry employed within this work.

Narrative inquiry

Narrative inquiry recognises the importance of storytelling. In fact, the telling of stories is seen as being central to human experience. As Creswell (2012) suggests, “telling stories is a natural part of life and individuals all have stories about their experiences to tell others” (p.

502). From a narrative theoretical perspective, stories or narratives are also understood as being “social artefacts, telling us as much about society and culture as they do about a person or group” (Riessman, 2008, p. 105). In this way taking a narrative approach to research allows the telling of individual stories of a small number of first-generation students within doctoral education, which may also provide some insights into the experiences of first-generation students more generally.

What is narrative?

A first step to be taken in working with narrative inquiry involves the identification of the key analytic structure that defines what a narrative is. As Riessman (2008) observes “the term narrative carries many meanings and is used in a variety of ways by different disciplines” (p. 3). Thus, producing a definition for all research purposes is difficult. However, I employ Riessman’s definition (2008) to frame the concept of narrative within this research. She says a narrative involves the “connecting of events into a sequence that is consequential for later action and for the meanings that a speaker [or writer] wants the audience to understand from the story” (p. 3). In this research I also use the term story and narrative interchangeably although I recognise that some scholars particularly within sociolinguistics draw a distinction between these two terms²³ (Riessman, 2008). Furthermore, narrative researchers are interested in individuals’ life experiences as narrated by those individuals, often focusing on a small number of individuals within a study (Creswell, 2012) as in this research. They engage in gathering narratives in different forms including written, oral, and visual narratives through a variety of mediums such as discussion, interviews, journals, letters, and collections of photographs (Creswell, 2012).

There are a number of reasons why a narrative approach seems particularly appropriate for this study. It is useful because it enables the researcher to pay specific attention to the stories first-generation students tell about their experiences within education from pre-tertiary learning contexts through to their progression into doctoral study. Stories in this study are recognised as providing “windows on distinct social worlds” (Gubrium & Holstein, 2008, p. 244), in this instance, the worlds of the university and doctoral education. On offer may be a range of interconnected narratives, for example there are stories that originated outside the student, that is, stories that are part of the cultural discourse associated with the

²³ Within sociolinguistics the term narrative is typically employed to refer to a general class of communication of which story is understood as a prototypical form. However, these terms are often used interchangeably (Riessman, 2008).

university that informed the participants' understandings of higher education. There are also, in response to the questions asked, stories the participants tell about their own doctoral education experiences, including how they first encountered the idea of higher and doctoral education and how they negotiated their study programmes. Moreover, the employment of narrative inquiry in this research gives insights into the diversity of the first-generation experience and opens up ways to interrogate how power operates within higher education particularly in terms of access to opportunity at the university's highest levels. The narratives encapsulated within this thesis then enabled me to connect the individual experience to the broader social and political issues surrounding higher education.

Bathmaker (2010) offers a further significant question that is necessary to contemplate in considering the role of narrative in research and that is "what work do narratives do, and how can we learn from the singular?" (p. 3). As Bathmaker (2010) points out, narrative research must do more than simply open up individuals' lives for scrutiny to satisfy the curiosity of consumers. The proliferation of personal stories in an "explosion of first-person programming" (Wood & Skeggs, 2008, p. 178) within the media is an example of the employment of individual stories largely restricted to providing entertainment value. This kind of programming, which increasingly seems to fill our television screens, relies on the telling of personal stories often constructed out of contrived situations for the purpose of spectacle and emotional engagement. Moreover, the decontextualized tellings common to the 'reality' television genre frequently work to blame the individuals appearing in the programmes for making 'poor' choices or being from 'bad' cultures, especially individuals from the working-class or other non-dominant social groupings. They also typically avoid examining the experiences of the individual in relation to broader social issues. In contrast with this use of narrative, this study seeks to locate the narratives gathered explicitly within a social and historical context and to pay close attention to the social relations of power.

Post-critical narratives

I approach the role of narrative construction and analysis from the position of a post-critical researcher. The stories offered by a research participant about their higher education experiences will be understood not as a series of isolated experiences told in a chronological order, but as a biographical construction. For researchers within the post-critical space, subjects are understood as the tellers of experience, "but every telling is constrained, partial and determined by the discourses and histories that prefigure, even as they might promise representation" (Britzman, 2000, p. 32). Within this orientation, stories are always told

within certain types of power relations, at particular moments in time. My work necessarily pays attention to issues of power relations that may be bound up within the research. In the construction of narratives within this text I wish to be explicit about my role as researcher and writer who, however invisible I may become within the participants' stories, is always present constructing the thesis narrative. My presence in narrative construction is important for many reasons, but as I have explained at the outset, it is marked by my shared status as a first-generation student studying for a doctorate. Moreover, in line with Britzman (2000), I have sought to go further than just recounting my positionalities by also articulating the ways in which I, as researcher, have crafted and constructed this research work.

Using a post-critical narrative methodology also means I craft my work with an awareness of the complex lives and shifting identities of the first-generation students who shared their educational stories with me. In telling the stories of the research participants I have sought to avoid presenting them as neat, fixed and total narratives thereby allowing for 'messy-ness' or complexity of the participants' lived experience of higher education. I think of this as seeking to avoid the temptation to 'smooth the crinkles' of the narrative texts provided by my participants. The urge to organise stories into neat packages is sometimes referred to as "narrative seduction" (Riessman, 2010 para. 6) and is something I have had to contemplate closely to avoid providing coherent totalizing depictions about the experience of first-generation students. I have also sought to resist the temptation to tell the 'real' or singular story of first-generation students in doctoral education rather than offering each participant's narratives in my research as one possible narrative, told in one particular moment, within the power relations that exist in our shared context. My role in constructing the narratives, that is, my interpretative role and my work in the making of the thesis narrative needs to be made explicit and involves acknowledgement that my own telling is partial and governed by discourses of time and place (Britzman, 2000). Moreover, I have also sought to make visible dominant discourses with a view to challenging them. This has meant I have had a close focus on the dominant discourses about first-generation students and doctoral education to identify what they are and how they operate.

Through providing rich accounts of the lived experiences of first-generation students my study has sought to critically examine dominant narratives that do not correspond to the experiences of these students (Bathmaker, 2010). And, as this research has a significant focus on the student's academic identity development, the utilisation of a narrative inquiry is further supported as identity itself can be seen as being constructed through stories both

at an individual or group level (Riessman, 2008). Storytelling not only provides a means for us to make sense of our experiences, but also to discursively position ourselves, and others, through the stories we tell about ourselves, and to ourselves, and how these stories play out within broader discourses. As Somers (1994) suggests:

Narrative is an *ontological condition of social life* ... people construct identities (however multiple and changing) by locating themselves or being located within repertoires of emplotted stories; that “experience” is constituted through narratives; that people make sense of what has happened and is happening to them by attempting to assemble or in some way to integrate these happenings within one or more narratives and that people are guided to act in certain ways, and not others ... derived from a multiplicity but ultimately limited repertoire of available social, public, and cultural narratives. (p. 614, original emphasis)

In this way it is possible to see how narrative formation has a deep connection with identity construction and how an individual’s self-narrative connects to wider social narratives both in terms of how we situate ourselves or how we are situated within particular discourses. The way individuals claim certain positions within their stories or construct certain kinds of identities or subjectivities within narratives is a form of ‘identity work’ (Bathmaker, 2010; Taylor, 2008). Thus, it is possible to see how powerfully stories can operate. As Polkinghorne (1988) suggests, narrative “is the fundamental scheme for linking individual human actions and events into interrelated aspects of an understandable composite” (p. 13). Indeed, it is also possible to conceptualise this research project as one that possesses several layers of narrative. The narratives contained within this thesis include those belonging to the research participants and those that belong to the researcher. In addition, narrative is focused upon in the inclusion of cultural texts which I analyse for their engagements with the idea of the university and those within it. In combination, this thesis can be understood as drawing together a number of different narratives into one, while not necessarily neat or complete, thesis narrative.

The place of cultural texts in this study

Green (2005) argues “that doctoral education is as much about identity formation as it is about knowledge production” (p.153) as such, academic identity must be a central consideration for an examination of the doctoral student experience. Understanding the place of academic identity formation also means it is valuable to recognise the power of discourse in shaping subjectivity and, in this case, academic subjectivities. This understanding then invites me as a researcher to investigate discourses that circulate in the cultural domain. A key way this has been undertaken through examining a variety of cultural texts that are set in the context of higher education to explore the implications of these

discourses on the academic identity formation of first-generation students. A range of different cultural texts can come into play including fictional representations, representations of doctoral studenthood via advice texts, memoirs, journalistic writing, in addition to educational or social policies. In this study I undertook an analysis of filmic or television texts as a means to understand ideas about the university.

Two texts were identified and analysed in terms of their representations of university students. To select the texts, research participants in the focus group and interviews were asked if they could identify any fictional (including filmic) texts that shaped their thinking about the university and doctoral education. I also reflected on a range of texts that have influenced my thinking about higher education to aid the final selection. On this basis, the two texts were chosen for analysis that each, in different ways, offer representations of the university and university students. These are:

1. *Educating Rita* (1980): A film based on the play by Willy Russell.
2. *Brideshead Revisited* (1981). A television series based on the novel by Evelyn Waugh.

In my discussion, a textual analysis methodology was employed to examine the depiction of the cultural world of the university which included a focus on how students are represented within the chosen texts, how the university is described, how academic staff are represented and what their interactions with students were like.

Textual analysis

This methodology, drawn from literary studies, is underscored by a deeply critical approach to language (Kelly, 2013). Gallop (2007) has described textual analysis or close reading as involving “enhanced, intensified reading” (p. 183) which can be valuable in revealing assumptions implicit within text, showing “that meaning is produced within (and for) particular ideologies” (Kelly, 2017, p. 72). In my exposition of this methodology I draw heavily on the work of Frances Kelly (2013) whose writing offers clear guidance to higher education scholars about how textual analysis can be employed within this discipline space. Through drawing on Kelly’s (2013) work I undertook my close reading of the two cultural texts by:

- Looking for concepts in the text that were not easy to define or were problematic

- Paying attention to imagery and metaphor within the text (what kinds of metaphor were at play in the text, were they unusual or common, and what were their effects?)
- Noticing gaps or silences within the text or as Kelly (2013) asks “what isn’t said?” (p. 72)
- Noticing repetition – what terms were repeated in text and what was the effect?
- Asking what relationships existed between the text I was reading and other texts (were there other texts referenced or evoked in my chosen text?)
- Identifying the purpose of the text and the intended audience
- Paying attention to form; for literary texts this involves analysing any extra-textual features such as font or titles that could add to the text meanings or in the case of filmic texts noticing how particular scenes are constructed, the mise en scene (visual setting/visual setting) and film shots

Interrogating a text using this analytic frame involved reading and re-reading of a piece of writing or watching and re-watching a filmic text to identify key elements of the cultural narratives that were important for this study. Kelly (2013) points to the importance of enriching this approach to close reading by employing other critical lenses. With this in mind, a further part of my analysis involved focusing on the context of the production of the different texts (Kelly, 2013), attending to ways (academic) identities were formed and represented within a text and to the overall shape of the narrative. An example of this approach involves inquiring into how the purpose of a university education is identified within a text and how it relates to the wider social context at the time of production. In the case of *Educating Rita* (Russell, 1983), for instance, neoliberal ideology under the political leadership of Margaret Thatcher was becoming dominant in the UK, and within this frame university education is largely focused on higher education for vocational purposes, in other terms, for the training of human capital for the market place. And, yet this is not at all apparent in the film, with Rita’s goals for the university revolving around her desire for intellectual development and in ‘finding herself’. Lastly, there was specific attention paid to the way power functions within the narrative setting of the text, for example when analysing *Educating Rita* (Russell, 1983) I was interested in the relations between the characters, particularly Rita and Frank, what kinds of power they possessed, and how this was shown within the film. In my examinations of each text I utilised all of the different aspects of this methodology, although some questions or analytic points proved more fruitful than others.

The analytic material I prepared using this approach was then used to construct the interlude pieces that sit between the data chapters of this thesis.

Autoethnographic inquiry

In conjunction with narrative inquiry, I also utilised auto-ethnography. Autoethnography is an “autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural” (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 739). The autoethnographer places an analytic lens on themselves and their experiences, writing, interpreting or performing narratives about their own culturally significant experiences (Creswell, 2012). Utilising an auto-ethnographic approach was valuable within this project because it recognised that the researcher’s own story is strongly connected to the research process and, in this case, provided the opportunity for the study to be informed by the researcher’s own experience of being a first-generation student in doctoral education.

Employing an autoethnographic approach makes explicit the particular space I occupy in relation to my study and can be seen as challenging the traditional conception of the scholarly researcher as operating in a detached, distanced and objective space. Instead, a ‘heartful’ autoethnography (Ellis, 1997, 1999) requires the researcher to engage in systematic sociological introspection and to draw upon their own emotional recall (Sparkes, 2002). My autoethnographic writing involves reflections on a broad variety of engagements with higher education and involved both writing about my present experiences of doctoral education and focused on looking back and looking forward as I examined my thoughts about the promises and hopes for doctoral education. A variety of scholars argue that the writing of autoethnography “allows us to know and analyse differently, as well as to make our ‘findings’ available to more diverse audiences” (Richardson, 1994; Barone, 2000 as cited in Sparkes, 2002, p. 211). This ability to write ‘differently’ and the potential to connect more with readers was a powerful motivation for me to employ autoethnography and in a wider sense this approach underpinned this whole scholarly project.

During my tenure of study, I have regularly written about my university and doctoral experiences in a diary. The entries are as short as a few sentences or as long as 1000 words, typically written on a monthly basis during the first three years of study (50 entries were collated for this study). Originally, I had planned to use this writing as a central component of my analysis, but as the project emerged I extended my focus outwards, to concentrate more heavily on the experiences of other first-generation students within doctoral education

and how the university was represented within cultural mediums such as film and television. This meant the material gathered was used in two main ways: one, as the basis of the Prelude which opens this thesis and two, as verbatim data in some of the chapters that follow. Though there was less inclusion of my autoethnographic material than originally planned, its presence within this thesis is intended to offer insights into my own experiences of the university, my positioning in relation to the stories of other first-generation students, and to the overall thesis narrative I present. It may also, in a small way, remind the reader of this academic work that behind the pages and pages of text lies the lived experience of the writer of this thesis which whether acknowledged or not always informs the shape of a research project. Moreover, this approach may evidence, as Sparkes (2002) suggests, a connection with practice of social science with the living of life.

Duoethnography

Alongside the autoethnographic work undertaken within this study, a duoethnographic approach was also employed. According to Norris and Sawyer (2012) duoethnography is “a collaborative research methodology in which two or more researchers of difference juxtapose their life histories to provide multiple understandings of the world” (p. 9). This method examines the roles each individual’s life history plays in meaning-making and behaviour, rather than seeking universal truths or tidy consensus. In fact, difference in perspectives between duoethnographers is an important part of the richness of this methodology, which can powerfully illustrate “how different people can experience the same phenomenon differently” (p. 17). In this case my colleague and I were both doctoral students at similar points in our doctoral programme but we belong to a number of different identity categories. For example, I am a female, first-generation student. I am also of Māori and Pākēhā descent and from a lower socio-economic background. My fellow duoethnographer is a male, continuing-generation student with middle-class Pākēhā origins.

As Norris and Sawyer (2012) argue the juxtaposition of different stories aids in keeping space open for listeners to form their own synthesis (p. 18). Thus, duoethnographers do not merely seek to retell the past but also ask questions about meanings held about the past in order to invite reconceptualisation. Norris and Sawyer have drawn upon Pinar’s (1974) concept of *carrere*, interpreting a person’s life as a curriculum where one’s present abilities, skills, knowledge and beliefs were acquired. The starting point for duo-ethnographers is to ask, ‘how have we come to know the world?’ In this way, our duoethnographic conversation was undertaken in response to the question, how have we come to know the university?

This question provided a strong platform to reflect on how we each thought about the university from our first memories and to think about where these ideas came from. Our discussion of this question was recorded and transcribed with a shortened text included within this thesis based on a fuller conversation that focused on the journeys of my colleague, and myself, through the university.

Although some small selections from this text are utilised across the data analysis chapters of this thesis, the main body of the duoethnographic text is included as a Coda at the end of this thesis. In this way, this piece is marked off from the main body of the thesis indicating that is a different kind of textual offering; one that does not involve me taking up the role of narrative analyst. Instead of my omniscient interpretative analysis, the duoethnographic text is provided to readers for them to construct their own narrative understandings of the shared duoethnographic stories of becoming doctoral students within the university. This duoethnographic text also provides an opportunity for readers to reflect on their own educational journeys. This approach is consistent with the theoretical goals of duoethnography where heavy authorial analysis is eschewed in favour of shared storytelling that is open to multiple readings and interpretations (Norris & Sawyer, 2012).

Research participants

The research participants in this study are first-generation individuals who are currently, or have recently finished, studying for a PhD or EdD at a research-intensive university in Australasia. All students were drawn from the discipline of Education. As I explained in *Chapter One*, the choice to focus on the discipline of Education was underpinned by its history of being a subject that has often been attractive to ‘non-traditional’ students like those that are first-generation, and I was interested in drawing upon my own experiences and knowledge of doctoral study in Education. Moreover, my choice to focus on one subject is also underscored by an awareness of the significant variation of doctoral programmes and contributes to my research being relevant and focused. This focus on single or a collection of related groupings of doctoral disciplines is common within research on doctoral education. A significant example of this found in Golde and Walker’s (2006) Carnegie essays on the doctorate which were organised across six fields of study.

Fifteen current or recent education doctoral students were recruited through advertising within the Faculty of Education and via my networks of friends and colleagues within the

Faculty. The initial participants selected were also asked if they could recommend other first-generation doctoral students. In addition, I advertised for research participants through doctoral networks using email lists and emails to departmental administrators to aid recruitment. These approaches to selecting participants can be described as purposive (Bryman, 2004) in that I sought to select participants who fitted the focus of the research. Secondly, my approach can be described as utilising a snowball sampling technique via the recruitment of further research participants through their connections with initial participants (see Bryman, 2004, for further explanation of these sampling methods). As part of my selection of first-generation students for this study, I sought to include individuals with a variety of experiences and cultural orientations. In line with this, attention was paid to including first-generation Māori doctoral students. This intention arose through my interest in Māori student success and my awareness that Māori students have not traditionally been represented in large numbers within doctoral education (McKinley et al., 2011).

The participant group was made up of thirteen women and two men from a variety of cultural backgrounds including two African students, three Asian students, one north-American student, six Pākēhā students, two Māori students and one Pasifika student. Of the total group six were international students and nine were classed as domestic students. There was a wide age range of participants in this study with similar numbers of students in each age range group outside of the youngest age range category, that is, with four students in the 30-39 years category, four students in the 40-49 years category and five students in the 50+ age group. There were only two students in the youngest age range group of 20-29 years. As the students were drawn from a Faculty of Education, this gender imbalance was unsurprising. In addition, previous research from the American context suggests that women are overrepresented within populations of first-generation students within doctoral education (Gardner & Holley, 2011). This cohort of doctoral students also possesses an older median age in comparison with other disciplines, with the majority of participants being in the 40 or older age group. This, too, is in line with earlier research on doctoral students within Education, who often have transitioned into doctoral work after pursuing careers in teaching (see for example Leonard, Becker, & Coate, 2005).

Storied introductions: 'Little' narratives

In this section I provide some 'little' narratives to introduce the participants and enable the reader to follow the discussion of the first-generation accounts across this thesis. I have

identified each narrative as ‘*a* story of’ rather than ‘*the* story of’ a participant to emphasise the fact that there are multiple stories that could be told about the participants and their university engagements. What I offer below are my narrative constructions based on the information students shared with me in their interview or focus group about their ‘academic becomings’ (organised in alphabetical order).

A story of Arohanui (*Māori, 60 years+*)

Going to university for Arohanui after school was not something that was possible given her whānau economic circumstances at the time, however, after a successful career in industry she began her journey in higher education later in life and simply loved it. She identifies her deep engagement with study especially in terms of the connections she has made with other Māori students and academics. From early on in her higher education journey, she was interested in developing her knowledge and extending her academic skills so that she could then use to help others, particularly other Māori learners, who may not have been able to access many educational opportunities in their lives. Through her doctoral works she sees even more opportunity to make a difference for Māori.

A story of Dante (*African, 40-49 years*)

Dante is a first-generation student whose parents did not attend university, nor did they participate in formal education of any kind and despite this, he was strongly encouraged to pursue his studies and go university from a young age. Dante had to work very hard as going to university was a big achievement for any young person, with higher education places being very limited in his African context. When he was accepted to university, it was community news and the cause of much village celebration. The economic costs of university were however, very high for Dante and his family, and there were breaks in his education as he sometimes was sent away for weeks at a time, until his fees were paid. However, despite the cost and breaks in his undergraduate studies, he persevered, and with his family and community’s support Dante has successfully moved into doctoral education.

A story of Helen (*Pacific, 40-49 years*)

Helen identifies the role of her mother and her Pacific culture in shaping her university pathway. For this student the university was firmly part of her family discourse, despite the fact that her parents did not have the opportunity for higher education themselves. Helen identifies her mother as an educational champion, working multiple jobs to ensure Helen would be able to receive a good education. Helen has a deep interest in Pacific education

and is concerned about the ways the education system can fail Pacific students in Aotearoa/New Zealand. Despite some reservations about doctoral study as being an individualistic undertaking, she is committed to her doctoral work to improve the educational experience of Pacific students.

A story of Hinekura (*Māori, 30-39 years*)

Hinekura's account of her educational journey is deeply underscored by her commitments to her whānau, hapu, iwi and Māori in general. She sees doctoral study as something which brings both mana (esteem) and a sense of obligation to others, and hopes that her work in Education can make a real and practical contribution. Through her academic studies she seeks to be an educational pathfinder, 'normalising' tertiary education for those extended family members who may be uncertain about how to navigate the spaces of high education and through sharing knowledge with whānau about how university 'works'.

A story of Isis (*Pākehā/New Zealander, 50-59 years*)

At the end of high school, Isis wasn't sure what direction she wanted to go in or what kind of job she wanted to do. She knew she didn't want to be a nurse, or to work in an office and she also knew she didn't want to go on directly to teachers college. Based on her academic success at school and her interest in the fine arts, university seemed to be a good place to go especially when she didn't know exactly what career she wanted to pursue. Her studies in the fine arts began an educational journey that has brought her to doctoral study in Education.

A story of Jackie (*Chinese, 30-39 years*)

Jackie talked about the fiercely competitive schooling environment she experienced in China and how she had to work extremely hard to gain good results. Looking back, she believed the years of high school were the toughest of her life, with the intense pressure to achieve. Jackie remembers the moment of getting her school results and the confirmation that she could get into a good university as being something that was absolutely overwhelming. This was especially true, given the fact that her parents had limited educational opportunities due to the Chinese Cultural Revolution. After teaching for several years she decided to study overseas for a doctorate because it represented a great opportunity to travel and to learn.

A story of Kat (*Pākehā/New Zealander, 20-29 years*)

Kat's engagements with higher education, while undertaken with some economic imperatives in mind, were powerfully shaped by the desire to follow her passions. She described being guided by an intuitive sense about what suits her and how doctoral study can help her achieve her dreams. Kat spoke of largely drawing her early inspiration for going to university from two key sources – her family, particularly her mother and grandparents, and from the world of literature and the arts. She sees herself as a storyteller with a great love of literature and narrative. Kat pursued a university education in connection with her desire to tell stories and with a view to challenge the traditional distinction between the academic study and creative practice.

A story of Katie (*Pākehā/New Zealander, 40-49 years*)

Katie identified her enduring interest in writing and creative pursuits. Her creative interests and passion for learning brought her to university but her journey there was by no means straightforward. As a school leaver she faced a number of challenges in finding a university path for herself especially given how her parents who were very concerned about study costs and the moral environment of the university. Despite their concerns, Katie found a practical means to achieve her dream of tertiary study and attended teachers college with her parents' support after their initial reluctance. Although her doctoral studies were a requirement for keeping her university position she describes herself as being very fortunate to study for a PhD given that she loves research and the “minds she gets to rub up against”.

A story of Lan (*South-east Asian, 40-49 years*)

Lan locates her university story in the highly competitive tertiary setting in her country. At the time she was completing her secondary education, university places were so limited she describes having to “almost fight against 100 others to get in”. Lan remembers her family's great pride in her success in her making it into higher education during this time because it was such an enormous achievement. She also spoke of the powerful ways her parents encouraged her to ‘study hard’ and how her father continues to support her now. She also describes her pride in being able to help her children gain university educations. Possessing a doctorate will be valuable to her in her work context but is also something that has enabled major “change” in her life.

A story of Linda (*Chinese, 30-39 years*)

Linda describes the valuing of higher education as something deeply embedded in her Chinese culture. She also describes her good fortune or luck in being able to pursue a tertiary education in contrast with her parents, who like Jackie's, had limited educational opportunity in the time of the Cultural Revolution in China. As a gifted student, Linda has worked hard to make her parents proud and pursued academic excellence throughout her studies. In this pursuit, she has gained some significant insight into the ways in which education systems work and their effects on learners based on her experiences in the Chinese, American and now Aotearoa/New Zealand educational contexts. These understandings have brought her to doctoral study in Education.

A story of Marie (*Afro-Caribbean, 20-29 years*)

Marie travelled the globe to pursue academic study. She moved from her island nation home to the UK and now Aotearoa/New Zealand to gain a doctoral qualification. She describes her educational goals as being strongly linked to her family background where education was highly valued. In fact, she talked about her grandparents encouraging her to 'aspire to greatness' in whatever she did, including education. Her commitment to education was also linked to her love of English and her experiences of teaching in her 'gap' year. She also talked about choosing to go to university because she believed in the power of education to enable people to gain employment opportunities and her goal to make a contribution to others through her studies.

A story of Pierre (*Pākehā/New Zealander, 50-59 years*)

Pierre describes how his intention to go to university was formed relatively early. He says he was determined to study at university since the fifth form (Year 11). He said, "there was absolutely no doubt in my mind ... that I was going to go further". His interest was underpinned his belief that going to university was a means to gain opportunity and that it would be something of adventure. His determination to study meant he embraced every opportunity especially as he knew the chance to gain a higher education is not something everyone has. Higher education gave him a profession through teacher training, meaning Pierre achieved his professional dream. He now is undertaking doctoral education which he sees as being a new kind of adventure, for Pierre, doctoral study can be understood as an adventure of the mind.

A story of Sandy (*Pākehā/New Zealander, 60+ years*)

Sandy imagined herself becoming a teacher as far back as primary school. Achieving the results for tertiary study was not an issue for Sandy as she was a strong student in the top academic stream at her high performing state school. However, she also possessed significant talent in the performing arts and had to choose between training as a performance artist and teaching. She describes her decision to teach as being made in relation to her “very conservative working-class background” with teaching being a “moral choice” in addition to it possessing significant teacher trainee funding at that time, something which was very important given her parents’ concerns about study costs. After a long period of working in the teaching profession, doctoral study for Sandy is now an opportunity to pursue a life-long dream.

A story of Ses (*Pākehā/New Zealander, 60+ years*)

Ses describes being encouraged to seek employment by her parents after her School Certificate year (Year 11) as they felt she had ‘done very well at school’ and that achieving highly in School Certificate was enough. Upon finishing her secondary education and taking up administrative positions she quickly found that she felt bored and needed to engage her mind more. In her early twenties she realised that she wanted to be a teacher. This ‘realisation’ as she describes, set her on a learning pathway that brought her to doctoral education. A decision she says lies in her desire to live fully and pursue her dreams because as Ses explains, “life is short”.

A story of Sue (*North-American, 30-39years*)

Sue doesn’t really recall her parents discussing university plans with her, though she remembers that they seemed to have the idea that if you go to university you’ll make lots of money and therefore that Sue and her sibling should seek higher education. Sue progressed through high school and decided to go directly to university after she completed her secondary education. Economic concerns were significant in her family and she was encouraged to choose a local university, to live at home, and to work part-time while she studied. She reflects on the impact of this as meaning that she feels like she didn’t really participate in an undergraduate university experience because she commuted and worked off campus so much. However, through working at a higher education institution she learned about a whole “other side” of the university and found out how much broader a university experience could be. From this, she sought opportunities for overseas study as a doctoral student.

Research methods

A variety of methods were employed in this study including participant self-reports, focus groups, semi-structured interviews and reflective journal writing. These methods are outlined below:

Participant self-reports

A self-report was given to all research participants at the outset of the study. This document was used to gather demographic data about the research participants (see Appendix C) including information about the participants such as gender, age, year of doctoral study, ethnicity and socio-economic background.

The focus group

According to Sarantakos (2005), a focus group involves individuals who are “brought together as a group for the purpose of the study, guided by the researcher and addressed as a group” (p. 194). There are a number of reasons for utilising a focus group within a study such as the ability of the focus group to encourage discussion and to foster motivation to examine critical issues. A further benefit of focus groups is that the researcher can lead and participate in the discussion in a way to ensure that significant topics are addressed (Sarantakos, 2005). In this research, the focus group was identified as a valuable method because it would provide opportunities for students to share and reflect together on their experiences as first-generation students in doctoral education. It also gave the students the opportunity to question each other’s understandings about what it means to be a first-generation student in the contemporary higher education context. All research participants were provided information about the focus group (see Appendix F) and were invited to join one of two focus group meetings held on site at the university. Using the online Doodle tool (<http://doodle.com>) to identify the best possible times for the participants, two focus groups were scheduled with a total of nine of the 15 students participating. In addition to attending the meeting, participants were asked to bring along an image of something that represented the university to them (8 images and one artefact were shared). These images are discussed in relation to university imaginaries in *Chapter Five* of this thesis.

In the focus group participants were asked to respond to short texts about the university and prepare short written reflections in response to questions about their journeys as first generations students through higher education and into doctoral study. Following this, participants were then invited to share their reflections with the group and this discussion

was recorded and transcribed. To provide a generous amount of time and reflective space each focus group was 1.5 hours in length.

Semi-structured interviews

Research participants were interviewed once during the period of data collection about their experiences of the university and doctoral education. A semi-structured interview format was chosen for this research. This interview type is helpful in that the researcher prepared an interview guide to help foster the interview ‘conversation’ and address some key topics, but such a guide is prepared with flexibility in mind both for the interviewee and interviewer. For the interviewee, there is leeway in how they reply to questions, and for the interviewer, there is space for the researcher to ask non-planned questions in relation to the ‘story content’ or information shared by the interviewee. The flexibility of this interview format was especially fitting in relation to my use of narrative methodology where there was an emphasis on providing space for detailed accounts rather than brief answers or general statements (Riessman, 2008). Below are some of the key interview questions asked of interview participants used to prompt students to share their educational stories.

Questions linked to narratives of hopeful beginnings:

- Where did you learn about the university?
- Can you identify any books or films that shaped your thinking about the university/doctoral education?
- Why did you choose to study for doctorate?
- Was there any particular event or events or individuals that contributed to you undertaking doctoral study?

Questions linked to experience narratives and of promises broken, or kept:

- How have your doctoral studies met your expectations or been different to what you expected? Who has been important in supporting the goal of doctoral study?
- What have been the challenges you have faced with your studies?

Questions linked to future orientations:

- Do you have a specific guiding vision or picture in mind for your future?
- Do you see yourself becoming an academic post-doctoral study? If not, what do you see yourself doing?

The interviews provided an opportunity for participants to reflect on, and share, their stories about their educational experiences, and as such provide detailed insights about being part of the first-generation of their family/whānau to enter higher education.

Each individual who agreed to participate in this study was sent an email containing an outline of the interview process (see Appendix D). Attached to this email was a participant information sheet that included a list of key questions (see Appendix A). The interviews took place at a mutually agreed time and at a convenient location for the participant, usually on campus. The majority of the interviews were conducted on the university campus, with three interviews being undertaken at participants' homes. Each interview was approximately an hour in duration. Permission was sought for the interviews to be digitally recorded and were later be transcribed for the purposes of data analysis.

Reflective journal writing

Journal writing, or the keeping of a field journal, is recommended by Chang (2008) as a key method for autoethnographers to capture reflections about the self and the research process. In this study, journal writing was undertaken by the researcher to provide a source of data. Over the course of the first three years of my doctoral study (including notes and reflections as I undertook the journey into applying for PhD study), I made regular, monthly, entries into a PhD journal. This journal was focused on capturing self-reflective data including discussion about my thoughts, feelings and observations about my doctoral work and my experience of the university. The journal entries also included self-observational data collected about typical events within doctoral study such as supervision meetings, interactions with the university through undertaking administrative requirements, participation in doctoral student events such as the doctoral student symposium. As discussed earlier, my initial intention in keeping a reflective journal was to gather the data to utilise this material as a major component of the thesis; however, as I developed my project I became more interested in the stories of the first-generation students supplemented by my examination of cultural texts as the main core of my exploration work and employed my autoethnographic work as a foundation for the Prelude of this thesis along with some small inclusions of material in the data analysis chapters.

Analysis of information

My choice of methodologies shaped my approach to data analysis. In the following section I describe the analytical strategies I have applied to the autoethnographic, interview and focus group data gathered in this research.

Narrative analysis: Narratives of self and others

In utilising a narrative methodology for data analysis, I acknowledge a range of different understandings and approaches. Riessman (2008) says, “narrative inquiry in the human sciences is a 20th Century development; the field has realist, postmodern, and constructionist strands, and scholars and practitioners disagree on origins and ways to conduct analysis” (p. 13). However, within this methodological terrain there are some pathways to follow and examples of narrative analysis that can be drawn on. In this study I employed two key narrative analytic approaches to interrogate the data: Riessman’s (2005, 2008) work principally on narrative thematic analysis and also Bamberg’s (2004) approach to performance analysis. A strength of the narrative thematic approach is its close focus on what is said (or written). This approach is common within narrative study and across a range of other qualitative research methodologies. Secondly, I adopted a narrative performance analysis approach through drawing on both Riessman (2010; 2008) and Bamberg’s (2004) work to broaden my engagements with the narratives gathered in this study allowing me to move from a primary focus on what is said to consider how speakers and writers position themselves and others within the stories they tell.

Determining the scope of a research narrative

To carry out narrative analysis, I needed to consider my understanding of the scope of a research narrative. Narrative researchers can focus on analysing broad narratives such as a participant’s life story shared within an interview or in a series of interviews, or they can focus on analysing narratives within bounded segments of interview texts about particular events or interview topics (Riessman, 2008). Both of these approaches can be identified within this study. Firstly, the focus on the broader or life story approach where a narrative is constructed from the research participant’s full interview account as is evidenced by the autoethnographic Prelude and the ‘little’ narratives in *Chapter Four* of this thesis. In addition, I have analysed narratives through the identification of bounded narrative sequences within a participant’s account around aspects of their first-generation experiences found throughout the data analysis (chapters four and five).

Narrative thematic analysis

In the first instance, I worked with larger chunks of text rather than breaking up interview data into individual units such as key words or phrases, as might be more common in thematic analysis often undertaken in qualitative research. This was because of my attention to “attempting to keep a participant’s ‘story’ intact. For example, I identified narrative

sequences within the students' accounts of how they learned about the university. After analysing the interview texts for the larger narrative arcs (such as a student's story about how they entered higher education) I then focused on smaller units of text or story fragments which themselves provide insights into aspects of the first-generation student experience. As I undertook a thematic approach, rather than structural analysis, my transcription practice involved the careful recording of the content shared within an interview or focus group; less attention was given to sociolinguistic markers or patterns (for example, clause structures). This also meant that when I worked with the data I often 'cleaned up' small grammatical features of the text common to spoken English to aid readability within the academic text of this thesis. I sought not change the content or intent of the participants' interviews. Once I had identified the students' stories of educational becomings relevant educational literature was drawn upon and organised into key topic areas, guided as I was, by the logic of the data. To undertake the analysis, interview transcripts were read closely (many times) to identify narrative sequences within segments of interview texts. I identified a series of events or actions that were connected to a student's understanding and experiences of higher education that were meaningful for the actions described later in their account and for the meaning, as I apprehended it to be, that a speaker [or writer] wanted the audience to understand (Riessman, 2008).

Narrative performance analysis

I supplemented this thematic approach with narrative performance analysis to broaden the discussion moving from a focus on what is said to consider the significance of the audience(s), that is, to focus on what is said and to whom it is said, to supplement the thematic approach. Through drawing on both Riessman (2008) and Bamberg (2004) I applied the following questions to my narrative data:

- In what kind of story does a narrator place themselves?
- How does the narrator position themselves in relation to the audience and vice versa?
- How does the narrator position characters in relation to one another, and in relation to her/himself?
- How does the narrator position herself to herself (or himself to himself), that is, make identity claims?

These questions guided my attention to the social positioning in the participants' stories. Attention to the narrator's positioning is important as it plays a key role in the

accomplishment of identity. As such, attention to the kind of story told and the positioning of the narrator provided an important means to focus on the academic identity development of the first-generation students within this research. An example of this is found in the story of Marie, when I focused on how she positioned her story of academic achievement. This focus helped me identify that she spoke directly about her achievements in a limited way. Instead she told the story of her academic success through the eyes of another, in this case a family friend, and how her family friend's recognition and encouragement led her to apply to a famous university for her masters study. Such a telling may reveal her reluctance to talk about her own success, in the context of her efforts to answer my questions about her move into postgraduate study. I undertook this analysis, recognising that I could not, as some authors might claim - through careful interviewing and application of these questions - 'capture' a participants lived experience in the sense that I had unmediated access to a participant's social world.

Instead, the narratives are recognised as being enacted in an immediate discursive context, for an audience, or for audiences, and thus do not provide a direct route to the truth of an experience. As Riessman (2008) points out, "stories don't fall from the sky (or emerge from the innermost "self"); they are composed and received in contexts - interactional, historical, institutional, and discursive to name a few" (p. 105). This is an important understanding because I did not approach the narratives told in the interviews as providing an essential or fixed presentation of self and rather see the stories told within the interview or focus group as being strategic and deeply contingent on context. The application of a performance analysis to the data in these ways can also be understood as being consistent with the post-critical orientation of this study.

Trustworthiness and reflexivity

Key considerations for an educational research project are trustworthiness or validity, and reliability (Merriam, 1998). This applies to different forms of academic research, although the ways trustworthiness and reliability are understood and achieved depend on the nature of the research project, and in a wider sense the research paradigm that the study is located within (Giddings & Grant, 2009). There are different conceptions of validity but in a very general sense it can be defined as the "ability to produce accurate results" (Sarantakos, 2005, p. 99). Merriam (1998) identifies a number of strategies that a researcher can use to enhance

validity including triangulation, member checks, peer examination and identifying researcher bias.

In this study I achieved trustworthiness through a number of mechanisms. Triangulation or “cross examination at multiple points” (Savin Baden & Howell Major, 2013, p. 477) was achieved through the employment of a variety of research methods including the auto-ethnographic field journal, undertaking interviews and a focus group with first-generation doctoral students and analysing fictional texts about the university. These different sources of data served to confirm findings and helped identify contradictions or discontinuities that may have required further investigation and analysis. Moreover, a form of peer examination was attained through the provision of feedback on different stages of my work (including data collection and interpretation) from my doctoral supervisors. A further way I have sought to ensure that my work is trustworthy, as identified earlier, is through my efforts to be self-reflexive at every stage in this project. As Tolich and Davidson (2011) point out:

If we accept that there is no way in which to remove the effect of the researcher on that which is researched, we need to introduce ways that make those effects explicit. How we do this is by having the researchers self-consciously reflect upon what they did and how they did it. (p. 171-172)

Given the post-critical positioning of this research, significant attention has been paid to clearly identifying my standpoint in relation to my study as outlined in this chapter and thoughtfully reflecting on my beliefs, assumptions and approaches to the work. In fact, this positioning is likened to a kind of ‘situated trustworthiness’ that emphasises “the researcher’s keen awareness of their own perspective particularly in relation to culture, politics and history” (Giddings & Grant, 2009, p. 130) and yet, at the same time, as I employ this critical understanding of validity, I also recognise the limitations to knowledge claims and the necessity for validity processes to be context-sensitive and open-ended (Lather, 1993). This understanding therefore leads me to consider post-structural conceptions of validity. Discussions on validity by post-structural theorists such as Lather (1993) have been described as “elusive and intensely abstract” (Giddings & Grant, 2009, p. 132) and researchers within this paradigm need to attend closely to validation throughout their research and to be “as transparent about their standpoint and decisions as possible in their accounts of the research” (Giddings & Grant, 2009, p. 133), something I have sought to do throughout the research process and account for in this thesis text.

Ethical considerations and the research process

In this section of the chapter, I consider the ethical dimensions of my project, that is, how I have undertaken this research in a way that can be understood as moral, 'good' or 'properly done' in terms of my engagements with others and the research outcomes I have produced. The ethical domain in research is a complex area manifest with discussion and debate. As Birch and colleagues (2002) have suggested shifts in late modernity "have led to ethical debates becoming a part of everyday life" (p. 1). In line with the greater attention to ethical issues in general, has been the development of numerous codes and guidelines for ethical practice and this is particularly true in the case of research undertaken within the university space. As such to conduct this research I followed the required ethical processes as outlined by my institution and gained ethical approval for this research project via the university ethics committee. This approval was sought, and gained, before I undertook any engagements with potential research participants. Gaining ethics approval required following ethical guidelines and involved a careful examination of all aspects of a project to ensure research participants were not harmed through their involvement in the proposed study.

Following this process also required the careful crafting of information guides about the research to ensure that participants were fully informed about the purpose of the study; including clear information about the key issues relating to the first-generation experience I was interested in investigating and the nature of the participation (see Appendix A). This was to ensure that participants were adequately informed about their study before they consented to their involvement (see Appendix B). It also involved ensuring participants anonymity as much as was possible through the use of pseudonyms²⁴ within the study documentation and care with use of personal information in the research work that could lead to participants to becoming identifiable. In following the ethical process, I also protected the information research participants shared with me through my storage of electronic documents such as interview/focus group transcripts on a password-protected computer, with hard copies of materials stored in a locked filing cabinet.

While setting out and operationalising ethical standards early on is important, seeking to be ethical in a research project requires more than the completion of formal processes required by a research institution at the outset of a study. As Birch and colleagues (2002) observe

²⁴ Pseudonyms have been used for participants unless the participants wished for their names to be used in this study.

“ethics guidelines, and the committees established to administer applications, encompass different philosophical positions and principles, and pragmatic approaches. Yet, ethical considerations encountered in research are much more wide-ranging than this” (p. 1). Edwards and Mauthner (2002) also explain, ethics as concerning “the morality of human conduct. In relation to social research, (ethics) ... refers to the moral deliberation, choice and accountability on the part of researchers throughout the research process” (p. 14). As these authors make clear, ethical issues can potentially arise at any point during the course of a study, and as such a researcher must be attuned to ethical matters as they proceed through the research process.

In this research I encountered a number of issues that possessed ethical dimensions. One of the first dilemmas I experienced related to my concern about taking from my participants, particularly in terms of their time investments in my study (responding to email, being interviewed, attending focus groups, for example). Despite the fact that I had outlined the time required from participants from the outset (in my study advertisement, participant information documents and when talking to potential study participants), and the students volunteered in the study. However, I was still concerned about taking too much of these individuals’ time and energy. I understood that many of these students possessed significant workloads arising from their studies and work outside of their doctoral studies which I did not want to add to. I was also uneasy about making requests of these individuals in part because I am aware of a significant history of researchers who have ‘used’ particular communities as sites for research for their own benefit, offering little in return.

However, I knew that to do justice to the research topic and to seriously engage with the first-generation student experience I needed to spend the (indicated) time with these students to gain insights into their involvements with higher education with a view to extending the current knowledge about first-generation students. As such I had to balance the different ethical goals I sought to pursue. As such, I kept my concern for the students’ time firmly in mind when contacting participants and making requests of them for interviews for example, to ensure I used their time well and focused on undertaking the research as care-fully as I could out of respect for those involved in my study. My efforts to treat the research participants with respect can be understood in terms of my seeking to protect or uphold these individuals’ mana. Mana is one of the most important Māori cultural concepts and can be understood, in simple terms, as an individual’s status, power or authority (Bishop,

2008; Ka'ai & Higgins, 2004). This cultural concept is understood as a key principle to guide the practice in Māori research (see Tuhiwai Smith, 2015).

Another significant dilemma arose for me in relation to my role as narrator of the students' experiences within the university. As a researcher my work in the interpretation of others' words, my ability to select, or leave out data and my control over the writerly practices of thesis construction has meant I had a significant responsibility to the research participants to represent them in a way that was thoughtful, appropriate and fair. This is by no means a straightforward undertaking as I discussed earlier in this chapter. I felt a significant sense of responsibility for the ways the participants were 'shown' within my study, but also I needed to be able to write about potentially complex or challenging findings as I encountered them within this research, again to do justice to the project and to extend the knowledge in this area - writing that could potentially be of benefit of first-generation students in future. To guide me through these issues I drew on a feminist ethic of care. The feminist ethic of care according to Sevenhuijsen (1998) involves "different moral concepts, responsibilities and relationships rather than rules and rights" (p. 107). In this approach there is an emphasis on contextual reasoning (rather than reliance on abstract universalistic principles), responsibilities to others and self (understood as a self-in-relation), and a focus on personal connections. This care ethic sees responsibility and empathy being central to ethical practice (Sevenhuijsen, 1998). How exactly a feminist ethic of care is brought to a project is dependent on the particular power relationships between researchers and research participants and the context of the research.

Adopting feminist ethics informed the ways; I invited first-generation individuals to take part in this study, how I communicated with participants and how I organised the interviews. For instance, I sought to provide comfortable and convenient meeting or interview spaces or if the interview space I arranged was not suitable I travelled to participants' homes. It shaped my decision to provide refreshments for participants in the interview contexts (where this was possible) and for the focus groups where I prepared home baking for each gathering. It extended to my work to build connections with participants and share information with the interviewees about my doctoral experiences or my own history of being a first-generation student.

I also wish to acknowledge that my engagement with a feminist ethics of care was not done without an awareness of some of the critiques or limitations of this ethical approach. For

example, scholars such as Lauritzen (1992) have raised concerns about the ethics of care approach arguing that it runs the risk of reinforcing traditional sexist stereotypes (with reason being associated with men and women with emotion) within a hierarchy where reason and masculinity dominate. Other commentators have also raised concerns about the implications of a care-focused approach as being burdensome or even potentially exploitative of research participants. Duncombe and Jessop (2002) describe this in their discussion of feminist and qualitative research interviews in relation to efforts to build relationships through the employment of rapport building techniques and false friendships with research participants. Nonetheless, as Lauritzen (1992) suggests the “effort to recover the importance of emotions in moral life is especially significant” (p. 383) and for my own work provides me with a valuable compass to guide my ethical decision-making.

In simple terms, I sought to take responsibility for the research process and to treat my research participants with care and respect. I also followed Gillies and Alldred (2002) who argued that a feminist ethic of care extends to epistemological considerations. As such, I sought to be care-ful in how I handled the data provided to me, how I analysed and discussed it and how I sought to generate knowledge about first-generation students. It is important here that I define what I mean by responsibility. I view this concept as involving a relational practice and a disposition which has as McLeod (2017) suggests “a collective remit, rather than a singular focus on personal responsibility or responsabilisation” (p. 53). This notion of responsabilisation is firmly associated with a neoliberal worldview and is one that operates in a narrow way. I understand my responsibilities in broader terms, that is, I understand I have responsibilities to the individual participants within this study, but also to first-generation students in a general sense and the scholarly and research community I am a part of for example. Thus, my responsibility for this research work was collectively focused rather than defined only in relation to an individual or a small group of individuals.

Taking this issue of representation seriously meant I provided participants with their interview transcripts and invited them to review them to ensure they were accurate, and also for them to check they were comfortable with the material that would be used for analysis and discussion. Participants were then invited to remove any material that they wished from the transcripts. In addition, as part of representing the participants within the research writing I produced narrative sketches about each student and their higher education experiences. These stories were sent to the participants for their approval (or amendment) before they were utilised within the thesis text.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this chapter has discussed the post-critical theoretical location of my study and provided an overview of the methodology and methods employed within the study. It has outlined my reasons for undertaking this research using narrative inquiry and the related methodologies of autoethnography, duoethnography and textual inquiry to examine the contemporary doctoral experience of first-generation students. Ultimately, I have sought in this writing to provide a strong account of the thinking that underpinned my research processes and how the choices I have made in this work are informed not only by reference to sound theory, but have been deeply informed by own positioning, interests and orientations to this research project. In reference to the whakatauki (proverb) that opened this chapter I hope my account of my research methodology illustrates that I have brought together the ‘right feathers’ for this research project’s successful flight. Following this chapter is an interlude which examines the filmic text *Educating Rita* (1983) for its engagement with the idea of the university and its depiction of the experiences of a first-generation working-class woman. This interlude provides a platform for the discussion in *Chapter Four* where I explore the promise of the university for first-generation students and their investments in the discourses of meritocracy and social mobility.

Interlude I. Filmic figurations: Educating Rita (1983) and non-traditional students' entries into the university

Introduction

In this interlude I provide a descriptive and analytic reading of *Educating Rita* (1983) to examine the way a well-known filmic text represents, and provides insights into, the world of the university. As Reynolds (2009) suggests “as the product of many, for the many, film is particularly effective at displaying ‘dominant ways of seeing’ “ (p. 209) She also suggests that the ways stories are “presented in a manner recognisable for, and in alignment or discussion with the ... ideas of the viewing masses” (p. 209). As such, I maintain examining a filmic text can provide useful entry points into how the university may be understood within the cultural or social imagination. Based on the 1980 play of the same name by Willy Russell, *Educating Rita* tells the story of a working-class woman and her aspiration to become ‘educated’. The film became a major success when it was released in 1983 and in the intervening 30+ years since it was first staged, its play form has remained popular, with it being performed around the globe almost continuously since it premiered (Midgley, 2015).

Mangan (2002) argues that the play and film in combination have had “a wide impact on contemporary cultural consciousness” (p. 19); as such it is an important filmic text to consider popular notions of both the university and the idea of the university student. In my discussion, I draw attention to the narrative constructions of the university student, the university and the university academic in this text. I also enquire into the ways that *Educating Rita* may provide ‘equipment for living’ for non-traditional students who are typically at a social and cultural distance from the university. I argue that the story of *Educating Rita* is one that conforms with, and is based on, familiar and traditional notions of social mobility as ‘escape’. This escape is founded on a duality between the haves and the have-nots which relies on the stigmatising of the working-class world that a ‘non-traditional’ student originates from.

I have also chosen this film for analysis not only because of its ground-breaking depiction of a working-class woman at university, but because of the way an idea of the university features so strongly within its narrative. Although there are many similarities between the play form of *Educating Rita* and its filmic text, including the fact that Willy Russell wrote both the play and then the screenplay, the following discussion will concentrate on *Educating Rita*'s cinematic form.



Figure two. Rita crossing the threshold of Frank's office (*Educating Rita*, 1983).

The story of Rita

Educating Rita focuses on Rita, a 26-year-old Liverpudlian hairdresser who is intent on gaining a university education. She enrolls in an Open University course in English literature and meets Dr Frank Bryant, a jaded academic whose job it is to tutor her. We follow Rita as she meets with a number of trials and tribulations in her pursuit of becoming 'educated'. The narrative is presented in comedic form and centres on the personal and pedagogical relationship between Rita and Frank (Bramman, 2009) as she undertakes her learning journey. Ultimately, Rita is successful in gaining an education and is shown to have improved her life through 'escaping' the limitations of her working-class world. Much of the narrative power of the story emerges in the context of Rita's self-development and through the film's aspirational message, that is, an individual can improve their life and achieve their goals no matter what their circumstances are

or where they come from. Willy Russell believes it is this message that underscores *Educating Rita*'s enduring popularity. He says, "the desire to improve one's lot is a primal human force. Rita's aspiration touched a nerve because it represents the universal struggle to get something better" (Midgley, 2015, para. 7).



Figure three. Professor Frank Bryant at his desk (*Educating Rita*, 1983).

Meeting Frank

The film opens with Frank walking to university and making his way across campus to his office. In this short opening scene, the audience is provided with some powerful and stereotypical images of Frank as 'Professor'. Dr Frank Bryant is a bearded white man in middle-age. He is dressed in a blazer and jeans and is shown to be carrying a leather satchel as he moves across the university grounds. Frank walks assuredly past old stone buildings and tidily laid out lawns peopled by students casually chatting in groups or sitting under trees in the summer sun. His journey is accompanied by the strident sounds of a classical orchestra. When he arrives at his office we see Frank closely survey his bookshelves and run his fingers along a row of serious literary tomes in his collection. However, what we see next is not a professor beginning his scholarly work through a selection of reading material, rather we find Frank searching for his bottle of whiskey, ironically located behind Charles Jackson's novel *The Lost Weekend* (a critically acclaimed story about an alcoholic writer). The scene closes with Frank sleeping in his

comfortable chair no doubt after imbibing significant quantities of the formerly secreted whisky plucked from his bookshelves.

Rita, as we see next, navigates the campus in a less self-assured manner. She walks quickly, but at an uneven pace. She stops hesitantly and asks for directions as she struggles to navigate her way. Her uncertain walk across the university tells the audience she is new to this place; she is an outsider. Alongside the sounds of a classical track, we hear the persistent noise of Rita's high heels clickety-clacking on the paved ground beneath her feet. It is a nervous rhythm which fades when she stops at the stairs to Frank's office. The audience then sees Rita grimacing as she listens to a group of students above laughing about the perceived ignorance of someone who did not know what 'assonance' was. Rita, seemingly halted by their words, does not know what this literary term means (as we learn later) and walks slowly up to Frank's room. A key symbolic moment then occurs outside Frank's office door; Rita knocks and grasps the door handle to open it, but to no avail, the door does not move. Frank invites her in politely at first, and then in a grumpy tone yells, "for God's sake, come in". It takes an almighty push for Rita to open the jammed door. Rita's struggle to cross the threshold of Frank's office is symbolically mirrored in her struggle to enter the university. However, rather than being a forlorn presence, Rita is funny and sharp, and quickly tells Frank what he needs to do once the door swings open:

Rita I'm coming in aren't I? It's that stupid bleedin' handle on the door. You wanna get that fixed!

Frank Erm – yes, I suppose I always mean to...

Rita Well that's no good always meanin' to, is it? Y' should get on with it; one of these days you'll be shoutin' 'Come in' an it'll go on forever because the poor sod on the other side won't be able to get in. An you won't be able to get out.

Frank appears to be struck by Rita's dramatic arrival in his office and this arrival marks the beginning of the narrative proper.

Rita, in their first meeting, is talkative, dynamic and funny. She is nervous and excited, expressing her desire to get to know herself through learning. Frank, however, appears to be less than enthusiastic about her goal to become 'educated', and as we learn later, he fears she will lose her vibrancy and become like everyone else in his dreary academic world. As Bramman (2009) suggests, "in Frank's mind, education and culture are not expressions of a higher or deeper wisdom anymore, but pretentious exercises in futility" (para. 11). As Frank comments to a colleague before meeting Rita, "why a grown adult wants to come to this place after putting in a day's hard work is totally beyond me". Frank, of course, would much rather spend an evening in the pub than instructing some disadvantaged student. The comical paradox of the narrative is that Rita desires exactly what Frank no longer values (Bramman, 2009).

The film then follows the dyadic tutor-student based interactions of Rita and Frank. Frank introduces Rita to key literary texts and authors, establishing a clear divide between 'literature' as high culture and lowly popular culture. We find Frank instructing, or perhaps chastising, Rita during their tutorial sessions about her poor taste in books. For example, Frank tells Rita in one instance that "devouring pulp fiction is not being well read". Rita's working-class community, who read 'lowly' popular texts, are presented as being ignorant and cheap or tacky (Fisher, Harris, & Jarvis, 2008) and her educational experience operates in the film with enabling her to access a higher, better culture. Rita initially struggles to gain access to the literature, particularly in relation to understanding academic language and so she grapples with being in the world of the university. In this way *Educating Rita* can be read as a fictional literacy narrative which tells the story of a student who meets the challenges of moving from one discourse community to another (Rutten, 2011). Although the narrative shows that the middle-class university world which Rita seeks access to is flawed – Frank is a drunk and Trish, her high culture loving flatmate is depressed and suicidal; however, their lives are not mocked in the way Rita's working-class background is. As Fisher et al. (2008) suggest, cheap laughs are garnered at Rita's expense, for example when Frank asks Rita if she is familiar with the poet Yeats, and she responds, thinking Frank is talking about a local wine lodge.

Rita and the development of her academic personhood

The construction of 'Rita' as a 'non-traditional' student is a compelling one. She is courageous, funny and determined. She is lacking in formal education and unfamiliar with the culture of higher education at the outset, but is shown to be bright and capable. Rita is also extremely eager for knowledge and keenly pursues 'a life of the mind', a life of the mind that would help her to find herself. As she says to Frank "see, I want to discover meself first. Do you understand that?". Significantly, the kind of knowledge she is interested in is firmly associated with high culture and middle-class tastes and in this way Rita can be seen as seeking a particular kind of personhood, one that is more sophisticated, cultured and undoubtedly classed. Going to university as shown in this filmic text seems to be as much about attaining a certain lifestyle as gaining an education (Fisher et al., 2008), albeit without attention to work or career. In these terms, we see Rita make considerable efforts to develop the dispositions of a student, which can be understood in a Bourdieusian sense²⁵, as the drive to develop a middle-class habitus.

One of the interesting omissions in terms of Rita's characterization is the invisibility of economic constraints and motivations for higher education – so often present for students from lower socio-economic backgrounds. As can be evidenced from the discussions of many of the first-generation students in this study, economic matters are extremely significant for them; shaping not only their pathways into and through the university, but the lives they wish to live at the completion of their current academic work. *Educating Rita* is almost silent on this point which is striking given the timing of the film, set as it was in Thatcher's Britain a time which saw the rise of neoliberal theory and an increasing emphasis on vocational education and efficiency (Fisher et al., 2008). Certainly, Fisher and colleagues (2008) suggest, the "portrayal of adult learning ignores the extrinsic goals that motivate many adult students. Limited economic prospects often drive adults to education" (p. 151). Instead Rita's educational

²⁵ Bourdieu (1990) describes habitus as a socially constituted system of dispositions that orient "thoughts, perceptions, expressions and actions" (p. 55). These mental attitudes and perceptions are manifest in durable ways "of standing, speaking, walking and thereby of feeling and thinking" (Pierre Bourdieu, 1977, pp. 93–94). As Lee and Kramer (2013b) explain individuals internalise their social position "into their tastes and world view" (pp. 18-19) which then can reinforce their position in their social context.

aspirations to 'find herself' appears to be her single purpose for study, in this way, the character of Rita seems particularly flattened or limited.

Another of the film's central issues emerges from her working-class origins and her family as barriers to Rita's success. Her educational background is shown to be problematic given her lack of knowledge about literature and her unfamiliarity with academic vocabulary or argumentation. She is knowledgeable about popular fiction and television shows from ITV instead, something that Frank disapproves of. Moreover, her family and especially her husband stand in her way. Rita's father, for example, condemns her for not having provided him grandchildren. Denny, Rita's husband, also has very traditional ideas about the role of a wife, and seeks to obstruct Rita's education wherever he can. This includes burning her books and destroying her academic work. Denny, frustrated with Rita's refusal to stop taking birth control, presents her with the ultimatum of either 'packing in' her university studies or leaving their home and marriage. Her family and background are presented as nothing more than barriers to her success and as obstacles that should be rightly left behind. Despite these circumstances she decides to continue her education, but it takes all of her determination to do so, and she forsakes many elements of her life to continue her studies. This representation of a wholesale lack of family support for members who seek a university education contrasts significantly with the experiences of the majority of first-generation students in this study who describe the often, multiple ways family members provided ongoing encouragement, moral and financial support where possible, to enable them to go to university and undertake higher study.

The university in *Educating Rita*

The university in *Educating Rita* (1983) is generously showcased in the opening scenes of the film. The audience see Frank walk through arched stone corridors and past elegant old buildings skirted by pleasant green spaces. Students occupy quad-like lawns and sit contemplatively under shaded trees or casually line the walkways holding their books and bikes. The campus is drenched in the warm sunlight of an English summer. This familiar iconography of the elite university continues to be displayed throughout the film and as Fisher et al. (2008)

suggest, “everything connected with the northern provincial red brick university Rita visits is presented to connote privilege and culture” (p. 166). Interestingly, while the story’s setting is Liverpool, Trinity College in Dublin was used as the location for filming the outside university scenes (Rutten, 2011). Although Liverpool University is an established institution (founded in the late 19th century), filmmakers opted to shoot the opening scenes at Trinity College which is one of the oldest universities in Europe²⁶ and, in doing so, these filmmakers confirmed the notion of the university as being a very old world and high culture space. It is also noteworthy that the plans for Trinity College, were influenced by the design of universities of Oxford and Cambridge (Trinity College Dublin, 2014). This fact may be understood as further reinforcement for the notion that universities are imagined in terms of these two ancient English institutions. Through the depiction of an elite university space, *Educating Rita* as a filmic narrative goes some way towards re-inscribing and re-articulating one of the central imaginaries of the university, that is, the university as elite place or ‘ivory tower’.

The position of the university academic

The audience sees from the outset of the film the status of Frank as a senior academic. Within the narrative Frank is shown briefly teaching a classroom of students and, despite appearing bored and somewhat drunk, his students only politely express their concerns. His status and authority are also quickly made evident in one of the early exchanges between Frank and Rita, in response to Rita’s question in their first meeting: “What do they call you round here?” Frank replies “Sir”, although he then tells her to call him Frank as she is an Open University student. Frank teaches Rita in his office rather than in the classroom. It is a tutorial space that also works to confirm the privileged position of university professors. The office is generously proportioned with high ceilings and large windows overlooking a green outdoor space. The room, though somewhat untidily organised, is filled with brimming bookshelves, old leather furniture and an antique desk. Frank’s furniture and his possessions within the office are a key part of the *mise en scene* and powerfully represent upper middle-class wealth and taste (Fisher et al., 2008).

²⁶ Trinity was founded in 1592 (Trinity College Dublin, 2014).

Rita demonstrates her desire for this kind of wealth and taste in telling Frank, in their first meeting, “I love this room, I love the view from this window, do you like it?” Frank, long established in this place does not give it much thought as he says, “I don’t often consider it actually, I sometimes get the urge to throw something through it, a student usually”. As Fisher and colleagues (2008) observe, Frank’s rather grand working space is “entirely unrepresentative of the facilities accorded to most university staff” (p. 166) but its presentation works to confirm the elevated status of the university academic. To reinforce this view of Frank’s lifestyle the audience is invited into Frank’s home when Rita goes to a dinner party he is hosting there. Viewers are shown the outside of his large, beautiful Georgian home along with interior scenes, although Rita herself is unable to cross its threshold due to her fear of not fitting in with those at Frank’s party. Frank is represented as a possessor of legitimate knowledge eschewing popular culture and occupying a superior position to Rita despite his bad behaviour and drunkenness. As Mangan (2002) suggests “*Educating Rita* stages a world in which it is taken more or less for granted that hegemonic social and cultural authority is most naturally vested in a male figure; and while ... Willy Russell subjects this social and cultural authority to a good deal of good-natured ribbing, he leaves these values fairly intact” (p. 20). Mangan (2002) also goes on to suggest, that the construction of the older authoritative man and the younger woman within the narrative is “blatantly patriarchal” (p. 24), though Rita does eventually challenge, to some extent, Frank’s patriarchal power.

***Educating Rita* as ‘equipment for living’**

Rutten (2011) argues that *Educating Rita* is an “exemplary fictional literacy narrative” (para. 1) and one that can provide students with ‘equipment for living’ within higher education given the way it highlights Rita’s struggle to develop her academic literacy and succeed at university. Rutten (2011) draws on the work of literary theorist Kenneth Burke, who in *The philosophy of literary form* (1967), described literary art forms such as tragedy, comedy and satire as equipment for living that ‘size up’ situations. Burke identified the way literature provides a specific kind of ‘naming’ that seeks to chart ‘type’ situations and proposed a number of principles and methods for analysing human symbolic action within literary texts. As

Brummett (2006) explains “once a way of understanding and reacting to a problem is encoded in a text that text becomes a place to which others may also turn for motivation and perception” (p. 180). Burke’s analytical approach was employed by Rutten (2011) in his study of *Educating Rita* (1983) and a group of students’ engagement with it as a literacy text. He sought to identify whether and how this narrative provides ‘equipment for living’ for thinking about their higher education experiences within the university classroom. Rutten (2011) argued that the students were able to reflect on their experiences and were able “to identify with the particular discourse community they are engaging with” (p. 8). He also pointed to the ways “some students reflected on the power of fiction to frame what to expect from the university and how to behave” (p. 5).

Although Rutten (2011) makes some valuable points about the usefulness of *Educating Rita* in terms of providing ‘equipment for living’ for students to engage with in a classroom setting, I would like to depart from his analysis to recognize how popular culture texts like *Educating Rita* can also potentially operate to mislead or misinform, particularly those individuals outside of the critical space of the classroom. Gregory (2007) contends that education narratives “that swirl thickly in most cultures, especially western culture ... haunt real classrooms like ghosts and invisibly distort” (p. 8). In contrast with Rutten (2011), Gregory believes that these narratives create notions that effectively work against education” (p. 8). Filmic texts can employ stereotypical and outdated images of the university that can hinder rather than help students navigate higher education. Certainly, the notion of the working-class student pursuing self-discovery through high art, in itself, does not reflect the numerous other goals many students from lower socio-economic backgrounds have for higher education. Rita’s laudable, though narrow, motivations do not reflect how many working-class students seek higher education to improve their employment opportunities and life chances. Equally, the images of professors as privileged, leisured, and well-off, white men does little to speak to the growing diversity of university teaching staff, the commitment many academics have to their students’ learning, the realities of academics’ working conditions or the rewards associated with academic work.

In addition, the representation of the university as elite old-world institution offers only one story of the university located in the 1980s. It is through these stereotypes or simplifications that *Educating Rita* can be seen as providing only basic equipment for living for individuals at a distance from the university, like many first-generation students are, before they begin their tertiary studies. Arguably, the film's age may account for its outdatedness, however, as Fisher and colleagues suggest (2008), "even in 1983, it presented a picture of higher education, adult learners, particularly women, learners and working-class life that bore little resemblance to contemporary experience" (p. 148). Instead perhaps, a better account for the elevated notion of the university presented in this filmic narrative comes from an engagement with the 'ivory tower' imaginary of the university. This university as an elite 'ivory tower' space, discussed in the next interlude of this thesis, is still referred to and recycled in discourse in the contemporary social imagination. This film, some thirty years old, remains significant as an example of how "... its clichéd view of higher education and of the adult learner is still prevalent, in spite of the widespread experience of the reality of university life" (p. 148).

Conclusion

In summary, *Educating Rita* can be understood as both disrupting and re-inscribing traditional conceptualisations of the university. *Educating Rita* challenged established notions of the university student through its positioning of a working-class woman, in her 20s, going to university. She is shown to be bright and engaged, and despite the challenges she develops a stronger sense of self and is ultimately successful in achieving her goal of becoming 'educated'. While the story of *Educating Rita* points to the rightful place of 'non-traditional' students like Rita within the university, its narrative provides limited 'equipment for living' for contemporary 'non-traditional' students. This is especially evident in the way it reinforces the idea that a university is an elite place that is sought out purely for the love of knowledge alone. It also needs to be understood as confirming the validity of high culture and middle-class values located within what is shown to be a very privileged space. To take her place within the university, Rita is mostly depicted as needing to break with her working-class world. She leaves her husband, moves out of her home to flat with another student (a ready consumer of 'high

culture’) and changes her job. In fact, she seems to have had to change everything about her life to achieve her academic dream. In this sense, the film identifies Rita as needing to ‘escape’ her working-class world to enable her to gain a university education. This is shown to be difficult for Rita, however, it appears to be a necessary fact of her self-development. Thus, the story of *Educating Rita* positions working-class students as needing to escape their origins and separate themselves from those around them to have better lives. In this way, this filmic text conforms to traditional conceptions of social mobility which rely on the notion of escape and a kind of stigmatisation of the working-class world from which the ‘non-traditional’ student emerges from. I address this articulation of social mobility as ‘escape’ in the following chapter of this thesis.

Moreover, the university of *Educating Rita* (1983) is inhabited by students and professors who are, by and large, privileged individuals who pursue high culture forms, in elegant and old-world spaces. In fact, to imagine the university, is to imagine the ancient universities of Oxford and Cambridge and arguably, this involves the assumption of a particular kind of British middle-class subjectivity. Ultimately, *Educating Rita* is a film that provided only a limited reflection of reality, even when it is thought about in its temporal and social contexts. Nonetheless, it is a significant filmic text in that it carves a space for the ‘non-traditional’ student within higher education and identifies a cultural idea of the university, one that continues to circulate in the social imagination.

Chapter Four. The university and the promise of meritocracy and mobility

Oxbridge journeys

I remember
One of my first experiences
at uni,
Somebody asked me how I
got here
And, for me I thought

It meant like travel. So
I started explaining like how
I actually got there,
The plane ride
And all that bit.
And, the person said
No, how did you get here?
With the emphasis on
“here”.

And, I still thought
It meant travel
But probably travel
From where
I was staying in Cambridge
to the faculty of education.

And I explained,
It is quite difficult for me
But, I took the bus,
And still again
The question,
How did you get **here**?
So, I said, well do you mean
the university?

And, they said yes.
So I said,
Well I applied, like the same
way you did,
is what I said....

Marie

*(Text taken verbatim from
Marie's interview)*

Introduction

To echo the words of the poem that opens this chapter, I seek to respond to the question regarding how first-generation students ‘got here,’ that is, to the university and doctoral

education. However, in contrast to what may be identified in the tenor of the exchange captured in the opening verse, I ask this question in an effort to gain insights into the understandings that contributed to this group of first-generation students' choice to pursue doctoral study. To formulate a response to this question, it is necessary to further unpack it, particularly to ask: where have these students come from? What kinds of journeys have they made? And, how and why have these students arrived at the point of undertaking doctoral education? These questions of arrival provide a generative space for the broader consideration of the key discourses shaping first-generation engagements with the university and the formation of their academic identities. Based on my analysis of the data gathered in this study, I seek to make visible the presence of meritocracy and social mobility discourses in the students' narratives and argue that one significant way first-generation students meet the challenges of doctoral study is through the mobilisation of these discourses to recognise themselves as academically talented, high achievers, in other words, to they recognise themselves as 'meritorious students'. Meritocracy discourse, in particular, is invoked as a key means for these students to make sense of their academic identities and take up doctoral student subjectivities within the spaces of the contemporary university. I also identify the central role of meritocracy and social mobility discourses in not only shaping doctoral student identities, but in the formation of the identity of the contemporary university itself. In this conception, the 'meritocratic university' is a place of opportunity for students from all social backgrounds to succeed on the basis of their talent and hard work and, through higher study, move 'up' the occupational and social ladder. This form of university ideal, though not exclusively connected to neoliberalism, nonetheless aligns with many aspects of a neoliberal university imaginary where talented and enterprising students are understood as being able to succeed in higher education independent of their social origins.

I also explore the way social mobility has come to be understood through tracing some of the contours of this discourse and identifying how understandings of social mobility are deeply reliant on the notions of individual 'escape'. In my discussion, I find within the students' narratives the significance of the conventional notions of gain and also departure, escape or even trauma associated with their educational and social mobility. However, from the students' accounts I also locate understandings of social mobility which foreground connection, return and reciprocity. Specifically, I seek to evidence the ways many of these first-generation students frame social mobility in collective, rather than individualist, terms which exceed simplistic escape narratives. Lastly, I draw attention to the experiences of the

students and the ways they possess diverse mobilities in an effort to further contextualise the notion of contemporary social mobility to recognise the complex social, cultural and geographical spaces that many first-generation students traverse to achieve their dream of gaining a doctorate. In doing so, I seek to attend to the students' experience of social mobility within doctoral education. As such my work responds to Friedman's (2014) call for research into how social mobility is actually *lived*, in this case, through an exploration of how social mobility is lived within the university by first-generation doctoral students. This analysis may also be seen as a call for the need to re-orient or extend social mobility discourses to better encompass the experiences of contemporary first-generation students.

This chapter is divided into two main parts. The first opens with a discussion of the interpretive grounding for the analysis of the student narratives. I then move to examining some key literature that will help me unpack the contemporary discourse of meritocracy before exploring the relationship between meritocracy and first-generation doctoral student identities. Included within this discussion, are three introductory 'little' narratives I have constructed based on interview material. I have framed these brief texts as stories *of* the student in question, rather than *the* story of the individual. In line with post-critical theory, this choice of frame is intended to indicate, albeit subtly, that the narratives I offer are just one version of many possible stories that could be told about a student and are constructed through my narration. I do not intend to identify a singular 'truth' of these students' experiences through these short pieces, nor to suggest that I can capture the richness of the students' educational journeys in a handful of sentences – hence my naming of these pieces as 'little' narratives. Nonetheless, they are included to provide a foundation for the analytic discussion that follows and to open up a space for readers to think about the varied nature of first-generation student experiences. Following the first 'little' narrative, I examine Marie's engagement with the discourse of meritocracy to contemplate how she constructs her identity within the doctoral space.

The second part of the chapter focuses on some key concepts that underpin the discourse of social mobility that are then considered through the metaphor of movement primarily in relation to Dante's educational account. Following this examination, I focus on how first-generation students' social mobility can be layered within a variety of mobilities by exploring Linda's educational journey across a range of cultural, linguistic, and geographical spaces to interrogate the idea of mobilities in relation to first-generation students, both of these discussions are opened with a 'little' narrative. In the final section of this chapter I discuss

some of the challenges of mobility for first-generation students and enquire into the future of social mobility for these students within the university.

Tracing discourses and academic identity formation

In my effort to identify the most influential discourses shaping the academic identities of first-generation students as well as their ongoing engagements with the university, I employed a post-critical analytic strategy as explained in *Chapter Three*. This involved multiple close readings of the interview texts to identify assumptions, conflicts or contradictions. My focus was on both the telling of stories which captured significant events across the students' lives over time and paying attention to smaller story moments located in bounded segments of interview texts. In adopting this analytic strategy, I recognise the students' narratives as biographical constructions shared within the interview space. Moreover, I understand these narratives as being constrained, partial and determined by the discourses and histories that prefigure them.

Furthermore, in line with Petersen (2014), I examined the stories of the first-generation students with close attention to how their subjectivity or selfhood is (re)constituted and negotiated within the context of doctoral education. As Petersen (2014) suggests:

doctoral study makes available to the student new subject positions (e.g. qualitative researcher, producer of knowledge, writer) which in various ways may complement, extend, negate and challenge previously embodied subject positions. In the take up of new subject positions, the subject may be faced with a resignification of his or her self; a new story of who the self is, who this self is becoming or has become, a new way of making meaning and making sense of him/herself, others around him/her the world and so on. (p. 824)

As such I focused on how these first-generation students constructed their identities in discourse and their doctoral student subjectivities within the university. Post-structural theory understands subjectivity to be an ongoing process shaped by discourse and occurring in the context of historically contingent matrices of cultural intelligibility (Butler, 1990). The stories and the readings given here do not seek to fix the students' academic identities, recognising that, "who we are is never settled, but is continually being formed and reformed, signified and resignified" (Petersen, 2014, p. 824). Through this analysis I identified the powerful presence of meritocracy and social mobility discourses in shaping these students' identities and their continued investments in higher education. Attention to the significance of these discourses in relation to first-generation students is particularly consequential given, as Gofen (2009) suggests, that "individuals who attain a higher education, whereas both their

parents did not, embody the realization of social mobility” (p. 104). To undertake an exploration of the discourses of meritocracy and social mobility, I will describe how the construct of meritocracy has figured in the work of some influential theorists and then move on to give a post-critical reading of it as a discourse. From there I move to identify the ways in which this discourse is visible in the accounts of many of the first-generation students in this study before exploring the construct of social mobility.

Making sense of meritocracy

Michael Young was one of the first authors to employ the term meritocracy in his influential work *The Rise of Meritocracy* in 1958. Although his use of the word was pejorative, “used to describe a social system based on intelligence testing and educational attainment” (Liu, 2011, p. 385), the term continues to have great social appeal in the modern vernacular. This social appeal arises, in large part, because a meritocratic system is seen as allowing people to shape their own lives based on their talents and effort rather than being fixed in a particular social structure due to their family origins. Meritocracy therefore can be understood as a system, as Moore (2004) suggests, “whereby people can achieve social status by virtue of their actual abilities and contributions rather than having it merely ascribed to them by the accident of birth” (p. 39). At its core is the idea that “those who are the most talented, the hardest working, and the most virtuous get and should get the most rewards” (McNamee & Miller, 2009, p. 4). The notion of meritocracy based on the core construct of merit, can also be understood as being linked with a range of concepts including distributive justice, equality of opportunity and social mobility (Liu, 2011).

Michael Young (1958) provided a now well-known formula to calculate merit: I (Intelligence) + E (Effort) = M (Merit) (p. 252). Likewise, Liu (2011) suggests that merit is commonly associated with “talent, skill, intelligence and effort” (p. 385). The positive traits or descriptors making up the concept of merit suggest that it is something identifiable and unequivocally good, which therefore warrants reward. Van den Brink and Benschop (2012), in their discussion of promotion practices within the university, explicitly link the notion of excellence, in this case academic excellence, to Western norms of meritocracy, as they say “in a meritocracy, the label of excellence should be reserved for scholars of the greatest merit” (p. 509). However, they challenge this simple view and argue that it ignores powerful relations between different individuals and groups within higher education and instead refer

to a “myth of meritocratic impartiality” (p. 509). Sen (2000), too, reminds us the concept of merit is in general, normative and “deeply contingent on our views of a good society” (p. 5).

Another key element of meritocracy is distributive justice. In a meritocracy, rewards are distributed on the basis of merit and inequality is justified through an individual’s lack of merit. A pure meritocracy is not focused on social justice or equality in terms of sharing society’s resources, outside of individual’s demonstration of merit, which then strictly accords with reward, provided that there has been equality of opportunity. Equality of opportunity, then, is concerned with the idea that individuals must be given an equal chance to show “their talent in the competition for rewards” (Liu, 2011, p. 389). There are varied conceptions of what equality of opportunity is or what it requires; however, the idea of equality of opportunity or a kind of level playing field for individuals competing for rewards is highly problematic, given the difficulty of achieving such equality in the face of different kinds of persistent social disadvantage or structural inequalities. Moreover, as Liu (2011) observes in relation to education, “a troubling effect of an uncritical view of meritocracy is that by not acknowledging there are greater structural social inequalities at play, there may be a tendency to view students who do not reach higher levels of educational attainment as having failed on their own terms” (p. 384). In spite of its apparent problems, the idea of a social order based on merit has powerfully shaped many Western societies and educational systems.

Meritocracy through a post-critical frame

Through a post-critical lens, meritocracy is understood as being a mainstream discourse (Śliwa & Johansson, 2014) that has powerful effects on individuals, institutions and wider society (Littler, 2013). Understanding meritocracy in this sense means attending to the ways in which meritocracy produces varied kinds of subject positions, in this case, within the university and doctoral education. It means recognising how this discourse operates within different kinds of power relations and, as such, involves asking questions about how and why the concept of meritocracy has come to be seen as a social ideal with its major effects on Western systems of organisation (Śliwa & Johansson, 2014). Moreover, given the way meritocracy mobilises certain kinds of power relations, it is necessary to think about who benefits from this discourse.

Pursuing a post-critical analysis of the discourse of meritocracy involves (even if briefly here) tracing its genealogical roots. Although it is possible to make links to some varied historical

lineages such as Victorian self-help traditions and the aspirational consumerism of the US associated with the ‘American dream’²⁷ (Littler, 2013), the term meritocracy has, in fact, a relatively short etymological history of approximately 60 years. Despite this short history, it has nonetheless undertaken significant conceptual travel (Littler, 2013) starting with its inception in the work of left-leaning scholars who framed it in highly negative terms, to its adoption and redeployment by thinkers such as Daniel Bell, and neo-conservative writers like Irving Kristol. Through their notable work, and others from the political right, the term has been effectively re-cast and became an “embryonic system of state organisation creating problematic hierarchies” (Littler, 2013, p. 68). This discourse travel has continued and despite the many significant criticisms that can be made of it, meritocracy has become “a celebratory term connecting individualism ... with a belief in the desirability and possibility of social mobility in a highly unequal society”(Littler, 2013, p. 68).

Moreover, this discourse travel reflects an interplay between meritocratic ideas and other dominant discourses particularly that of neoliberalism. As Littler (2013) observes, meritocracy discourse has been, and continues to be, influenced by diverse agents and constituencies, but has been “mobilised gradually into, through and by neoliberalism” (p. 68). One feature of the impact of neoliberalism on the discourse of meritocracy is the way higher education has been presented as a key mechanism for demonstrating merit and improving one’s life chances. As Brown (2013) suggests, within a meritocratic frame ‘learning equals earning’, with higher education promoted “as the route to individual prosperity” (p. 685). Meritocracy also possesses strong connections with the significant social discourses of excellence, self-investment and social mobility. From a post-critical standpoint, meritocracy can be understood as a discourse with a varied historical lineage which has become entangled with other dominant discourses to produce contemporary identities within Western liberal societies.

The wide appeal of meritocracy and its ubiquitousness means that it can be employed to serve a variety of interests to mask the continued influence of privilege in contemporary social life. Khan and Jerolmack’s (2013) ethnographic study of young men at an elite American school highlights how the concept of merit can serve to endorse traditional forms of privilege. In their study, they found the young men utilised the concept of merit, and hard work in particular, to discuss their achievements. The researchers suggest:

²⁷ Sliwa and Johansson (2014) point to even older historical roots in Plato’s notion of the ideal state and to Confucian principles.

in interviews, most students construct a narrative of having achieved by dint of their hard work; meanwhile observations reveal that most students seldom worked hard and actually marginalised those that do ... we contend ... students recognize the importance of rhetorically embracing meritocracy – even as they work in practice to protect the advantages they have most often inherited. (p. 12)

In this passage, Khan and Jerolmack (2013) identify the ways in which a group of students from a high socio-economic position used a rhetorical strategy to ‘talk meritocracy’ “while doing the ease of privilege” (p. 16).

Littler (2013) also describes the discourse of meritocracy as a “potent blend of an essentialised notion of ‘talent’, competitive individualism and a belief in social mobility” (p. 69). She argues this discourse is mobilised to disguise and gain consent for the significant economic inequalities brought by neoliberalism. In relation to the academic context, scholars such as Sliwa and Johansson (2014) and van den Brink and Benschop (2012) have identified the ways in which this discourse impacts on those within the university setting with particular reference to those who do not possess traditional forms of privilege. Van den Brink and Benschop (2012), for instance, argue in relation to gender and professorial appointments in Dutch universities that meritocracy is a “hegemonic discourse” used by university appointment committees “to veil the practice of inequality” (p. 81). In the case of this research, I seek to examine the ways in which the discourse of meritocracy shapes first-generation student identities within the university and doctoral education, both in terms of how it can enable or constrain these students within these spaces. In the exploration undertaken in the next part of this chapter, I argue first-generation students actively take up the discourse of meritocracy to create a space of engagement and belonging for themselves within the university.

First-generation identities and the discourse of meritocracy

Locating merit: ‘Being excellent’

I examine here the educational accounts of the first-generation students in my study to identify the presence of the discourse of meritocracy and the ways it manifests in their narratives before focusing in more detail on the accounts of just three of the students. To guide my examination, I have identified a number of key concepts associated with contemporary meritocracy discourse drawn from the literature including: talent (Burke, Bennett, Burgess, Gray, & Southgate, 2016; Liu, 2011; Moore, 2004) and excellence (van den Brink & Benschop, 2012); achievement (as the outcome of measurement or

intelligence); and effort (Liu, 2011; Young, 1958). I also include the construct of competitive individualism (Littler, 2013) as a further key aspect of neoliberally influenced meritocracy discourse. I then examined the students' accounts to identify the presence or otherwise of these key ideas.

The importance of achievement and being academically talented appeared over and over in the students' accounts in relation to their schooling. Linda spoke of her academic achievements at school that led her to gain entry into a top Chinese university, identifying the significance of being academically successful early on. She recounts:

Back in my middle school I was a very good student and my academics were always good. I was in the [top class], we have different placements in high school for students. Students with A's are placed in class with qualified or highly qualified teachers ... So, I was lucky to have the best teachers ... and that's probably one of the reasons why I was able to get into a good college.

Here Linda identifies her longstanding academic achievement and links her successful university entry with her access to quality teaching and luck. Like Linda, many students in this study spoke about their academic achievements and formation of a positive academic identity when they were quite young. Helen spoke about being an "academic kid" in relation to her educational experiences before she undertook university study, though she mentioned this in relation to her teachers encouraging her to apply herself more. And, Ses, too, talked about being "a top student" in her stream at high school. Similarly, Sandy described being put into the academic stream at her school where it was almost assumed students would be interested in attending university. Hinekura and Marie also told stories of how others described them as "being bright" when they were at school, and Lan talked about her drive to always be "one of the top students" invoking in these words, a sense of competition and her seeking to achieve more highly than others.

Jackie also reflected on her early engagements with the university and spoke of the ways she did not really understand much about higher education and what it could mean for her life. She says, "actually, I didn't have a very long-term picture". Her description employs the metaphor of a picture or an image of her future, and the university as a site to navigate through to achieve the desired future goal or career. Her comments indicate that she did not have a journey endpoint in mind and did not have a sense of the journey points she would need to reach along her way. As she explained, "I didn't have ... maybe because I was so young at that time, and I couldn't see, what should I do, I didn't have a dream job (in mind), a particular job for me". Here she articulates the role of the university in planning

for a career, something she was unsure about and instead she identified an approach where she focused on achieving the immediate goals in front of her and doing well with those. Significantly, she points to her drive for excellence and achievement as something which helped guide her through her studies despite her uncertainty: “I just want to look ahead and see what I can do. If I can reach there, and then I think I will take the next step ... So, just maybe, be excellent”. Her step-by-step approach was arguably less strategic and focused than someone who had some clearer long-term educational or career goals in mind, but she nonetheless aspired to achieve at a high level, that is, in “being excellent” along the way. These comments from Jackie highlight the importance of excellence and academic achievement to this first-generation student’s ongoing engagements with the university.

In the present setting, Linda spoke about how doctoral study represents a way to be a high-achieving individual, where she would “strive for excellence”. As she explains she wants to achieve at the highest level, “I really want to get it done, I have very high expectations. Really, I can’t settle for like a mediocre performance. I really want to get the best, get the most out of it”. Other students also spoke about their academic identities in connection with notions of excellence in the context of doctoral study. Kat for example described herself as “a perfectionist and a high achiever”. Isis, using very similar language, also identified herself using the present tense as “an achiever”. Only one of the participants spoke in quite different terms, with Pierre identifying himself as being “not as bright as some”, but instead mentioned his “ethic of hard work” which he believed accounted for his academic achievement. For almost all of the students, longstanding academic achievement and a desire to be excellent is strongly apparent. These students in various ways seemed to identify themselves as possessing relatively confident learner identities. As I discuss below, these individuals also demonstrate a significant belief in social mobility which provides a significant foundation for their ongoing investment in higher education as well as speaking to their investments in meritocracy discourse. In combination, through these students’ articulations of the notions of achievement, excellence, their willingness to strive for success and their hard work (representing the effort they bring to their studies), they may be understood as strongly ascribing to the key constitutive constructs of meritocracy discourse.

Locating the meritorious student

A story of Marie

Marie's desire to go to university was underpinned by her love of English, her experience of teaching in a gap year and, perhaps, critically, the contribution of her family who highly valued education. Her progression, however, was not straightforward; the transition from high school to university was challenging, not because of the academic demands, but in economic and geographic terms. Although there was some funding from the government, she and her family did not know how they were going to pay for her studies. The sacrifices made were significant and included her mother taking out a mortgage to help Marie take up her place at university. Marie also had to leave her home and community to travel to a different island to pursue her studies. Marie now has travelled the globe in pursuit of higher education, from one island nation to another, across the world via Europe.

In her account, Marie did not speak of her own talents in a great deal of detail, in fact she seems to minimise her success describing her 'luck' at the award of a significant scholarship as an undergraduate. She does briefly identify that, when she was going through the undergraduate programme, she was successful. As she says in "first year I did well, and the second year I did well" so she started thinking ahead to further study. However, she also tells a story of a family friend who was an academic and the support he gave her in terms of helping her apply to study for her masters degree at a British university. She talked about the importance of his encouragement even though she was unsure about whether she could do it, given that in her words, she did not think she automatically belonged at an elite university due to her social and cultural background. As she says, "I thought of a university of that calibre as being for a certain class of people, from a certain background ... I come from a small island". Nonetheless, this friend strongly encouraged Marie even though she did not think she would be accepted:

I said I don't think I could get in and he said to me, "why don't you think you'll get in ... you are very intelligent and I think you have all the attributes and you have what they are looking for" ... He went to [Oxbridge] ... (and he said) "I know what they look for and I think you have it".

Marie's story here demonstrates the crucial importance of the guidance that was available to her through this family friend who had experience of elite higher education and the way he encouraged her to pursue masters study despite her uncertainty. It also establishes that, in the eyes of her family friend, an alumnus of one of the most famous universities in the world, that she is an academically capable student who is talented enough to be successful at Oxbridge (which subsequently she was). In the selection and telling of this educational narrative, Marie may be seen as taking up the meritocratic subjectivity of the academically gifted student, though as she tells this story such a positioning is not based on her own

assessment of her abilities, but rather is conveyed through the eyes of an established scholar who was a family friend.

Her story also suggests that elite research universities like Oxford or Cambridge are open to those who have enough merit despite their social or cultural origins. Marie's recounting of this higher education story suggests that, to some degree, she ascribes to the notion that universities, even elite ones, are institutions that are meritocratic and provide opportunities for those who deserve them. Later in her account, Marie extended her interpellation as the meritocratic subject when she talked of inspiring a younger sibling through her success. She wanted him to understand:

that we are not limited by space, we are not limited by where we come from ... we are not limited by class ... there are things we can achieve and there are some avenues that we can ... go through to achieve these things.

The emphasis here is on the efforts an individual can make and the ways that 'non-traditional' students can pursue their goals. Her words also suggest that educational institutions are open to diverse students in significant ways. Her account is a progressive one that can also be understood as revealing a particular kind of imagining of the university, one that connects with a conception of the meritocratic university which is discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

Further, Marie identifies in her interview how determined and committed she is to her doctoral study. This is notable given the way in which effort is a key constitutive element for the meritocratic subject. Marie speaks to the concept of effort in terms of her drive for success. As she says, "I think in terms of motivation not only (do I want) to finish, but to do well". Here Marie talks about she is focused on successful completion, but she also identifies a further, less certain, measure of "doing well". Determining what her aspiration for 'doing well' means for Marie may be found in the way she talked about her grandparents encouraging her to "aspire to greatness" in whatever she did including education. In this light, her 'doing well' may be read in terms of achieving some kind of scholarly greatness – obviously this is an extremely high standard. Marie can be understood as positioning herself as a highly motivated doctoral student engaged in the pursuit of excellence. As such, it is possible to identify her invoking a key construct of meritocracy discourse.

She also describes her significant concerns about her place within higher education at the postgraduate and doctoral levels. Yet she seeks to resignify herself, through the language she

deploys in terms of the concepts of ability, her aspirations to achieve and the efforts she has made to pursue her aspiration for higher study, linking again to a key constitutive elements of a 'meritorious' self. As a black woman from a lower-socio-economic background from a small island nation, her employment of this discourse can be seen as operating to speak herself into the university doctoral space, a strategy which may assist her to establish a sense of rightful belonging without which she may otherwise not been able to locate herself within the university. Marie also identifies how she wants to do well not only for herself, but for others:

It's the whole idea for me of doing it for the persons in my family who never had the opportunity to go to university or who might not have gone past the undergraduate level. So, in that sense it is more of you not only having to finish, but I have to do well.

Her drive to do well is described in terms of Marie's own personal goals and in reference to making her family proud. She also talked about what university study means to her family and community. As she says, "for us at home, it is like this major, it's a major ... thing". Marie again refers her community, in explaining how she came to understand what a university represents through linking the award of a degree to the accord of "status in your community". In Marie's words her goal to get a "greater paying job" is firmly linked to helping her family members, as "you can use the money to help your family, [I can] help them for the rest of my life". In expressing her determination to achieve highly for others, Marie's words suggest some divergence from mainstream neoliberal meritocracy discourse, suggesting instead a key aim of her's is to help others and this speaks to a collective rather than strongly individualist orientation.

This broad sense of obligation is also inflected with a palpable fear of failure found in the way she invokes the idea of shame in her narrative:

At times ... I feel like I want to give up, like I have had enough, like I want to go home. If I go home now then what do I have to show for my time away. It would be seen as something shameful. So, I don't want to face that shame and I am going to try to pick myself up, I am going to try and finish. There is that whole sense of this as well ... on a local or personal level, (but) I think even on a national level.

Her comments such as 'I feel like I want to give up', or 'I want to go' are marked with her recurrent use of the present tense. Fear of failure and a sense of shame are clearly immediate issues for this student who at the time of interview was immersed in completing her thesis in her final year of study. Her work to resignify herself as 'meritorious', as someone who rightly belongs in a higher degree programme, is continually present, yet the demands and fear associated with being a 'non-traditional' student remain in evidence in her story

suggesting that doctoral study places significant identity demands on this student. Her deployment of the language of meritocracy to construct herself as someone who belongs within the university may be seen as acting as a buffer to limit the impact of these pressures.

The meritocratic university: The pursuit of an ideal

In addition to meritocracy discourse shaping the identities of individuals within higher education, it is possible to identify how it also has profoundly shaped the identity of the contemporary university itself. With the expansion of higher education from the late 1970s the university became increasingly shaped by a widening participation agenda in many contexts (Adnett, 2016; Burke, 2012). Access to university for people from a range of social backgrounds was seen as important to ensure talented individuals were able to succeed and become socially mobile. As Stuart (2012) observes “social mobility is deeply entwined with the development of high level skills and education” (p. 3). This focus on social mobility and improved economic outcomes through the expansion of higher education was advanced by policy makers across a range of different contexts. These policy makers saw the expansion of higher education and the inclusion of students from diverse backgrounds as being crucial to a country’s economic and social development (Delours, 1996). Hence, from an institutional perspective, being able to demonstrate that a university is achieving broader social goals which align with social policy mandates is valuable, in this case, through the ability to evidence the ways that talented and diverse students can achieve within the university.

This may be then capitalized on in a variety of ways including contributing to a university’s self-narrative and identity, not to mention the ways an institution may be able to market itself to future candidates or justify its continued public funding. As Leong (2014) suggests, it has long been fashionable for educational institutions to highlight their racially diverse students. And, certainly in the era of mass participation in higher education and neoliberal rationalities, achieving student diversity measures equates with some degree of success. Leong (2013, 2014) for example, examined the images used by a number of US universities which suggest that the institutions are far more diverse than they actually are in reality. She highlights the sometimes poor ‘photo-shopping’ of images of students who are racially diverse inserted in university website and promotional materials of predominately white institutions. Leong (2013) argues this ‘fake diversity’ represents a form of racial capitalism where an individual or group gains “social or economic value from the racial identity of

another person” (p. 2153). The value gained from the utilization of diversity can translate to a range of different institutional goals; including meeting governmentally prescribed educational targets. As Taylor (2013) explains “across different institutional contexts, diversity and equality are increasingly positioned – and monitored – on the basis of ‘performance indicators’: equalities strands are uneasily evidenced (numerated, for example in the existence of the ‘right number’ of overseas/ ‘non-traditional’ students) as diversity ‘counts’ ” (p. 244). Taylor (2013) also argues that institutions’ tell (or strategically employ) diversity stories “despite the reality of unequal opportunities, entries and futures” (p. 244).

Indeed, Ahmed (2012) provides a powerful thesis on the manifold ways diversity discourse can become harnessed to support particular kinds of institutional labour. She suggests that the creation and use of institutional images of diversity, diversity stories, policies, statements, projects and funding operate as “public relations” (p. 143) through which diversity is mobilized to generate goodwill towards an institution. This goodwill can operate variously as a means to develop “organisational pride” or it can even serve as a defence of the institution should it be challenged in terms of its educational practices in areas such as equality of opportunity or racism, for instance. Moreover, diversity as a “branding exercise” (p. 153) provides a way of ‘re-imagining’, and I would suggest re-imagining, a university as being diverse and meritocratic. These diversity ‘imaginings’ highlight the university as a place of opportunities for those who have the required merit to succeed through “inclusion of those who embody diversity” (Ahmed, 2012, p. 153) like many first-generation students, especially those who are identifiably diverse in terms of ethnicity or gender for example, despite the potential problems with these claims or the reality of diversity at a particular institution.

Ahmed (2012) further argues that the inclusion of diverse others can also be read as a “technology of happiness; through diversity the organization is represented happily as ‘getting along’, as committed to equality and anti-racism” (p. 153). She also ties this technology to the performance culture of the enterprise university where diversity policies and reports require the production of “friendly documents” where ‘happy diversity’ can more easily result in the ‘ticking of the box’ of positive educational measures. Diversity in this way can further work to displace other more challenging issues or concepts. What marks this institutional employment of ‘diverse meritocracy’ is the power situated with the university as opposed to the individual first-generation students’ own engagements with meritocracy discourse. Moreover, engaging with, or promoting, the presence of diverse

meritocratic students can be seen to confirm and sustain the idea of the university as meritocratic institution. Understanding the way meritocracy discourse can operate requires a complex view to be taken of higher education institutions, one that recognizes the ways this conception of meritocracy can not only enable opportunity for individuals from diverse backgrounds, but also work to reproduce privilege. In the next section of the chapter I undertake a discussion about social mobility, a concept that is frequently deployed in conversations about diversity, merit and the discourse of meritocracy.

Understanding social mobility

Interest in social mobility from researchers extends back to the 19th century with most examining social mobility in terms of class or income (Stuart, 2012b). Stuart (2012b) describes social mobility as focusing on “the size and shape of different groupings in society and how fluid and porous the boundaries between these groupings are” (p. 8). Liu (2011) explains it in similar terms, suggesting that social mobility comes into existence when class (or another social marker like gender, sexuality or culture) is no longer a barrier for a better life. She also credits the role of education as being the main mechanism for social mobility to be achieved. A significant amount of social mobility research has involved quantitative analysis that has measured movements of individuals across time, class or income levels or measured the degree of mobility within particular historical periods or across countries. Since the late 1970s the view that higher education plays, and should play, a critical role in contributing to social mobility²⁸ has become increasingly powerful. The university of the 19th and early 20th century where students were almost exclusively drawn from a privileged minority, has been replaced by a university system that is massified, where students are drawn from across a range of social backgrounds provided they possess “the potential and ability to participate” (Burke, 2013, p. 110). Moreover, the idea that individuals with ability should have access to higher education as a springboard for their upward mobility has become fixed within higher education agendas. In this way higher education can also be understood as sustaining the notion of a meritocratic society just as it may be deeply implicated in reproducing social privilege.

²⁸ The work of Daniel Bell (1976) is significant here. In *The coming of post-industrial society: A venture in social forecasting*, Bell wrote about how class structure is reshaped through meritocratic competition rather than by birth, “transforming the role of education as it becomes the ‘arbiter of class position’”(Brown, 2013a, p. 679).

Social mobility through a post-critical lens

Like meritocracy, social mobility can be understood via a post-critical analysis as a discourse with powerful effects on individuals, institutions and broader society. It is a discourse that is widely invoked in both policy and political arenas in a variety of contexts. Reay (2013), for example, describes social mobility as occupying an “iconic place” (p. 662) in contemporary British political rhetoric. One of the main sites where social mobility discourse is most significant is in the area of education, due to the way it is seen as one of the principal vehicles for social mobility (Stuart, 2012b). Furthermore, social mobility is something that is generally seen in highly positive terms (Friedman, 2014) and, as a mainstream discourse, it shapes a particular type of reality and possesses identity-forming effects. Those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are encouraged to work hard and aim high, in education and in work, with the prospect of achieving social mobility and a better quality of life. And yet, as mentioned above, despite the celebratory language associated with social mobility, there is a significant amount of research which suggests social mobility in recent times has stagnated or declined (see Blanden et al., 2005).

Indeed, scholars like Payne (2012) contend that the term ‘social mobility’ is used in the mainstream political arena in a way that ignores the issue of downward mobility and the excessive advantages possessed by those from higher socio-economic strata. Payne (2012) goes on to argue this is no accident. He suggests that through employing a particular form of social mobility discourse, “the class structure of the UK is conveniently hidden away” (p. 69). Reay (2013) concurs with this view and asserts that while social mobility “is increasingly seen as a major source of social justice in contemporary society, a strong version of social justice requires much more than the movement of a few individuals up and down an increasingly inequitable social system” (p. 661). She maintains, social mobility is in fact “a mirage, a source of immense collective hopes and desires for those in the bottom two-thirds of society, but in reality, it is largely a figment of imagination brought to life in policy and political rhetoric” (p. 662). Moreover, this discourse concentrates on the individual rather than on the collective because within its frame, as Maslen (2018) sharply observes, not everyone can win.

The experience of social mobility

In contrast to the large and well-established body of quantitative work on social mobility, there has been less attention paid to exploring and understanding the lived experience of this phenomenon. Across the relatively small (Mallman, 2017), but growing, qualitative

literature there is a number of common themes including the notions of circumscribed gains associated with movement, departures, loss and escape. These themes of departure and loss are strongly evidenced by some of the language deployed by social mobility scholars. Nainby and Pea (2003), for example, discuss their experience of social mobility, identifying how it involved “saying farewell to the economic, cultural, and personal homes that have, for better or worse, nurtured us” (p. 35). These working-class scholars poignantly articulate a strong sense of loss that for them is bound up in their social mobility. As they say, “to be socially mobile is to move from one place, economically, culturally, personally to another ... One consequence of that loss, sometimes, is immobility - a paralysis brought on by the violent, forceful, uncertain rush of social mobility itself” (p. 35). In other words, these writers articulate their experience of social mobility in terms of gains and opportunities and also in relation to difficult departures and trauma. Stuart (2012b), in her life history research of 139 first-generation students working in higher education in the UK, also identified the significance of movement to describe the experiences of first-generation students. The theme of movement was strongly associated with travel away from an individual’s social origins. It is possible to identify here how the discourse of social mobility works to ‘other’ those individuals from diverse backgrounds identifying the lifestyles, values and ways of living of those of the dominant classes as superior and something to be strived for as part of being socially mobile, whereas working-class modes of living, and indeed identities, are necessarily points of temporary attachment, to be discarded on the path to success and a ‘better life’.

For example, Lacey (2000) writes about working-class or first-generation students being “educated out” of their social locations. Nelson, Englar-Carlson, Tierney and Hau (2006), in their study of counselling academics from lower socio-economic backgrounds, also observed that:

upward mobility seems to involve alterations in identity and related stressors as well as loss of connection to one's original culture, loss of a sense of home, and other losses, such as no longer being simpatico with family members and old friends. (p. 2)

A sense of struggle is apparent in the words of Lacey (2000) who describes her experience as a working-class academic and how she often imagines her life:

in which I live patterns resembling struggle and survival narrative formats of ‘made-for-tv’ movies. In one scene I am an old woman, recounting, through camera gauze and flashback the story of my life. It’s an egotistical fantasy really, ... but a story of struggle and success. It’s an image that grasps onto a particular fantasy of emerging out of a life that has been about struggle ... not necessarily my life, but a working-

class life that is given dignity, strength and drama. In retrospect, it is the narration of escape, fantastically created in the imagination of someone who has escaped her class through education. (p. 38)

This story of Lacey's imagined self is powerfully and inexplicably bound in class relations. It indicates her engagement with classed 'escape' fantasies as a working-class woman who has gained an education and achieved career success.

Participants in the present study also talked about their strong desire to escape limited employment opportunities. However, several also identified their social mobility as being bound with significant connections to their home communities. For them, social mobility involved sharing their skills and expertise and helping family and home communities, whether they were physically close or further afield. This seems to be in contrast with the thrust of Stuart's (2013) study of first-generation individuals. In her work, on first-generation students' social mobility was identified most strongly in terms of one-way journeys and "escape" (p. 32) whereas within my study participants often spoke to different kinds of movement that were two-directional, or in fact, multi-directional. In this way, the dominant discourse of social mobility emphasises the concept of escape in a way that does not fit neatly with the experiences of first-generation students within this study.

First-generation students and the discourse of social mobility

The students in this research readily invoked the discourse of social mobility to describe their experiences, in particular in relation to their hopes or beliefs that doctoral study would enable them to gain access to quality employment. A number of the students referred to their goals to gain 'good jobs' that would assist them to take care of themselves and their families, thus strongly positioning doctoral study as a means to securing themselves 'good lives'. The notion of securing a 'good job' was often explicitly tied to the concept of success. Outside of the students who were within five years of retirement age (n=3), almost all of the students in this study spoke of their goal to gain more or better employment opportunities and their desire to succeed. This was often the first, though far from the only, reason the students identified as underscoring their choice to undertake doctoral study. Kat for example, described her choice to study for a doctorate as being about "access to better work roles". Isis described her decision to undertake doctoral study as "evasive action" at the end of a period of work and a strategy to gain employment opportunities at a time when she "didn't know what else to do". Dante described his desire to study for a PhD as being

based on the fact “there is a lot of competition in terms of getting a job”. And, Linda when asked about her choice to undertake university study, described it as being tied her ambitions for a ‘good life’ through achieving highly and access to employment. She says she studied “for a better life, a good job, I want to succeed”. Certainly, both Dante and Linda located their decision to undertake extended periods of academic study in terms of the labour market and the need to be competitive through gaining advanced qualifications.

Locating the socially mobile first-generation student

A story of Dante

Dante’s story of being a first-generation student begins in rural Africa, as the child of an obedient son. Dante is a first-generation student whose parents did not only not attend university, they did not participate in formal education of any kind. Dante’s father, as a well-behaved child was given the responsible job of looking after his family’s precious livestock. His unrulier siblings were sent to school and the implications of this for Dante’s father and Dante were life-defining. As an adult, Dante’s father watched as these same siblings gain opportunities and careers, while he remained in the traditional role of farmer within his village struggling to support his family. The seeds of Dante’s journey into higher education are found in this story, because Dante’s father was determined that his children would go to school and, beyond, to university. Dante’s journey, similar to others in this research, would take him around the globe, in this case from a small rural community to a city, from one continent to another and ultimately to a small island nation in the south Pacific.

In his interview account, Dante revealed his understanding of the social mobility promised by education. He speaks of his doctoral studies in terms of meeting his father’s challenge of “going further” and also to gain better employment options and economic security. His goals for his study include getting a “good job ... where I can work in a better environment, where I can make a choice on where to work ... and being able to support my family in a better way”. These comments connect to traditional notions of social mobility through Dante’s identification of gaining choice about where he would like to work and earning a higher income and as such they correspond strongly with the mainstream discourse of social mobility. This discourse and the way Dante takes it up can be seen as contributing to his continued labours within the university despite the many challenges he faces in terms of undertaking doctoral study in a new country and culture, in an additional language and with the responsibility of supporting his young family.

However, Dante’s articulation of social mobility can also be seen as divergent from mainstream social mobility discourse in that rather than focusing on his personal goals for himself, and his close family, he also frequently spoke of his connection to his wider family

and community. When asked about his experience of university study and how it impacted on his family, Dante responded by identifying the way it could positively aid not just himself, or his family members, but also his home community. He highlighted in detail how when he returns home he is sought out by many of the villagers and the role he plays in sharing information about his university experience and providing encouragement to those interested in academic study. In his account, he signals no clear demarcation between helping family and helping community. He says:

We would support not only my siblings, or brothers and sisters. Like, I did mention, it was a village thing, so the whole village knows, oh Dante is on holiday... back from the university, he's got ... maybe one, two months ... the whole village will be coming for a chat and I will encourage them and encourage the other children, I mean the village, just to have that goal, like as well, to succeed and move to join the university.

Here Dante employs the plural pronoun to describe how he can help others from his village which suggests his sense of being part of a community rather than identifying himself separately, or in solely individual terms. His use of the plural form, and his explanation of his engagement as this being “a village thing” may also suggest that it is not just him, but any member of his community, who would naturally help other village members if they were in his position.

He further outlines the ways he would counsel members of his local community about university study:

How to go about it, how did you study, how hard did you work to get used to this and that, so they would want a way out ... or at least how I used to do my thing. So you would give a few tips here and there, and you need to study these books and go the library from time to time, maybe share this and the other ... or I would give them some good talk on how to study, ways to succeed.

Within this story it is possible to identify the role Dante's plays in sharing educational stories through his offering information about a ‘way out’, of finding new and better life pathways. In this way Dante's social mobility can be understood in terms of a broad sense of departures and escape from limited opportunities, and also, of connection and returns home to family and community. His story can thus be read as offering an individualist, but also strongly collectivist vision of what social mobility might mean for first-generation students.

Diverse mobilities

A story of Linda

Linda locates her educational story within a longstanding cultural tradition of valuing education. As she says, “maybe for 2000 years Chinese people believe that if you get a good education, you will succeed in society”. Her story of being a first-generation student is also tied to events from more recent political history and the Cultural Revolution in China. Linda says her parents did not have ‘good luck’ and instead of thinking about going to university when they were young, they were sent to rural villages to work in the fields, there was “no choice”. As a gifted student from a young age she worked hard in a highly competitive context to ensure that she was likely to gain the best educational opportunities possible. Her pursuit of higher education has been a pursuit of excellence and her achievements earned her a place at a top university. She chose to study English on the advice of a relative and then followed this later with a focus on Education in the US, where she joined another relative who had relocated there. Her masters study in Education brought her into the American school system, where she found inspiration for a different kind of education. After completing her masters in the US she returned to her home university to teach and was then encouraged by her institution to “go out again and pursue doctoral study”. Her interest in educational opportunity, in addition to the pressure of her university employer, have brought her to study in Aotearoa, across language and cultural boundaries.

I include Linda’s story to consider what social mobility encompasses in the current context of doctoral education and how is it best understood in the stories of the doctoral students within this research. Stuart (2012) observes in her study of first-generation students that “conventional debates around social mobility centre on a vertical movement of people up or down a clear hierarchy” often using “quantitative data which fixes people at certain points on a scale” (p. 118). This kind of approach does not capture the complexity of social mobility in a situated way nor does it recognise the different mobilities that lie within the upward or downward trajectories. In line with Urry (2007) I recognise the importance of considering the experiences of individuals within a broader mobilities paradigm. In *Mobilities*, Urry (2007) asserts that social theorists need to “reflect, capture, simulate and interrogate movements across variable distances” (p. 44) to gain insight into how social relations are performed, organised and mobilised. In this study, I suggest that notions of social mobility in relation to first-generation students need to be more deeply contextualised to identify the ways that social mobility is wrapped in layers of different kinds of mobilities which mark the contemporary first-generation student identities and experiences.

In Linda’s story, and her interview comments, the theme of mobility is articulated across a range of dimensions. Her narrative incorporates a journey across educational boundaries and spaces as the first person in her family to go to university and then on to doctoral education. As Linda comments in her interview, getting a university education “is a must

do, a must do thing” linked to the highly competitive job market in China. In this way, Linda describes a situation where higher education is something that is imperative - as something one needs or effectively has to do - given that without an entry into the university one’s life options are likely to be very limited. She also articulated the importance of education for a better life in relation to her parents who did not have the opportunity to go to university, “because my parents didn’t get a good education and I saw their life ... and I didn’t want to be in their position”. Participating in higher education is identified as a means to escape limited employment opportunities and be able to get a “good job”. This goal of getting a university education and a “good job” is clearly based on Linda’s desire to avoid some of the hardships her parents experienced without the benefit of higher education, but is also linked to increased social status. Linda says that, in her part of China, even if your income is mediocre “but you have a degree that means you’re someone ... so really an identity brought by higher education”. Thus, Linda articulates the importance of education beyond just economic rewards alone. Gaining an education means that an individual will be socially recognized and respected.

The mobilities woven within her narrative also encompass major physical movements as Linda has travelled around the world to gain educational and employment opportunities from China to the US and now to Aotearoa/New Zealand. Her decision to study for her masters in the US was explained as a way for her “needing to go further”. Linda described this “going further” in terms of gaining higher qualifications and a higher quality educational experience. This movement from the East to West involved major cultural, educational and social shifts. For Linda, this also brought a change in the language of daily life and academic study. Her desire to go further echoes the words of Dante, and is illustrative of the significant contemporary trend of increasing student migration. As Raghuram (2012) points out, the total number of students migrating to other countries for study has grown significantly with a 70% increase in numbers between 2000-2008. The OECD (2015) has recently estimated that 4.3 million students are enrolled in tertiary education outside their country of citizenship. This is nearly 2 million more than at the turn of the millennium.

Though Linda had a family member in the US she could stay with, her experience of mobility came with a significant emotional cost for her in terms of isolation and uncertainty. As Linda says, “I was alone. I was really, and I had no idea what life would be”. The family member she stayed with urged her to remain in the US and seek residency. However, gaining residence was likely to have taken Linda many years and would have potentially required her

to inhabit a national 'interspace' where she would be fixed in place in the US, although without citizenship, or residency, and unable to return home to China for up to a decade. As she explained, "you cannot travel back to China and then go back to the US". For Linda, this period of quasi-homelessness was a step too far, and instead she decided to work in the elementary school system to gain some experience of American education before returning to take up work at her 'home' university.

Linda discusses her decision to undertake a doctoral degree somewhat differently to how she described her earlier educational decisions: she speaks of being compelled by the Chinese university she was working at to undertake more academic study. She describes the impact of institutional power as underpinning her move, "I will say, I was forced to do that". This 'force' she later identifies as springing from her home university's desire to achieve higher international research rankings. Staff at her university with a masters degree are strongly 'encouraged' to gain doctorates and produce more research outputs. This phenomenon can be linked to a wider drive within higher education to increase competitiveness and achieve higher rankings or the much sought after 'world-class' status. The impetus to achieve international or world-class status has been discussed by higher education commentators with some irony. Altbach (2004) remarks that, "everyone wants a world-class university ... the problem is no one knows what a world-class university is, and no one has figured out how to get one" (para. 1). Linda describes her recent movement to undertake doctoral study in terms of 'going out again', a phrase which may be read as speaking to the notions of departure, extension, and movement from a one space to something different and further away. It may also be read as speaking to the leaving of a familiar home space to move outwards to the unknown and the identity demands that this might entail in terms of distance, uncertainty and, perhaps, some discomfort in conjunction with a sense of opportunity.

The phenomenon of educational mobility is one of increasing significance within the higher education literature and speaks to large-scale moves of students across the globe for educational opportunity. As Knight and Madden (2010) suggest, "the international dimension of higher education is becoming more important and more complex" (p. 19) bringing new opportunities, challenges and risks. The size and scope of internationalization within higher education has lead a number of researchers to focus on the social implications of this type of mobility (Waters, 2012). This form of movement may bear particular significance in the case of first-generation students given the numerous kinds of movements

these students often make. Importantly in the case of local students a range of diverse or layered mobilities is also strongly articulated mirroring physical mobilities in terms of movements from rural or regional locations to cities or shifts in neighbourhoods, to movements in terms of class and culture as well as their educational mobility. The diverse mobilities possessed by many of the first-generation students, both local and international leads me to consider the ways mobilities may be potentially significant in terms of understanding the contemporary first-generation student identities beyond the narrow focus on social mobility alone. Though I do not go as far as Urry (2007) does in suggesting a mobility frame is “a new universalising condition” (Skeggs, 2004, p. 52)²⁹ or one that replaces other important social categories such as class for example. Urry’s argument for attention to a range of mobilities and their effects on identity formation and social interaction is potentially valuable in understanding contemporary first-generation student identities given the complex kinds of journeys many of these students undertake in the pursuit of higher education and in this case of doctoral studies. I now move to exploring some of the challenges associated with these students’ movements into educational spaces far from ‘home’.

The challenges of mobility

All three of the students featured in this chapter commented on a number of challenges that came with their mobility. Marie describes the difficulties associated with moving away for her masters degree and from her small island nation to study overseas. That shift for her “was quite traumatic ... I moved out of my home where I was surrounded by familiar culture, family and you know, people like myself”. As she explains:

There was a cultural shock for me where I was perceived as being lesser than, not intelligent as, not having as much power ... and you are seen as being powerless.

These comments connect with the account of an experience Marie had early in her masters study that is rendered in poetic form at the beginning of this chapter where she is repeatedly asked on arriving at university, how ‘she got here?’. I turn to her (verbatim) words once again:

Somebody asked me how I got here
And, for me I thought
It meant like travel. So
I started explaining like how I actually got there,
The plane ride
And all that bit.

²⁹ For a comprehensive discussion with the problems with focusing on mobility as an object of analysis instead of class see Skeggs, B. (2004). Mobility, individualism and identity in *Class, self, culture*. pp.45-61.

And, the person said
No, how did you get here?
With the emphasis on “here”
...And still again
The question,
How did you get **here**?

These words shared by Marie capture and exchange between her and another student who seemed to not understand how Marie could be at their university. As Marie described this experience was deeply confronting and undermined her sense of merit and earned right to be at the university. It is possible to identify a powerful ‘othering’ of Marie in the exchange; Marie’s presence to her colleague is one that does not appear to make sense. Her being in the educational space needs accounting for, because in this place she does not belong. It also suggests the person asking about her arrival feels as though they are entitled to question her and equipped to make an assessment of who does, and does not, belong in this university setting based on their own familiarity with the university. Somehow, Marie’s embodied presence transgresses this individual’s sense of university space, which therefore requires an explanation.

I draw on the anthropological work of Douglas (1966) to suggest Marie’s very personhood becomes ‘matter out of place’ in the exchange. Her emplacement within the university setting seems to contravene an established system or order, and therefore Marie’s presence needs justification, or at least explanation. Although Douglas’s idea of matter out of place was articulated in the context of the study of cultural ideas of purity and pollution, it provides a powerful analysis of the ways in which someone’s embodied personhood can contravene another’s sense of social order. Marie articulates the impact of this incident some years after it took place: she says, “it undermined my confidence ... like people probably think I have some special privilege because I come from a certain part of the world, or maybe because of my race”. In this story it is possible to see how prejudice and judgments about a student’s embodied presence in terms of belonging within a university space can make the diverse first-generation student experience difficult to navigate.

Linda also identified a number of mobility challenges and the periods of uncertainty and isolation she experienced. As identified earlier, her story reveals how her study experience encapsulates a complex layering of physical, cultural, class and educational mobilities. It also highlights the way Linda has successfully navigated a range of complex worlds to gain an education and improve her life as she aspires to gain a doctoral degree and achieve a

successful post-doctoral future. In addition, Dante spoke about his recent move into doctoral education and how he is figuring out how to undertake his doctoral work because he has found, “doctoral study is so isolating”. He commented in “the past couple of months I was a bit lost trying to figure out what I needed to do and how to do it” but he was now “starting to feel at home”. Dante’s comments may be read as speaking to a range of different challenges faced by him in terms of living in a new city and new country, along with undertaking doctoral work in a new institution and not having a community around him. His story also indicates his resilience in the way that he is beginning to feel more comfortable in his new setting. Moreover, if we return to the story of Marie we can see a similar pattern of mobility as is described by Dante: these movements from rural or island locations to educational centres in cities and in Linda’s case also, moves around the world, and more than once, as these students undertake journeys as educational pathfinders moving into new environments, within different cultures and across different social contexts. These movements also evidence the resilience of these first-generation students as they ‘go further’ to seek out educational opportunities.

Other students in this study, also identified the impact of a lack of financial resources as impacting on their pursuit of higher education. Despite the significant moral support many of the students identified, most of the participants talked about the limited financial support their families could provide and the major economic challenges they faced on entering the university and throughout their courses of study. Financial barriers were significant from the outset for many, with some parents feeling that university study for their family members might simply be too costly for them. Despite the high value placed on education by Sandy’s family, a value which had underpinned the decision to move the whole family from a regional centre to Auckland so the children could attend high performing state schools, she, “had to argue with ...[her] parents to make it [university study] happen”, because “in their minds they couldn’t afford it”. She describes finding out about the teaching training studentship³⁰ “because I knew about the seven-year signing for studentship and that was the only way my parents would let me go”. Sandy’s university story demonstrates how financial considerations could have prevented her from getting to university and how she needed to choose a vocationally focused programme of study.

³⁰ A government funded programme where students received an allowance and were guaranteed a probationary position after the completion of their course available to teacher trainees from 1965 onwards (Ministry for Culture and Heritage., 2009). From 1983, “following widespread perceptions that teacher education was too expensive, trainee teachers received only the standard tertiary bursary paid to other students” (Alcorn, 2014, p. 456).

Sandy's story also speaks to the way she had to advocate for herself and be resourceful so she could identify a pathway to study which ultimately convinced her parents of the viability of her university plans. Furthermore, it demonstrates the significance of government funding for higher education places for students from lower socio-economic backgrounds and suggests such funding schemes may be the difference between some students accessing higher education or not. The significance of financial costs and the burden of study debt on first-generation students has been identified in earlier American studies. Hoffer and colleagues (2003) for instance, found that first-generation students within doctoral education were more likely to report higher debt levels than their continuing-generation counterparts. These authors also found that 34% of first-generation doctoral recipients in the US used their own resources to support themselves during their doctoral studies compared to 22% of continuing-generation students.

Study costs remained a significant pressure on many of these first-generation individuals as they moved into postgraduate and doctoral education. As Hinekura suggests, the significance of financial barriers is very real in influencing an individual's decision to undertake a doctorate, "I mean, the biggest barrier I think is finance". She maintains, that "if you're not working in the institution, or have a scholarship or you have a partner that you can rely on for three or four years, then it's pretty inhibiting". Her comments suggest that unless first-generation students' financial circumstances fit a handful of situations, doctoral study becomes difficult to seriously contemplate. Her words may be read with Katie's, in terms of the articulation of a sense of delay, as Katie says, "it took us a long time to get here": a sentiment which indicates that these students see first-generation individuals as needing time to marshal the resources to make doctoral study possible. These students' views may be borne out by the findings of a study, as noted earlier, by the Higher Education Policy Institute (2010) in the UK which described participation in postgraduate education, particularly for doctoral programmes as "appearing to be heavily skewed towards those from higher socio-economic backgrounds" (p. 20).

Optimistic attachments to meritocracy and social mobility

As evidenced in the discussion earlier, Dante speaks about the promise of higher education in optimistic ways. For Dante, higher education and specifically doctoral education, is a means to achieve a good job, enough material resources for himself and his young family, and a way to help those from his home community. In his comments there seems to be a

relatively straightforward relation between higher study and social mobility. Furthermore, Marie talked about going to university for a variety of reasons including her love of her subject and her desire to teach others. Her decision to participate in higher education was underpinned by the notion that gaining a university education was something that accorded significant social recognition and status in her community. Marie also spoke about how higher education delivers a degree of security and quality employment. And, from her words it is possible to see how Marie equates having a university degree with the promise of social mobility in a somewhat straightforward way:

You have had that opportunity and you are learned, personally as well social mobility, a greater paying job. You can use this money for your family, help them to go to college as well. You are seen as that person, your cousins or other family members; they will look up to you, and want to aspire for some of the things you have accomplished.

Through study Marie seems to believe one's employment possibilities are greatly enhanced and that graduates experience a degree of economic security, and more, those who succeed at a high level within the university assume an elevated position in the community as role models and standard setters. In this way, her presentation of what the university offers can be construed as being expansive. It also seems to align with the dominant discourses of social mobility and meritocracy where an individual through their efforts to gain university qualifications will receive appropriate rewards both economically and socially. In her words, this optimism is though not only located in her personal goals but also she speaks to her ability through higher education to help family members financially and through her knowledge and experience. This optimism about what higher education delivers to graduates in terms of economic opportunities appears to be somewhat at odds with a developing body of research on higher education which suggests that social mobility is lessening in many contexts. A number of scholars have identified this aspect of higher education in an era of widening participation. As mentioned earlier, a study by Blanden, Gregg and Machin (2005) contend that "social mobility is declining" (p. 2). They also argue that in fact "the expansion of higher education since the late 1980s has so far disproportionately benefit[t]ed those from more affluent families" (p. 2). Likewise, Burke (2012) says in unequivocal terms "those benefitting the most from policies to expand higher education are those with relative social, economic and cultural advantages" (p. 11).

Obviously, this is a complex area - in different contexts a university education and doctoral qualifications may be valued differently - but certainly in a variety of Western settings the employment situation for doctoral graduates has been commonly identified as being

concerning, competitive and challenging (Acker & Haque, 2017; Neumann & Tan, 2011). Moreover, in Marie's discussion of social mobility the redemptive qualities of education for herself and her family are powerfully evoked. In the following quote she identifies her and her family's belief about her higher education journey where she says, "like we have had faith in God for so long ... like God is showing us there is some hope here". Higher education is thus seen as providing access to different kinds of futures for those within the family and this is tied to their spirituality and faith that their lives can change through hard work and seeking educational opportunity.

Stuart's (2012) account of first-generation students working in higher education clearly points to the way tertiary education "acts as an engine for social mobility" (p. 113). She notes that employment opportunities in higher education in the UK have grown significantly over the last 70 years from about 20,000 full-time academic roles to over 100,000 by the beginning of the 21st century. However, as Stuart (2012) observes in relation to British higher education, "from the 1980s, as the unit of resource decreased in the sector, opportunities for employment in academic posts became more competitive" (p. 112). In her study of first-generation individuals and their roles in higher education she also identifies the increasing prevalence of employment insecurity in the narratives over time and suggests that the role of higher education in offering significant employment, especially for academic jobs, may be coming to a close, given an apparent surplus of qualified graduates.

Determining the likelihood of doctoral graduates in Education gaining permanent academic posts in Aotearoa/New Zealand, and beyond, is difficult; however, it is clear that most commentators point to a very tight, and perhaps shrinking, academic job market in most Western contexts (Acker & Haque, 2017; Neumann & Tan, 2011; Stuart, 2012a). This is a concerning picture for the futures of first-generation students interested in academic positions, one that leads me to consider how first-generation students will fare in comparison to other more traditional students in the highly competitive academic job market. Although these students may possess some newer forms of 'diversity value', as Taylor (2013) writes about, it is also true that the students may not possess the traditional forms of social, cultural or economic capital that other doctoral students from more privileged or well-connected backgrounds have meaning their journeys within higher education may be increasingly truncated by employment pressures.

First-generation student identities and the discourses of meritocracy and social mobility

The discussion across this chapter has highlighted the ways in which analysis of the first-generation students' accounts reveal the significance of the discourses of meritocracy and social mobility for offering the students a frame in which to make sense of their higher education experiences and find a place for themselves within doctoral education. The discussion also works to identify the place of these 'sister' discourses in shaping the first-generation students' doctoral student identities. Certainly, in Marie's narrative it is possible to see reference to these discourses at work in her story of the major challenges she faced to undertake higher education and go on to doctoral education. The discourse of meritocracy, in particular, is consistently visible within her story, evidenced in her selection of a narrative about a family friend who identified her as being 'very intelligent' and 'having all the attributes' that an elite university would look for along with her identification of her 'doing well' and wanting to achieve highly. In other words, through this story Marie interpellates herself as the meritorious student.

Marie's later comments about the nature of the university as an avenue for opportunity and success and, her words of advice to her brother she mentions, indicate that for Marie, the university can be seen as a place that imposes 'no limits' on her goals. These comments further suggest that an identity investment in a meritorious student subjectivity makes sense because the university is a place that is defined by merit, or at least, is a place that recognises it. In this way, the discourse of meritocracy can be understood as hailing Marie into place in doctoral education, encouraging her to continue to work and study and to achieve, even in what might be recognised as a context of uncertain rewards given the state of the academic job market in many settings. In Marie's case, the discourse of meritocracy can be seen as enabling in many ways, through buffering other social discourses which position diverse women from lower socio-economic backgrounds as not belonging in higher education and as not possessing the appropriate academic personhood more traditional students possess. However, broader questions remain about the kinds of investments first-generation students make in doctoral education in a time of growing structural inequality and the opportunities that exist for these students particularly in relation to achieving academic roles post-doctoral study. It is also important to recognise that Marie's engagement with meritocracy as a means to establish her doctoral identity as a meritorious or high achieving student comes with significant identity demands through the pressure that she experiences in relation to her need to 'do well' and 'aspire to greatness'. This pressure is demonstrated with poignancy in

her description of her fear of failure and the sense of deep shame she would experience if she was not successful in her studies.

The narratives of both Dante and Linda evidence the role of the discourse of social mobility in producing their doctoral student identities. In fact, Linda speaks directly about the way higher education ‘brings someone an identity’ which results in respect and social recognition even if this is not accompanied by direct material rewards. Both Dante and Linda employ representative concepts of social mobility discourse to articulate how they understand their doctoral journeys and, through this, the way they understand doctoral education as a means to ‘get a good job’ and ‘work in a better environment’. As Dante explains, the university and doctoral education represents ‘going further’; in Linda’s words, it means ‘you will succeed in life’. In these terms, Dante and Linda can be seen as taking up the social mobility discourse, the language of which reveals how they understand themselves as individuals who are ‘going further’ and as success-oriented achievers engaged in the pursuit of ‘good jobs’. Their investment in this discourse and in the university is evident in the efforts they have gone to in pursuit of their academic dreams. Such a firm investment in the discourse of social mobility is not surprising given, on the one hand, how successful they have been in higher education and their ability to access doctoral education and, on the other, the dominant presence of this discourse in the cultural context. As Reay (2013) argues, this dominance has powerful effects not only on individuals but also on society. She maintains, “the promise of mobility allows capitalist societies ... to maintain a system of firmly entrenched inequalities” (p. 664). The promise of social mobility pursued by these students, as I identified earlier, does not come without its costs. The challenges of being the ‘new arrivals’ in the gendered and classed spaces of higher education can be significant, as Marie’s story in particular indicates; nonetheless, the promise of social mobility and meritocracy discourses in combination work to hail students into place within the university to pursue their doctoral dreams.

Conclusion

This chapter has provided insights into the ways in which some of the first-generation students have ‘got here’, that is to the university and to doctoral education, and the role of the discourses of meritocracy and social mobility in constituting first-generation student academic identities. Although different aspects of the discourses were emphasised, or different language was used by students, many of them in a variety of ways, identified

themselves as ‘meritorious’ students in line with the discourse of meritocracy. These students also spoke of their hopes to become upwardly mobile through their doctoral studies in ways that strongly reflected the presence of mainstream social mobility discourse in shaping their doctoral aspirations. Through close attention to the narratives of three first-generation students in this study, I identified the way these discourses have enabled these students to understand themselves as belonging in the relatively elite space of doctoral education. I have shown how the discourse of meritocracy can be employed to reinforce or consolidate a student’s own positioning within the university and the ways in which first-generation students may construct self-narratives which utilize conceptions of merit to enable them to take up their doctoral subjectivities. I have also identified the role of meritocracy discourse in underpinning a particular conception of the university, that is, the meritocratic university, and have explored how this conceptualisation can be sustained through the inclusion of diverse meritorious students like first-generation individuals.

In addition, I suggested that conventional readings of social mobility which emphasise departures and escape fail to capture the nature of first-generation social mobility because of the often very close connections to family and home which exist despite the students’ desire to transform their lives in career and economic terms. I have also located some divergence from mainstream social mobility discourse in the ways that some of the students frame social mobility in a collectivist worldview. Lastly, I have highlighted some of the challenges faced by first-generation students in pursuit of their educational dreams and drawn attention to the various kinds of mobilities that can be found within the first-generation student experience with a view to contextualizing these students’ social mobility within a broader frame of plural mobilities. Overall, this chapter has offered insights into the arrival stories of first-generation students by recognizing the range of social, geographical and cultural boundaries these students traverse to take up doctoral study and the identity work they undertake to find space within the complex world of the university. As a foundation for my discussion of the university imaginaries invoked by the students in this research, I explore a particular media representation of the university as one kind of utopian dream in the next interlude.

Interlude II. Filmic figurations: The university of memory, myth and dreams in *Brideshead Revisited* (1981).

Buildings and landscapes were alive, they displayed and evoked emotional responses, and their carefully arranged structures, grounds and ornaments were as educationally functional as outright attendance at lectures and recitations.

Sheldon Rothblatt (1997, p. 78).

In this interlude I continue my examination of the idea of the university within a well-known cultural text as a means of reflecting on aspirations, knowledges and imaginings about ‘the university’ in the wider social and cultural domain. In this instance, I explore the university of the past as a utopian dream, as represented in the television serial *Brideshead Revisited*³¹ (Lindsay-Hogg & Sturridge, 1981). In my discussion I contend that the first episode of *Brideshead Revisited* (*Et in Arcadia Ego*)³² discursively constructs the university as an elite ivory tower space through the production’s engagement with memory, place and character within its narrative dimensions. I also suggest that this text has contributed to broader social imaginings identifying the university as a kind of mythic site that is idealised within collective memory which operates to invite in certain kinds of students while working to exclude others.

Examining a text, such as a television text, for its contribution to a social imaginary is worthwhile because, as Mason and Gehrman (2012) remind us, “texts shape communities and transmit experience across continents as well as time” (p. 419). I chose *Brideshead Revisited* for analysis as it offers what some authors have described as the “defining representation of the English university” (Mason & Gehrman, 2012, p. 415). Furthermore, my choice to explore

³¹ My discussion here largely focuses on the television text, although some reference will be made to the eponymous novel by Evelyn Waugh (1945). In addition, a filmic version of *Brideshead Revisited* was made by BBC films in 2008 (Directed by Julian Jarrold).

³² The first episode, like the first chapter of the novel is titled *Et in Arcadia Ego*, which is both the name of a 1637 painting by Nicolas Poussin and a title that has been used for a number of literary works. In its usual interpretation "I" refers to death, and "Arcadia" means a utopian land or heavenly place. *Et in Arcadia: I* (the deceased) too lived in Arcadia; *also: I* (death) too am present in Arcadia (Merriam Webster, n.d.).

this television narrative was informed by the fact, as I wrote about in the Prelude to this thesis, that *Brideshead Revisited* was one of the first media texts that I encountered as a teenager which shaped my understanding of what a university was. *Brideshead's* screen imagining of the university, nested within the broader narrative of social change and war was deeply compelling; in effect, capturing my imagination and shaping my early hopeful imaginings of a future within the university. In this interlude a generous description of the plotline and the episode settings is provided as a means to evoke the world of the university found within the television narrative.

At the time of its debut *Brideshead Revisited* (1981) was received with both popular and critical acclaim (Cardwell, 2002). Like *Educating Rita* (1983), it garnered large audiences around the world and earned numerous awards for its producers and actors (IMDb, 2015). The television series made up of eleven episodes traces the story of Charles Ryder and his relationship with Lord Sebastian Flyte and the Marchmain family in the early part of the 20th century. The television adaptation closely follows the story of the novel of the same name by Evelyn Waugh (1945) and draws heavily for dialogue on the ornate language of the original text. This feature of the series fits well with the historical, cultural and class location of its central characters but also works to confirm its high culture or literary tone as 'television art' (Crozier, 2005). Despite the historic nature of the story of *Brideshead Revisited*, it continues to have a presence in contemporary culture and maintains connections to the University of Oxford student experience. Brandon-Salmon (2016) suggests in *Cherwell*, the University of Oxford student publication, that *Brideshead Revisited*:

carried an aura of being a summation of what it means to be an Oxonian, even if only its first third is set in Oxford. It's surprising how its depiction of Oxford still resonates, despite being firmly set in the 1920s. (para. 1)

The representations of the university within this cultural text also, arguably, continue to inform broader ideas about the social institution of the university itself.

The story of *Brideshead Revisited*

The story is first set in the 1940s, but audiences are quickly transported via Charles's memories to his time as a student at University of Oxford in the 1920s where he meets the beautiful and eccentric Sebastian Flyte. The episode opens in the grim present of the closing months of World War Two. The central protagonist, Captain Charles Ryder is immersed in the apparently dreary activities of an officer stationed at home waiting for orders. His disillusionment with army life becomes abundantly clear when he describes to the television audience in melancholic tones by means of voice-over how he:

felt like a husband might feel, who in the fourth year of his marriage, suddenly knew that he had no longer any desire, tenderness, or esteem, for a once beloved wife ... we had been through it together the army and I, from the first importunate courtship until now, when nothing remained to us except the chill bonds of law and duty and custom.

In the grey gloom of an English winter, we learn that Charles and his division are waiting to relocate before entering active duty. Following receipt of his orders Charles unexpectedly finds himself at the grand country estate of Brideshead, a place we learn he has been before.

The story then shifts from Charles's gloomy present and viewers are transported to the bright past of his time at the University of Oxford in the 1920s. Long shots of Brideshead castle transform into a montage of Oxford's cityscape to spires and to a college quadrangle (Cardwell, 2002). The dull grey-brown world of the military morphs into sun warmed vistas of the university before the viewer's eyes. As Cardwell (2002) observes these shots of the university and those in subsequent scenes set at Oxford "are softly lit, pictorially framed and accompanied by haunting theme music" (p. 125). The camera fixes on a scene panning slowly and more closely across a set of buildings and then upwards towards the blue skies where we are drawn into Charles's life within the world of the University of Oxford undergraduate in the first decades of the twentieth century. We hear Charles's narration again, though he speaks in a tone now far less gloomy, recalling his time as a student:

Oxford in those days was still a city of aquatint. When the chestnut was in flower and the bells rang out high and clear over her gables and cupolas she exhaled the soft airs of

centuries of youth. It was this cloistral hush that gave our laughter its resonance and carried it still joyously over the intervening clamour.

We then see Charles in his well-appointed rooms getting ready for the day and being brought tea by Lunt, a man who is there tidying up after Charles. We watch Sebastian drop in to Charles's rooms and as they make plans to spend the day together. Charles tells the audience that he doesn't regard his time at Oxford as really having begun until he got to know Sebastian. Shortly after this, viewers are taken still further back in time to see Charles and Sebastian's first meeting. Charles is shown as a new student at Oxford being given an introduction to university life by his cousin as they walk the university grounds.

Young men fill the college spaces, going busily from class and buildings with most attired in black formal academic garb over their suits and shirts as also worn by Charles. This attire, now reserved largely for graduation days in most Western universities, helps mark out the historical and academic territory in which the story takes place. It also defines the privilege of these well-dressed young men. These scenes establish that this is an elite university space, and one that is also monocultural and highly gendered. Within these early scenes, the audience is also given a glimpse of the strikingly dressed Sebastian (suited from head to toe in white), a figure who stands out from Charles and his associates. Viewers are then shown another scene where we see a serious Charles, with a group of earnest young colleagues engaged in academic debates late in to the evening. This group of students, one of whom Charles refers to as an 'embryo' don, are portrayed as being decent, but dull and Charles tells the audience he was hoping for something more from his time at Oxford - a statement that leads the way for Sebastian to make his dramatic entry into Charles's life.



Figure four. Lord Sebastian Flyte (holding his teddy bear Aloysius) played by Anthony Andrews and Charles Ryder played by Jeremy Irons (*Brideshead Revisited*, 1981).

Charles then recounts his unlikely meeting with Sebastian late in that evening when a drunk Sebastian leans in through one of the open windows of Charles's ground floor rooms and throws up. An apology and an invitation to lunch mark the beginning of their relationship, arising from their seemingly unpropitious first encounter - a meeting which we later learn will come to define Charles's university experience, and in fact, much of his life. As viewers watch Charles and Sebastian getting to know each other, they are offered sumptuous views of the university and the undergraduate life at Oxford. Sebastian is shown hosting elaborate lunches with a selection of fine alcoholic beverages and complete with epicurean delights like plover's eggs and lobster Newburg. We also find Charles and Sebastian walking arm and arm through the beautiful grounds of the university's botanic gardens shot in the gentle light of a radiant English summer. This view of the idyllic Oxford life is shown in still more scenes depicting Charles and Sebastian passing their time together as they punt along the river Isis or when they take day trips from the university together in borrowed cars.

This genteel university lifestyle is mirrored by the slow pacing of these scenes which allows viewers to engage with the characters' uncomplicated happiness in each other's company and to revel in the glorious luxury of their affair. Crozier (2005) suggests *Brideshead's* slow pace is a marker of a mode of television spectatorship that values the evocation of past-ness as a means of entering an alternate world (p. 175), in this case, the leisured world of two young University of Oxford students in the 1920s. The presence of hard work and study is only briefly addressed

with images of Charles, though not Sebastian, working furiously at the end of semester to pass his exams. Outside of this, these characters enjoy a comfortable life together, although this lifestyle becomes a source of contention between Charles's and his priggish cousin given the latter's opinion that the young man who Charles has "fallen in with is of the worst kind". Charles's 'frivolous' spending habits and flamboyant dress, highlight the influence of Sebastian and, perhaps, signals the potentially untenable nature of the central characters' existence together given Charles's more modest, although still privileged, background.

Beyond the scenes of Charles's cramming for exams at the end of the semester, there is little more in the text that engages with academics or academic work. In fact, both are treated as being somewhat irrelevant to Charles' experience of the university. The only point where there is much attention to the figure of the academic is found in the advice issued to Charles by his cousin who tells him which lectures to attend and how to treat the dons, that is, not like schoolmasters but rather that he should "treat them like you would the vicar at home" perhaps suggesting that the academics should be treated with a kind of polite, but distanced respect. Despite the limited presence of academic matters within the television narrative, or perhaps in some part because of it, *Brideshead Revisited* nonetheless confirms and re-inscribes the place of Oxford as a kind of utopian university space. The arcadia of the title of the episode can be read as not only applying to Charles' remembered past, but also to fittingly describe the heavenly nature of the university as depicted in the narrative. This ideal form of the university represents a particular imagining that remains present through its familiarity and connections with other social and historical discourses.

Oxbridge³³ in the social imagination

Numerous scholars have identified the place of Oxford and Cambridge universities in the social imagination and point to the place of these institutions in social and literary discourse. The presence of Oxbridge in discourse works to maintain the power of these institutions and

³³ Mason and Guhrmann (2012) identify the term Oxbridge, a composite name for Oxford and Cambridge, as one that has endured despite attempts to replace it with other terms such as the 'ancient universities'.

reinforce “the enormous cultural authority of Oxford and Cambridge” universities (Barnes, 1996, p. 273). Well-known historical scholar, William Whyte for example identifies a kind of obsession for these universities (Whyte, 2015). In an interview with the *Times HE* Whyte observes, “not a month goes past without another book on Oxford or Cambridge. In a way, historians have been a bit like contemporary politicians or a lot of journalists in the broadsheets who have an obsession with Oxford or Cambridge” (Morgan, 2015, para. 5). Whyte makes these comments in relation to his recent work on the redbrick universities, like the university attended by Rita, which have been in many ways overshadowed by Oxbridge and have received far less attention from historical researchers.

Johnson, Lee and Green (2000) also point to a link between the University of Oxford and what they term as “continuing group fantasies” where the notion of the University of Oxford defines a utopian dream of the university itself. They suggest:

The dreaming spires of the ancient university, the lure of just the name ‘Oxford’, or the image of the scholar in ‘his’ library, all represent continuing group fantasies or social utopias for the aspiring academic, just as the imagined, longed for, community of scholars continues to be a reference point which academics frequently invoke as representing the ‘real university’ of ‘the past’. (p. 137)

Their description of this fantasy university powerfully illustrates the traditional notion of university as ivory tower through the institution of the University of Oxford and the place of the academic within this fantasy. These authors here draw on Mathew Arnold’s well-known phrase of Oxford’s ‘dreaming spires’³⁴ to further connect the university to a celebrated, historic and literary past.

The university as a site of memory

The return to the past within the episode, and indeed, within the serial is a defining element of *Brideshead’s* narrative. As Crozier (2005) observes “*Brideshead* is relentlessly backward

³⁴ This is in reference is to Mathew Arnold’s *Thrysis* (1866). Arnold wrote about Oxford as “that sweet city with her dreaming spires,” (“The Oxford dictionary of phrase and fable,” 2005) pointing to the elegant buildings of the university seen from Hinksey Hill, Oxford.

looking” (p. 173). She also points to the screen offering’s careful attention to the “artefacts, settings and modes of living of a bygone age” (p. 168) associated with the English aristocratic elite. This nostalgic celebration of things of the past includes *Brideshead Revisited*’s loving depiction of University of Oxford as a place of joy and memory. Viewers, through this depiction are invited into the university in a golden age. A narrative construct which works to confirm the notion of the ideal university and an imagining which strongly connects to a golden age nostalgia for academics when they “were held in high esteem, were well-connected to the powers that be and enjoyed a relatively leisured and un-pressurised existence” (Tight, 2010, p. 106.) Tight (2010) maintains a nostalgia for this university is still deeply embedded within contemporary conceptions of academic life:

The golden age myth can seem to be ever present, whether directly expressed or not, in writing and thinking about academic life in the post-war period. Thus, even today, there is often a prevailing sense in academic discussions that things used to be a good deal better, and that they can only now get even worse. (p. 106)

The presence in contemporary imaginings of this mythic university, when times were good for the academy, suggests a collective attachment to a university that arguably offers “a coherent meaningful past identity, enclosed and enshrined in memory” (Rothstein, 1993, p. 319). This is true even if this university existed far more in myth than it ever did in reality, or it existed only for privileged few. This golden age myth may have particular appeal to university academics now given how academic roles are increasingly understood as “being heavy in workload and unsatisfactory in content”, and despite, as Tight (2010) maintains, this imagined university has in reality been “well and truly supplanted” (p. 109).

A troublesome past? Entangled notions: memory, fantasy and reality

Murphy (2011) also identifies the power of past notions of the university, like the Oxford of *Brideshead Revisited*. Indeed, he acknowledges that in the current higher education environment, historical comparisons are inevitable. However, he sees this spectre of the university of the past as being troublesome, suggesting that notions of what was, or what people imagine the university’s past was, casts an unhelpful shadow over contemporary higher

education. Interestingly, a starting point for this historical comparison for Murphy lies in the notion of the university as the ivory tower. Murphy (2011), using the words of Onsman, describes universities as formerly “sequestered ivory towers” now subject “to the vagaries of the marketplace” (Onsman, 2008, p. 77). Most troublingly for Murphy (2011) is that “it is difficult to separate real and imagined versions of academic history, a blurring that obstructs opportunities to take the [academic] profession forward” (p. 509). In contrast, I suggest in line with the work of Ylijoki (2005) that although there are limits to the value of yearnings for the university of the past, this ‘academic nostalgia’ (Ylijoki, 2005) can, in fact, provide academics “under increasing pressures with cultural resources through which they are able to create continuity and integrity in their academic identities” (Ylijoki, 2005, p. 571).

Secondly, I wish to point to Murphy’s comments about the entangled nature of memory and fantasy in shaping understandings of institutions like the university, because I suggest it is in this space that the screen representation of the University of Oxford within *Brideshead Revisited* is particularly significant. It is in the ‘blurring’ of reality, fantasy and I would add memory, that the depiction of Oxford within the text takes on particular power. Because the university of *Brideshead Revisited* exists as a real place with an ancient academic tradition *and* as an un-real space; a place enfolded within a fictional love story from a long past time told via the medium of television. The results of this ‘blurring’ are a group of ideas that shape collective notions about not only Oxford and Cambridge but broader notions of the nature of universities in general, because as Rochford (2006) observes, the universities of Oxford and Cambridge are the origins “from which many of our conceptions of a ‘real’ university arise” (p. 147).

Conclusion

In the first episode of the *Brideshead Revisited* series viewers find a university firmly captured in the admiring gaze of the camera. The University of Oxford of *Brideshead Revisited* shot as it is in golden hues is shown to be a site of “repose, pleasure and beauty” (Mason & Gehrmann, 2012, p. 416). Sustained attention to the narrative may well focus consideration on the way *Brideshead* can be read as promoting elite values and an excessive valuation of high culture

forms (Crozier, 2005). In many ways the narrative of *Brideshead* can be read as providing a “nostalgic attachment to a lost past”(Crozier, 2005, p. 173). Given how the university experience depicted in *Brideshead* is one that bears little resemblance to the experiences of contemporary students, it would seem this screen story would have limited appeal or relevance to understandings of the contemporary university and those that inhabit its spaces, and yet the university of *Brideshead* remains a seductive, if fantastic, place.

The presence of Oxford so significant within *Brideshead* can also be seen within the first interlude within this thesis. In fact, there exists a clear line of sight from the university as represented in *Educating Rita* to that of the university of *Brideshead Revisited* demonstrating a genealogy across popular texts, even when the mythic view of the university common to both is challenged by different political and social realities at the time of their telling. As Mason and Gehrman (2011) maintain:

campus fictions have long fermented in popular culture, providing powerful discourses about the liberties and freedoms associated with university life ... these powerful series of signs are part of the discursive and affective formations ... which both constitute and exert power over objects in the social realm. (p. 101)

Despite the limitations of the representation of the university in the story of *Brideshead*, the set of ideas about this institution revealed within this text have substantially contributed to current social understandings of what the university is, and who attends, even within the historic or narrative frame of this particular screen story. It is a narrative that is resonant, even in the face of the extraordinary privilege of the characters from a time long past. Or rather, in part, it is through this old-world privilege, so richly on display within this filmic presentation, that viewers are invited to dream of the university through the screen construction of a mythic Oxford from decades ago – a dream that may have particular weight - for those who are distanced from the ordinary world of the university.

Chapter Five. Dreaming the university: Exploring student imaginings

Imagination, a licentious and vagrant faculty, unsusceptible of limitations and impatient of restraint, has always endeavoured to baffle the logician, to perplex the confines of distinction, and burst the enclosures of regularity.

Samuel Johnson, 1751.

Introduction

In the preceding chapter I explored the place of the discourses of meritocracy and social mobility in shaping first-generation students' academic identities. In this chapter I examine the students' imaginings of the university and the doctorate to identify what these imaginings might tell us about the ways in which these students have arrived in the university and what kinds of university world they understand themselves to be in. Through my examination of these imaginings I seek to traverse the imaginative geography of the university located within the stories of the students and, in doing so, also locate the place of some significant social imaginaries of the university. In this work I seek to recognise the way in which students' imaginings of the university and the doctorate are underpinned by, and deeply entangled with, broad social discourses of the university, and indeed, are also linked to their academic identities. This entangled space, I suggest, may further account for the students' academic aspirations in what might be described as precarious times for the university and for many who dream toward it. Moreover, I point to the ways in which the established university imaginaries I identify can be understood as being interlaced with regimes of truth (Foucault, 1980) which may be disorienting, or even oppressive for first-generation students. In this chapter, I also draw attention to how two of the Māori first-generation students claim the imaginative space of the university in a way that is deeply connected to their own cultural knowledge and identities. In contrast to the earlier data analysis chapter, I focus not only on the first-generation students' experience of the university in broad terms, I also pay close attention to the doctorate and the student's imagined post-doctoral futures.

My particular focus is on the intriguing, and perhaps, as Samuel Johnson suggests, perplexing idea of the imagination and its connections with higher education. To undertake this task, I draw upon a variety of materials. First, I utilise interview data; analysing interview statements with attention to metaphor and symbolism in the language of the participants. I also include duoethnographic material to identify the way I imagined the university in my

reflections on my university pathway. Alongside this, I analyse images of the university provided by the first-generation student focus group participants. The use of a range of materials offers a number of different entry points into the university imaginings of the students in this study providing insights into the ways they have formed aspirations for their academic futures.

This chapter is organised into three main parts. The first examines literature about the imagination, the idea of a social imaginary and the ways in which individual imaginings bridge these two concepts. I then discuss some dominant social imaginaries of the university, including the ‘ivory tower’, the liberal university and the Hollywood pop culture imaginaries, along with the neoliberal university of the contemporary world. In part two, I explore narrative data gathered from the first-generation participants to identify their university imaginings from before entering higher education and the sources informing these as they were subsequently recalled in this study. The chapter then moves forward in time, to consider how these first-generation students presently imagine and represent the university, located as they are now: doctoral students in the academy. The final part of the chapter focuses on the doctorate; in particular, it considers how first-generation individuals imagine the doctorate and what it symbolises for the students in this study. This chapter is then closed with a discussion of university imaginaries as regimes of truth (Foucault, 1980).

The place of imaginings

I have taken imaginings of the university, the doctorate and the imagined post-doctoral futures of these first-generation students as objects worthy of investigation for a number of reasons. For one, I consider the ways these ‘non-traditional’ students have made sense of higher education both from when they began their studies and now as doctoral students. Moreover, I am interested in how an individual’s understandings of particular social spaces – the way they imagine a space to be – may inform how they negotiate these spaces. At a broader level, my work recognises the ways the imagination contributes to, or perhaps, may even fashion, social understandings of reality. The imagination’s elusiveness is not something easily pinpointed and yet it is, at the same time, it is so ubiquitous that to ‘imagine’ is an everyday endeavour. As Kearney (1998) suggests, “the imagination has long been acknowledged as one of the most fundamental, if concealed, powers of humankind” (p. 1).

Remembered university imaginings

This chapter relies on story fragments, rather than larger narratives, to engage with the participants' imagined universities. This reliance on story fragments arises in part from the abstract nature of the students' imaginings and the challenge of articulating those imaginings within an interview context, given these students were asked to think back to a part of their lives when they had not begun their tertiary studies. Such an endeavour involves reaching back into memory about a place where students have now spent considerable time. Thus, the first-generation individuals' recalled imaginings may have dimmed or changed. What the data provide, for the most part, are glimpses into the students' imaginings articulated in short accounts and described in abstract language or through metaphor. Nonetheless, these brief, but often evocative descriptions provide telling insights into the university imaginings of these first-generation students.

Engaging with memory is complex, as Suleiman (1999) observes, memory is “a construction of the past, not the past itself”, so it is therefore “necessarily mediated and incomplete” (p. v). Suleiman (1999) goes so far as to suggest that, “all memory is problematic in some way” (p. vi). Given the potential difficulties associated with remembering, it is important for researchers to acknowledge that memory “occupies one of the most controversial and contested sites over what constitutes legitimate knowledge-making” (Metta, 2010, p. 66). And, yet it is also the case that remembered or recalled imaginings can carry emotive weight and remain with people for significant periods of their lives. Kosut (2006) suggests that “although our memories are often fleeting and fuzzy, interpretations of lived events we rewrite and edit throughout our lives, some memories echo in our minds with clarity. Instead of drifting farther away from us over time, they remain distinctly audible” (p. 245).

The links between memory and the imagination are also significant. Metta (2010) argues that “imagination is, after all, a construct of the constituted and remembered self” (p. 17). In the context of her life writing work, Metta (2010) identifies memory and imagination as being tightly wound together:

Imagination operates in a reciprocal relationship to memory and the construction of the self and ... lived experiences ... Imagination allows the storyteller to select events, stories and themes to tell to a particular audience. Imagination is the creator of, created by ... the self and hence, with memory itself. (p. 17)

For Metta (2010), the imagination and memory are powerful sources of identity co-constructing an individual's sense of self. Thus, despite the time that has passed since the students first imagined the university, their constructions or reconstructions of their

remembered imaginings speak beyond the limits of the past and give insights not only about their earlier experiences within the university, but also the students' academic identities in the present.

Conceptualising social imaginaries

To lay a foundation from which to understand the concept of a social imaginary, I will consider the meaning of the related words 'imagination', 'imaginaries' and 'imaginings'. I draw on Barnett's (2013) explanation on the connections and distinctions between these three terms. He suggests, firstly, that the 'imagination' can be described as "a power, a potential, a capability, which may or may not be exercised" (p. 15). This faculty, or capability, has interested philosophers across human history who have considered it from a range of vantage points. Plato, for example, warned against the dangers of the imagination as "the making of images ... as mere imitations of truth, whereby artists or sophists alike ... fabricate fake copies of reality" (Kearney, 1998, pp. 2–3). Christian scholars such as Augustine and Aquinas also cautioned against the employment of the imagination because of its susceptibility to 'irrational passions'. Many other classical thinkers took a similar view, describing the imagination as "unreliable, unpredictable and irrelevant" (Kearney, 1998, p. 3). This suspicious view of the imagination was jettisoned during the romantic period, where the notion of human imagination took on an elevated or almost divine power. For, Kant and a number of German idealists such as Schelling and Fichte, the imagination was celebrated as a creative transforming of the real into the ideal. Fichte went as far as to claim that "all reality is brought forth solely by the imagination ... this act which forms the basis for the possibility of our consciousness" (Grundlage, as cited in Kearney, 1998, p. 4). This far more favourable view of the imagination has been part of a move towards "humanist models of subjectivity which lay great stress on the imagination's prowess to fashion truth rather than merely represent it" (Kearney, 1998, p. 5).

Latterly, alongside the notion of the imagination, the related concept of the 'imaginary' has gained significance. The imaginary, or perhaps, more accurately, *an* imaginary, speaks to a notion of shared or social imagining. Barnett (2013) describes an imaginary as "a collective way of understanding a matter and such an imaginary ... will emerge – at least in part – from the exercise of the imagination" (p. 15). Social imaginaries play an important role in how people interpret their everyday lives (Gaonkar, 2002). As Taylor (2004) explains, a social imaginary involves "the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together

with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underline these expectations” (p. 23). In simple terms, he suggests, the concept of an imaginary has a focus “on the way ordinary people ‘imagine’ their social surroundings” (Taylor, 2004, p. 4). Taylor (2004) also points to the significance of legend in relation to social imaginaries which creates the space to consider the role of longstanding culturally located stories or mythologies as a further force in shaping social imaginaries. Gaonkar (2002) explains this in more detail, describing social imaginaries as being “expressed and carried in images, stories, legends and modes of address that constitute a symbolic matrix” (p. 10). It is important to highlight in this discussion that social imaginaries are understood as particular kinds of discursive formations that are focused on the way ordinary people imagine their social surroundings. They are also deeply connected to the social and historical conditions of their existence.

The third of these related terms is ‘imagining’. This word possesses a number of meanings, but in general terms it can be understood as involving an individual forming mental images of things not present to the senses. It can also mean ‘to conjecture’ or ‘to guess’, and can be used in place of verb phrases such as to think, believe, suppose or to fancy (“Imagining,” 2016). Imagining, identifies what individuals ‘do’, that is, they imagine, and these various ‘imaginings’, whatever they may be about, are connected to person’s interests and life experiences. In this way, an individual’s imaginings are influenced by their social and cultural location and are thus inescapably informed by particular social imaginaries through the language the person uses and the cultures they are a part of. While a social imaginary may shape the imaginings of individuals, the relationship between an individual and a social imaginary is not one way. Although an individual’s imaginings are far less likely to impact on a collectively held social imaginary, it is possible that one individual’s imaginings may possess the potential to shape or at least contribute to a social imaginary. Examples of this may be found in the great leaders in history or in the scholarship of leading academic figures. Arguably, though Cardinal Newman may not be a well-known figure by those outside of religious or academic circles, the influence of his work on the idea of the university, discussed later in this chapter, may be seen as one such example of the influence an individual can have on a social imaginary, in this case on the formation of the liberal university imaginary.

Returning to the concept of a social imaginary, it is useful to reiterate how it is representative of the ways ordinary people imagine their world and that a social imaginary is deeply

informed by stories, images and symbols. These understandings are important for my methodological and analytic approach in two main ways. Firstly, as stories and images are key constitutive elements of an imaginary, tracing the students' university and doctoral imaginings can be recognised as a fitting undertaking in seeking insights into university imaginaries. And, secondly, utilising images of the university chosen by the students turns out to be valuable, given the role of symbols and imagery in shaping imaginaries.

Four social imaginaries of the Western university

The university as an institution of higher learning in Western cultures has played a role in social history stretching back over 800 years through its provision of education and opportunity to various constituencies through to the present day. The way the university has been understood and imagined over time has profoundly shaped people's attitudes and beliefs about the value of higher education, who should have access to a university education, and its purposes. Edgerton and Farber (2005) make this point in relation to the academics who inhabit the university, arguing that they should have an interest in how a particular university imaginary can operate to shape peoples' attitudes about the role of scholars and scholarship, as they colour "the public perceptions of the worth, relevance and meaning of their work" (p. 4). A wider corollary, of course, can be made to this in terms of the perception of the worth of the university and the relevance of a university education, which extends well beyond the interests of academics only. Scholars like Hey and Morley (2011), Barnett (2013) and Kelly (2017) identify the importance of university imaginaries and have produced work on possible alternative imaginaries. Hey and Morley (2011) for example, describe the main rationale for their work in terms of their desire, "to imagine the future cohabitation of equity and universities, in light of the present, continuing and compounding inequalities" (p. 165), particularly in relation to 'non-traditional' students like first-generation individuals. Their work, like mine, is underpinned by the view that it is important to pay attention to university imaginaries especially for individuals who have not normally fit within traditional conceptions of the university student.

In this section, I focus on four different but connected imaginaries whose presence is visible in the narratives of the first-generation students in this study. The imaginaries identified in this thesis have emerged from different histories and have diverse levels of ascendancy, with many authors pointing to the dominance of the neoliberal imaginary of the university in the present. Although these imaginaries may be linked most strongly to certain contexts or times, they are not neatly separable and instead continue to operate alongside one another,

sometimes in uncomfortable ways (Kelly, 2017). Similar to Barcan's (2013) description of a palimpsestic university, Barnett (2013) also sees different university imaginaries as existing in layers and continuing to shape understandings about the role of the university within Western settings. Despite the fluctuating importance of the various university imaginaries in social life they all can exert some force over the ways in which students understand the university, their place within it and their possible post-study futures (Grant, 2005).

To the ivory tower!

One of the most enduring and long-established imaginaries³⁵ of the university is that of this institution as an 'ivory tower'. Though the origins of the term ivory tower lie in antiquity, the usage of this expression can be first traced to the Bible³⁶ (Shapin, 2012). From this religious context, the term then re-emerged into everyday language in the nineteenth century when French poet Augustin Saint-Beuve employed it in a poem to condemn fellow French poet and aristocrat Alfred deVigny whom Saint-Beuve viewed as aloof and removed from the practical concerns of life during a time of considerable social change in France. The meaning of this phrase then became, in simple terms, that "someone living in an ivory tower is ... sheltered from the realities of existence" (Quinion, 2001, para. 6).

The idea of the ivory tower university did not immediately follow from the term's reemployment in cultural life, rather, it was applied most readily to artists throughout the nineteenth century (Shapin, 2012). However, the ivory tower trope in the early twentieth century:

began its systematic drift away from art and the artist towards an identification first, with a particular type of cultural institution and, second, with a form of culture to which the ivory tower had scarcely ever been attached. By the end of the twentieth century it became natural to think of the ivory tower as the university, or at least some version of what a university was or might be. (Shapin, 2012, pp. 13-14)

Mason and Guhrman (2012) draw on the familiar iconography of the historic British universities of Oxford and Cambridge with their grand buildings, ancient quadrangles and associated idyllic lifestyles to illustrate how the university as ivory tower has come to be commonly understood. The presence of Oxford and Cambridge as representations of ideal 'ivory tower' universities is evidenced in a number of cultural texts such as Evelyn Waugh's

³⁵ The university as ivory tower is one of the long established imaginaries of the university, but it is not the earliest imaginary of the Western university. The metaphysical university, with a focus on "humanity's connection with God, or the Universe or truth" defined the earliest forms of the university emerging as it did from the Christian church and monasteries in Europe (Barnett, 2013).

³⁶ The phrase is used in the *Song of Solomon* in the Old Testament, where Solomon describes his love as possessing a neck like a tower of ivory (Song of Songs, 7:4).

Brideshead Revisited (1945) and though in a less direct way, in *Educating Rita* (1983) discussed earlier in this thesis.

Kelahr Young (2005) offers a keen description of the historic figure of the academic in the ivory tower. She identifies the popular perception of this figure in some detail, which:

involves the older, distinguished, white, gentleman-scholar, the liberal intellectual who sits in the Ivory Tower, contemplating questions about which the majority of people could care less. Clearly the conventional image conveys both hierarchy and separateness to higher education, an aura of exclusive elitism that keeps out the intellectually unwashed. (p. 97)

Though Kelahr Young's portrayal of the ivory tower could be read as a conflation of the ivory tower and liberal university imaginary (discussed in the next section), through her identification of a 'liberal intellectual', Kelahr Young makes some telling observations about how this ivory tower academic figure is understood in terms of class, gender, race and age. Her description of the academic sitting in contemplation suggests a rather genteel and comfortable existence far removed from the anxieties of struggle and survival located somewhere outside the university. Kelahr Young's account of the university scholar draws attention to the privileged social position of an academic within this imaginary. This is significant, as it speaks to the fact that white men, particularly from the upper middle-classes, and personified in individuals like Frank from *Educating Rita* (Russell, 1983), have traditionally dominated university spaces with few from less privileged backgrounds gaining access to the academic world during much of the recent history of the Western university. This imaginary, though arguably waning in the context of neoliberalism, seems readily conjured by those connected with the academy and beyond. Indeed, Brew (2001) suggests that the idea of a privileged and genteel academic existence like that of the ivory tower academic remains ever present. She contends that "society is still imbued with outdated and erroneous images of academics who spend all day reading, taking tea, drinking sherry and going on long vacations" (p. 5). Despite its historic character, the familiarity of the ivory tower university and the academics within suggests its continuing power and influence over commonplace ideas of the university and the lifestyles of those within these institutions.

The liberal university

The liberal university imaginary is one that is arguably less immediately familiar in terms of its usage in language than the ivory tower trope, but nonetheless has powerfully shaped ideas about institutions of higher education in Western contexts (Turner, 1996). This imaginary is strongly influenced by liberal-humanist ideas that focus on the university as a site for the

development of an individual's mind, particularly through the study of philosophy, the arts and science. One of the most significant descriptions of the liberal-humanist university is found in the work of the leading 19th century scholar Cardinal John Henry Newman³⁷ (Kelly, 2017). Newman believed that a university education should focus on the intellectual development of the individual, with particular reference to tradition, civic responsibility and the establishment of a broad knowledge base. He maintained that the "training of the intellect, which is best for the individual himself, best enables him to discharge his duties to society" (Newman, 1996, p. 154). As the quote suggests, Newman saw a liberal education provided by the university as one that should develop the individual (though this individual is solely male in his conception) so that 'he' could contribute to society, although his view of a university education was not in his mind strongly associated with vocationally-focused or technical education. For Newman (1996), if a practical outcome "must be assigned to a university course, I say it is that of training good members of society" (p. 125). Newman, though a Catholic priest at the time of much of his most significant writing on the university, advocated for a university education that was broad and secular in its orientation, something he referred to as the need for universities to teach "universal knowledge" (Newman, 1996, p. 25). He sought to advance the higher education of individuals in a way that cultivated the intellect through the teaching of scholars. While his view of the role of the university was not explicitly linked to the idea of universities as hubs of national culture, his conception of this higher education institution resonated with a view of the university as a site of teaching and learning, intellectualism and knowledge.

In identifying the liberal university imaginary, we can recognise the ways that it overlaps with the notion of an ivory tower university. This link is especially visible in relation to the figure of the academic within the liberal university. The academic within the liberal university imaginary is a 'gentleman scholar' not dissimilar to the ivory tower academic, though in Newman's articulation of a liberal university there is a clear emphasis on the importance of teaching by academics, rather than on research (a further contrast can be seen in relation to the German university model which had a strong focus on research), for example. In some writing the liberal and the ivory tower university is conflated and represented as one view of the university (Chantler, 2016), as was evident in the passage from Kelaher Young included earlier. However, there are some important distinctions to be drawn between the ivory

³⁷ Cardinal John Henry Newman's famous work *The idea of a university* was first published in 1852. Newman wrote the book in two parts. The first part is made up of a series of discourses he gave in Dublin in 1852 and the second part was comprised of a series of writings for lectures and essays he prepared between 1854-1858 (Turner, 1996).

tower and liberal university imaginaries, particularly in relation to extending opportunities to learners beyond a narrow elite. Newman, as rector of the newly established Catholic University in Ireland, wanted there to be opportunities for higher education beyond what existed at Oxbridge, particularly relation to religion, as for a considerable period of time Catholics had been banned from attending Oxford or Cambridge³⁸. Though the development of the ‘redbrick’ universities³⁹ from the mid-nineteenth century had a greater vocational focus than Newman advocated for, his ideas strongly informed the design of these institutions in Britain. Newman’s work has now a significant legacy, helping to define a liberal university imaginary which has powerfully influenced the establishment of universities around the world, as can be seen particularly in the development of the American liberal arts colleges from the last part of the 19th century into the 20th Century.

The Hollywood pop culture university

An imaginary of the university that emerges from a very different time and cultural space is that of the pop culture university manifest in Hollywood realist cinema. As Conklin (2008) points out, Hollywood filmmakers have presented stories of university life for over a century⁴⁰, “shaping popular perceptions of our colleges, universities and the students who attend them” (p. 1). Dalton (2004) argues that popular culture films provide an implicit curriculum about the role and purposes of education that is manifest through the on-screen relationships between teachers and students. She also identifies a narrow, generally politically conservative focus in the films, commenting that the “social curriculum of Hollywood implicit in popular films is based on individual rather than collective action and relies on carefully plotted action rather than meaningful struggle” (p. 1), leaving dominant power relations in place. As Conklin (2008) observes, “because the Hollywood dream factory exists to make money and profits depend on entertaining the public, it isn’t surprising that movies about college life dwell on the fun students have” (p. 3) rather than focusing on work, study or broader educational issues.

³⁸ According to Vanderstraeten (2015) Roman Catholics “were effectively prohibited”(p. 779) from earning a degree at Oxford or Cambridge until 1871 as they were required to sign an oath declaring themselves to be members of the Church of England.

³⁹ The redbrick universities, as they are referred to by Bruce Truscott in his acclaimed book *Redbrick university*, (1943) were built in the nineteenth century and include Leeds, Liverpool, Manchester, Birmingham, Bristol and Sheffield universities.

⁴⁰ According to Conklin (2008) the short documentary film *Harvard Crew* (1897) is the first American film to portray university life. The first fictional movie was *The Professor of Drama* (1903) and the first full-length American university film was entitled *The College Widow* (1915).

Although there is not just one uniform version of the university or university student represented in pop culture media, common narrative elements within filmic and television texts have emerged over time (Conklin, 2008). One of the most common themes presented by Hollywood is the university as a site of fun and youthful independence. The fun depicted in this genre of films, sometimes referred to as campus films, is often associated with fraternities and sororities where young students are portrayed as being largely interested in and occupied by drinking alcohol and participating in social activities, especially in partying and pursuing relationships. The comedy film *National Lampoon's Animal House* (1978) is arguably the most well-known of all American college movies. It centres on a group of students involved in “raucous partying and rampant sexual activity” (p. 5). The university world in this film is set within the pleasant surroundings of Faber College and largely focuses on groups of relatively privileged young white men from the Delta fraternity who engage in rule-breaking, bad behaviour and heavy drinking. The success of this film with movie audiences has shaped the form of Hollywood college films since its release in the late 1970s (Tucciarone, 2007). Despite the influence of this movie, the portrayals of the Greek-letter organisations within campus films have not been free from critique, with some commentators highlighting “the criteria they used to select their members: economic privilege, race, physical attractiveness, athletic prowess and popularity” (Conklin, 2001, p. 124). The presence of the pop culture university imaginary within social life has no doubt been strengthened by the increasing numbers of college films produced since the 1990s (Conklin, 2008). Interestingly, Horowitz (1987) writing about the mid-1980s charted the rise of a ‘new’ type of ‘outsider’ sub-culture of privileged students whose ‘grim professionalism’ was focused on ensuring their social and economic advantages. Such a university sub-culture may fit well with the rise of a neoliberal university imaginary.

The neoliberal university

The last and most recently established imaginary examined here, and one that has arguably come to dominate higher education, is that of the neoliberal university⁴¹ (Petersen & Davies,

⁴¹ I have chosen to name this imaginary the neoliberal university throughout my discussion because I want to explicitly link this imaginary to the body of ideas and philosophies that form neoliberal theory. This theory base has deeply informed many areas of social life within, and outside of, higher education. My choice of nomenclature could have been different, as there are a cluster of concepts that exist together that can identify this imaginary, including the ‘enterprise university’ (for a comprehensive discussion of the enterprise university, see Marginson & Considine, 2000), the ‘entrepreneurial university’, the ‘commoditized university’, the ‘corporate university’, and the ‘managerial university’ (Barnett, 2013). These terms are not identical in meaning and tend to emphasise different values and approaches as shaped by neoliberal ideology and politics. Moreover, the influence of neoliberalism and its associated university imaginary is celebrated in some circles, while in others the ideas and practices associated with the neoliberal university are seen in particularly dark or

2010). Neoliberalism, as discussed in *Chapter Two*, has come to inform many aspects of social policy across all parts of society including higher education. Neoliberal discourse is imbued with a host of ideas and values which support a particular way of seeing the world based on economic and market principles (Morrissey, 2015). The role of the university within this imaginary is understood primarily in terms of its economic contribution and the development of human resources for the market place (Bansel, 2011). Neoliberal higher education is based on a set of relationships between students and academics (and managers) largely determined by market values and individual rewards or costs (Lemke, 2001). Within this imaginary students are viewed as consumers and rational economic actors engaged in making choices about their higher education based on the economic rewards they can accrue in the employment marketplace through gaining a university qualification (Petersen & O'Flynn, 2007). Moreover, as the potential economic rewards from university studies are received by the individual, the individual is seen as rightly bearing the cost of their own higher education. Hence the justification for the reduction in public funding of university places for students following this logic of private economic benefit.

Neoliberal academics as 'new knowledge workers' (Tennant, 2004) possess two key roles within the university. One is to provide the teaching, or perhaps more precisely, the training for students. The other is to play a pivotal role in the development of the knowledge economy through the new knowledge they produce via research (Bansel, 2011). Knowledge with the most market value is most highly prized, with less obviously utilitarian forms of knowledge being far less valued. Academics work including research outputs is carefully scrutinised through performance management technologies (Morrissey, 2015) to ensure accountability and efficiency. In this imaginary, the close scrutiny of academics' work is required to bring the greatest return on governmental investment, and academic entrepreneurship is encouraged in the furtherance of economic productivity, income generation and global competitiveness (Morrissey, 2015). In the next part of the chapter, I explore the students' accounts to identify their university imaginings and the presence of connections to the identified social imaginaries.

dystopian terms (Barnett, 2013). However, this newer conception of the university is named, it is clear that neoliberal ideas have refashioned contemporary understandings of the university.

Tracing university imaginaries in the student narratives

A thread that emerged in a number of students' shared stories about their early imaginings of the university was the presence of literary or popular narratives and Oxbridge. Despite the cultural, social and geographical distances from Oxford and Cambridge Universities, their history and cultural power could be seen resonating within the stories of the students in a variety of different ways. Katie for example, talked about her love of storytelling and her experience of reading the books of CS Lewis and JRR Tolkien, both University of Oxford professors, at intermediate or high school. In her mind Tolkien and Lewis, these lofty figures of English literature, represented the university:

I read about how CS Lewis and Tolkien used to go to this club and they would talk together and I loved that idea of these two professors getting together with their pipes ... I had this image in my mind ... like the hobbits all getting together with them and blowing smoke rings like Gandalf. As I got older I became aware that to be a writer there were different things that you had to go through to learn how to write and where the *appropriate* (emphasis added) places to learn how to write might be ... So, Tolkien and Lewis lived in a university in my mind.

This quote speaks to a fantasy world where authors mingle with their characters and to a domain of old-fashioned men's clubs, pipes and privilege from a distant time. Katie's account has some clear connections to the historic university especially with its specific reference to these famous writers and Oxford lecturers, directly linking her imagining to an Oxbridge of a bygone age. A feminist analysis⁴² of her recalled imagining might point to the fact that Katie imagined a place of privileged white men within an ivory tower-like setting - a place that did not have much space for working-class women - including herself. Yet she talked about this recollection as being inspiring and through her reading was able to imagine herself into those spaces of elite male privilege. I also identify another thread in her comments, where the university is a kind of 'special' place; one that enables someone to become a writer, in the company of others with similar interests and commitments. In this reading, it is possible to find a kind of cosiness in her account where the university is a place where the life of the mind may be nurtured and valued. In this way, this imagining may also reflect some of the central aspects of the liberal university with its emphasis on the development of one's intellect through learning and scholarship.

⁴² Feminist scholars may point to the subordination of women (Abbott, Wallace, & Tyler, 2005) and identify the imagining shared by Katie as being grounded within a privileged space where men typically possess high status roles with women often being excluded from these positions. Although I make this general claim about feminist thought, I also acknowledge that feminism "as a theory or a world view... it is not a unified one; feminists do not agree on the ways in which we can explain women's subordination or on how women can be emancipated or even what constitutes oppression" (Abbott et al., 2005, p. 28).

Another tangential link to University of Oxford can be found in Kat's account where she described being so inspired by reading (and being read) the story of *The Lord of the Rings* (1954) that she decided, at the age of eight or nine, that she was going to be a film director. A way to do this, in her mind, was through university study and this early foundation later became important in her subject choices and pathway through the university. Kat's account also reveals very clearly the way her imaginings of her future and of the university were informed by literature, or in different words, her account suggests how her university imaginings were clearly inflected by other culturally located narratives, in this case, her university imaginings were stimulated by her introduction to the work of a famous Oxford scholar.

In my own reflections on my early understandings of the university, discussed in the Prelude and the duoethnography in the Coda of this thesis, I draw attention to the distance of the university from my everyday world and highlight the ways in which I came to understand this institution in an historic, even fantastic way. My recollections also arise from a period of time before I began higher education and are deeply wrapped up with filmic representations of Oxbridge. I was captured by what Eagleton (1990) refers to as “the brittle glamour of Cambridge” (p. 28):

My earliest memories of the university were in third or fourth form at high school and watching *Brideshead Revisited* re-runs. University seemed to me to be a place of privilege. People were sophisticated, charming, well dressed, good looking – and clever. They were British and witty ... I had this dream of going to Oxford or Cambridge, which was so far beyond Mt College. It was this exclusive better world. I guess you could describe my perception of academia as distanced, filmic and ridiculous! ... Outside of a few teachers, I didn't know a single person who'd been to uni.

To echo the sentiments of Green and colleagues (2000), I imagined the university to be a fantastic place that was beautiful and refined, located in some historical period decades long past. My imaginative engagement with this idea of the university was formed through encounters with a variety of written or filmic narratives such as *Brideshead Revisited* (1981) rather than through any direct or close experience. This lack of direct experience with the university was common for the first-generation students in this study. The spaces I imagined, filled with privileged people so distanced from the everyday experiences of most students, evidences the presence of the ivory tower imaginary. The force of this mythic university is significant despite, as Mason and Guhrman (2012) suggest, that its “depiction of the university was outdated and obsolete even when it was first promulgated” (p. 421).

Appadurai (1996), in his explanation of mediascapes as a key site for the construction of imagined worlds, draws attention to the importance of distance in shaping individual and social imaginings. He says:

What is most important about these mediascapes is that they provide (especially in their television, film ... forms) large and complex repertoires of images, narrative, and ethnoscapescapes to viewers throughout the world ... The lines between the realistic and the fictional landscapes they see are blurred, so that the farther away these audiences are from the direct experiences of metropolitan life, the more likely they are to construct imagined worlds that are chimerical, aesthetic, even fantastic objects. (p. 35)

Both in Katie's and my reflections it is easy to see some idealised views of university and the academics within. In my case, this was influenced by my location in a small town far from the metropolitan world of the university. Because of my distance, I constructed my imaginings from the sources of information I had access to, such as film and television. In fact, it was precisely my own distance, in time, geographical space, class, gender and ethnicity that made those imagined spaces so potent with possibility, in ways that a more proximate account may not have done. The university was a place that was 'other' in my recollected imaginings, and this elevated notion of the university was also seen in a number of the students' recollections. For instance, Pierre described the university simply as "just a world away". When asked about what it was a world away from, he identified the university as a world away from what his mother, father, elder brother and sister did in their lives, working in trade and industry. His comment confirms the sense of distance that emerged within the narratives of the majority of the first-generation individuals in this study.

For Sue, the Hollywood pop culture university imaginary was particularly significant:

There's a lot of movies about the American college... so (university was), like, living in dorms and the kind of party side or whatever, and it's always very interesting, because that's... always in the movies, but then I went to university and that was not my experience.

Sue mentions this contradiction between her experience of university and representations of the university in film and television several times in her interview. She described living at home some distance from her university and commuting to campus (she did not live with other students throughout her studies). She also worked a significant number of hours in paid employment and did not go to student parties as is suggested is commonplace in American campus movies. Her comments indicate the significance of her positioning between her own lived experience of the university and the Hollywood pop culture

imaginary. The disjuncture between these two versions of the university left her with some lasting sense of disappointment.

Sue also highlighted the way her secondary school teachers constructed the university as a place deeply implicated in the consumer economy. It was described as providing access to jobs that empower an individual to purchase goods in exchange for more highly valued labour. Sue describes her desire to attend university in relation to a high school trip and her teacher's advice:

They took us to an engineering firm ... I remember they did this thing where they took like a page from a magazine and they said, okay, so this outfit costs whatever. If you worked at McDonald's it would take you three weeks to earn this money, if you did this job it would take you one week to earn this money, if you're an engineer you could make this by Monday morning, and then I was, like, I'm going to university ... I was, like, that's it, I have to go.

This conceptualisation of the university in terms of money and purchasing power, speaks less to an elevated sense of the ivory tower imaginary and more to everyday concerns about work, remuneration and consumerism. The aspiration for higher education this teacher was seeking to encourage is one that was undoubtedly presented in "predominantly economic terms characterised in our current times by neoliberal ideology and consumer values" (Sellar & Gale, 2012, p. 105). Sue's recollection of this advice highlights her teacher's efforts to invoke a neoliberal university imaginary to encourage student interest in higher education. Although her teacher's representation of the university sparked Sue's interest in higher study, the messages she received about what it delivers was something that Sue reflected on in her interview as being simplistic, misleading and ignoring the complex effects of the diverse kinds of social and cultural capital that she did not have access to as a young first-generation woman.

Marie also recounts attending a college fair and the way the university was presented in narrow employment-focused terms:

We had a college fair at home and there were stalls set up from different universities... I remember attending this fair ... you know, just to see what they had to offer, but at that same time not quite knowing what I wanted to do after college. Everything was about going to get a job. That was like the main thrust. Yeah, so there was that experience, and I think that was probably sort of the impetus for me to go online and search and find out about schools outside of the [home area]. I think that was the major thing about that, going to that fair.

Marie's and Sue's introductions to the university at school mirror each other in terms of a representation of the university in strongly economic and arguably a-social or a-political

terms. Interestingly, these students were amongst the youngest in my study (in their late 20s or early 30s) and their remembered representations of the university as primarily identified for its contribution to employment training for improved economic returns likely evidences a growing emphasis on neoliberal conceptions of higher education. It is possible to identify this approach as evidence of what Giroux (2010) describes as a “bare pedagogy” (p. 184) that defines higher education in terms of a capitalist agenda which relegates other educational goals, such as those of personal development, citizenship or advancement of knowledge (outside of that which serves the market), as unnecessary, secondary or as an unaffordable luxury. Both students readily spoke of the ways they were interested in pursuing higher education through these arguably neoliberal constructions, but at the same time, also identified how they found articulations of the university in such strong neoliberal terms problematic or narrow. Sue in her reflections of the way the university was presented as offering promise and opportunity for all, independent of their social-cultural positioning and Marie in terms of the dominance of a narrow focus of “just getting a job”.

Tracing university imaginings through image

In addition to exploring participants recalled imaginings, those students who attended the focus group sessions were asked to contribute an image that represented the university as they saw it now. Eight images and one artefact were shared within the group. The representations of the university chosen by participants ranged considerably in their subject matter, some being relatively traditional or commonplace images of the university, while others provided images that more specifically connected to participants’ identities and particular experiences of higher education contexts. Many of the images presented also bore some direct connections to the university imaginaries discussed earlier in this chapter.

A journey with an unknown destination

A familiar representation of university study was shared by two students who saw the university in terms of a journey. One image shared was of a road stretching to a horizon, the destination somewhere unknown; a place that sat beyond our view. Another image was of a winding road with lots of bends, which appeared to require a significantly tortuous journey before it stretched outwards to a similarly unknown horizon. This image, described by several students, may be read as speaking to the long and demanding journeys students have undertaken within higher education. It also connects to an often-used metaphor for the doctorate as a journey (Hughes & Tight, 2013). Although Hughes and Tight (2013)

raise problems with using the journey metaphor to represent the doctoral experience, arguing instead for a plainer metaphorical construction of ‘the doctorate as work’, they identify the ways ‘the doctorate as a quest’ metaphor fits with the pursuit of a doctoral qualification. Drawing on the story of John Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress* and linking it to the stages of doctoral study, they note, “the power of the journey metaphor and its relevance to the doctoral experience” (Hughes & Tight, 2013, p. 771). Hughes and Tight (2013) warn against the excessively individualising effects of the over reliance on this journey metaphor, given the way that it suggests a lone journey of an individual overcoming obstacles through their own resources solely through their inner strength and determination. They also express concern at the ways in which this metaphor does not pay sufficient attention to the work essential to the completion of a successful doctorate. Nonetheless, this image of the road to an unknown journey, often with twists and turns, offered significant symbolic meaning in terms of representing the university and the doctorate for a number of the research participants.

The trencher and scroll

For Dante and Ses, the image of the cap (or trencher) and scroll best represented the university. This traditional image of an item of academic garb worn on graduation day highlights the end result of a successful university trajectory through the award of a degree. The scroll and the trencher signify longstanding Western academic traditions and rituals. The scroll, a document that certifies the successful award of a degree, speaks to a deep past of intellectual recognition. Once a handwritten document, commonly prepared by intellectuals, members of government, or clerics, the scroll has connections which stretch back to the earliest forms of the university. Moreover, the scroll and ritual academic garb through their connection to the history of European universities possess strong linkages to ivory tower and liberal university imaginaries.

The image of the trencher and scroll may also be seen as being associated with the participants’ aspiration for success, to get to the end of a course of study, and to achieve. Symbols which represent the university for these students may speak to the growing significance of credentials, given that the image chosen depicts artefacts associated with the award of a degree, highlighting the importance of the end point of study rather than the learning or development acquired through study. The choice of this image may connect to the rise of credentialism which can be described as a “modern tendency in society to allocate positions, especially occupational positions, on the basis of educational qualifications or

credentials. 'The pursuit of such credentials then becomes an end in itself' (Abercrombie, Hill, & Turner, 2004, pp. 76–77). Whether this representation of the university through the symbols of the award of a degree on graduation day reflects the growing force of credentialism or, rather, speaks to the dream of success at the end of a long study period, or some combination of both, is open to interpretation. However, there is no doubt the image of the scroll and trencher are potent images of the university which bear some links to both the ivory tower, liberal and neoliberal imaginaries.

Walking in the shoes of others

Another image of the university offered by Katie was a large poster filled with different shoes. The colourful group included contemporary and historic shoes from a range of cultures and incorporated formal and informal footwear ranging from high heels to soft sole sport shoes and jandals. Some shoes in this poster emanate from non-Western cultures, including traditionally woven handmade shoes from Asia or the Pacific, for example. For Katie, this image represents an ideal of the university as providing space for individuals “to walk in the shoes of others”. She understands the institution as a place to learn about others and to gain new perspectives. As expansive as it sounds, this image might be connected to some of the defining aspects of humanist conceptions of the liberal university: the university here is a site of intellectual and cultural growth through learning and knowledge, although the importance of diversity and difference is strongly emphasised in this image something which is not a defining aspect of liberal university conceptions. However, despite its emphasis on diversity, the poster images chosen by Katie bear notable connections to the liberal humanist tradition particularly in the way Katie’s spoke about this poster as representing the university as a place of intellectual development and enrichment. So, while the ideal of the liberal imaginary is being eclipsed by the dominance of the neoliberal university, it nonetheless remains present for some students, such as Katie.

The university game

Another image presented by Marie was of a game of chess with pieces laid out on the chessboard. An analysis of the symbolism of this image might suggest that the university is a highly competitive place where one has to make the right ‘moves’ to win. This image also indicates that one can win or lose, depending on the chosen strategy, often within strict temporal boundaries. If we understand chess as a game with associations of intellectualism, then a successful player is understood to be strategic, analytical and in possession of a very good memory. The university is imagined here as a place where an individual must

understand the rules of the game and then act strategically in line with these rules, in order to beat the opposition. This need to overcome the opposition, in Marie's case, might also evoke the dominance of individualism. The notion of a chess game may also be read as identifying the cultural context of the Western university, its intellectualism, and to some extent, the need for a young, black, first-generation woman to be highly strategic to succeed.

Marie's characterisation of the university as a game aligns with the work of scholars such as Lucas (2006), who draw on Bourdieu's theory of practice to identify the multiple ways that university life can be understood through the notion of the game, especially in the context of neoliberal audit regimes. As Lucas (2006) argues "greater ... game playing has been encouraged for research audit purposes" and this has "infiltrated the cultures and values of academic life" (p. 2). It is interesting to consider Marie's symbolic representation of the university to think about who the university players are – is university study a competitive intellectual game that pits student against student? Or are the participants (and necessarily opposing sides) comprised of students in opposition to academics? Or the institution itself? Or, is it simply that the chess image indexes neoliberal ideas and ideals: individualism, the centrality of strategy and competition in which merit will even out the playing field. It is noteworthy that Marie who shared the chess image also described her involvement in university study in neoliberal terms, that is, she was an "investment of taxpayer dollars' that needed to provide "a return". These comments and her choice of image may evidence the growing significance of the neoliberal imaginary. However, Marie's comments mentioned earlier about her recollected school experience of attending a college fair, and how she found everything was only about "just about getting a job", might also suggest a lack of enthusiasm for neoliberal values.

Official knowledges

For Sue, the university was best represented in official handbooks. She presented an image of series of handbooks issued during her time studying that had been pasted together to form a pattern. Sue spoke of the importance of reading these handbooks "cover to cover" and the efforts she made to understand the university and the doctoral process through learning the formal rules. This official knowledge was a lifeline for her. However, she spoke of this official knowledge as being an unstable foundation with ever newer versions of guidebooks and regulations being sent out and, in her words, with the "rules constantly changing". This focus on policy, rules and regulations seemed to suggest that carefully finding out the rules was Sue's way of keeping up and of making sense of the complex

academic world she was in, despite the limits of official knowledge. This image, with its complex, colourful pattern, was made up of a series of smaller images, including some that represented indigenous flora or fauna such as images of the tuatara (New Zealand's endemic reptile) for example, firmly tying her imagining of the university to her period of study in Aotearoa/New Zealand.

He moko (a tattoo)

The importance of cultural identity and indigenous ways of thinking in framing these students' understandings of the university was evident for two of the focus group participants. This was revealed in their chosen images, or, in one case, in an artefact to represent the university. Instead of offering imagery from Western culture, one student, Arohanui, spoke of her tā moko (tattoo) as representing her view of the university. Her tā moko incorporated a historic European motif associated with intellectual work, together with traditional Māori motifs. According to Arohanui, this tattoo represents knowledge that comes to the student from the heavens and the student's tīpuna (ancestors). This tā moko can be understood as connecting with the student's deep sense of spiritual engagement with knowledge and how she sees knowledge as being located within whānau (family/extended-family) relations. It also identified the importance of using knowledge, with love, kindness and responsibility for others. In this way, this student's representation of the university reworks the university as a place for knowledge that connects with the student's whakapapa (genealogy) made sense of through her cultural identity.

He kākahu (a cloak)

Rather than sharing an image, Hinekura brought in a kākahu (a handwoven Māori traditional cloak she crafted) to share with the focus group. For Hinekura, the university was something that could be metaphorically worn, or at least, a university education could be understood as something that embraces the body. A kākahu is also something that is carefully constructed, woven by hand and takes considerable time to craft. This aspect of the construction of a kākahu describes the investment of time and effort needed to gain a university degree. A kākahu also functions to keep a person warm, so it is possible to identify the importance of a university education as providing the practical means for an individual to gain employment and ensure that their, and their family's, physical needs can be met. A kākahu also accords the wearer some status or mana (esteem) and this aspect of mana means that a fine kākahu needs to be worn with pride, but also with responsibility for others. The student's choice of a kākahu to represent the university may be read as suggesting that the

possession of a university education is something that needs to benefit others, from whānau to the wider community. Furthermore, a kākahu is often worn at university graduations, linking it to the image of a trencher and scroll identified and shared by two students in the focus group. Hinekura's symbolic representation of the university as a taonga (treasure) worn on the body provides insights into a deeply cultural orientation towards the Western university and speaks to the way Māori within Pākehā institutions can rework and incorporate Pākehā knowledge systems within a Māori worldview.

In combination, the images and artefacts chosen represent a range of diverse imaginings of the university that speak to different experiences within higher education and different expressions of the participants' academic and cultural identities. In brief, the images may be read as expressing a sense of extended journeys found in the images of long and winding roads, the expectation of reward and success through the award of the degree as evidenced in the image of a scroll and a piece of academic garb reserved for graduation day. The university is also understood as a site of intellectual and cultural development allowing students to walk in others' shoes. In addition, the university is identified as a competitive game, and one that requires effective strategizing to 'win'. It is a place understood through the image of official handbooks as defined by rules, policy statements and official knowledges. In this regulated university, we may find an educational space understood through its formal knowledge structures. Access to the sites of this formal information may provide a first-generation student with a sense of security and empowerment, despite the obvious limits of reliance on a constantly shifting knowledge base. And, lastly, in the presentation of a tā moko and a kākahu it is possible to glimpse an imaginary distinct from that of the university solely rooted in Western conceptions. Both Arohanui's and Hinekura's offerings firmly position the university within a Māori worldview and connect it within a constellation of spiritual and whānau relations. Their choice of a kākahu and a tā moko draws Western and Māori indigenous knowledges together and represents a profoundly different orientation to the university than that which is articulated within neoliberal university conceptions.

Imagining the doctorate through metaphor and symbol

I now refine my focus from looking at the university broadly to examine the students' doctoral imaginings. This involves exploring the participants' narratives to identify the figurative ways they referred to the doctorate, particularly with attention to metaphor and

symbol. The data gathered from the interviews and focus group with the first-generation students show that the doctorate represents a wide range of ideas, hopes and dreams in relation to academia and beyond. This research also demonstrates the significant symbolic work of the doctorate in the lives of these first-generation students. The stories provide understandings about why these students undertook doctoral study and what the doctorate might 'do' in their lives. This use of symbol, metaphor and storying by the students further reveals the way the doctorate is 'sticky' (Ahmed, 2012), accruing deep and varied meanings for the first-generation students who undertake doctoral work.

It is worth now to pause, to take a brief detour into the work that symbol and metaphor do in language and thought. Symbolism and metaphor are often focused on in linguistic or literary studies. Lakoff and Johnson (2003) note, that metaphor is more than a purely rhetorical or linguistic device. They argue that metaphor in fact needs to be recognised as going to the heart of meaning-making. A metaphor can be regarded as "a figure of speech in which one thing is described in terms of another" (Cuddon, 2012, p. 432). Sfard (1998) points out that, "because metaphors bring with them certain well-defined expectations as to the possible features of target concepts, the choice of metaphor is a highly consequential decision" (p. 5). Lakoff and Johnson (2003) also emphasise the ubiquitousness of the use of metaphor, suggesting that "metaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action. Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of both how we think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature" (p. 3). In contrast, a symbol can be defined as "any gesture, artefact, sign or concept which stands for, signifies or expresses something else" (Abercrombie et al., 2004, p. 352). Further, Abercrombie et al. (2004) suggest that attention to symbols is important "because they are public and convey shared emotions, information or feeling" that may have significant social effects. The traditional distinction between metaphor and symbolism has it that metaphor is narrower in meaning, that is, it is understood as being constructed in speech or language, whereas a symbol may be employed with or without language as might be found within an artefact or artwork, for example.

Interpretation is no straightforward matter. Kelly (2011) points to the potentially risky nature of trying to identify fixed meanings for metaphorical language, inviting attention to the ways "its use acknowledges the inability of words to be stable, clear and unequivocal" (p. 430). There can be no absolutely determined meanings of metaphor given the way understandings of words can shift, or change, in relation to their contexts. This is especially important to recognise in post-critical work which is predicated on the inability to rely on

essential truths. However suggestive and indeterminate, metaphor remains a valuable site of investigation. As Elbow (2002) maintains, metaphorical thinking emanates from, and is connected directly to, the imagination. Importantly, both metaphor and symbolism are significant in terms of sense-making, and in this study they provide insights into the ways in which these first-generation students make sense of the idea of the doctorate.

A boarding pass or ticket

In the participants' data there were numerous symbolic and metaphoric representations of the doctorate. Kat, for example, described the doctorate as a "boarding pass" or "ticket". This metaphoric representation suggests that possessing a doctorate would allow her to gain entrance to places and roles and ways of being that would not be possible without a doctorate. In the context of her comments, she described working overseas in places like the UK or Europe and in roles for NGO's (non-governmental organisations) or the United Nations suggesting how the doctorate will give her access to new career options and professional identities. In this sense, her use of metaphor identifies access, mobility, employment and opportunity in the way that many students understand and hope for increased life opportunities gained through the receipt of a doctoral qualification.

A marathon

Kat also described the doctoral process as "like running a marathon". The doctorate here is constructed as a site of great challenge and demands, requiring physical endurance, commitment and patience for the long, and perhaps, unpredictable journey ahead. In this way, those who gain a doctorate might be seen as the toughest and fittest individuals, reinforcing the idea that doctoral holders are amongst the ablest and strongest. The choice of this metaphor may be also a way of identifying the competitive doctoral world, where there is an element of working with an eye on others in the field. The doctorate in this sense may be understood as primarily a long and demanding individual activity, but one undertaken in the context of others, many of whom possess similar goals in terms of 'winning' or 'finishing the race' through gaining professional or academic employment opportunities beyond the award of the degree.

An independent journey

For Pierre, the doctorate represented an independent journey. In his interview, Pierre invoked the familiar metaphor of the doctoral experience as a journey similar to some of the students in the focus group, however, he also emphasised the importance of independence.

Pierre spoke of the ways studying at university as a young man gave him independence. He recalled the feeling of freedom and empowerment of being a student, “being in the city ... riding my motorbike, using my studentship money to fuel it ... it just was the independence for me at the time of my life when I thrived on that”. The source of this independence for Pierre was the university. Thinking of the doctorate now, he identifies a different and exciting kind of independence, “because it’s an independence of thinking”. This articulation of the university as a site of youthful independence has some connections to the Hollywood university imaginary, where the university is understood in terms of freedom and as a place to make your own way to echo Pierre’s description, as a ‘student about town’.

Pierre explained his notion of the doctorate further, describing it as “a journey you build”. He describes the ‘journey’ as being built; the connection between building and journey-making may speak to the way a doctoral candidate needs to construct his/her own experience and work in a fairly methodical way, moving from one point to the next towards the completion of a particular material object or structure: the doctoral thesis. The doctoral thesis, of course, may be understood as possessing foundation arguments, structural components and movements that need to be made over a defined period of time. Pierre’s words also bring to mind for me the quote by Freire, “we make the road by walking”⁴³ (Horton, Bell, Gaventa, & Peters, 1990). Following this notion of the idea of path making and finding, the building the journey metaphor may connect to the notion of the PhD student researcher, inventing their thesis as they research, creating its foundations and arguments, and although others may contribute along the way, it is the student’s own road in the end.

A beacon of hope

Marie described having a doctorate in powerful metaphorical terms as a source of continued hope and faith. In fact, Marie describes the example of a student like her progressing through her studies and undertaking doctoral education as a “beacon of hope at the local level, the country as a whole”. This metaphor can be read in multiple ways. It may be read as connecting to enlightenment ideas, where the notion of knowledge is often understood as light casting out darkness. Her use of this metaphor may also have some connections

⁴³ Paulo Freire’s words may be drawn from the Spanish poet Antonio Machado who wrote “Wanderer, your footsteps are the road, and nothing more; wanderer, there is no road, the road is made by walking. By walking one makes the road, and upon glancing behind one sees the path that never will be trod again. Wanderer, there is no road— Only wakes upon the sea. — Antonio Machado, *Campos de Castilla* (1912) (Trans.).

through the idea of light which may align with the notion of a person being ‘bright’, that is, intelligent or intellectual. Following this interpretation, having a doctorate confirms the intelligence and capability of its holder. In the most straightforward interpretation, the bright light of the beacon can be understood a symbol for those at a distance from the university, or the doctorate, and may operate as a navigational mark for others trying to find their way. Hope, of course, is a core religious value which may have close connections to this student’s faith. It is also a value which deeply underscores the work of educators like Paulo Freire who saw education as a means to liberate the oppressed (Barcan, 2013). This too has significant connection with this student’s commitments to helping others with limited opportunities to gain access to education. It is also interesting to consider the perspective of cultural studies scholar Ruth Barcan (2013) on hope, who locates its importance within the university as an intellectual matter, but also as something of a “matter of survival” (p. 142) for contemporary academics.

A step forward

Sandy identified her decision to study for a doctorate in terms of it being “the next logical step” for her. The doctorate is a stepping forward, a progression following on from other steps or movements this student has made in her life in an order that is understood as reasoned, rational, right. At the same time however, Sandy describes having more time in her life now and this can be spent doing what she loves. So, not only is there a logical orientation, there is also an affective one: in that by doing a doctorate, Sandy, is able to pursue something she loves, because she loves learning, thinking and studying. She describes how much education is a part of her life, “what do I do, when I have got time? education. I do, I just learn, I love learning”. In this way, her metaphorical stepping forward is also a step in the pursuit of something that is cherished and loved.

Imagining academic futures: the pursuit of the ‘academic good life’

The doctorate as a mechanism for achieving an ‘academic good life’ was identified in optimistic ways by the majority of the participants within this research. Many described their choice to undertake doctoral study with the hope of becoming academics in future, as being underpinned by their love of scholarly pursuits, their desire to get a good position and to develop themselves, and their hope to help others, with two thirds of participants (10 out of 15) indicating that they wanted to pursue traditional academic roles at the completion of their studies. This proportion gets even larger if the number of participants who have a

considerable period of their working lives left is focused on in isolation. If the students who are within five years from the national retirement age of 65 are separated from the remaining students, the proportion of first-generation individuals seeking academic positions becomes even larger, at over 80%, (or 10/12) of this particular group wanting to work within the academy.

A good job

In describing their interest in becoming academics, the students evidently believed that academics had good jobs in terms of economic rewards, status and respect. Being able to earn a good salary and support themselves and others was articulated strongly by many of the students as key reasons for doctoral study as I discussed in *Chapter Four*. As Dante explained:

My dad will be extremely happy because as soon as I get my PhD and yes, I think I am looking at ways of just supporting him in whichever way I can really and establishing one or two projects or project back where my family can work with me.

The doctorate in this sense will enable him to support himself and also members of his family. Moreover, Dante further identified the projects he wanted to establish as being community-focused and not undertaken for profit, further identifying how he is seeking to share the benefits of his education with others. He commented more about his hopes for the future and that his current doctoral research will serve his community:

I think my doctoral study will be useful, because yes, it touches on not only education but its helping, I mean it will offer some good findings on helping the people who are vulnerable in the society ... and the children with disabilities in this case. ... [it] will be quite good support ... for society.

Here we find a layering of hopes and aspirations tied to his post-doctoral life, where Dante imagines how his work will be educationally valuable to those in his village. It also indicates something beyond educational value – something practical – to aid the lives of the physically vulnerable in his community and his society. Dante’s account invokes the idea of movement and departure to occupy a better social life, have a better job and support his family, but he does so with reference to his home community. He readily speaks of home connections and his hopes for his post-doctoral future with his village community and family in mind.

Several students saw an academic role as “a good job” where “a person was respected and valued” (Linda). It was noteworthy that the identification of academic roles as highly valued and respected was made by the international, as distinct from local, students in the study. Marie talked of academics in her home context as possessing high social status. As she

explained, “academics, we put them on a pedestal in a sense, we don't see them as equal”. In this quote Marie identifies the high status of academics in her home setting, whereas she seemed to indicate that academics in Aotearoa/New Zealand did not possess the same status. A number of scholars in recent times have identified the changing focus of doctoral education. Pearson (1999) argues:

just as the doctoral students are more diverse in backgrounds and interests, so are their career goals and likely employment outcomes. No longer can academic teaching and research, or even full-time research in government or industry, be the only or the primary goal. (p. 273)

Yet, as identified above, most within this small group of first-generation students possessed fairly traditional aspirations for their doctoral study underscored by positive views of academic work. Nevertheless, though the participants were mainly focused on working in academia, a number indicated that they felt that they needed to consider other possible careers given the challenges of the academic job market.

Interestingly, one student identified the ways in which the doctorate could limit one's employment options:

because if you, well, once you get it (your doctorate) and you go to like a supermarket to do a cashier's job, they will think that you're crazy right. So, once you get this thing you don't have a lot of choice. (Linda)

Linda's description of the doctorate as “a thing” contrasts with the more positive descriptions offered by most other students in this study. Although the term “thing” is somewhat amorphous, her use of it is striking. It might suggest a degree of ambivalence, perhaps, a doctorate is both a promising, hopeful thing that allows her to achieve to a high level, but also somewhat of a heavy weight with its associated years of hard work and the uncertainty about who will read it or how it will be valued. There is also a sense, in Linda's earlier remarks about wanting a family and her comments about her desire to be a high achiever that she feels some tensions between these two things. Such tension may be seen as arising from her recognition of the demands of being an academic and a wish for a simpler, more family-focused and straightforward life.

The aspiration for an academic future also seemed subject to change as students moved through their studies. Sue, for instance identified a shift in her aspirations after completing her doctoral study. She describes having changed her mind and is now “... seeking a position as a research/project manager. The role of an academic is no longer appealing to me because of the lack of employment stability and low pay”. This shift in aspiration for

this student may fit with findings of earlier research which shows that as doctoral students move through the stages of their doctoral study they begin to develop clearer understandings of the contemporary role of an academic (Mason, Goulden, & Frasch, 2009) and the likelihood of achieving a permanent academic post. As McAlpine and Turner (2012) suggest students move, “from early often imagined intentions to later more pragmatic ones” (p. 544).

Affective orientations: For the love of it

A number of students in this study framed their pursuit of the doctorate through declarations of love. Their declarations took different shapes but were repeated throughout the transcripts of a significant number of participants. Many expressed a love of learning, of their subject, of studying at university, of academic work, or of research. Doctoral study was spoken of, as “doing what a student loves”. One participant, Katie, not only expressed her love of her creative and academic work but described her thesis as a ‘love object’ in terms of her desire that her thesis will invoke a strong affective response in her readers, that it will be “something stunning that will capture the hearts of people and that will move them”. Perhaps, this is an expected finding, as Bell and Sinclair (2014) suggest love has always had a place in the university where people can pursue their love of learning. Although this positive reference to a love of learning, research or study was identified by the participants in many of the interviews, Pannacker (2013) provides a salient caution against its dangers in the neoliberal university suggesting:

the rhetoric of "**love**" has an ambiguous meaning ... It can be impossibly idealistic, and deeply rooted in powerful experiences that override economic self-interest. It also can be deeply cynical, a means of devaluing the work of some for the benefit of others. The transformation of higher education into a system of contingent labour ... depends on "**love**" in both senses. For some "**love**" is a calling; for others it's a tool. (original emphasis, para. 22)

Pannacker, a Professor at an American University, sharply identifies the possible negative political consequences of love specifically in relation to the position of those graduate or doctoral students seeking to work within the contemporary university.

University imaginaries as ‘regimes of truth’

It is here that I draw on Foucauldian theory to identify the complex ways that the students’ imaginings and the imaginaries connected to them, may operate as regimes of truth, or are interlaced with regimes of truth. Foucault (1980) explains a regime of truth in terms of how

larger structures or discourses regulate individuals thoughts, beliefs and behaviours. He points to the way particular images are inscribed and reinscribed upon an individual's consciousness until they are thought of as 'normal'. These images, and the beliefs and practices that go along with them exert "a tremendous force upon consciousness encouraging compliance and making resistance difficult" (Carroll, Motha, & Price, 2008, p. 167). University imaginaries can be seen as fitting with this description in that way that social imaginaries are significant social constructs that are discursively formed and offer powerful ideas and understandings of the university which are familiar and normalised. As Carroll, Motha and Price (2008) suggest attention to an individual's imaginings and a sense of agency that may come with them, has the potential to "obscure the coercive and veiled role of hegemony" (p. 168). This conceptualisation of 'regimes of truth' is particularly valuable when focusing on university imaginaries as it identifies the ways in which these imaginaries have 'truth effects' normalising certain understandings of the university that may be problematic for first-generation individuals.

The four established imaginaries of the Western university discussed in this thesis, to differing degrees, identify the institution as a site of opportunity and privilege across multiple dimensions. This privilege is strongly located within the university institution and also is located in the articulation of the university academic, a role many in this study are interested in pursuing post-doctoral study. The imaginaries of the university can create the possibilities for new imaginative affiliations and encourage these students to pursue higher study to gain learning, employment and social opportunities based on the images and understandings of the academic world and the position of the academic. The privilege of academics is especially evident within the ivory tower and liberal university imaginaries for example. However, these imaginaries are interlaced with regimes of truth that privilege Western concepts of the university, reinforce the dominance of individuals from particular class, race and gender positions, prescribe notions about who university students and academics are, and seem to promise access to certain kinds of opportunities that may not be available to many of those who aspire to the academy. As such imaginaries can not only provide new imaginative affiliations, and encourage individuals to pursue their imagined worlds they "can also become oppressive, or at least, sources of disappointment, disillusionment or alienation" (Carroll et al., 2008, p. 174) arising when an individual's lived experience does not fit with the imagined world and identity they have constructed for themselves.

In this study, the Hollywood pop culture university imaginary can be recognised as possessing a regime of truth about the university as a site of fun and socialising. Sue's experience her own lived experience of the university did not align with this imaginary and was something that left her with a degree of disappointment. In my case the idea of the traditional, historic and privileged university made it hard for me to seriously contemplate that there was room at such places for someone from a more ordinary background. It seemed to me that you needed to be extremely talented, something not far off from genius and there was no way I saw myself in those terms. My assessment of the class and intelligence needed to attend university therefore made it difficult to imagine myself as ever belonging there and rendered my efforts to go to university potentially futile.

Genius is an idea that Yeatman (1998) in her influential discussion of traditional approaches to graduate teaching raises within the dynamic of the master-apprentice model of supervision. This model works through the transmission of academic expertise and knowledge through an apprentice observing how the master does research and learning from his or her own experiences of undertaking research with feedback from the supervisor-master. Yeatman (1998) suggests in this learning context, "it is the genius of the apprentice which is responsible for how he takes up into his own creative powers the exemplary virtues and skills of the master" (p. 21). This traditional model was established when postgraduate numbers were small. As she comments "PhD candidates were a tiny few and represented a select elite of aspirant academics" (p. 22). Yeatman (1998) further suggests that this master-apprentice approach is inadequate in the massified university of today where doctoral candidature has become much more frequent, especially in light of the presence of "the many new PhD aspirants who, by historical-cultural positioning, have not been invited to imagine themselves as subjects of genius. These include all those who are marginalised by dominant scholarly culture" (p. 23). Here Yeatman (1998) articulates the place of genius within a university imaginary and which kinds of individuals can or cannot take up this form of student subjectivity. The spectre of the 'always-already' student (Johnson et al., 2000), even for my teenage self with limited engagement with the university suggests the power of this regime of truth encompassed within the ivory tower imaginary and its removed and elevated academic. It is also possible to identify the presence of this student in *Educating Rita*, (1983) given how much Rita seeks to take on a particular type of student personhood she imagines is required to be a 'real student'.

Imaginings informed by broader social imaginaries of the university alongside the regimes of truth that are interlaced within them may also lead to less effective navigations of university space or disappointment based on a misconception of what certain pathways within the university may offer. As mentioned earlier, Sue described how she found that going to university and earning a degree did not make her financially well-off, that other forms of social and cultural capital operated, which meant she still was positioned differently after her undergraduate study as compared with some of her middle-class colleagues. She says she, initially “bought into” this narrow economic view of higher education. Katie also identified the impact of having “a limited map” of the university in that she talked of the effect of this on first-generation students and how a lack of knowledge and resources meant it took “us longer to get here”.

The limits of imaginings

As this chapter draws to a close it is necessary to acknowledge that while some students’ university imaginings bore significant resonance and weight in their recounted narratives that seemed to provide motivation to begin what turned out to be extended academic journeys, others, did not. This may point to the participants not easily recalling their imaginings after so much time at university, or it may indicate that they had limited imaginings about the university and yet, they like the other first-generation students in this cohort, pursued higher education through to the doctoral level. This may suggest that imaginings of the university are strong for some and less so for others. It may also mean that student aspirations for higher education may be less informed by imaginings of the university than by other kinds of discourses and imaginings, such as imaginings of a ‘high achieving self’, who has considerable academic merit, and who is socially mobile as discussed in *Chapter Four* of this thesis. In this way, it is vital to understand student imaginings as powerful and potent but also slippery, unpredictable and to some extent, idiosyncratic.

Conclusion

In the students’ imagined universities it is possible to trace broader social imaginaries at work, such as those of the ivory tower university defined by the Oxbridge of another, perhaps, largely fictional age or the liberal university as a place of intellectual growth and knowledge. It was also possible to identify in the participants’ accounts the university as a place of fraternities and fun, as found in the Hollywood pop culture university imaginary.

Furthermore, my study suggests the significance of the imagined neoliberal university as particularly located in the narratives of two of the first-generation students. What was clear from the data was that there were some significant disjunctures between the neoliberal discourse of the university with its conception of the doctoral student as entrepreneurial knowledge worker and the students in this study's own powerful declarations about their desire to help others and their affective engagements with scholarly work as underpinning their aspirations for their imagined academic futures. In addition, the data also demonstrate the presence of an indigenous imaginary where ideas of the university are reworked through Māori cultural knowledge with deep connections to whānau and whakapapa. The presence of this imaginary leads me to contemplate its distinctiveness especially in regards to neoliberal university constructions.

Overall, the imaginings explored within this study evidence the diverse ways the students imagined the university. Their imaginings identified the significance of the distance of the university from the everyday worlds of the first-generation students before they began their tertiary studies, a distance which retains its resonance, despite these same students having now accrued significant time within higher education. This sense of distance manifested in different ways, but no doubt led to the students constructing their imagined university from often serendipitous encounters connected within their schooling and friends, popular culture and literary and filmic narratives. Arguably, given the lack of concrete engagement with the university before these students undertook their academic studies, their imaginative constructions may take on even greater meaning than for those students whose parents, and wider social networks have higher education experience. In recognising the power of the students' often very positive university imaginings, there is a need to also identify the ways in which different university imaginaries are interlaced with certain kinds of regimes of truth which can be problematic, leading these students to navigate the university in less effective ways, or in ways that these first-generation individuals may be "bound to their fantasies of the future" (Burford, 2018, p. 1) despite the precarious and uncertain nature of academic work and the possibilities of them realising their imagined academic lives.

Chapter Six. Closing arguments: Opening-up spaces of opportunity

Introduction

This thesis traces the stories of 15 first-generation students from the discipline of Education at a research-intensive university in Aotearoa/New Zealand. It explores these individuals' stories to gain insights into how, and why, this particular group of 'non-traditional' students, are making such significant investments in higher education in a time of considerable change and uncertainty. In this final chapter, I look back over the work of this thesis and weave together the central arguments I have made across its chapters and interludes. I begin by responding separately to each of the three research sub-questions that animated this study, then I summarise the original contribution of the thesis under the overarching research question. Finally, I identify the implications of this research and some of the study's limitations. To close, I take a moment to mention some of the learning I gained from undertaking this research project.

The origins of this research grew out of my interest in first-generation students whose experience of higher education has been underexplored in Aotearoa/New Zealand. I was particularly curious about this group of 'non-traditional' students and their investments in higher education from undergraduate studies through to the doctoral level, especially in the context of the "new times of contemporary academia" (Archer, 2008, p. 265) marked by neoliberalism and its concomitant high levels of individualism, competition and precariousness. As I contemplated the direction I wished to take the research, I realised I wanted to learn more about why some first-generation students have invested so significantly in the idea of higher education, in particular doctoral education, and how they imagine their place within the university. Thus, the central research question guiding this study is:

What are the dreams and promises of doctoral education for first generation students?

Three specific sub-questions arose from this main question:

- What discourses most profoundly influence first-generation students ongoing engagements with the university and their doctoral identities?
- What are the impacts of these discourses on these students' understandings of, and aspirations for, their doctoral studies and their post-doctoral lives?
- What imaginaries of the university shape first-generation students' understandings of this institution and especially doctoral study?

In what follows, I address each question at a time.

What discourses most profoundly influence first-generation students ongoing engagements with the university and their doctoral identities?

Based on the analyses I have undertaken in this study I identified the significance of the mainstream discourses of meritocracy and social mobility as deeply influencing first-generation students' identities within doctoral education. I locate meritocracy in the students' accounts through tracing key concepts associated with contemporary meritocracy discourse from scholarship in this area including *talent* (Burke et al., 2016; Liu, 2011; Moore, 2004) in this case, academic talent and excellence (van den Brink & Benschop, 2012) achievement, as evidenced by assessment and as the outcome of intelligence or hard work and effort (Liu, 2011; Young, 1958). I also included the concept of *competitive individualism* as definitive of contemporary meritocracy discourse (Littler, 2013), a construct which is tied to the meta-discourse of neoliberalism. My analysis of the students accounts showed that they, in different ways, and in different language, used these constructs to describe and make sense of themselves within the university. In this way, the discourse of meritocracy was highly visible in the students' accounts in this study.

I also drew attention to a divergence between the articulation of social mobility discourse in the extant research which emphasises departures and escape and how first-generation students in this study articulated their social mobility. Instead of being 'educated out' (Lacey, 2000) of their home communities, these students often possessed very close connections to family and home, despite their desire to achieve, and to transform their lives in career and economic terms. Moreover, I identified another variance from mainstream social mobility discourse in the ways that some of the students frame social mobility in a collectivist, rather than exclusively individualist worldview. This collectivist orientation to social mobility was, perhaps unsurprisingly, most evident in students from collectivist cultures (such as those

individuals from indigenous or African traditions), but the way it was articulated clearly demonstrated how many first-generation students' orientations to higher education have not been fully captured by neoliberal discourse which turns on its emphasis on market principles and self-interest. Lastly, I have pointed to the various kinds of mobilities including geographical, social and cultural mobilities that are present within the first-generation student educational experiences with a view to contextualizing these students' social mobility within a broader frame of plural mobilities.

What are the impacts of these discourses on these students' understandings of, and aspirations for, their doctoral studies and their post-doctoral lives?

As I have argued in this thesis the impacts of meritocracy and social mobility discourses were manifold and operated together to encourage these first-generation individuals to continue to pursue academic study to doctoral level. The discourse of meritocracy, in particular, constitutes the university as a place that recognises (academic) merit, something these students see themselves as possessing, with a majority of the students in this study aspiring to academic positions post-doctoral study. Alongside this discursive framing of the university, mainstream social mobility discourse positions these students as 'upwardly' mobile: through their achievement of high-level skills, knowledge and ultimately the award of a doctoral degree, many of these students will have, or hope to have, the opportunity to become academics. In this way, the university is seen as a means to gain a good life where, as the students suggested, they can earn respect, status, material rewards and the ability to help others. These discourses therefore can be understood as a major force constituting first-generation student identities and hailing these individuals into place within the university despite, as Brown (2013b) suggests, that academic credentials are "a declining currency of opportunity" (p. 687). In this sense, there are significant questions about the ongoing labours of first-generation students within the university and the likelihood of these students reaping the rewards on their investment in doctoral education in the ways they anticipate.

Moreover, the discursive framing of meritocracy can ignore the realities of gaining academic roles in the university and does not recognise the ways more privileged students may be better positioned to gain access to these roles, not necessarily due to a possession of greater merit but, as Brown (2013) argues, through the ability of the more privileged to demonstrate

the appropriate 'economy of experience'. Such an appropriate 'economy of experience' involves the translation of everyday life into a narrative of employability and includes the ability to capitalise on 'extracurricular' activities and social networks that demonstrate the range of behavioural competencies potential employees are measured against. Highly valued economies of experience (Brown, 2013a) may be difficult for many first-generation students to demonstrate or acquire outside of more traditional forms of academic merit, even though these students might possess some 'diversity value' within the university.

In addition, the discourses of meritocracy and social mobility can be seen as enabling first-generation students, helping them to take up their doctoral student subjectivities and to develop their sense of entitlement and belonging in the relatively elite context of doctoral education. In recognising the importance of meritocracy discourse for first-generation students in doctoral education, it is important to understand that it is not a discourse open to everyone; it excludes many in our educational system who are positioned as 'non-traditional' students. As Burke and colleagues (2016), point out constructions of capability and merit are deeply connected to social inequalities and processes of misrecognition. My reading of the student narratives suggests that the first-generation students in this study were positioned to take up this discourse through their long established positive academic histories of high achievement beginning for many at an early age. This meritorious student subjectivity, paired with a belief that the university is an institution open to talented or meritorious students from a variety of social backgrounds, enables these students to pursue university study to the highest level. Burke and colleagues (2016) also point to the troublesome view that capability is something that is easily or straightforwardly identified, in absence of any recognition of the ways talent, ability or capability are deeply connected to social, cultural and educational disadvantage and inequality. Thus, understanding the meritorious student subject does not mean it cannot be relied upon as an avenue to address educational inequality for individuals from social contexts that are often excluded from higher education.

What the identification of the meritorious student subject does emphasise, however, is the significance of young people coming to see themselves as talented and capable and with the potential to be high achievers. The formation of a positive academic identity may position 'non-traditional' students to be able to engage more in higher education because such an identity provides a foundation to take up the discourses of meritocracy and social mobility that can be further enabling, though this process is not one-way, with these discourses

similarly contributing to the formation of a positive academic identity. And, it is worthwhile to identify, this given how students from ‘non-traditional’ backgrounds are infrequently invited to see themselves as capable, high achievers as much as more privileged individuals. This understanding however does little to unsettle the complex issues surrounding the ways merit is understood and recognised within educational contexts or to lessen the need for critical engagement with meritocracy discourse to address educational inequalities.

It is also important to recognise that the discourses of meritocracy and social mobility were not just enabling these students to take up their doctoral subjectivities, but also placed significant identity demands on them in terms of these students drive to achieve at very high levels. As Marie’s account illustrated, she felt significant pressure to consistently achieve and a sense of fear about the shame she would experience if she did not achieve the academic results she sought. Other students identified the personal demands they faced associated with their pursuit of higher education across language, cultural and geographical boundaries. As Dante said simply, his experience of doctoral education after his move to Aotearoa/New Zealand was “so isolating”. Despite these challenges these students were nonetheless determined to pursue their hoped for academic futures in the university.

What imaginaries of the university shape first-generation students’ understandings of this institution and especially doctoral study?

A number of different university imaginaries came into view in the accounts of the students in this study. One was the ‘ivory tower’ university, perhaps the oldest and most enduring imaginary. This imaginary was visible in varied ways in the accounts of the students and was often linked to the ancient universities of Oxford and Cambridge. Katie, for example, identified a kind of elite, old-world university space when she talked about famous University of Oxford professors meeting together, smoking pipes and discussing their literary works. Kat also talked about Tolkien and how, through reading *The Lord of the Rings* (1954), she was inspired to seek out a university education. In my own account, I identify the potent imagery of University of Oxford from some time long past magnificently evoked in the opening episodes of *Brideshead Revisited* (1981) as a key site of my university imaginings. This elite, old world university site, peopled by students and academics in swooping black capes within a landscape of grand old buildings and ancient quadrangles, powerfully invoked an ivory tower university imaginary in a way that I felt simultaneously compelled and intimidated by.

A liberal imaginary of the university which defines the university in terms of its focus on intellectual development and scholarship also emerged in the student accounts. This imaginary was evident in subtler ways than the ivory tower university imaginary but it could be seen, for example, in the image Katie chose to represent the university which included a variety of shoes from all over the world. Her presentation spoke to the university as a place of diversity and also as a site for intellectual and cultural growth as the university allowed her to walk in others' shoes, and in other spaces and places. As such the university in this representation can be seen, amongst other things, as a site of learning, knowledge and development. This imaginary was also traceable in Pierre's discussion of the university as a place of great independence and a site of journey-making. Pierre reflected on his experiences as an undergraduate and how the university was an exciting place in his youth, and now many years later he still understands the university in a similar way. He also spoke about the doctorate as an independent journey, though he associates this independence with academic and intellectual pursuits, as he says it is about an "independence of thinking". Doctoral education within the university space, then, is positioned as a site for great intellectual development and, through these ideas, it is possible to identify some of the defining features of a liberal university imaginary.

Furthermore, the presence of the Hollywood pop culture university imaginary with its emphasis on the university as a site for fun, socialising and youthful independence was particularly clear in Sue's narrative. Sue spoke directly about Hollywood films and how she formed some understandings about the university based on her consumption of this, particularly, American media form. She mentioned this representation and how the university was "like, living in dorms and the kind of party side or whatever". Sue also commented on how the filmic images were largely incongruent with her own experiences as a student who commuted to university and worked a significant amount of hours in paid employment across her undergraduate years.

Sue also invoked another university imaginary which was significant in shaping her understandings about the purpose of a university education. She recounted a story about her high school teachers seeking to encourage her and her classmates interest in higher education through the use of consumerist and neoliberal logic where the university became a means to earn more money to buy, in this case, nice clothes more quickly. Sue remembers this as compelling, but something that ultimately was problematic given the way these teachers presented a story of reward and merit that seemed divorced from the realities

associated with traditional forms of privilege and disadvantage that can so powerfully shape access to opportunity for individuals from diverse class, socio-economic and cultural backgrounds. The spectre of the neoliberal university imaginary could also be seen in Marie's account. She described how she learned about the university at a college fair for high school students, where "everything was about going to get a job". Although this event sparked Marie's interest in study and motivated her to look at higher education possibilities, she did not speak of it enthusiastically and mentioned, more than once, its narrow focus. Moreover, Marie shared a representation of the university as a chess game. This image may be read in more than one way, but it is possible to see in it a university defined by the neoliberal values of strategy, individualism and competition.

In addition to the articulations of these Western imaginaries of the university was another that emerges from a different worldview. The Māori students' choices of tā moko (tattoo) and a kākahu (woven cloak) to represent their understandings of a university identified the way these students imagined the university as located in a constellation of whānau and spiritual relations. This imaginary has a long tradition within Māori culture tied to the higher education traditions of wānanga. However, it may be only coming into view within mainstream institutions in Aotearoa/New Zealand in recent years, alongside a growing awareness of the place and significance of Māori culture and of the need to ensure that Māori students can succeed as Māori within higher education. In this imaginary may be the means for us to imagine the contemporary university in other ways, and in ways which may powerfully challenge and exceed dominant neoliberal discourses of the university.

Overall, the presence of a variety of established and newer university imaginaries in these first-generation students' narratives provides insights into the ways they understood and, to some degree, continued to make sense of the university and their hopes for their time within it. Such imaginaries can be seen as both encouraging or positive frames from which students may take action to gain better lives *and* may operate as regimes of truth (Foucault, 1980) which, in conjunction with the discourses of social mobility and meritocracy, hail these students into place within doctoral education, normalising ideas about the university as a site of opportunity and privilege which may turn out to be unhelpful, disorienting or even oppressive.

Having canvassed my thesis findings with respect to each of the sub-questions, I now return to the overarching research question in order to summarise the contributions this thesis makes to our understandings about first-generation students within doctoral education.

Thesis contribution: What are the dreams and promises of doctoral education for first generation students?

The 15 students involved in this study identified a plethora of dreams and hopes for their studies. For most (ten of the 15), these various hopes and dreams coalesced around the goal of becoming academics, to continue to pursue their love of learning, thinking and researching. Indeed, when those participants who were within five years of the national retirement age were excluded, the proportion of first-generation individuals seeking traditional academic roles was 10/12 of the participant group. An academic role, was identified in many positive ways by these participants with some of the students identifying their hopes for academic work as a means to gain more opportunities, to be able to support themselves and others and to develop community projects, and to help not only close family, but also extended family and the community. The optimistic hopes for the academy of many in this study, as I have explained, is powerfully entangled with the social discourses of meritocracy and social mobility and influenced by some key social imaginaries of the university. In combination, these students were effectively hailed into place in pursuit of the good academic life. In this section I summarise the five key contributions to knowledge this study offers to the research field of doctoral education.

This study makes several contributions to our collective knowledge about first-generation doctoral students and their reasons and hopes for undertaking doctoral education. The first contribution this thesis is in its extension of existing knowledge about first-generation students in doctoral education within the Aotearoa/New Zealand setting. As I argued in the literature review, there are gaps in our understandings about first-generation doctoral students and questions over how these students have been understood and represented in the (limited) research literature to date. This study adds to the body of literature and provides particular insights into first-generation doctoral students' reasoning about their ongoing engagements in university study and identifies their aspiration to gain traditional academic roles, despite the current dearth of academic employment opportunities. In

seeking to take seriously the reasoning and aspirations of first-generation doctoral students in Aotearoa/New Zealand, this is the first study of its kind.

A second major contribution to knowledge that this thesis makes lies in its investigation of the powerful discourses that shape the decision-making of first-generation doctoral students. I point to the valences of the meritocracy discourse, in particular, which appeared to enable participants to take up meritorious student subjectivities. This meritorious student subjectivity, in turn, appeared to provide the first-generation students with a sense of belonging and entitlement that may not have automatically arisen from the other kinds of identities they brought to doctoral study. Moreover, in being *productive* of first-generation student identities, the meritocracy and social mobility discourses appeared to enable these students to achieve recognition and intelligibility within the university. Additionally, this study has illuminated the relatively confident learner-selves first-generation doctoral students bring to study as a consequence of being hailed by the meritocracy discourse in particular, a finding which challenges much of the existing literature on first-generation students, which tends to position these students as being 'at risk'. A key contribution of this thesis, then, is to demonstrate that studies about first-generation students in doctoral education may proceed from starting points that exceed the 'at-risk' framing.

A third key contribution to knowledge I have made in this thesis is in the nuanced discussion I have offered about some key divergences from the individualist orientation of social mobility through my demonstration of these students' strong connections to home and community. These are ideas that are underdeveloped within conventional understandings of social mobility, with its emphasis on departure and escape. In this way, I have argued that mainstream individualist social mobility discourse does not fully capture these students' understandings of social mobility, and other cultural discourses may come into play in shaping first-generation doctoral students' aims and aspirations for their studies. Moreover, through my close analysis of the mobility story of Linda I drew attention to the multiple mobilities that first-generation students may possess. Thus, my argument is that the concept of plural mobilities rather than social mobility alone, is a more useful frame for understanding the contemporary experiences of first-generation students within doctoral education. This is an important contribution that further research can build upon.

A fourth contribution I have made in arising from this study is found in my exploration of the diverse social imaginaries of the university that informed first-generation doctoral

students' thoughts and anticipations about the university. In this thesis I have presented evidence of a number of imaginaries that first-generation doctoral students called upon: the ivory tower, liberal and Hollywood pop culture imaginaries, as well as the neoliberal university imaginary. With reference to the latter, however, what was striking in the analysis I offered was that it was not dominant in the students' narratives, despite the dominance of neoliberal discourses more broadly within higher education. This is a significant finding in that it offers a more nuanced starting point for doctoral education researchers who wish to understand the aspirations, understandings, and to some degree, expectations of broader cohorts of the doctoral student body.

A final contribution to knowledge that I have offered in this study is my identification of an emerging indigenous imaginary of the university. This finding extends our understanding of the university and its socio-cultural significance by countering the view that ideas of the university are, at least in the public domain, "hopelessly impoverished" (Barnett, 2013, p. 1). Indeed, I argue for the significance of this imaginary as a means from which to think about the university in new ways in Aotearoa/New Zealand. I will outline this further below.

New ideas: Locating the presence of an old/new indigenous imaginary

One of the most compelling findings of this research project lies in the clear identification of the emerging presence of an indigenous university imaginary. This university imaginary can be identified in the presentation of a *kākahu* (a cloak - as shown on the cover page of this thesis) one of the students brought to the focus group in response to my request for students to bring an image that represented the university to them, and in the *tā moko* (tattoo) which incorporated traditional Māori motifs with a European symbol of scholarly work presented by another student. This indigenous imaginary is one deeply rooted in a Māori world view with a focus on *mana* (esteem and obligation), *whānau* (family/collectivity) and *whakapapa* (ancestors and genealogy). This articulation of the university demonstrates the way Māori students, even within mainstream institutions, are making sense of higher education in culturally appropriate ways even as they encounter and engage with the institutional structures of the Western university in contemporary Aotearoa/New Zealand. The significance of this finding is manifold, as the students' invocation of an indigenous university imaginary may be seen as providing a significant space of possibility and indeed counters Barnett's (2013) charge that ideas of the university are currently, narrow and limiting. This is significant as it provides a site from which to imagine the university as

other, with the possibility to re-work traditional Western notions and expand contemporary ideas of the university, especially in the context of the ‘bare pedagogy’ of neoliberalism (Giroux, 2010). In particular, the competitive individualism associated with meritocratic systems and current understandings of social mobility are both conceptions which are likely to be profoundly unsettled by this imaginary.

This finding adds to the body of literature that identifies how indigenous epistemologies can offer alternative ways of knowing and being that can challenge dominant practices in higher education (see Bishop, 2003; Bishop & Glynn, 1999; Macfarlane, 2012; Smith, 1999), and, I add dominant discourses shaping higher education itself. In fact, it is possible to see a connection to McMaster’s (2013) argument in the way that this indigenous imaginary may provide “intuitive cultural resisters” (p. 529) to challenge neoliberal hegemony and the connected discourses of meritocracy and social mobility. However, as I make this claim I do not do so with the belief that pluralist epistemologies and indigenous ontologies and can be “seamlessly inserted into Western systems” (Ahenakew & Naepi, 2015, p. 181). Rather I see in this space a fertile place for thought and dialogue which may also provide a fruitful basis for resistance. In this next part of this chapter I identify the value of a post-critical theoretical orientation brought to bear in this study.

The value of a post-critical theoretical orientation

Taking a post-critical approach, in particular, a post-critical narrative approach in this study has been valuable because it has allowed me to attend carefully to the lived experiences of the first-generation students through my engagement with the students’ stories. It also has given me the opportunity to consider questions of subjectivity and identity without resorting to the common assumptions and frameworks that tend to surround critical research including psychodynamic analysis or personality trait theory. Such approaches currently dominate the writing on student diversity, and amongst other things, disregard contextual conditions of possibility (Petersen, 2014).

Nevertheless, adopting a post-critical theoretical orientation is not without challenges. Alongside its complexity and requirement for rigorous reflexivity, I became aware of how central my voice was to this project, and how a kind of distancing occurred between what I wrote and the participants own talk. I understand that a researcher’s voice, and role, in constructing a research project is always highly significant. However, one possible

implication of a 'postie' research orientation, "is a return to a kind of objectification of the research subject, in the sense that as subjects of discourse the research participants are decentred, no longer guaranteeing their own truth" (Grant & Giddings, 2002, p. 21). In this way, I recognise there is a risk that the readings I have offered of the first-generation students words (and shared visual texts) will not be recognised or necessarily even agreed with by the participants. I see this most strongly in my framing of a meritorious student subjectivity, a construct that I do not think the participants in this study would find immediately, or necessarily, appropriate.

I understand also, as Grant and Giddings (2002) suggest that the task of a researcher within this space is to persuade readers of the validity of the readings undertaken, but nonetheless, recognising the particular power of the researcher/writer is a significant challenge for researchers, including myself, who are committed to respecting the views of those included within their research. Such an awareness, however, gave me even greater impetus to carefully construct my arguments across this thesis text. I did so, ultimately, because of my commitment to a post-critical orientation's ability to offer understandings for resisting undesirable discourses and imagining new ways forward (McKenzie, 2005); an approach that seems especially fitting given the focus in my study on how first-generation students imagine the university and from this how we might imagine it anew.

To reiterate, the employment of narrative approach specifically in this research was valuable because it allowed a window into the social world of first-generation students in doctoral education. Through this theoretical focus I was able to pay attention to the way these students told stories about themselves and their experiences that connected to the broader social discourses. In this way, I view a narrative approach as providing a helpful means to attend 'close-up' to the students' stories while at the same time allowing me to connect their stories to larger social-cultural stories or discourses. However, this approach must be employed thoughtfully given the ways in which narrative researchers, may through their authorship practices arrange stories into neat or tidy packages (Riessman, 2010 para. 6). This is something I have worked hard to avoid, seeking input from other scholarly readers along this research journey, to ensure I kept a firm focus on the storytelling practices I employed with a view to avoid providing totalizing depictions about the experiences of first-generation students.

Research implications

I recognise in work within the post-critical space, based on the way knowledge is understood within this theoretical location, that there are no easy pathways “from theory to practice or from cause to effect” (Grant & Giddings, 2002, p. 21). Nonetheless, there are some insights that can be taken from this research which may be useful for universities or first-generation students to understand about the doctorate within the changing landscape of contemporary higher education:

1. Firstly, for doctoral students or those contemplating doctoral study, I emphasise the value in interrogating and reflecting on what it is you are pursuing in the university, the potential benefits that may accrue to you and the costs associated with this pursuit. The present study identifies the significance of a variety of social discourses including meritocracy and social mobility discourses along with certain kinds of university social imaginaries that can powerfully shape individuals’ investments in the university, in sometimes problematic ways. The contemporary university in my view, remains a site of amazing possibilities, but it is also a place that is dominated by neoliberal rationalities and practices and thus may not be an arena that possesses the kinds of promise first-generation students might imagine, especially for those whose imaginings may be shaped by longstanding ideas and values of the university that have emerged from periods of history not so strongly defined by neoliberalism.
2. Given that universities receive significant funding associated with doctoral enrolments (in the local context) I argue that there is a pressing responsibility for these institutions to provide much more information about the work of academics, the employment opportunities and selection processes associated with academic appointments. My research suggests that first-generation students’ imaginings of the university are informed by a variety of different social imaginaries which help the students pursue their academic aspirations as university entrants through to doctoral study, in both helpful *and* problematic ways. As such, the provision of greater information may enable the students to gain more proximate understandings of the university and to navigate their higher education journeys more effectively.
3. If we are to pursue the goal of achieving a more diverse academy, one that better reflects the contemporary student body entering the university, there is need to provide greater financial support to first-generation students who are interested in pursuing postgraduate and doctoral study. Although many first-generation students

at the doctoral level may not be academically 'at risk' these students often need to undertake long, complex and challenging journeys and for many, a lack of financial resources can delay or likely render postgraduate or doctoral study unachievable. This is a space where major equity issues remain and the findings of this study indicate financial resources are pressing and significant.

4. For universities, it is important to remember that students bring with them a diverse range of aspirations and interests. Although many prospective doctoral students will be keenly interested in employment opportunities associated with doctoral study, they may also possess a range of other hopes and dreams shaping their desire for advanced study. This needs to be considered in the way doctorate study is talked about and promoted to potential students beyond a narrow job or career focus alone.

In the following section I discuss the limitations of this study before I close this chapter.

Study limitations

Reflections on the study processes I employed across this project leads me to identify some limitations of my research approach. I identify these aspects of my study with the hope that I may be able to help future researchers in this area develop their approaches.

A limitation of this study lies in the gender imbalance of my research participants. While I do not claim that the findings from my study are generalisable, I believe a more proportional balance of genders may have strengthened this work. This means that future researchers may need to focus more on gender balance than I did in my data collection processes or there may be a need to extend future research across a wider range of subjects or disciplines to gain a better gender balance - both research approaches would be valuable. Another potential limitation was the decision to focus on the discipline on Education. As I noted in my introduction of my methodological approaches in *Chapter One* of this thesis, this narrow focus on one discipline may be a strength of my study given that the results will have a clear relevance to first-generation students in this area, though as I said earlier, I do not wish to claim that my results are generalisable even within this frame, given the size of this study. This may be especially significant in my identification of the presence of students' commitments to helping others in the data of this study, a finding which may connect most strongly with first-generation students located in disciplines like Education or in other social

science disciplines and may be less present in accounts of first-generation students located in other areas.

In addition, though the students in this study were involved in an individual interview and then also had the opportunity to discuss their experiences further in a focus group setting, I see the value in undertaking follow-up interviews over a longer period of time than was possible within the time constraints of this doctoral study. I recognise there could be significant benefits to this approach, in terms of gaining more in-depth insights into the first-generation student experience and for the way follow-up interviews over time could offer understandings into students' aspirations as they progressed through their studies and moved towards their post-doctoral futures. This point was made clear to me through my communications with one student in the study who was very near to completion of her doctoral work and had originally expressed her desire for an academic career. By the end of the data collection period however, this student identified that her goals had changed, indicating how a student's aspiration to become an academic may alter significantly as they reach completion and their post-doctoral future becomes imminent. As such, this may be a worthwhile approach to pursue for future researchers interested in first-generation student doctoral experiences.

Final remarks

Overall the work of this thesis has offered insights into the experiences of first-generation students within higher education. In particular, it has provided knowledge about these students' identities and the reasons they continue to make such significant investments in higher education. In this space this study has identified the power of the key discourses of meritocracy and social mobility and the presence of particular social imaginaries which, in combination, contribute to these students ongoing engagements with the university. As such this study confirms the place of the university in the social imagination: the discourses, imaginings and the ideas that circulate in this space can be seen as having potent and significant effects on how students understand themselves and the institutions of higher education. In the students' articulations of different university imaginaries and, perhaps, most evidently in the emerging presence of an indigenous imaginary there is hope to find

ways to imagine the university anew, and to counter the narrowing of the ideas about this cultural institution (Barnett, 2013) within a neoliberal frame.

In closing, I wish to identify one of the most significant learnings I took away from this project. Almost from the outset of this study I began to recognise how intricate and deeply contextual first-generation student identities are. Although I have been able to draw out common themes across the cohort of students in terms of shared aspects of first-generation academic identities, what has become obvious to me is that how this identity category close-up becomes troublesome and difficult to pin down given the students varied social and cultural locations, languages, economic contexts and belief systems. What I came to understand about what unites these students, perhaps more than anything else, was is their hope for their futures and their determined commitment to seek the promise of the university. These students without doubt aimed to not only arrive but to thrive within the spaces and places of the contemporary university.

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CODA. Duoethnographic explorations of the idea of the university and academic becomings⁴⁴

SB: I grew up around the university. It was definitely very familiar place for me. We lived in a university town, and my Mum was an academic. University felt comfortable, my Mum had an office on the top floor and there was often no one around in her building. So as a kid I'd sometimes go there after school or on sick days. If I had an assignment to do for high school I could get books from the library, or use the printers. Mum's office was a quiet place for me to work in. I had a friend whose Dad was an academic too, and I knew the university quite well. Ultimately, I guess I was just a kid running around the uni, occupying that space.

CM: Did it feel normal to you?

SB: Yeah, it was just Mum's work.

CM: So, when did you know you'd go to university?

SB: I can't remember a moment in my life when I wasn't going to go. It wasn't a conscious thought, it was an unspoken expectation. Preferably I would study something 'useful', but of course I would go. I wasn't an athletic kid, I was a queer kid. It felt like there were no other options. I couldn't just suddenly decide to be a mechanic. And it was a strong expectation in my family that going to university is what you do. My Mum was one of the first in her family to go to university, but my Dad never had the opportunity, so it has become a part of the way my family talks about success. It

⁴⁴ This duoethnographic piece is based on a transcript of a conversation myself and my colleague shared about our academic experiences, hopes and 'becomings'. It is a shared production in that both myself and 'SB' spoke for similar amounts of time and undertook the work of recording and transcribing our conversation, but it is not a co-produced and written paper in the traditional sense.

This transcript for the purposes of length has been edited. However, considerable efforts have been made to not to edit the content so heavily that seamless and neat narratives are presented. Despite the sometimes, significant drive to tidy up or present a more idealized version of it was our intention at the outset of this duoethnographic conversation to leave in elements that have had an emotional impact on us.

was unthinkable when I was growing up to imagine not getting a university qualification.

CM: You know, for me, this kind of ordinariness about the university didn't exist. It wasn't a normal part of my life. My earliest memories of The University are in third or fourth form at high school and watching *Brideshead Revisited* re-runs. University seemed to me to be a place of privilege. People were sophisticated, charming, well dressed, good looking – and clever. They were also British, and witty! It was a seductive image. I had this dream of going to Oxford, which was so far beyond my college in regional New Zealand. It was this exclusive better world of grand buildings and fine places. It was a fantasy. Outside of a few teachers, I didn't know a single person who'd been to uni. In that sense I locate myself in a different position to you in terms of my journey into HE and class background and so on. I guess when I was dreaming of going to uni, while not fully understanding what uni meant, I was strongly propelled by the vision of determining my own path, and being independent and that kind of translated into economic independence. It was about practical considerations of how I could look after and decide for myself. And that is why I chose law.

SB: I recall something from our earlier conversation when you said you didn't have the audacity to think you should enjoy your studies, or that it could be fun or stimulating - it was work. I noticed when you said that, because it was different to my experience. I expected that university would be fun and stimulating! The intersection where our stories met was doing first year law, but we made different choices. You decided to stay and I decided to change courses. I remember being anxious about telling my Mum I wanted to shift majors, as she was trained as a lawyer. But I understood it like this: I wanted to do the best I could, I recall thinking 'If I do law I won't be, there are other students who are better at this than me. I am better at cultural studies, political science, subjects like that'. That's how I justified it. So I studied literature, and

film and classical studies, I guess you could call them 'academicity' rather than necessarily career-driven subjects.

CM: Was that brave?

SB: No, not really. I was just following my interests, and I thought I would get a liberal arts education, and follow that up with a post grad degree. I thought I was going to be a diplomat so I decided to learn a second language. That was my narrative. It fitted too because my Mum never wanted me to be an academic. She didn't see me with all of the committees, and all of what she saw as the bullshit of academia. She hoped I would work for a large organisation, travel abroad, that was the vision I think she had for me. I recall her message was 'dream bigger', that I might come back to being an academic, but that wasn't where I should initially set my sights.

CM: Interesting, when you talk about your family's sense of dreams and hopes for you, I notice I can't pinpoint what dreams or visions my family had for me. I can't recall any conversation or behaviour that indicates that they dreamed anything in particular, outside of getting a job. I know they would have had hopes for my future, but I can't really identify them. My parents never said anything, outside of the odd comment about being good at school, so I had to dream for myself. It would have been encouraging for people to have had big dreams for me, but on the other hand I didn't feel pressured, or restricted. I had a lot of intellectual space, which was perhaps constrained by my lack of knowledge and self-belief. I could choose for myself, but I don't know if I necessarily made the right choices! I operated from a solitary position in the sense of going to university as the first in my Whānau, and right or wrong I had to work it out for myself. Thinking back, it would have been nice to have people support me in those terms, but it was not a part of my family discourse.

SB: This is interesting to reflect on. I think a lot of my emphasis on being a bright student was connected to sexual identity, and my need to develop self-worth and options for myself. I had to be good at something because I was an abject failure in the

areas of gender and sexuality in rural South Canterbury! All I had was being brainy. I would always try and talk to Mum and Dad about it. But the thing is, I think they always expected I'd get good reports, so they never made much of a fuss.

CM: Funny, my parents are similar. I remember my whole life my Dad had a particular seat, 'the right chair' at the table and he used to take our reports and look at them for 30 seconds and then say 'that's good dear' and fold it in half and stick it in the jar behind his chair. My parents certainly didn't keep track of that stuff, I am sure that they liked that I was good, quite good, at school, but it just wasn't a focus. And in fact other things came before my studies really. My Dad, decided to buy a fish and chip shop when I was 13, and as a result of that, I had to work six nights a week, after school, for the next three years, including School C. So, I remember begging not go to work, cause I hated it, and because I wanted to study for my exams. Interestingly, my sense of being good at school came from primary school, it became a pigeon hole within the family. I just remember thinking when I was very young: it is good to be smart. That connected later on with how to have a good life, I thought the only way I could do that was through education. I had a very modest dream, that was motivated by the idea of independence and security - that is what I saw in uni. That is what I held onto into despite hating secondary school.

SB: Yes, I am connecting to your idea of security, and as you say that I can see that it did partly represent economic security for me as well. But ultimately I think most of it was cultural security. 'How can I have a good life, as a queer person? What options are available to me? What kind of job will let me become myself?' It was also a way of boosting myself up amid the bullying and awfulness of high school. I think my attitude was 'well fine, I will get to 'the end', and I will be Dr whatever'. And I am still in that space to some extent. I think a PhD is still a source of pride and self-esteem for me, among other things. I wonder if this is a common thing for queer kids, whether we have bought into the idea of the university as leading to something better?

CM: Yeah, the promises of university were really big. But then I didn't really know what an academic was. For me, it still represents lots of things that I am not, lots of things that are better than I am, I guess. In some ways I approach my own studies, with a kind of survival tendency, or with uncertainty and hesitancy.

SB: I can see that, I can hear some of the uncertainty – and I notice too my privilege to be more playful. In fact I often have positioned myself as an activist in the university, thinking: I need to rark you guys up! In some ways I guess I have developed quite a lot of confidence about being in the university, we have spoken about this as a difference between ourselves.

CM: I don't want to name it in a way that isn't helpful, but I look back at my distant idea of going to uni, and my thought that I would never get there, and just keeping on going. It was sort of like 'Oh I might do that, it might be ok, I will just keep going'. This sort of mirrors how I approach things now. I wonder what that means, people are capable of growth and change! But things haven't shifted enormously for me.

SB: That's interesting that you say that. That's different to how I viewed you when I saw you at the duoethnography session. I was impressed by how confident and chatty you seemed!

CM: Sometimes, I wonder about the gaps between the understandings we have of ourselves, and our academic identities, and how others see us. I think the anxiety and uncertainty has had quite an impact on how I have achieved. I was worrying about my place, worrying about what to do at the end of it that will earn money. For a long time, I couldn't commit to my work because I didn't have a clear vision of my future, so that made me quite easily confused. So that's why it took me quite a long time to find a way forward that was right for me. You know? It also makes me think of mentors or people around you that can provide some guidance, and how powerful that can be for those who aren't native to universities. Other academics and working class, women, and indigenous writers have talked about the alien nature of academia too.

SB: Yes. Whereas I think the main part where I come unstuck as a university native is around queerness – the rest of my background prepared me to fit in quite well really. I am trying to pick out some of the key narratives we have been talking about. You mentioned that part of this is having a good enough job, but there seems to be something more, like a social justice narrative as well?

CM: Yeah. The more people that see themselves reflected, having greater diversity within the academy, the more people understand they can also be a part of it.

SB: And perhaps that desire for visibility is something we share. I want to make a contribution as a visibly queer academic. Being in this position is important to me, so I try and make space for my difference to be present and seen. I wonder if it would be fair to say we see ourselves as part of a broader process of creating more space for people like us in the university?

CM: Yeah, but when I say that, I soon want to add for myself that in a small way. Talking about social justice is a kind of grand narrative, and I am interested in small stories too and the human aspects of being or becoming an academic.

SB: Yeah. The interesting thing for me is how some of this identity stuff works. I take some of the pains of my educational past, and re-purpose them. I write about queer. I am quite good at incorporating my ‘other’ and my native identity, and making it work for me. I want to acknowledge I have the language and capital, and confidence to do this: ‘Yeah I am queer, and I am going to base my career on this’ and um, try and get some scholarships!

CM: I have quite a conflicted sense of dealing with some of the deficit discourse around being a first-generation student, and knowing what some of the research says about who gets the jobs etcetera. How, you position some of your experiences of oppression into strengths is really powerful. So I am wondering, what is the gift or the value in living, as I do, with so much uncertainty within academia? What is the good in me being conflicted, how can I reframe that, or how can I understand what that gives

me? I hear some of the things you say, and I think. 'I am on the wrong team! I am never going to make it, if I am this worried about my research proposal – give it up'

SB: That question – what is the value of my position – sounds like a really interesting thing to unpick. Maybe the gift of your anxiety is a critical gift? What does it help you to understand about being a first-generation PhD student? Hesitance, and uncertainty themselves might have some positive attributes – perhaps they open onto carefulness, deliberation, attentiveness? What I am noticing now is that we both have a similar concern for those who experience feelings of alienation in academia. So in some ways our journeys come to another meeting point. We cross, separate, re-join, it is like a figure 8. I'm also trying to understand some of the negative feelings I feel in HE as both potentially problematic, and valuable. This is not to say that feeling depressed, for example, is great everyone should stick with it. I want to acknowledge it, and acknowledge that its presence can offer some critical feedback on what it may be like for some of us to be involved in HE itself.

CM: And the need to challenge the individualistic, Tory voting, competitive....

SB: ...white, hetero, neoliberal values. And I think that we, in small ways with our bodies, and writing, can make some trouble.

Post script... A final (small) thesis tale

Some time ago now, I was travelling home after a year in London. As part of this journey home, my sister and I decided on a short stay in Bali. At this midway point on the globe I found myself at my own crossroads. My situation, outside of this brief holiday, was tenuous. I was jobless, essentially homeless (outside of my return to my parents) and missing much of a sense of direction.

As a treat, before my small stock of pounds dried up, I indulged in a massage at our hotel. One warm Balinese afternoon on the deck of our humble villa amidst a lush tropical garden, I found myself in the powerful hands of a local women who tried to tell me my future. It was hard to understand her, given her densely inflected English, but she said, or at least I made out from what she said, that I was a scholar. I remember this incident well, because I was so struck by what I heard, or did I misinterpret her? 'Scholar' wasn't a word that is typically used in casual conversation ... And, of course, I wasn't a scholar, I was unemployed! I remember thinking, if I heard her correctly, how interesting it was that she seemed to name one of the few roles that I would love to do. Though, of course, this was nigh on impossible.

And, now more than a decade hence I find in the completion of this thesis work some truth in her prediction. Despite all the uncertainties of life in the academy, or in what happens next, I have become a scholar through the writing of this thesis. Even if this moment is fleeting, this unexpected prophecy delivered to me at a time when I was most unsure about what my future would hold, has come true.

APPENDICES



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PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Interview/Self Report/Focus group

Title: What are the dreams and promises of doctoral education for first-generation students? A narrative analysis of doctoral student experiences in the discipline of Education.

My name is Catherine Mitchell and I am currently undertaking a PhD degree at Faculty of Education, University of Auckland. I am writing to invite you to participate in a research project I am undertaking.

The specific aims of this project are:

- To investigate why first-generation students' choose to study for a doctorate.
- To identify first-generation students' expectations of doctoral study (of the university, their supervisors, of themselves).
- To identify the students' aspirations for, and expectations of, their futures post-doctoral study.
- To investigate the perceptions of first-generation students about how their HE experiences differ from others.

I am inviting you to be involved in the research because you identify as a first-generation university student that is, a student whose parents did not go to university, and you are undertaking (or have recently completed) doctoral study in Education. A pseudonym will be used in the study but your stories of life experience and perspective as a first-generation university student will be shared in the public domain (a thesis). Every effort will be made to ensure confidentiality but because of the small number of participants involved, confidentiality cannot be assured.

I am aware that your time is valuable so I have endeavoured to keep the participant self-report, individual interview and focus group requirements to a minimum. You will

be required to commit to participating in a 5-minute participant self-report, two 60-minute individual interviews and one 90-minute focus group. Over the course of this study this equates to a total time commitment of approximately 5 hours. Digitally recording (audio only) the interviews and focus group will be essential; however, the recorder can be turned off at any time should you so wish. Please be aware that assurances have been sought from Associate Professor Graeme Aitken, Dean of the Faculty of Education, that neither your grades, nor academic relationships, will be affected by either your refusal or agreement to participate.

Individual interviews

You will have an opportunity to listen to the interview recordings and to make changes before they are sent to an expert in transcription. The digital recordings will be transcribed and the transcriber will be asked to sign a confidentiality agreement. A transcript of the interview will be sent to you as soon after the interview as possible so that you can verify that it is an accurate record, or for you to make changes, should you so wish. You have the right to withdraw from this study at any time, or withdraw information you have provided in the interviews up until the point of data analysis (21 September 2013).

Focus group

All participants are asked to keep the identities of participants and matters discussed in the focus group confidential, but due to the nature of the group situation confidentiality cannot be guaranteed. You are welcome to withdraw from the discussion within the focus group, but will not be able to withdraw your data from the focus group if you withdraw from the study. In addition, focus group participants will not be provided the opportunity to edit the transcripts from the focus group.

Participant self-reports, consent forms, and transcribed interview and focus group data will be stored separately and securely for six years in my supervisor's office at the Epsom Campus, after which they will be destroyed.

Information gathered will be analysed and common themes reported on. Upon request, at the completion of the study you will receive a summary of the main findings. The final copy will be submitted for assessment for the PhD degree from the University of Auckland and a copy of the thesis will be accessible at the University of Auckland library. Findings will also be used for academic publications and conference presentations. If you wish to receive a summary of the findings of this study please write your email address on the consent form provided.

Thank you in anticipation for your time and help in making this study possible. If you would like further information about this research project, please phone me on (09) 373 7599 extn 48779 or email me at cmit024@aucklanduni.ac.nz. Alternatively, you can contact either of my supervisors Barbara Grant on (09) 373 7599 extn 48272, or Melinda Webber on (09) 373 7599 extn 48456.

The Dean of the Faculty is Associate Professor Graeme Aitken
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For any inquiries regarding ethical concerns please contact:

The Chair
The University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee
The University of Auckland
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APPROVED BY THE UNIVERSITY OF AUCKLAND HUMAN PARTICIPANTS ETHICS
COMMITTEE on 7/ 11/12 for a period of (3) years. Reference 8409



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CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

Interview/Self Report/Focus group

This Consent Form will be held for a period of 6 years

Title: What are the dreams and promises of doctoral education for first-generation students? A narrative analysis of doctoral student experiences in the discipline of Education.

Researcher: Catherine Mitchell

- I have been given and have understood an explanation of this research project.
- I have had an opportunity to ask questions and have them answered to my satisfaction.
- I consent to participating in the study with the understanding that my participation is entirely voluntary.
- I agree to take part in two one-hour individual interviews.
- I understand that I am free to withdraw participation at any time and to withdraw any data traceable to me from the individual interviews up until the point of analysis (21 September 2013).
- I agree to the interviews being audio recorded and transcribed, but I am aware that I can have the digital recorder turned off at any time.
- I agree to take part in one, 1.5 hour focus group
- I understand that once I have participated in a focus group I cannot withdraw my data from the focus group if I withdraw from the study.
- I agree to not disclose anything discussed in the focus group.
- I agree to complete a Participant Self Report (approximately 5 minutes). I understand that assurances have been sought from Associate Professor Graeme Aitken, Dean of the Faculty of Education, that neither my grades, nor my academic relationships, will be affected by my participation in this study.
- I understand that my name will not be used in any written documents or oral presentation without my permission.
- I understand that while all efforts will be made to protect my identity, confidentiality of my information cannot be guaranteed due to the small size of this study.
- I understand that a third party who has signed a confidentiality agreement will transcribe the digital recordings.

- I understand that the data gathered from the interviews/focus group/ Participant Self Report will be used for a PhD thesis, academic publications and conference presentations.
- I understand that data will be kept for 6 years, after which they will be destroyed.

I agree to participate in the research.

Signed: _____

Name: _____

Date: _____

I wish to receive a summary of research findings at the completion of the study.
If so, please provide your email contact below:

APPENDIX C. PARTICIPANT SELF-REPORT FORM



THE UNIVERSITY OF AUCKLAND
FACULTY OF EDUCATION

Te Kura Akoranga o Tamaki Makaurau
INCORPORATING THE AUCKLAND COLLEGE OF EDUCATION

Epsom
Campus
Gate 3, 74 Epsom Avenue
Auckland, New Zealand
Telephone 64 9 623 8899
Facsimile 64 9 623 8898
www.education.auckland.ac.nz

The University of Auckland
Private Bag 92601, Symonds Street
Auckland 1035, New Zealand

PARTICIPANT SELF-REPORT

Title: What are the dreams and promises of doctoral education for first-generation students? A narrative analysis of doctoral students' experiences in the discipline of Education.

Please answer these questions as best you can. Where you wish to add additional information please use the space provided.

Name (First name/Family name):

Preferred Pseudonym:

Age: (please circle) 20-29 30-39 40-49 50-59 60+

Sex: (please circle) Male Female

Ethnicity (please state): _____

Email address: _____

What level of education did your father complete?

What level of education did your mother complete?

What was your mother's occupation?

What was your father's occupation?

Have any other members of your immediate family participated in tertiary education?

YES/NO

If yes, what was the order of your participation in tertiary education?

(e.g first amongst your siblings/ second etc)

Programme enrolled in:

(e.g PhD, EdD)

Current year of study (if relevant):

Current enrolment status (tick one or more boxes):

Provisional/conditional enrolment or Full enrolment

Full time or Part-time

Deferred/suspended

Submitted *and* awaiting outcome *or* Degree awarded

Thank you for participating. Please post this Participant Self Report and the Consent to Participate in Research form back to the researcher in the stamped self-addressed envelope provided.

Kind regards

Catherine Mitchell

APPROVED BY THE UNIVERSITY OF AUCKLAND HUMAN PARTICIPANTS ETHICS
COMMITTEE on / / for a period of (3) from / / . Reference 8409

APPENDIX D. INTERVIEW SCHEDULE



THE UNIVERSITY OF AUCKLAND
FACULTY OF EDUCATION

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The University of Auckland
Private Bag 92601, Symonds Street
Auckland 1035, New Zealand

Dear _____

**Research Project: What are the dreams and promises of first-generation students?
A narrative analysis of doctoral student experiences in the discipline of Education.**

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research. I am looking forward to the prospect of exploring your first-generation university experiences with you. As part of my research, I am using a narrative methodology. This means that I intend to write stories based on your, and others', experiences, as a first-generation student within doctoral education in Aotearoa/New Zealand. As such, I will interview you on two occasions and digitally record (audio only) our discussion. The first interviews of research participants will be held in November and December 2012. The second interviews will be held between April and May 2013. The questions that you will be asked are written below.

Can I set up a time to interview you?

I look forward to your reply.

Yours sincerely

Catherine Mitchell

INDICATIVE SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Interview one – First-generation students and doctoral journey beginnings:

1. Where did you learn about university? The doctoral experience?
2. Was there any particular event or events, or people that contributed to you undertaking doctoral study?
3. Why did you choose to undertake doctoral study?
4. Can you identify any books or films that shaped your thinking about going to university or doctoral education?
5. If so, what did you learn from the texts about the university? Doctoral education?

Interview two – doctoral experiences:

1. How have doctoral studies met your expectations or been different to what was expected?
2. What have been the major challenges you've faced with your doctoral studies to date?
3. How have you dealt with the challenges?
4. What factors have contributed to your perseverance in your studies?
5. How do you describe the current university world?

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COMMITTEE on // for a period of (3) years from //. Reference 8409



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TRANSCRIBER CONFIDENTIALITY AGREEMENT

Title: What are the dreams and promises of doctoral education for first-generation students? A narrative analysis of doctoral student experiences in the discipline of Education.

Researcher: Catherine Mitchell

I agree to transcribe the audio recordings for the above research project and understand that the information contained within them is absolutely confidential and must not be disclosed to, or discussed with, anyone other than the researcher, Catherine Mitchell and her supervisors, Barbara Grant (6238899 extn 48272) and Melinda Webber (6238899 extn 48456).

Name: _____

Date: _____

Signed: _____

APPENDIX F. FOCUS GROUP INFORMATION AND QUESTIONS



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www.education.auckland.ac.nz

The University of Auckland
Private Bag 92601, Symonds Street
Auckland 1035, New Zealand

Dear _____

**Research Project: What are the dreams and promises of first-generation students?
A narrative analysis of doctoral student experiences in the discipline of Education.**

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research. I am looking forward to the prospect of exploring your first-generation experience of doctoral education with you. To explore the first-generation experience, I invite you to participate in 2 group discussions with up to 9 other first-generation students studying for an Education doctorate and digitally record (audio) our discussion. The general thrust of discussion will be focused on gaining insight into your views on being a first-generation student in doctoral education and your future aspirations. The first focus group will be held in February 2013 and the final focus group will take place in June 2013. Some indicative questions that you will be asked are written below.

I intend to contact all research participants to identify the best days/times for the focus group gatherings. Can I email you to work out some days/times that may suit you?

Yours sincerely

Catherine Mitchell

INDICATIVE FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

Focus group one – First-generation academic identities

1. Can you identify a time or event at university when you recognized how your first-generation impacted on your studies?
2. How important is being the first member of your family to attend university to you?
3. Do you think that your first-generation status impacts on your doctoral experience?
4. Do you think that your first-generation status has more or less of an impact on your doctoral studies than it did on your undergraduate studies?
5. Do you think that being a first-generation student has contributed to your choice of study (in Education/your research area)?

Focus group two – Post-doctoral aspirations of first-generation students

6. Do you have a specific guiding vision or picture in your mind for your future post-doctoral study? If so, what or who has contributed to this vision.
7. Do you feel like you have the knowledge you need to plan for your future post-doctoral study?
8. If yes, where how did you gain that knowledge? If not, what could be done to better support you to better plan for your post-doctoral future?
9. Do you see yourself as becoming an academic post-doctoral study? If yes, why? If no, why not?
10. Can you identify any advantages of being a first-generation student, particularly in terms of being a future academic?

APPROVED BY THE UNIVERSITY OF AUCKLAND HUMAN PARTICIPANTS ETHICS COMMITTEE on // for a period of (3) years from //. Reference 8409

Invitation to participate in a study of first-generation students' experiences studying for a PhD or EdD in Education

The broad aim of this PhD project is to explore the experiences of first-generation students (that is students whose parents did not go to university) within the doctorate of Education.

The specific aims of this project are:

- To investigate why first-generation students choose to study for a doctorate.
- To identify first-generation students' expectations of doctoral study (of the university, their supervisors, of themselves).
- To identify the students' aspirations for, and expectations of, their futures post-doctoral study.
- To investigate the perceptions of first-generation students about how their HE experiences differ from others.

Participation will involve completing a short Self Report form (5-10 minutes), undertaking 2 x 1 hour interviews (scheduled for November/December 2012 and April/May 2013) and joining two on campus focus groups of first-generation doctoral students (catered /maximum 1.5 hours each held in February and June 2013). Over the course of the study, this equates to approximately 5 hours of time commitment.

If you are interested in participating in this research or you have any questions, please contact:

Catherine Mitchell
Phone +64 09 373 7599 extn 48779
Email: cmit024@aucklanduni.ac.nz

OR

Dr Melinda Webber
Phone: +64 09 373 7599 extn 48456
Email: m.webber@auckland.ac.nz

Thank you in advance for your participation!

The project has been approved by University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee (Reference Number 8409 //).

