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“Becoming a lawyer”: Understanding the experience of legal career aspirations amongst final year law undergraduates.

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Abstract

Endemic barriers to the legal profession persist which effectively exclude those from low socio-economic backgrounds, perpetuating the profession's elitism on classed lines, amongst other inequalities. Issues of fair access to the legal profession are pertinent to English contemporary higher education because law is a graduate profession and many undergraduates embark upon a law degree because they aspire to become a lawyer. However, it has been observed that by the final year of the law degree although some have maintained their legal career aspirations, many law undergraduates have apparently opted out of their original plans to become a lawyer. Amongst undergraduates from low socio-economic backgrounds this observed attrition raises challenges for legal education's role in widening access to the legal profession and higher education's ability to deliver social mobility outcomes.

Given the potential implications of this observed attrition, the research focused upon the experiences of law undergraduates from low socio-economic backgrounds who began their studies wanting to become a lawyer within a Law School, in a post-92, English university. The research explored these undergraduates' perceptions of the experiences that had influenced their career decision-making, to understand why some maintained yet others opted out of their original plans to become a lawyer. Qualitative data was generated via semi-structured interviews with sixteen law undergraduates who self-identified as coming from low socio-economic backgrounds and three focus groups of Law School academics.

The findings suggest that these undergraduates encountered class-based inequalities as they navigated their academic and professional journeys through higher education. Although their experiences suggest that habitus relevant to becoming a lawyer developed during the degree, it did so individually and unevenly. This uneven habitus development seemingly informed their perceptions of their employability, using the concepts of professional identity and possible selves, in relation to the occupational future as a lawyer that they could envisage, and ultimately their career decision-making. Some of these undergraduates sustained their original legal career

aspirations whereas some opted out of them, selecting an alternative graduate career, potentially explaining the observed attrition.

The research suggests that due to the classed nature of their undergraduate experience, to sustain their original legal career aspirations and to prepare to enter the legal labour market, these undergraduates must do more during the degree, despite limited, if any, access to relevant capitals, potentially perpetuating existing privilege. By combining the concepts of possible selves and of equity-based education a conceptual model has been developed from the research's findings, to support law undergraduates from low socio-economic backgrounds in developing their legal employability as they negotiate their academic and professional journeys through higher education, by fostering relevant habitus development to elaborate lawyer possible selves.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Introduction and context

Lawyers have a significant role to play within society, seemingly based upon a social contract in which the provision of legal services to protect the rights of members of society, is exchanged for the legal profession's autonomy, including control of who enters the profession (Herring 2023; Susskind & Susskind 2016). Although a career in law offers many different roles (Lawcab 2025) the terms, the "profession" or the "legal profession" will refer only to solicitor or barrister, utilising "lawyer" to refer to both occupations. The Legal Services Board (LSB) has oversight of legal services within England and Wales and amongst other statutory duties, it has regulatory oversight of the relevant professional regulators (LSB 2025), which are the Bar Standards Board (BSB) for barristers and the Solicitors Regulation Authority (SRA) for solicitors (the "professional bodies"). All the regulators are subject to a statutory duty to encourage "an independent, strong, diverse and effective legal profession" (s.1(1)(f) Legal Services Act 2007).

Becoming a solicitor or barrister in England, is subject to a formal qualification process of academic and vocational training, determined by the relevant professional body (BSB 2025a; SRA 2024d). The professional bodies publish data regarding the composition of the profession and although there have been improvements in diversity, with increasing numbers of women and black and minority ethnic members of the professions (BSB 2024a & SRA 2024c), the composition of the legal profession demonstrates "some of the highest rates of elitism" (Sutton Trust & SMC 2019: 4). Using educational background as one indicator of social class, "a disproportionately high number" of barristers have attended an independent school in the UK (BSB 2024a:26) with two-thirds of the judiciary having been privately educated (Sutton Trust & SMC 2019). In data published by the solicitors' regulatory body, the number of lawyers from low socio-economic backgrounds (SEB) has dropped from 21% in 2015 to 18% in 2023 (SRA 2024b). It has been argued that the legal profession is elitist and "segmented and stratified on gendered, raced and classed lines" (Sommerlad et al 2010:10), so that its "power structures are dominated by a narrow section of the

population" (The Sutton Trust & SMC 2019: 5) and do not reflect the diversity of the society it represents.

The narrow, classed composition of the profession is not a recent development. Claims were made in the early 1970s that domination by the middle and upper classes acted as "an effective mechanism of social control and exclusion" leading to "highly discriminatory" recruitment, likely to exclude those from less privileged socio-economic backgrounds (Thomas & Mungham 1972: 104). It has been argued that the elitist nature of the profession, specifically in relation to class composition, has been sustained by recruitment into the profession. Recruitment of trainee lawyers amongst "elite law firms" leave those "from less privileged backgrounds" at a disadvantage because it prioritises "characteristics" that "map closely to social class" (Ashley et al 2015: 28). Possession of degrees from a limited number of selective universities are used to signal talent and aptitude, resulting in recruitment of those "predominantly from more privileged backgrounds," with 40% of trainees at these firms having attended fee-paying schools in comparison with the national picture of 7% of the population (Ashley et al 2015:9).

1.2 Becoming a lawyer: legal education and the qualification process

Class-based elitism within the legal profession is relevant to legal education within contemporary higher education (HE) in England, because law is a graduate profession with the law degree having operated for some time as part of the formal qualification process to become a lawyer (BSB 2025a: Ormrod 1971; SRA 2024d). This arose from a formal review of legal education in England which had found the legal profession "outmoded, narrow-minded and implacably hostile to change" (Millner 1971:2). The review recommended the university law degree as the most appropriate method of modernising and expanding the scope of English legal education, for the purposes of professional qualification (Ormrod 1971). This proposal was adopted, along with proposals for an academic and vocational stage of training, to diversify membership within and access to the legal profession. Although over time other routes to

qualification became recognised by the professional bodies, the academic stage of training normally but not exclusively involved the successful completion of a qualifying law degree (QLD), followed by relevant post-graduate professional vocational qualifications, prior to a period of work-based learning (BSB & SRA 2014; SRA 2021). By 2013 this had resulted in there being more than 600 QLD programmes in the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland with the QLD acknowledged in the Legal Education and Training Review (LETR) as the dominant route to entering the legal profession (LETR 2013).

With the QLD providing a route to qualification, data tracking the legal career aspirations of undergraduates when they start and finish the law degree is not collected formally and therefore relies upon historical studies. Although now two decades old, students surveyed across forty English Law Schools indicated that 92% intended to become legal professionals (Cuthbert 2003 cited by Childs et al 2014: 55). In research across a sample of universities in England, 79.1% of law students on enrolment intended to enter the legal profession, however, a significant number of undergraduates had, in effect, opted out of becoming a lawyer with 58.15% of participants having changed their career intentions by their final year of undergraduate study (Hardee 2012).

Recently English legal education has been subject to a period of significant change due to the reform of aspects of the formal qualification process. The law degree remains part of the academic component of the training to become a barrister (BSB 2025a). Changes were introduced into the qualification process to become a solicitor, with the introduction of the Solicitors Qualifying Exam (SQE) as a centralised professional entrance exam so a degree in any subject (or equivalent work experience) can be used to qualify (SRA 2024d). Further, as legal education remains so closely connected to the legal profession, uncertainty within the profession has the potential to impact upon legal education. It has been claimed that technological advances will transform the nature and volume of work that lawyers will carry out in the future, ultimately reducing the number of lawyers needed (Susskind & Susskind 2016). If fewer lawyers will be required in the future, it is likely that there will be fewer

training opportunities, which could have consequences for legal education and the law degree as a means of accessing the legal profession.

Legal education operates within the context of HE in England which over several decades has been subject to the HE policies of successive UK governments. Such policies aim to address the perceived challenges of the knowledge economy and to drive economic prosperity and, additionally, to address inequality based on socio-economic background (SEB) and deliver social mobility outcomes by widening access to the professions (Robbins Report 1963; DoBIS 2016). Social mobility is justified as a policy outcome of HE by generating a broader source of talent in the graduate labour market (Major & Machin 2020). However, a fundamental challenge arises for the law degree in delivering HE's social mobility function, specifically in relation to accessing the legal profession, which seemingly maintains its classed composition (BSB 2024a; SRA 2024b), constraining social mobility and diversity (Ashley et al 2015; Krengel et al 2024).

1.3 Research aims and questions

Having taught within legal education in HE in England for over two decades within the Law School of a post-92 university, a former polytechnic granted university status in 1992 (Morgan 2022), undergraduates' experiences of career decision-making are of significant professional interest to me. Data is not collated formally addressing initial and ultimate legal career aspirations of law undergraduates however, over several years, I had observed anecdotally that most law undergraduates in their first year seemed to aspire to become a lawyer. Despite that, by the final year of their degree it appeared that significant numbers of each cohort had opted out of those original legal career aspirations. Little seems to be known about how law students feel about their legal career expectations and any changes to those original aspirations during the degree (Hardee 2014), although barriers to access at the point of entering the profession have been identified, for example in the LETR (2013). This apparent attrition in the numbers planning to become a lawyer, and specifically amongst those from low SEB, raises potential issues in widening access to the profession. Given the

law degree's role in the qualification process, this observed attrition, particularly amongst law undergraduates from low SEB, was also of interest to me personally, as someone originally from a working-class background, with a profound belief in the potential opportunities HE affords in addressing inequities based on class.

Within the research low socio-economic background (SEB) has been used as a proxy for class. Class is a contested, multi-dimensional concept without an agreed definition or common means of measurement (Ball 2008; Crompton 2008). Multiple sociological interpretations of class have evolved, originating from a Western European hierarchical categorisation, to describe inequality and its sources, denoting an individual's position within society (Crompton 2008; Savage 2015). It is a concept reflecting "systematically structured social and economic disadvantage which is reproduced over generations" (Crompton 2008:5; Skeggs 1997).

Marxist conceptualisations of class, reflect the ownership and control of the means of production within society, identifying the conflict between two distinct classes (the bourgeoisie and the proletariat), due to the bourgeoisie's exploitation of the proletariat, whose power came only from the labour that they could trade (Crompton 2008; Savage 2000). Weberian conceptualisations of class relate class to an individual's position within the market, where individual life chances were connected to skills, lifestyle, income and wealth, aligned to status (described as honour) and aligned to the groups within society (described as parties) able to exercise power (Crompton 2008; Weber 2009).

Bourdieu's conceptualisation challenged purely economic interpretations of class, incorporating access to resources as capitals with economic, social and cultural dimensions, capable of being accumulated (Bourdieu 1986; Savage 2015). Bourdieu claimed that all capitals are derived from, and can be converted into, economic capital (Bourdieu 1986). These capitals are reflected in an individual's habitus, which shapes their understanding of and behaviours in the social world, through their dispositions (Bourdieu 1977). The interplay of capitals and habitus, which are valued and provide

prestige for advantage in a particular social context (or field), generate symbolic capital. According to Bourdieu the distribution of social, cultural, symbolic and economic capitals represents the structure of the social world, and the uneven accumulation of capitals over time results in inequality (1986; Savage 2015). This uneven accumulation of capitals is sustained and transmitted intergenerationally by social actors and institutions (like the educational system), through a process that Bourdieu describes as reproduction (1986; Bourdieu & Passeron 1977). Reproduction maintains "the social, economic and cultural status quo" (Thomson 2017: 4), creating "social and cultural advantage or disadvantage" (Moore 2008: 101). Bourdieu's conceptualisation influenced Savage et al's Great British Class Survey in 2011 from which "a new, multi-dimensional way of registering social class differentiation" was proposed (2013: 223). This was comprised of the following seven classes: "Precariat, Emergent Service Workers, Traditional Working Class, New Affluent Workers, Technical Middle Class, Established Middle Class, Elite" (Savage et al 2013: 230). Bourdieu's concepts of capitals and habitus are used within the research's theoretical framework and are examined further in the literature review in Chapter two.

Reflecting the nature of class as a multi-dimensional and contested concept, different models of class have been used within the "grey" literature. For example, the first official UK measure of class, created by the Registrar General's Office in 1911, conceptualised class as a hierarchical structure of occupations, although some cultural aspects were included, suggesting "cultural judgments about the ranking and social importance of jobs" (Savage 2015: 35). Within the UK's current official statistics relating to the economy, population and society, this conceptualisation of class has been developed further. These official statistics are produced by the Office for National Statistics (ONS), a non-ministerial UK government department (ONS 2026a). In its National Statistical Socio-Economic Classification, the ONS utilises two socio-economic criteria for class, based on occupation (which is described as formerly the Registrar General's Social Class) and socio-economic groups (ONS 2026b).

As “not all inequalities are about class” (Savage 2015: 45), these established conceptualisations of class have been criticised. The conceptualisation based upon occupational grouping used by the Registrar General and which forms the basis of the ONS’s approach, have been challenged by Savage et al (2013) because, amongst other things, it does not address income disparities within occupations. Additionally, these conceptualisations have been challenged for homogenising representations of class (Crompton 2008; Savage 2003). Various academic critiques challenge the lack of consideration within these conceptualisations of the impact of gender, race, ethnicity and disability, particularly within the working-class experience (Crompton 2008; Savage 2003; Skeggs 1997).

Within the research it is recognised that class is a complex, multi-dimensional concept and being working-class is not a universal experience. Class has been framed within the research to reflect conceptualisations of “structured social and economic inequality (related to the possession of economic and power resources)” (Crompton 2008:15) and therefore, low socio-economic background (SEB) is used as a proxy for class. This has been influenced by my own background and my awareness of socio-economic circumstances as inter-generational family experiences of primarily manual or unstable employment, limited economic resources, and limited access to educational opportunities (Crompton 2008; Major & Machin 2020). Socio-economic background can encompass not just occupations but also earnings, wealth and education however, it is acknowledged that using low SEB as a proxy for class can represent an over-simplification of the complexities of inequalities of gender, race, ethnicity and disability upon the conceptualisation of class (Crompton 2008; Savage 2003; Skeggs 1997).

Notwithstanding this potential shortcoming of low SEB as a proxy for class, it is a proxy used widely in the context of social mobility in the UK. Within the academic and grey literature relating to social mobility, socio-economic background is used as a measure of social mobility. For example, the Social Mobility Commission (SMC) measures social mobility outcomes using socio-economic background (SMC 2025:22) and published a toolkit that encourages employers to consider their recruitment strategies

in relation to those specifically from low socio-economic backgrounds (SMC 2020). In their analysis of social mobility policy and literature, Major & Machin's work on social mobility refers to the "disadvantaged" in relation to socio-economic background as "earnings, income and wealth", with social class framed in relation to wealth and power, connected to parental occupation and "relative income categories" (2020: 2-4). However, the Sutton Trust, which describes itself as the leading social mobility charity in the UK, acknowledges that some of the measures of social mobility should be more comprehensive and inclusive, reflecting gender, ethnicity and disability (Sutton Trust 2025). Although there are some shortcomings in using low SEB as a proxy for class, it is used within the research. This is because the research focuses upon understanding the experiences of career decision-making amongst law undergraduates, situating it within the broader context of UK social mobility, where low SEB is often used to measure social mobility. Social mobility in the UK and higher education is examined further in the literature review in Chapter two.

The research took place at a time when legal education has been undergoing significant change, with a new qualification process for solicitors (SRA 2024d; Sommerlad et al 2010). Within my normal academic practice, the available HE regulatory data did not provide the means to exploring the problem of this apparent attrition as it addresses students' experiences generally and the nature of their employment many months after graduation (OfS 2024c; HESA 2024a). However, the professional doctorate provided an opportunity to understand more about this observed attrition in the legal career plans of law undergraduates from low SEB.

Given the classed nature of the profession and the recognised barriers to access, the research therefore aimed to understand some of the possible reasons for this apparent attrition in legal career aspirations during the degree, amongst undergraduates from low SEB, within a Law School in a post-92 university in England (Morgan 2022). The research also provided the opportunity to explore these undergraduates' perceptions of the HE experiences which had influenced their career decision-making, and to understand why some maintained yet others opted out of their original plans to become a lawyer.

Those research aims are elaborated through the specific research questions, set out here and again in the literature review at the end of Chapter two:

1. Why did students want to become a lawyer when they started the degree?
2. Did students see themselves as a lawyer?
3. How has the course shaped students' career aspirations?
4. How are students' career aspirations perceived by staff?
5. How, if at all, do staff believe that the course influences students' development of a professional identity as lawyer?

1.4 Structure of the thesis

To explore possible reasons why sustaining legal career aspirations during the degree might be difficult for some law undergraduates from low SEB, the thesis has set out an introduction including the research's context, the relationship between the law degree and entry into the legal profession, the nature of the research problem and the research questions. Chapter two reviews the relevant literature within the field and identifies the rationale for using Bourdieu's thinking tools of field, habitus, cultural and social capital and his theory of practice, as the theoretical framework (Bourdieu 1977; Wacquant 1989). Chapter three addresses research design, connecting the ontological, epistemological and methodological assumptions to the qualitative methods used to generate data. As the site of the research was my place of work, issues of positionality and being an insider researcher influenced decisions relating to the research's design (Mercer 2007), trustworthiness and ethical approval and are also addressed in Chapter three. The research's findings are set out within Chapter four and discussed in the context of the research questions and relevant literature in Chapter five. Chapter six concludes the thesis, by reflecting upon the findings, acknowledging the study's limitations and making recommendations. The following chapter reviews relevant literature.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

As the research focuses upon law undergraduates from low socio-economic backgrounds (SEB) who started the degree aspiring to become a lawyer, to explore why sustaining those career plans might be difficult as they negotiate HE, this chapter will consider social mobility policy, specifically relating to higher education (HE) and graduate employability as an outcome of HE. Graduate employability is a contested concept, which has evolved to incorporate aspects of identity, prompting a review of literature relating to the sociological concept of identity generally. As preparing to become a lawyer is one of the possible outcomes of the law degree, the literature review considers identity within an occupational context and specifically, its early development within HE as pre-professional identity (Jackson 2016: 2017). Although this was a valuable concept for the research, to understand how undergraduates envisaged their futures as lawyers and how that might motivate actions in the present, in relation to their career decision-making, the concept of possible selves (Markus & Nurius 1986; Harrison 2018) was also reviewed. Finally, Bourdieu's thinking tools and theory of practice (Bourdieu 1977; Wacquant 1989) will be reviewed as the theoretical framework for the research, culminating in the research questions.

2.1 Social mobility policy and higher education

"Social mobility is the link between a person's occupation or income and the occupation or income of their parents" according to the Social Mobility Commission (SMC) (2024), an independent public body, with a statutory duty to evaluate progress in developing and promoting social mobility within the UK. Social mobility is a government policy which aims to address inequality within society where "class background still too often determines life chances" (Milburn 2009:6). After a period of increasing absolute mobility in the UK, measured as children with a "higher economic or social status than parents" (Major & Machin 2020: 8), the latter part of the twentieth century saw social mobility stalling and then falling between 2008-2020 (Major & Machin 2018:2020). In comparison with other countries, social mobility in the UK is "not doing well" leaving with those from low SEB likely to find it harder to improve their life chances (Major & Machin 2020:2). Although the SMC claims that the evidence for social mobility is now not as "gloomy as the popular narrative", it recognises that social

mobility is complex and easier for some groups than others (SMC 2022:25). The Sutton Trust (2024) which promotes social mobility policy and research, states unequivocally that Britain has low levels of social mobility because income determines life chances.

In the UK, education is deemed to be a critical means of delivering social mobility policy (Major & Machin 2020), with social mobility an anticipated outcome of HE, facilitating better access to the labour market, intended to generate "better opportunities for each generation and making access to these opportunities fairer, regardless of background" (BCG & Sutton Trust 2017:6). The financial investment required to participate in HE is justified on the basis that HE offers a gateway to graduate work providing improved income and occupational outcomes (Hordósy & Clark 2018b). The current Secretary of State for Education said that the government believes that universities should operate as "engines of opportunity" (*Hansard*, HC Deb 9 September 2024 Vol 753 c551), endorsing this through proposed tuition fee reforms which expect universities to deliver the government's mission to "break down barriers to opportunity (DoE 2024). Despite working-class school children already encountering "barriers to learning" which are "multi-dimensional, interactive and cumulative" in their prior education (Major & Briant 2023: 33), HE can be a significant driver of social mobility, as it improves chances of securing higher earnings and based upon income measures, undergraduate law courses are amongst those offering the highest mobility rates (The Sutton Trust et al 2021).

Nonetheless, the stratification of UK HE constrains its effectiveness in delivering social mobility, because selective universities enhance the likelihood of successful labour market outcomes but many undergraduates from low SEB attend less selective institutions (The Sutton Trust et al 2021). It is claimed that rather than fostering social mobility, HE maintains inequality enabling the economically privileged to distort the graduate labour market sustaining opportunities for their offspring (Major & Machin 2018; 2020). "In an unequal world, education struggles to be the great escalator imagined by politicians" (Major & Briant 2023: 45). Within HE, students from working-class origins are expected "to prepare themselves for the middle-class norms of

academic life" (Major & Briant 2023: 95). Consequently, HE seems to contribute to the maintenance of barriers to the elite professions, to the detriment of those from low SEB (Major & Machin 2020; Tibbs 2022).

2.1.1 Social mobility policy and aspiration

As HE provides a critical means of delivering social mobility policy in the UK (Major & Machin 2020), encouraging young people from working-class backgrounds to aspire to participate in HE as a route to accessing the professions, has been a significant feature of educational policy of successive UK governments (Allen 2015). Educational policy has incorporated raising aspirations to participate in HE as a means of generating improved labour market outcomes thereby addressing societal inequalities (Allen 2014 & 2015; Harrison & Waller 2018; Spohrer 2011; St. Clair et al 2013). These policies have been built upon the assumption that poor employment outcomes amongst working-class young people are due to a "poverty of aspirations" (Allen 2014: 760) and if these aspirations are raised, improved labour market outcomes will follow (Spohrer 2011; St. Clair et al 2013). For example, the Panel of Fair Access to the Professions, set out unambiguously the importance of aspirations as a means of delivering improved labour market outcomes to achieve social inclusion (Milburn 2009). Its Final Report was underpinned by assumptions that social mobility is driven by individual "effort and endeavour," and claimed that "it is the aspirations people have to better themselves that drives social progress" and that these aspirations needed "unleashing" (Milburn 2009: 5-7). Although not explicitly described as aspiration, it is a policy which persists, demonstrated through its recent reiteration within the Government's recent Paper for post-16 educational reforms which connected economic growth and removing barriers to inclusion through individual engagement in education (DoE, DWP & DSIT 2025:5).

Nonetheless, aspiration and the assumptions underpinning the effectiveness of this policy to deliver social mobility, are contested within the literature. Reflecting a change from post-war policies of state interventions, Raco (2009) claims that, as an educational policy it expects individuals to actively participate in the prioritisation of national economic outcomes by taking responsibility for their own labour market

success. This transfer of responsibility is claimed to be a class-based policy (Allen 2015). This is because it positions working-class young people who are unsuccessful in achieving educational and labour market outcomes in deficit, resulting from their lack the aspirations, due to their own behaviours, choices and attitudes (Friedman 2014; Harrison & Waller 2018; Spohrer 2011). This deficit of aspirations "individualises structural problems" because it transfers the problems of an unequal society on to working-class young people, obscuring the wider societal problems that generate inequality and maintain socio-economic disadvantage (Friedman 2014; Harrison & Waller 2018; Spohrer 2011: 53). It is claimed that aspiration's meritocratic assumptions (which suggest that irrespective of background, anyone can succeed in education and in the labour market), are flawed because not everyone is equal within HE, and choices are limited by an individual's social background (Archer 2007; Harrison & Waller 2018; Raco 2009). It has been argued that rather than a policy of opportunity and inclusivity, instead aspiration reflects the "ongoing social reproduction of privilege/disadvantage" as it encourages everyone "to aspire to outcomes that only a privileged few are likely to attain" (Archer et al 2014:77).

The literature indicates that there is "scant" evidence of the existence of low aspirations amongst working-class young people (Harrison & Waller 2018:919) or evidence to suggest that increasing aspirations will assist the marginalised (St. Clair et al 2013), seemingly contradicting the premise upon which the policy was built. For example, St. Clair et al explored aspiration amongst schoolchildren between thirteen and fifteen years old, based in parts of the UK with constrained employment choices and "few models of high-status occupations" (2013:727). They found aspirations amongst their participants which were "far higher than the labour market can possibly support" and went on to claim that amongst working-class young people, it is a lack of knowledge about how to realise those aspirations that operates as a barrier, rather than any lack of aspirations (St. Clair et al 2013: 734). Similarly, in Archer et al's study of career aspirations amongst ten to fourteen-year-olds in England, they found "little evidence of poverty of aspirations" (2013: 66). Harrison & Waller's study claims that "young people from different social groups have similar aspirations" and that expectations around HE may have a stronger relationship with participation (2018: 915). They suggested that rather than the focus upon aspirations, expectations would

be a more effective focus for policymakers. Yet, despite being contested, aspiration has remained a feature of social mobility policy through widening participation in HE and transitions into the graduate labour market (Allen 2015; Spohrer 2011; St. Clair et al 2013).

Therefore, aspiration is a contested term that makes claims about working-class young people's behaviours and motivations, based upon meritocratic assumptions that success is the outcome of individual hard work and endeavour. As a concept, aspiration assumes that lack of success is an individual failure of effort, rather than due to wider societal inequalities, placing unsuccessful students in deficit. However, according to the literature, these students do not lack aspiration but lack the knowledge to achieve their aspirations and, as such, it is a flawed means of delivering real social mobility outcomes. Additionally, it is even more problematic because arguably, at its heart, is a fundamental inequity, due to its neglect of wider inequalities and its deflection of responsibility for success on to individual working-class students. Despite the critiques of aspiration and its apparent inequity, it is a concept that has been an established feature of the discourse surrounding HE and UK social mobility. Nevertheless, despite its potentially problematic nature, given its place within the discourse surrounding HE and its social mobility function, it has been used within the research because it is a term which can encompass law undergraduates' broad aim of becoming a lawyer, representing their individual anticipated social mobility outcomes. Therefore, it is a concept aligned to the research's aims of understanding how the experience of law undergraduates from low SEB has shaped their individual legal career aspirations.

As an undergraduate degree in law acts as one of the routes to entering the legal profession (BSB 2025a; SRA 2024d), this chapter will move on to consider the recognised barriers to access to the legal profession, relating to socio-economic circumstances, given the research's focus upon the experiences of law undergraduates from low SEB.

2.2 Becoming a lawyer: What are the known barriers to access?

Notwithstanding policy efforts to enhance social mobility, fair access to the legal profession has been and remains an issue (Krengel et al 2024; Thomas & Mungham 1972). Access to training to enter the profession had been used as “an effective mechanism of social control and exclusion” (Thomas & Mungham 1972: 104), facilitating domination by the middle and upper classes, maintaining the “narrow social basis of the recruitment to the legal profession and its place in the context of English elite groups” (Thomas & Mungham 1972: 107). Reform of legal education was set out in the Ormrod Report (Ormrod 1971), in part to tackle these issues, yet decades later, “gendered, raced and classed” segmentation of the profession persists (Sommerlad et al 2010:10). The profession uses attendance at fee paying schools as a proxy measure of social mobility (BSB 2024a; SRA 2024b). At the Bar, “a disproportionately high number of barristers” attended fee-paying schools when compared with the wider population and in 2023 this was 19.4% of barristers compared to 6.5% of school children in England (BSB 2024a:26). Solicitors comprise the largest branch of the legal profession (Milburn 2012) but in 2023, the proportion of lawyers who had attended independent schools was also high at 21%, with only 18% of lawyers from “lower socio-economic backgrounds” (SRA 2024b). Despite data from both professional bodies showing improvements in the number of women and minority ethnic members (BSB 2024a; SRA 2024b), endemic barriers to access remain, which are complex and intersectional (Krengel et al 2024). However, as the research focuses upon law undergraduates from low socio-economic backgrounds as class, the literature review will not consider all potential issues of inequality and barriers to access relating to socio-economic background will be considered in the following section of this chapter.

2.2a. Funding

Even though a national scheme of means-tested financial support existed at the time, funding of legal education and training was an issue in relation to fair access, noted in the reforms to legal education in the Ormrod Report (Ormrod 1971). Decades later funding remained a barrier to access according to the Legal Education and Training Review (LETR) which had been created by the legal sector’s professional bodies to

assure quality and standards amongst those entering the legal profession, and to make recommendations for the future regulation of legal education and training (LETR 2013). Given its intended audience of legal educators, practitioners, and regulators, the LETR's report was not intended as a scholarly work, but the research it commissioned was carried out by established, well-respected legal academics. The LETR's report stated that issues of access had become acute, compounded by undergraduate tuition fees, increasing student numbers and escalating costs of mandatory post-graduate professional qualifications, within a highly competitive and narrow labour market. This created a "bottleneck" in the training system caused by an over-supply of applicants exceeding training opportunities (LETR 2013:63). Financial constraints persist, as structural factors inhibiting diversity within the profession, and continue to contribute to the "exclusion" of those from low SEB (Krengel et al 2024:24; Yau et al 2020).

2.2b. Recruitment

Over time, with changes to the regulation of legal education, the professional bodies' gatekeeping role seemingly shifted to the profession, triggering both a change in how the profession viewed itself and the balance of power in controlling access (Ashley et al 2015; Ching et al 2015). Therefore, it is claimed that the profession now sets and controls standards for entry by defining recruitment criteria like the status of law schools and minimum academic credentials, using perceptions of merit and quality in selection processes which can perpetuate barriers to access (Francis 2015; Yau et al 2020). For some time, credentialism and "conceptualisation of merit" within recruitment processes have generated a "culture of inequality" for non-traditional students (Francis & Sommerlad 2009:67) by using recruitment criteria more likely to reflect socio-economic privilege (Francis 2015). This has been compounded by an "information gap" amongst students, as "a lack of transparency in the recruitment marketplace about the criteria law firms are using to select trainee solicitors" (Yau et al 2020: 76). Research commissioned by the LSB noted the persistence of this potentially exclusionary recruitment approach within some parts of the profession. This, combined with other forms of bias, shape understandings of what a lawyer is like which are more likely to reflect the "opportunity a person has been given than of their

potential or ability" thereby maintaining the status quo and minimising the effectiveness of diversity initiatives (Krengel et al 2024: 15).

2.2c Work experience

Access to work experience opportunities based on socio-economic background has been a recognised barrier, operating as an expected credential and means of articulating a personal employability narrative to access the legal labour market (Francis & Sommerlad 2009; Krengel et al 2024; LETR 2013). Francis & Sommerlad's (2009) empirical research claimed that work experience was used in legal recruitment to observe how individuals work within the organisation to welcome insiders and to exclude those they describe as outsiders who were unable to replicate cultural and behavioural expectations to demonstrate suitability. They claimed that this advantaged those with relevant social contacts, thereby excluding those whose awareness of the profession was gleaned from portrayals in the media, and who were most likely to be from low SEB.

In accessing the legal labour market, participation in informal legal work experience, operates as a marker of merit as "commitment", acting as a credential to access the limited, highly valued, formal vacation placements which can be essential in securing training opportunities (Francis 2015:19). However, informal work experience opportunities are not accessed equitably so not all students can participate in the same way because these informal work experience opportunities can be dependent upon social or familial networks unavailable to many students from low SEB (Francis 2015). Additionally, in the current economic climate, students from low SEB can be further disadvantaged in obtaining this type of work experience because many cannot afford to participate in unpaid informal work experience (Tibbs 2022). Consequently, unpaid work experience within legal recruitment continues to operate as a means of excluding those from low SEB (Krengel et al 2024).

2.2d. Stratification of legal education

The university attended has been another long-established barrier to access given its relevance in recruitment decisions (Francis & Sommerlad 2009; LETR 2013). “High marks in a law degree from the wrong kind of university will rarely ease” a law student’s entry into the legal profession (Webley et al 2016: 216). Elite commercial firms with a dominant place in the training market apply selective approaches to recruitment, concentrating exclusively upon a small number of “selective” universities whose students are more likely to have come from “relatively affluent” backgrounds (Ashley et al 2015:9). Usually, these elite firms attend law fairs held by these selective institutions thereby excluding students from other HE institutions (Webley et al 2016), (including post-92 universities, defined by Morgan (2022) as the former polytechnics or colleges of higher education which were granted the status of university in 1992). Selecting applicants based on the university attended was identified a decade ago as contributing to recruitment into the profession of those more likely to have privileged backgrounds in comparison to the UK population (Ashley et al 2015). Although the professional bodies actively pursue their statutory duty (BSB 2024b; 2025b; SRA 2024c) to “encourage an independent, strong, diverse and effective legal profession” (Legal Services Act 2007), these recruitment approaches persist, with recruitment criteria based on attendance at specific universities, identified as part of an embedded culture which impacts upon the success of equality, diversity and inclusion initiatives within the legal profession (Krengel et al 2024).

2.3. What do students have to say?

The student voice seems muted within the “grey” and scholarly literature, arguably resulting in law undergraduates from low SEB becoming marginalised, while endeavouring to access a profession with long-standing barriers to access, potentially inhibiting the social mobility outcomes they expect of HE. Between 2019 and 2021 95,000 students had studied Law in England (HESA 2022a) but, given the significance of its recommendations in shaping the process of qualification, only 67 law students contributed to the LETR (2013: 316). Subsequently, Hardee (2014) claimed that little seemed to be known about how students felt about possible changes in their plans to become a lawyer. While Childs et al’s (2014) longitudinal study sought law

undergraduates' views of the constraints upon their legal career aspirations, it focused upon students at one Law School only. In a small study at one "elite" university, continuing issues of access were claimed as "some law students "opt-out" of applying to certain law firms where they perceive there is no fit between themselves and the law firm" (Rowan & Vaughn 2018:217).

Although the regulatory metrics engage graduates and undergraduates, they are not discipline specific and do not focus upon law students' perceptions of access to the legal profession. The annual National Student Survey of final year undergraduates' focusses upon the quality of their academic experiences including analysis based on socio-economic circumstances, using free school meals eligibility and the indices of multiple deprivation (OfS 2024c). It does not address the factors which influence law undergraduates when making decisions about entering the legal profession. Similarly, although the annual Graduate Outcomes Survey asks graduates about the contribution they believe their studies have made to their career and work fifteen months on from graduation, its focus is upon graduates rather than undergraduates (HESA 2024a).

Therefore, the apparently muted nature of the student voice within the literature seemed significant and this influenced the research aims and the decisions relating to research design addressed in Chapter three. Accordingly, as the research concentrated upon law undergraduates' perceptions of becoming a lawyer during their degree, this prompted consideration of employability within HE as the next stage of the literature review.

2.4 Employability within English HE

Employability began as a macro-economic policy utilised internationally by respected organisations like the United Nations and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. "Government and universities believe that HE benefits the nation economically, culturally and socially" (Archer & Hutchings 2000: 556). It has since been used by successive UK governments to justify HE policy (Bathmaker et al 2013),

from the Dearing Report (NCIHE 1997) to being a rationale for full tuition fees (DoBIS 2010), the transactional nature of which generates a “moral duty” upon HE providers to address employability (Artess et al 2017:6). Employability as a public policy in England has been rationalised through the simultaneous reframing of HE as a means of responding to globalisation and the shift to the knowledge economy and also to fuel economic growth by increasing emphasis upon HE’s role in preparing graduates for work (Boden & Nedeva 2010; Holmes 2013: 2015; Tomlinson 2008). The efficacy and legitimacy of this reframing of HE has been the subject of wider academic debate (for example, Collini 2012; Nussbaum 2010) beyond the scope of the research.

In 1998, the Department of Education and Employment published a definition of employability as “the capability to move self-sufficiently within the labour market to realise potential through sustainable employment” (Hillage and Pollard 1998: 2) so employability was utilised to support employers’ mounting expectations of graduates’ work-readiness (Morley 2007; Tomlinson 2008). Informed by the meritocratic transaction implicit within HE (Tomlinson 2008), employability under-pins the rationale for full undergraduate tuition fees linked to social mobility policy (Artess et al 2017; Hordósy & Clark 2018b). It continues to inform current HE policy by balancing students’ financial investment with the expectations upon universities to “boost access for disadvantaged students and break down barriers to opportunity” to improve life chances (DoE 2024) and within current HE regulatory requirements in England which monitor under-represented students’ progression into employment and/or further study (OfS 2024a).

Notwithstanding its place within policy and regulation, employability within HE is controversial and contested. Artess et al (2017) identify critiques of employability, including amongst others, criticism that it is not sufficiently clear, that it can by implication create expectations upon HE to deliver training more appropriate for the workplace and that the regulatory approach to employability is a measurement of employment after graduation rather than a measurement of being employable. Critiques of interpretations of employability within HE include claims that they do not address labour market issues and the structural inequalities that are beyond the

control of graduates from low socio-economic circumstances, who encounter continuing differential access to relevant resources (Brown et al 2003; Hordósy & Clark 2018b). Additionally, the HE regulatory metrics do not utilise a definition of employability (OfS 2024b) which reflects the experiences of differential access to education that those from low SEB were likely to have encountered before starting the degree (Major & Briant 2023) and which might impact upon their opportunities as a graduate.

The policy and regulatory approaches to employability seem to be underpinned by an assumption that differential economic circumstances can be mitigated over the course of an undergraduate degree to facilitate professional graduate outcomes. The number of students from low SEB entering HE has increased however, they remain “at a significant disadvantage” when entering the graduate labour market (McCafferty 2022: 570). It is claimed that graduate employability can be a tool of inequality, facilitating a culture of credentials which advantages the middle-class and fails to recognise related external influences beyond the control of the individual, including local labour market variations (Brown et al 2003). It assumes that graduates perceive themselves to be in direct competition with each other which, combined with the inflation of academic credentials, freezes out those from the least advantaged backgrounds to the benefit of middle-class students (Brown et al 2003). Framed as agentic and an entirely individual responsibility, this interpretation of employability neglects the impact of labour market conditions and consequently interprets failure to secure labour market outcomes as a personal responsibility rather than considering social and structural inequalities (Bathmaker 2021; Brown et al 2003; Moreau & Leathwood 2006). This interpretation seems to continue to underpin current policy within HE (DoE 2024). Therefore, it is claimed that definitions of employability which focus upon individual possession of skills and attributes (Holmes 2002; 2013; 2015), with emphasis upon individual investment for success in the labour market, do not encompass how students behave, evaluate and access the labour market (Bathmaker 2021; Tholen 2015). Similarly, the emphasis upon internalised and individualised responsibility for employability is replicated within relational interpretations of legal employability. Law students are expected to situate themselves in relation to the legal profession and are situated by the profession as part of the recruitment process (Francis 2015).

In their empirical study of working-class students at an elite Chinese University, although Jin and Ball do not specifically address employability, they allude to it by framing current education policy as an expectation that the individual will achieve "upward social mobility", if everyone has "an equal opportunity to compete for social resources on the basis of merit, rather than by inheritance or wealth" (2020: 65). By introducing the concept of merit, which "is not an inherent personal quality", they challenge the assumption that achievement of these outcomes is an individual responsibility, and they claim that such meritocratic assumptions regarding the ability to benefit from educational opportunities really depend upon accessibility to relevant resources (Jin & Ball 2020: 65). They claim that equality of opportunity as meritocracy, obscures the impact of class and inequity, deflecting accountability away from the systems of education and social structures, onto the individual (Jin & Ball 2020).

Within the literature there seems to be a consensus that employability as HE policy, is assumed to produce social mobility outcomes, despite claims that the graduate labour market is riven with inequalities, including social class (Burke et al 2019). McCafferty claims that the data shows that although HE is perceived as facilitating social mobility via access to the graduate labour market, this is not an inevitable outcome of HE for students from low SEB, who must demonstrate "heightened resilience" to create "networks and connections from a position of deficit" as they engage in HE (2022: 586). Despite these longstanding concerns about equality of opportunity, meritocratic assumptions, employability and social mobility as outcomes of HE, continue to inform government justification for the investment undergraduates make in funding HE (DoE 2024) and rationalising its incorporation within the current regulatory framework of HE (OfS 2024b). Therefore, the next section of this chapter will consider graduate employability specifically.

2.5 Graduate employability

Graduate employability does not have a single agreed definition shared by HE stakeholders (Artess et al 2017). Employability and graduate employability are used inter-changeably in relation to undergraduates and recent graduates in the literature.

In the UK since the late 1980s employability practice within HE featured definitions which often referred to transferable, generic, key, core and employability skills (Atkins 1999). A practitioner focussed, theoretical definition is widely cited within the literature and describes graduate employability as:

> "a set of achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes – that makes graduates more likely to gain employment to be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy."
>
> (Yorke 2006:8)

This definition maintains an understanding of employability as individual and personal (Artess et al 2017) with a focus upon skills and attributes.

Alternative definitions of graduate employability have been proposed which incorporate concepts of the self and individual identity. Bridgstock advocated for the incorporation of career management skills within employability to equip students with "the ability to build a career" using "skills necessary to navigate the world of work" and "self-management skills" (2009:34-35). Self-management skills are underpinned by an awareness of the self, encompassing the ability to evaluate personal "values, abilities, interests and goals" and are aligned with career identity (Bridgstock 2009:37). Tholen's qualitative study of British and Dutch students claimed that students' understanding of the labour market was limited within "existing social conventions, values and sanctions" so past experiences are used to understand the possibilities available to them and how to prepare to enter the labour market (2015: 777). Therefore, employability should be perceived as relational, because as students enter the labour market, they use their identity relationally, seeing themselves in competition with others, influencing their understanding of the labour market (Tholen 2015).

In a review of employability literature commissioned by Advance HE an “increasing number of identity-based accounts of employability” was observed (Dalrymple et al 2021:24). For example, Holmes’ concept of graduate employability draws upon the theory of social identity to argue that definitions of employability based purely on possession of traditional skills, reflecting human capital, do not address the influence of social class upon the graduate’s position in relation to the labour market (Holmes 2013). This can have a detrimental impact upon the ability of graduates from low SEB to exploit their educational experiences to secure employment (Holmes 2013). Holmes argued that as skills are founded in performance, they are socially constructed and relational in nature (2013) and therefore graduate identity evolves through interactions where identity is claimed by graduates and affirmed by “significant others” like graduate recruiters, and which therefore involve an awareness of self (Holmes 2015:224). Clarke’s (2018) theoretical model of graduate employability draws upon Holmes’ concept of graduate identity and the UK and Australian employability literature. It proposes a more integrated model for employability emphasising, amongst other things, graduates’ self-awareness of their own employability, to enable the reflexive audit of behaviours and attributes required to respond to the vagaries of the labour market and therefore situates graduate employability as an individual responsibility and as agentic.

As a possible conceptual framework for the research, graduate employability’s focus upon success in the labour market after graduation was not aligned to the research’s focus upon undergraduates’ perceptions of the experiences of becoming a lawyer as they navigated HE. However, as sociological concepts of identity specifically have become prevalent within the definitions of employability, the literature review moved on to explore identity generally and in relation to professional practice, to examine how students perceived their own employability in relation to becoming a lawyer.

2.6 Identity

Identity has both an outward interpretation that can be described as “roles” and a personal interpretation as the “ambivalent, reflective and reflexive sense that people

have of who they are" (Lawler 2014: 7). This section of the literature review will focus upon theories of identity located within post-modernism in sociology, given its association with social constructivism and the interpretivist paradigm (Cote & Levine 2002) aligning it to the research's ontological and epistemological assumptions in Chapter three. Post-modernism assumes that there has been a discernible shift in the social world, with the loss of old social structures which provided knowledge of an individual's place in the world, removing "ontological security" (Giddens 1990:131). As individuals can no longer influence their social world, Giddens (1990; 1991) claimed that this generates a sense of powerlessness, internalised as a process of self-enquiry as a personal development task resulting in attentiveness to identity, in a journey towards self-fulfilment. Giddens' structuration theory combines the use of individual agency to negotiate contemporary social structures, allowing the individual to seek their identity in response to those changes, describing that identity work as a "reflexive project" (1991: 32) making it compatible with interpretations of graduate employability as an individual process of personal development.

While Giddens' theory is not universally adopted across the literature considered, there seems to be broad consensus that identity exists at a micro level (focussed upon the individual's identity work) and a macro level (relating to social structures) (Cote & Levine 2002). Fixed or pre-determined identities, linked to old social structures have yielded to the possibility of the manipulation, selection, and adjustment of identity (Bauman 2005; 2009; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 2009). The literature also seems broadly consistent in its ontological assumptions, asserting identity as socially constructed and created through a social, collective process (Bauman 2005; 2009; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 2009; Lawler 2014). Generally, there is agreement with Giddens' claims that identity is reflexive, acting as a means of control, with individuals turning in upon themselves, internalising self-development as a process of self-enquiry (Bauman 2005; Elliott 2014; Lawler 2014). There is agreement that identity is predominantly an individualised project (Bauman 2009; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 2009; Cote 1996; Elliott & Du Gay 2009; Giddens 1990). As such it enables individuals to influence the things in the social world that they have the power to change rather than the things that they cannot (Bauman 2005). Identity is both a task (Bauman 2005; 2009; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 2009) and a process which is performative (Lawler

2014), fluid, fragmented and malleable (Elliott & Du Gay 2009). Accordingly, identity is inherently unstable, aiding the development of a new identity (Bauman 2005; Elliott 2014; Elliott & Du Gay 2009) as it responds to constant change within the social world, through identity work (Lawler 2014), enabling individuals to select their own biographies to live their own lives (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 2009). However, as identity is the product of the social world it can also produce the inequalities endemic in the social world (Lawler 2014).

The assumptions that underpin Giddens' "reflexive project" have been criticised as normative and theoretical (Adams 2006). Other critiques claim that if identity remains a project in constant transition, then all social actors are performing continuously, making it manipulative, artificial, and inauthentic (Elliott 2014). It is insular because of the emphasis upon the self and therefore reductive, diminishing social, and political issues to mere matters of personal change and development (Elliott & Du Gay 2009). In the context of the labour market, where everyone is a commodity the sense of self generated by the reflexive project deemed to be a marketable commodity becomes more challenging (Webb 2004). It is ethnocentric, based upon and only appropriate to Western, late-modern culture (Adams 2003; Jenkins 2000). As reflexivity is dependent upon context, it is therefore constrained by the specific culture in which it operates, restricting self-development, instead becoming another form of social control by a different name (Adams 2003; 2006).

Giddens' theory is criticised because rather than offering liberation from the constraints of social structure, it replaces one burden with another, within continual reconstruction of identity generating implicit uncertainty (Adams 2003). It exaggerates agency's ability to generate change, neglecting the considerable influence of structure upon inequities and elitism (Adams 2006; Webb 2004). Consequently, it is a theory which over-states the potential for self-development, thus creating unrealistic expectations for its achievement (Webb 2004). Given the apparent inequity in accessing the legal profession this last critique is a significant point for the research.

Lawler synthesised aspects of this literature, drawing upon concepts from symbolic interactionism to offer a contemporary but normative theory of identity (2014). Lawler (2014) claims that identity is both public and personal, conceding the impact of both agency and structure, and suggested a more holistic and inclusive approach. Identity remains performative, multiple, relational, and processual in nature, apparently sharing Giddens' and Bauman's standpoints because knowledge and understanding are changeable and unfixed, so identity is processual and fluid and therefore a task that will never be completed. Lawler's definition of identity falls into three parts: firstly, how different you are to others, secondly as identification (how we recognise that we are part of a category or group (i.e. what we have in common) and finally, how similar you are to others as in a shared identity. She claims that if identity fails it is because the identity does not live up to the social values that this identity ought to be. Lawler's position is that the social world constrains but also creates identity, produced collectively, as a product of social interactions and relations rather than as the property of a person. Therefore, as the product of social interaction, identity was compatible with the research because it can be a product of the undergraduate experience. However, as the research focused upon law undergraduates' experience of becoming a lawyer, it seemed that an interpretation of identity within an occupational context would be necessary. This prompted an examination of literature regarding professional identity which is addressed in the next section.

2.7 Professional identity

Professional identity shares characteristics of the theories of identity above but contextualised within professional practice. It is socially constructed (Ibarra 1999) and task based (Bowen 2016) and involves a "relationship between disciplinary knowledge, technical skills and values that underpin how professionals practise" (Trede 2023:312). Aligning with concepts of identity outlined above, professional identity formation is an "ongoing, transformative process with many intersections with personal, professional and social spheres" (Trede 2023: 322). Within the professional identity literature if a theory is stated at all, Giddens (1999) was used often as a theoretical underpinning (Trede et al 2012) with professional identity considered a self-

reflexive project, which although personal to the individual is shaped in relation to the social world at the same time (Abrandt Dahlgren 2011).

Some definitions of professional identity reference skills, beliefs and attitudes aligning with Yorke's (2006) definition of employability. Often, professional identity is defined as: "the relatively stable and enduring constellation of beliefs, values and motives by which people define themselves in a profession" (Schein 1978 cited by Ibarra 1999:764). Nadelson et al's (2015) definition begins by reference to skills and attributes which reflect the profession, but which are internalised, and linked to the individual's professional development. Definitions reference internalised meanings of the self, contextualised in a social role or profession, sometimes also referring to skills and attributes. Developing professional identity through relevant skills and knowledge development can "result in people feeling like a professional and/or as part of the profession (Reissner & Armitage Chan 2024: 2712). It is the "self that has been developed with the commitment to perform competently and legitimately in the context of the profession and its development can continue over the course of the individual's career" (Tan et al 2017:1505). As HE can be a site of identity work it is also a site of professional identity development (Trede et al 2012). It is claimed that professional identity is a tacit component of the undergraduate curriculum in preparing for the workplace (Jensen & Jetten 2015). Undergraduates can recognise their own professional identity and its development (Jensen & Jetten 2015; Nadelsen et al 2015) but as this is based upon self-reports this could be unreliable potentially (Tan et al 2015).

2.7.1 Professional identity and law students

For law students, "emergent professional identity includes a conceptualisation of the dominant roles that they will play as lawyers" (Field et al 2013: 17). That Law Schools can be a location for professional identity development seems to be self-evident in the United States of America (US) literature because professional identity has become an established and significant component of the reforms to the US legal education system (Sullivan et al 2007). Sullivan et al's influential report (2007) lacks explicit theoretical underpinning but was not intended as an empirical study. In the US literature the expectation of professional identity development seems to be largely unquestioned

perhaps due to the widespread influence of Sullivan et al's report for example, with claims made that professional identity is implicit within the undergraduate curriculum (Daicoff 2015) and models for its inclusion within the curriculum (Alexander 2011).

The high premium placed upon professional identity within the US literature seems to have been influential upon the Australian legal education literature which is persuasive given the similarities between the UK and Australian legal education sectors. Australian literature concurs that Law School contributes to the development of professional identity with professional identity almost a by-product of the curriculum which influences students' thinking and feelings about who they are (Hall et al 2010). Professional identity is developed in part by what is included as well as what is excluded within legal education, as professional identity exists within hidden aspects of the undergraduate curriculum (Hall et al 2010). Student perceptions of their own career aspirations might be influenced by their ability to form a professional identity whether as a legal professional or as a graduate in a professional career and it is claimed that professional identity can and should be developed within Law Schools to support students making the transition to thinking and becoming a lawyer (Field et al 2013).

This approach to professional identity development has not been as influential within English legal education perhaps because English legal education operates within an entirely different and separate legal jurisdiction, with different laws, principles of professional regulation, educational structures and pedagogies. English legal education exists within the specific context of the English and Welsh legal jurisdiction, operating as an autonomous legal system encompassing the law, courts and tribunals, judiciary and legal personnel within England and Wales (rather than the UK) (Gillespie & Ware 2025). Within the legal system of England and Wales the authority of the relevant regulators of legal education as professional bodies, derives from the Legal Services Board as the statutory oversight regulator for legal services in England and Wales (Legal Services Act 2007). At the time that the data was generated, in England the qualifying law degree (QLD), as the academic stage of training to become a solicitor or barrister, contained content prescribed by the relevant professional bodies,

which stipulated core knowledge and general transferable skills (BSB & SRA 2014; SRA 2021). The QLD did not address the vocational components of the final part of the academic stage of training which were addressed in the required post-graduate professional qualifications (BSB 2025a; SRA 2021). Reflecting the longstanding tension between law as an undergraduate academic discipline and its part in the academic stage of training to become a lawyer, because of its role as a QLD, (Burton & Watkins 2020), professional identity was not prescribed by the professional bodies in the general transferable skills which formed part of the QLD (BSB & SRA 2014; SRA 2021).

Neither was professional identity introduced within the recent changes to professional legal education. Those alterations were precipitated by the statutory reform of the regulation of legal services in England and Wales, which set out regulatory objectives and professional principles (Legal Services Act 2007). It is claimed that this statutory regulation prioritises “market forces” (Unger 2020) and accordingly, the legislation reshaped perceptions of professionalism within a regulatory context as market-driven, competitive and consumer-focused (Boon 2010). This statutory regulatory imperative, as consumer-focused and competitive, underpinned the review and reform of legal education that followed (LETR 2013) but, resulting changes to professional qualification for solicitors (SRA 2024d) and barristers (BSB 2025a) did not incorporate professional identity.

The literature relating to professional identity does not necessarily distinguish between being and becoming a professional. Aligning with the theories of identity outlined above, becoming a professional is “an emergent concept of identity formation” (Scanlon 2011:13), which is iterative and ongoing, involving the reflexive nature of the self as “a constant questioning and reconstructing of the self in a lifetime project” (Scanlon 2011: 27). Situated in time and space prior to entering a profession, becoming therefore enables the awareness of a professional self-equated with professional identity, as a “rehearsal for a professional self” (Scanlon 2011: 14). Reissner & Armitage-Chan claim that “the process of learning and development during

which individuals start to think, feel and act as professionals" or "becoming" is an early category of professional identity formation (2024:2712).

As the research was located within HE, (rather than in the workplace) an earlier form of professional identity was required for the research to explore law undergraduates' experiences of becoming a lawyer and their perceptions of preparing to enter a profession as they navigated HE. The literature review therefore moved on to explore the concept of pre-professional identity (Jackson 2016; 2017).

2.7.2 Pre-professional identity

Advocating for an expanded concept of graduate employability, moving beyond skills development, Jackson claims that definitions of employability should incorporate pre-professional identity, as an "understanding of and connections with the skills, qualities, conduct, culture and ideology of a student's intended profession" as a "less mature form of professional identity" (2016: 926). It is the process of "instilling professional values and qualities of a profession" which enables students to "act, think and feel like professionals" (Park et al 2025:1-2). Pre-professional identity involves a "relational and socially constructed process" Tomlinson & Jackson 2021: 885), aligning with the claims about emerging graduate identity within HE (Holmes 2013).

Amongst other things, pre-professional identity development can be influenced by personal factors, including values and motivations, students' own understanding of career direction (Clanchy et al 2021) and by work experience, work based and experiential learning (Jackson 2017; Park et al 2025). It is claimed that work experience provides students with exposure to the professional cultures and behaviours to support their developing professional identities, to demonstrate the behaviours employers expect when recruiting graduates, with this identity formation making an important contribution to ease students' journey from HE into the graduate labour market (Tomlinson & Jackson 2021). Limited access to such environments could constrain the development of such professional identity with Tomlinson & Jackson (2021) noting the connection between access to the social and economic

resources necessary to gain such exposure and professional identity development. However, HE can mitigate this by facilitating connections between students from low SEB and professional practice (Jackson 2016; Tomlinson & Jackson 2021).

Therefore, pre-professional identity offered a suitable concept, aligned to graduate employability, to explore how law undergraduates from low SEB connected their understanding of the skills, culture and ideology of the legal profession (Jackson 2016) and their identity development as a lawyer during HE. However, this concept on its own did not address how undergraduates went on to make career decisions during the degree. Addressing legal employability specifically, Francis (2015) suggested that it should include an understanding of what students imagine they can become and how that envisaged future incentivises their current behaviour in pursuing their career aspirations recommending the concept of possible selves. Accordingly, possible selves became an appropriate concept to explore why some undergraduates sustained and others opted out of their original plans to become a lawyer, prompting the review of relevant literature in the next section.

2.8 Possible selves

Markus & Nurius' concept of possible selves uses past and future perceptions of an individual's self-knowledge as the "cognitive manifestation of enduring goals, aspirations, motives, fears, and threats" (1986:954). They argue that possible selves include an individual's range of beliefs, hopes and fears of the future, and represent "what they might become, what they would like to become, and what they are afraid of becoming" (Markus & Nurius 1986:954). Within the European tradition of social psychology, self and identity are related (Simon & Trötschel 2009). Self and identity are the "shorthand expressions" for the collection of "psychological experiences (thoughts, feelings, motives, etc)" that mirror and shape an individual's representation and interpretation of themselves within the social world or, how we understand who we are (Simon & Trötschel 2009: 90). As part of understanding who we are, psychologists claim that an individual's thoughts, beliefs and feelings and their

observations of their own behaviours, generate self-knowledge (Simon & Trötschel 2009).

This self-knowledge within possible selves includes the self-concept (Markus & Nurius 1986). The self-concept is the framework in which an individual understands themselves with their own social world. It is “a system of affective-cognitive structures…about the self”, interpreting information about the self, providing meaning and understanding of relevant past experiences, shaping an individual’s expectations and their thoughts and beliefs about “their potential and about their future” (Markus & Nurius 1986:954-955). As well as interpreting prior experiences, possible selves project the self-concept in the future, as “the selves we could become and the selves we are afraid of becoming” (Markus and Nurius 1986: 954). This reflects an individual’s current understanding of what is possible or not possible to accomplish in the future, as “an evaluative and interpretive context” for the individual’s understanding of the self and their behaviour in the present (Markus and Nurius 1986:954). Therefore, this evaluation and interpretation of the future representation of the self, shapes actions in the present and the future, providing “a conceptual link between cognition and motivation” (Markus and Nurius 1986:954).

Possible selves are individualised and include both positive and negative self-conceptions with some self-conceptions accessible and established, as they are fundamental to the individual’s understanding of themselves (Markus and Nurius 1986). Others will be more precarious because of their links to motivation and individual socio-economic context, making possible selves the reasoned and intellectual expression of “hopes, fear, goals and threats” (Markus & Nurius 1986: 954). The range of possible selves available is dependent upon personalised prior social experiences and the “individual’s particular socio-cultural and historical context” (Markus & Nurius 1986: 954). Thus, socio-cultural context, experiences and what seems available or unavailable to someone in their circumstances, shapes the possibility and likelihood of the range of available possible selves (Markus & Nurius 1986). Individuals distil a range of potential possible selves into those that they would like to be and like to avoid using an internalised framework

to determine those possible selves they believe to be “more (or less) desirable than others” and those which are “probable and improbable” (Harrison 2018: 213). Positive or like to be possible selves seem to be possessed of and generate agency, acting as motivation for action in the present whereas, motivation is absent within negative possible selves as the negativity precludes the formation of approaches to break away from the negativity (Markus & Nurius 1986). Possible selves are more than intentions or doubts and involve elaboration, as “an experience of what it would be like” to be that possible self, which generates an individualized meaning of that possible self (Erikson 2007: 350). However, as possible selves are socially constructed and elaboration of a possible self is resource dependent, so differential access to relevant resources can result in some marginalised groups potentially being constrained when imagining their imagined futures (Henderson 2019; Stevenson & Clegg 2011).

Possible selves influence identity development, as professional identity, which involves ideas of the “desired future self and how this connects more broadly to individuals’ sense of who they are in relation to work” (Tomlinson & Jackson 2021: 886). It is a concept which facilitates the exploration of the relationships between imagined future careers, perceptions of past and current experiences, understandings of the self, as influences upon behaviours in the present (Clegg 2019). It is a concept applicable to HE, as HE is inextricably linked to graduate futures and perceptions of improved life chances, bolstered by employability initiatives and how the futures students envisage might be differentially accessed (Henderson et al 2019; Stevenson & Clegg 2012).

Possible selves as a concept has been used to explore the interplay between agency, socio-cultural circumstances, and systemic barriers to accessing HE amongst those from low-income backgrounds to explore how young people from low SEB make decisions about participating in HE (Harrison 2018). Within HE it has been used to explore access to extra-curricular activities and employability initiatives (Stevenson & Clegg 2011) and in relation to access to the accountancy profession (Papafilipou & Bathmaker 2019) where like law, recruitment processes have been claimed to have contributed to differential access (Ashley et al 2015). In relation to legal education specifically, Francis claimed that the socio-cultural constraints upon possible selves’

development could limit law schools' capacity to implement "transformative employability agendas for the benefit of all their students" suggesting that those from low SEB could be disadvantaged in accessing their chosen career (2015: 198). This suggests that legal employability based on Francis's interpretation presented a potential barrier to students hopes for social mobility.

The concept of possible selves links temporality, structure, agency, and subjectivity by addressing "social context, including past and present experiences", to explore potential inequalities within HE (Henderson et al 2019; Murphy 2019: 79). Therefore, it was an appropriate concept within the research to explore undergraduate participants' beliefs about their like to be and like to avoid occupational futures and their motivations and actions in the present as the negotiated HE to progress towards those futures (Erikson 2019). Possible selves was a concept used to understand law undergraduates' subjective feelings and beliefs about the relationship between their degree and experiences of HE and their legal career expectations, including their positive and negative beliefs about their futures, based on what they believed to be desirable and probable (Harrison 2018). Drawing upon Francis' (2015) findings about legal employability and possible selves therefore offered a means of illustrating how specifically class, interpreted in the research as socio-economic circumstances, could impact upon access to the legal profession and social mobility. As imagined futures of what is possible and impossible could be limited because of prior sociocultural experiences, possible selves as a concept was applicable to the experiences of becoming a lawyer amongst law undergraduates from low SEB and appropriate to employ within the research.

2.9 Equity-based education

Given the potential significance of prior-sociocultural experiences as an influence upon access to the legal profession as social mobility, the concept of equity-based education was also used within the research (Major & Briant 2023). Proposed and advocated as a means of improving social mobility in UK schools by the UK's first professor of social mobility and former Chief Executive of the Sutton Trust (a leading social mobility charity in the UK), equity-based education is a concept which acknowledges that "in an unequal world, education struggles to be the great escalator

imagined by politicians" (Major & Briant 2023: 45). It recognises that pupils from low SEB or working-class backgrounds face significant barriers to learning inside and outside schools and challenges educational policies within schools that expect education alone to be enough to deliver social mobility outcomes. Equity-based education therefore recognises the "challenge of reducing barriers to learning" but promotes approaches to learning which are simultaneously inclusive and are also "relentless in identifying - and where possible, helping to overcome - impediments to learning outside school" (Major & Briant 2023: 9).

Equity-based education is based upon four principles: "equity not equality," the prioritisation of capacity over deficit approaches, the development of "authentic individual relationships" and recognition that individuals have "multiple not singular talents" (Major & Briant 2023: 23). The first principle of equity and not equality, reflects a simple but powerful acknowledgement that pupils "do not all start from the same place" (Major & Briant 2023: 25). It rejects approaches to education which assume that all students should receive the same support by its acknowledgement that some pupils will encounter additional barriers to learning outside of the classroom because of their socio-economic background (Major & Briant 2023). It is a principle that promotes the provision of additional, targeted support as a way of "working alongside and enabling children who have faced greater barriers" (Major & Briant 2023: 25). The second principle is explicitly "anti-deficit" in its prioritisation of capacity thinking in relation to pupils from low SEB, by its emphasis upon what these pupils "can do rather than what they can't do, looking for their strengths and resources and building on them to create positive outcomes" (Major & Briant 2023: 26). In its application, this principle promotes identification of the barriers that these pupils have faced along with actions to remove those barriers, to foster their educational success (Major & Briant 2023). Equity-based education's third principle encourages the development of "authentic individual relationships with pupils," by acknowledging the unique experiences and backgrounds of each pupil (Major & Briant 2023: 33). Its final principle recognises that pupils possess many aptitudes, giving the examples of "creative, vocational, and personal, not just academic" aptitudes, all of which should be appreciated and celebrated (Major & Briant 2023: 39).

Equitable approaches to education are part of the national and international literature for example, inclusive and equitable quality education is one of the sustainable development goals set out by the United Nation's Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA 2026). Although sitting within this broad category within the literature, Major & Briant's specific principles of equity-based education were articulated as a practical approach for teachers to support working class pupils in UK schools and to foster debate, encouraging equitable educational policies. For example, the principles have been used to develop a "self-evaluation tool for schools to assess and enhance" their approaches to achieving educational equity (Brooks et al 2024).

By transferring the principles of equity-based education from UK schools into the context of HE, given the research's focus upon law undergraduates from low SEB, these principles have been applied in a new context. The principles of equity-based education are relevant within the research, because in their prior education the undergraduates from low SEB who participated in the research, are likely to have already encountered "barriers to learning" which are "multi-dimensional, interactive and cumulative" and which are likely to impact upon their HE experiences (Major & Briant 2023: 33), potentially contributing to the maintenance of barriers to the legal profession. Therefore, equity-based education has been used in the research to explore potential mitigations to address the classed barriers and equity challenges undergraduates from low SEB experience, as they navigate their academic and professional journeys through HE to become a lawyer, which could contribute to the maintenance of barriers to the legal profession. This is addressed further in relation to the proposed conceptual model in Chapter five.

Having explored concepts to be used within the research the remainder of this chapter will address the research's theoretical framework and how this contributed to the development of the research questions.

2.10 Theoretical Framework

As the literature suggested that HE is the site of inequality based upon class, potentially constraining the development of professional identities and the choices law undergraduates from low SEB believe available to them, an appropriate theoretical framework was required. It is claimed that social class influences the undergraduate experience and entry into the graduate labour market (Bathmaker 2021) so, to understand the potentially classed experiences of HE, low socio-economic background was used as a generally recognised signifier of class, initially by employing the widely utilised term “disadvantage” within the research. However, given the potential for deficit interpretations associated with the term “disadvantage” (Major & Briant 2023) it was replaced and references made to low socio-economic background (SEB).

As the discipline of sociology explores how individuals and organisations behave within society (BSA 2024) Bourdieu’s theory of practice (1977) seemed appropriate to the research as it reconciled the distinctive theories of structure and agency to explain social action (Maggio 2017). It is a theory which rejects explanations of structure alone as the controlling influence upon human action, with social actors unable to exercise any choice other than to submit to the systems imposed by structure and instead incorporates the possibility that social actors have choices, albeit with some constraints (Maggio 2017).

Actions (as practice) emanate from the habitus of social actors as habitus involves, “systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures” (Bourdieu 1977: 72). Habitus is structured and structuring because it results from an individual’s place within the social world, influencing their behaviour as practice (Bourdieu 1977). Habitus is enduring and shaped by social interactions, operating within a culture or social structure but also as the product of a culture or social structure, enabling individuals to perpetuate that social structure in how they think and act (Bourdieu 2005).

Habitus operates as a “matrix of perceptions and actions (Maggio 2017:79), forming “the basis of choices, practices and imposed limits perceived by social actors” (Burke & Hannaford-Simpson 2019: 20). It predisposes individuals to act or not to act based on dispositions which are the products of previous life experiences, thereby shaping what an individual believes is possible or impossible (Bourdieu 1990a; Reay 2004). Habitus is both collective and individualised (Reay 2004), reflecting the attitudes that social actors internalise, shaped by their past experiences and re-enacted in their current behaviours, albeit with some autonomy (Maggio 2017). Primary habitus is formed early in life through family and developed further through education (Thomson 2017). Although it might be difficult to change, habitus is capable of being developed or altered deliberately but such change might be within limits (Bourdieu 2005). While habitus generates actions unconsciously, circumstances can prompt the individual to question themselves resulting in its conscious development generating “new facts of the self” (Reay 2004: 438). Therefore, habitus influences the attitudes, interpretations and decisions taken as individuals as they engage with the social world and that influence is implicit and unwitting (Thomson 2017).

Along with habitus, the theory of practice (1977) provided the analytical tools of capital and field described as “thinking tools” (Wacquant 1989). Habitus operates in relation to the field because “the field structures the habitus” (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992:127). Therefore, habitus supports the individual’s interpretation of the field as a “meaningful world, a world endowed with sense and value in which it is worth investing one’s energy” (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992:127). However, when there is no sense of fit between habitus and field, this can generate distress, causing the individual to transform their habitus to “fit” the field (Thomson 2017). Fields are a “network, or a configuration, of objective relations between positions” as social spaces dependent upon power (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992: 97). They are sites of reproduction and of “struggles or competitions” which operate to create change (Bourdieu 2005:47), varying in formation subject to the game being played within the field (Thomson 2017).

Bourdieu claimed that the education system was a competitive field, operating as a structure mediated by perceptions of equality, reproducing privilege through the

connection between academic qualifications and work (Bourdieu 1977). Therefore, far from facilitating upward mobility, the education system sustains dominant, privileged cultures because successful negotiation of education requires knowledge of the rules of that dominant culture, reproducing social inequality "by guaranteeing social stability through the controlled selection of a limited number of individuals" (Bourdieu & Passeron 1977: 167). Burke (2017) applied this to contemporary HE to claim that rather than facilitating social mobility, the educational system sustains and reproduces privilege via endemic principles of equality and meritocracy demonstrated by treating everyone equally. Burke (2017) went on to claim, applying Bourdieu's theory, that although apparently meritocratic, the education system results in students making investments in their futures, who blame themselves for any lack of success, which constitutes symbolic violence, perpetuating inequality (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992), an approach relevant to the research's aims.

As an analytical tool Bourdieu's interpretation of capital extends beyond a purely economic value, as it refers to the reproducible resources, possessed and/or accumulated by social actors to improve positions within a field (Bourdieu 1986). Capital has three forms, subject to the field in which it is deployed, and all are capable of being converted into monetary value or for better outcomes within the field: economic, cultural and social capital (Bourdieu 1986). Cultural capital can be accumulated or developed because it emanates from habitus (Bourdieu & Passeron 1990). Particularly relevant to the research, cultural capital includes academic qualifications reflecting the degree's value as a means of exchange within the labour market which has become a "condition for legitimate access to a growing number of positions" (Bourdieu 1986: 26). Therefore, it is claimed that cultural capital contributes to the reproduction of social inequality within education (Webb et al 2005).

Social capital relates to the resources that can be marshalled to improve field position, resulting from the investment in building or reproducing relationships as social networks and connections relevant to the field (Bourdieu 1986; Maggio 2017). Maintenance of this network requires economic capital directly or indirectly (Bourdieu 1986) and therefore raises the issue of differential access based on socio-economic

circumstances. The combination of cultural and social capital can be a form of prestige or value recognised within the field which can be transformed into economic capital (Bourdieu 1990b; Maggio 2017). Given the value and potential benefit such capital can generate in the field, as with cultural capital, issues of differential access to social capital are also pertinent to the research's aims.

Bourdieu's theory is not without criticism. It is suggested that Bourdieu does not actually move away from structure and agency, because his theory must be explored utilising both concepts (Maggio 2017). If the social actor behaves without awareness of the influences upon them, and their own dispositions, it is argued that his theory replaces structure with habitus, without changing its impact upon the social actor's conduct (Maggio 2017). It is considered deterministic because it does not recognise the full extent of individual agency to produce change (Dressman 2008; Jenkins 1982; Sullivan 2002) and it suggests a narrow view of the working class which does not recognise its "internal differentiation" (Jenkins 1982: 278). Arguably, cultural capital could instead be interpreted as social mobility given educational credentials' ability to facilitate transition between classes (Sullivan 2002). Habitus is critiqued as undistinguishable from practice and is not fully defined for further examination (Maggio 2017). It is argued that habitus is not reflexive as it is fixed and not capable of change (Sweetman 2003) but Bourdieu (2005) did indicate that habitus could be transformed and is capable of adjustment although such change might be within limits.

Other critiques reported by Nash (1999) challenge the adoption of habitus by researchers who do so because Bourdieu is a well-known theorist. However, Bourdieu's theories were not familiar to me before starting the research and other potential social theories were considered. It has been claimed that although it can be difficult to work with Bourdieu's theory, it is valuable because it "forces one to think" (Nash 1999:185) so, as someone conducting research at their place of work this was a persuasive rationale. Despite its challenges it offered the potential for findings that might not have surfaced within my normal academic practice and therefore helped in minimizing the potential for assumptions based on familiarity (Mercer 2007). Consequently, Bourdieu's thinking tools (Wacquant 1989) were selected, not because

of their ubiquity, notoriety, or complexity but because it seemed essential given the research's focus upon the potentially classed experiences of HE amongst law undergraduates from low SEB.

2.11 Theoretical framework and the research questions

The research aimed to explore the perceptions of law undergraduates from low SEB, employing the concepts of pre-professional identity and possible selves to understand their experiences of becoming a lawyer. Bourdieu's thinking tools (Wacquant 1989) were adopted because they were relevant to the research's aim to utilise class to explain the potential for structural reproduction and legitimation of inequalities within higher education (Bourdieu & Passeron 1977). Therefore, they were suitable to analyse marginalised groups (Dressman 2008) like undergraduates from low SEB (interpreted here as Bourdieu's working class). Bourdieu claimed that the education system was a competitive field (Bourdieu 1977) and students experienced the prevailing cultures within the field of HE, while anticipating entry into the field of legal practice to become a lawyer, as social structures. Bourdieu's thinking tools were used therefore to address the relationship between the perceptions of law undergraduates from low SEB, of the connections between their own capitals, habitus and agency and their experiences of HE regarding their aspirations to become a lawyer and entering the field of legal practice.

As identity is a "manifestation of the habitus (Crozier et al 2019), pre-professional identity (Jackson 2016; 2017) was a concept compatible with Bourdieu's analytical tools. Originally, the research's thesis anticipated that the law curriculum, as a significant component of the undergraduate experience, would be an influence upon pre-professional identity development, constraining or enabling their envisaged lawyer possible selves. However, it became apparent during the research that pre-professional identity was one of several dispositions of the habitus which influenced undergraduate participants' evaluation of their lawyer possible selves (Harrison 2018) and their career decision-making, so possible selves as an aspect of habitus, took on greater significance than originally anticipated.

The concept of possible selves and Bourdieu's thinking tools are compatible. In relation to capitals, possible selves as a concept enabled the examination of undergraduates' understanding of relevant social and cultural capital used by legal recruiters (like extra-curricular activities), which can exclude potential candidates, reproducing inequality (Yau et al 2020: 85). As possible selves are shaped by an individual's socio-cultural context and are subject to the constraints and opportunities of current and past social environments (Markus & Nurius 1986), it is a concept aligned to habitus (Bourdieu 2005). Undergraduate participants had a shared original habitus as all were final year law undergraduates, who originally aspired to become lawyers, having self-identified as coming from low SEB. Habitus is one Bourdieu's thinking tools which enables analysis and explanation of experiences in the context of social reproduction, but which enables the influences of structure and agency to be reconciled (Costa et al 2018). Consequently, it was appropriate within the research as it encompassed undergraduates' experiences of HE as a structure and the exercise of their agency in making career decisions during the degree. When exposed to a different field like HE, habitus can alter (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992) so although it emanates from prior socio-cultural context "it is subject to the transformations brought about by subsequent experiences" (Nash 1999:176). Habitus alteration facilitates development of the self (Reay 2004) as a way of being and behaving (Costa et al 2018) so aligns with the concepts of professional identity and possible selves as elements of identity and the self. Habitus incorporates dispositions which reflect "tendency, propensity or inclination" (Bourdieu 1977) and generate those ways of being and behaving so the research sought to understand from the perspective of law undergraduates from low SEB, what they believed and how that influenced their behaviour as they navigated HE, relating to becoming a lawyer.

Therefore, the research set out to explore what law undergraduates from low SEB understood was necessary to become a lawyer, and the influence of that understanding upon their behaviour, as they navigated the field of HE. This reflected their 'feel for the game' of becoming a lawyer, as a disposition of the habitus (Bourdieu 1990a; Costa et al 2018). Additionally, using habitus also enabled analysis of these undergraduates' descriptions of other dispositions of the habitus, as behaviours and practices, which had influenced the exercise of their agency in becoming a lawyer, as

they evaluated their lawyer possible selves, and which might have been subject to issues of differential access because of their socio-economic circumstances. This was important both for those undergraduates who had decided to become a lawyer and for those who had decided not to, as a means of revealing any issues of inequity in developing relevant habitus, that they might have experienced. Bourdieu's theory helped shape the design of the research questions (Varpio et al 2020). Research questions one to three generated data via semi-structured interviews with final year law undergraduates from low SEB. The form of research questions four and five differ from the previous questions as they were used to generate data via focus groups of Law staff to explore their perceptions of undergraduates' career aspirations and professional identity development.

Consequently, the research sought to understand perceptions of the experiences of HE in relation to becoming a lawyer from the perspective of final year law undergraduates from low SEB, in a post-92 university in England and the following research questions were developed:

1. Why did students want to become a lawyer when they started the degree?
2. Did students see themselves as a lawyer?
3. How has the course shaped students' career aspirations?
4. How are students' career aspirations perceived by staff?
5. How, if at all, do staff believe that the course influence students' development of a professional identity as lawyer?

Having reviewed the literature and having set out the theoretical framework to be used in interpreting and analysing the data generated, the next chapter will address the design of the research.

Chapter 3: Research Design

As the research questions explore perceptions of the experiences of HE, in relation to becoming a lawyer, amongst final year law undergraduates from low socio-economic backgrounds (SEB), a flexible, qualitative research design was adopted. This qualitative or flexible research design was employed to generate sufficiently rich, descriptive data identifying participants' experiences (Bryman 2012; Robson 2002) which was compatible with the research's ontology, epistemological and methodology.

The research took place in the Law School of a post-92 university in England. Final year, law undergraduates from low SEB were invited to participate in the research because they were best placed to reflect upon their undergraduate experiences to share their perceptions of the potential socio-cultural influences upon their decision to become or not become a lawyer. As the site of the research was my place of work, considerations involved in being an insider researcher (Costley et al 2010; Mercer 2007) and of my positionality also influenced decisions in relation to research design, addressed in more detail later in this chapter. This chapter begins by aligning the ontological and epistemological assumptions underpinning the research with the methodology and research methods used in this qualitative research design.

3.1 Ontology & Epistemology

The research was designed to enable participants to articulate their experiences and the meanings that they attributed to those experiences, as they made sense of their social world. Ontology is, "concerned with the nature of social entities" and Constructivist ontology reflects a standpoint that those social entities are constructions of the ideas, beliefs, and actions of social actors (Bryman 2012:32). Constructivist ontology assumes that reality does not exist independently of social actors but is socially constructed from the actions, perceptions and meanings of those social actors seeking their own subjective meanings of their social world (Bryman 2012; Creswell 2014). As social reality is the creation of the participants in the research it was dependent upon their beliefs, suggesting that the nature of reality is therefore multiple, subjective, and not fixed (Bryman 2012). Constructivist ontology was appropriate for

the research because it concentrates upon the socially constructed participant views of the phenomenon and the meanings generated by participants as social actors in and through their relationships with other social actors (Creswell, 2014). Participants were selected from a population of final year law undergraduates who self-identified as coming from low SEB and who had started the degree aspiring to become a lawyer, to generate varied, subjective, socially construed meanings, reflecting multiple realities, locating the research within its Constructivist ontology (Bryman 2012).

The epistemological standpoint consistent with this ontology must prioritise the role of knowledge in understanding the subjective meanings of social behaviour necessitating an epistemology that assumes knowledge to be indeterminate (Bryman 2012) because reality is the product of relentless social interactions, resulting in the endless construction and reconstruction of knowledge (Bryman 2012; Crotty 2003). If knowledge is constructed by social actors rather than by them locating or detecting knowledge, this epistemology inevitably locates the research within the Interpretivist or Social Constructivist epistemological standpoint (Schwandt 2000). Additionally, as the research was designed to elicit the subjective perspectives of participants, it reflects their individual and shared views of social reality, situating it within the Interpretive paradigm (Cohen et al 2011). A paradigm strives to, “understand the subjective world of human experience” (Cohen et al 2011:17) and this demands natural settings for the research, rather than experimental or artificial settings (Lincoln & Guba 2000) which were available as the research took place at my place of work, the Law School in a post-92 university in England. This epistemology also aligns the research generally, and its theoretical framework specifically, to Sociology as a foundational discipline (Bryman 2012; Lincoln & Guba 2000). Sociology was an appropriate discipline as it, “seeks to understand all aspects of human social behaviour, including the social dynamics of small groups of people, large organisations, communities, institutions and even entire societies” (BSA 2024).

3.2 Methodology

Phenomenology is a both philosophy and methodology to facilitate a subjective, descriptive, interpretive research design (Cresswell 2013; Moustakas 1994; Robson 2002). This phenomenological methodology was used to explore how participants made sense of their personal experiences and shared understandings of the phenomenon of becoming or not becoming a lawyer as described by the final year law undergraduates from low SEB, within a post-92 university in England (Cresswell 2014; Denscombe 2003). As a qualitative methodology it facilitates the expression of the varied, subjective perceptions of participants' experiences, employing compatible methods to generate rich, descriptive data (Cresswell 2013). Phenomenology was also a pragmatic choice since it required methods of data generation which were both accessible and achievable as a novice, solo researcher in small-scale research study (Denscombe 2003).

Phenomenology is criticised for lacking scientific rigour because it is subjective, descriptive, mundane, and small scale (Dencombe 2003; Moustakas 1994). The lack of scientific rigour could be a critique of any qualitative methodology, but can be mitigated through a robust, transparent trustworthiness strategy (see section 3.4). To those from backgrounds who face issues of fair access to the legal profession, in an already highly competitive legal labour market, seeking to understand the experience of becoming or not becoming a lawyer was arguably far from mundane. Inevitably, as a doctoral study the research was small-scale, located amongst one cohort at one university. Nevertheless, the research can contribute to the debate regarding social mobility and access to the professions when lack of progress has already reached an "inflection point" for society (Social Mobility Commission 2017: 7). The next section will address the issues of trustworthiness within the research's design, positionality and the advantages and disadvantages of being an insider researcher.

3.3 Positionality

My positionality reflects my professional experiences of teaching and management within legal education in England over more than two decades. As someone originally

from a working-class background my positionality is also influenced by my personal values, including the belief that HE can deliver social mobility outcomes, particularly in facilitating fair access to the legal profession, despite claims of elitism. Consequently, in my work as a legal academic, located within a university Law School, I endeavour to support students' career aspirations as part of my professional practice, with a focus upon employability currently.

My positionality as a law academic and someone from a working-class background, with an interest in the research subject, reflect potential bias and power differentials within the research (Fleming 2018). Therefore, as a doctoral student researching an institution in which I work, I am both an insider and outsider within the research (Toy-Cronin 2018). Being an insider researcher presents some advantages and challenges. Advantages include access to the research location, prior knowledge and familiarity (Atkins & Wallace 2012b; Toy-Cronin 2018). Researching my own institution was a practical and pragmatic choice to address the observed problem set out in Chapter one. I was aware of and able to negotiate the process of seeking access within the Faculty and as a novice doctoral researcher, time and costs were also saved by researching my own institution (Atkins & Wallace 2012b). Additionally, I had prior, contextualised knowledge of the research location that informed the development of research questions, based on insight into the problem being examined (Fleming 2018). By sharing my own background with participants, I aimed to build trust and rapport (Atkins & Wallace 2012b; Martin 2023). As I was also familiar to participants as a member of staff, that familiarity could have operated to help participants to feel more comfortable and open during data generation (Atkins & Wallace 2012b; Fleming 2018). The combination of rapport and familiarity created the possibility of generating richer data than might have been generated otherwise by an outside researcher (Atkins & Wallace 2012b; Fleming 2018). However, being an insider researcher presents challenges, due to differential power and potential bias (Atkins & Wallace 2012b; Toy-Cronin 2018).

Although my role as a doctoral student suggests some objectivity, I cannot truly be an outsider (Toy-Cronin 2018) because as someone familiar with the research's location,

my role as an insider researcher represents a subjective situation in which objectivity will not be possible (Atkins & Wallace 2012a). Accordingly, I recognise that my positionality, as my values, assumptions and beliefs will inevitably have influenced the research (Fleming 2018; Yip 2022). Consequently, the potential impact of my positionality and my insider role upon the dynamics of power relationships and bias, had to be considered throughout the research process (Atkins & Wallace 2012a; Ayrton 2024; Pickering & Kara 2017).

Power is implicit within interactions with participants and in the analysis, interpretation and writing of the research, creating bias (Ayrton 2024). Therefore, throughout the research process it was necessary to have awareness of the implicit power relations of my roles within the research (Ayrton 2024) and the inherent 'role conflict' generated (Toy-Cronin 2018). The role of 'insider' creates bias as someone who is part of the institution with responsibilities towards it and has familiarity with the institution (Atkins & Wallace 2012a; Toy-Cronin 2018). Tensions exist between this role as an insider and the role of doctoral researcher, exercising power in the construction of knowledge through the interpretation of the data generated (Ayrton 2024; Pickering & Kara 2017), while simultaneously meeting ethical responsibilities (Toy-Cronin 2018). This tension is compounded by the inherent power in relation to undergraduate participants, as a member of teaching staff, whether I had previously taught them or not, and which is implicit in prior professional relationships of trust and respect with staff participants (Atkins & Wallace 2012c).

A further source of potential bias within the research was due to my own working-class background. As the research focuses upon law undergraduates from low SEB, (with low SEB used within the research as a proxy for class), some of the experiences shared by student participants were very relatable to me (Martin 2023). Similarly, within staff participant focus groups as a member of the community being examined, some comments from staff participants resonated with my own understandings and beliefs. The experiences which resonated with me required recognition of my positionality and were acknowledged using a reflective research journal that

contributed to the management of potential bias from my own feelings and beliefs, to support reflection and reflexivity (Martin 2023).

The research is situated within the Interpretive paradigm to elicit participants' individual, shared understandings and perspectives of social reality (Cohen et al 2011), so there is an ethical responsibility to make decisions within the research which represent those perspectives "faithfully or to explicitly acknowledge interpretive authority" (Pickering & Kara 2017:300; Toy-Cronin 2018). The nature of qualitative research and particularly interpretive approaches means that qualitative research will be subjective (Atkins & Wallace 2012a). Accordingly, in these representations of participants it was essential for me to consider how the participants' voices are reflected within the research and to consider who benefits from that representation (Ayrton 2024:138). This is particularly important as the undergraduate participants comprise an already marginalised group because of their socio-economic background.

Reflexivity involves evaluation of my own influence upon the research and how values, experiences, and assumptions also impact upon the research (Atkins & Wallace 2012b). This requires a systematic, rigorous, credible and reliable process throughout the research (Atkins & Wallace 2012a) which is addressed in more detail later in this chapter. This also includes the use of a theoretical framework within the research, which informs the research's design, methods, analysis and interpretation (Atkins & Wallace 2012a) and which is set out in Chapter two.

Additionally, reflexivity was ongoing, through the regular completion of a reflective research journal, to examine what was happening through the research process (Ayrton 2024). This provided an opportunity for reflexive practice, and reflection upon my own assumptions and beliefs, and recognition of my insider role and my own positionality in carrying out the research. The reflective research journal provided space to test my thinking, my explanations and interpretations as a means of challenging assumptions made throughout the research process. This was an opportunity to regularly challenge those assumptions by questioning if I was finding

what I had expected, asking if what I was finding was justified based on the data and asking if there were other possible interpretations that could explain the findings (Atkins & Wallace 2012b). For example, this arose after analysing the staff focus groups addressed in Chapter four. The focus groups data suggested a widespread belief that all students should be treated equally, seemingly underpinned by meritocratic assumptions that success or failure was based upon individual endeavour and commitment, with limited acknowledgement of the potential impact of wider societal inequalities (Reay 2020). Therefore, these apparently inclusive but fundamentally meritocratic viewpoints could have contributed, albeit unintentionally, to the reproduction and potentially, the exacerbation of inequalities within HE. I found this very uncomfortable because of my own beliefs about HE as a tool for social mobility. The reflexive process, including the supervision process, compounded this discomfort, because it enabled me to realise that as a member of staff myself, up to that point, I had also shared and had never questioned those same unconsciously meritocratic understandings. Additionally, the reflexive process resulted in the further realisation that in holding these assumptions myself I could have contributed, again unintentionally, to the reproduction of inequalities within HE. This prompted the search for an approach to mitigate this and ultimately informed the development of the conceptual model set out in Chapter five.

To further support reflexivity, some distance from my professional role was generated while writing up part of the analysis and findings (Fleming 2018) by taking a period away from the research site as unpaid leave. Reflexivity was also informed by regular meetings with my supervisors to reflect further upon the analysis and the potential biases and assumptions underpinning analysis and interpretation (Fleming 2018). Input from supervisors acted as critical friends as what was familiar to me was new to my supervisors so could be challenged (Fleming 2018). This process of regular discussion with my supervisors was valuable as they were outside of the research site and did not have personal experience of the academic and professional journeys of law undergraduates and helped to lessen the potential for bias generated by my own assumptions and values (Martin 2023).

As the research focused upon educational success and social advantage, and the possibility of complicity by HE in the reproduction of inequality, positionality was also acknowledged by recognising that participants who have a vested interest in the status quo, might also "be unwitting (or semi-witting) agents of inequality, whatever their motives, and despite what else their actions achieve" (James 2019: 37). Therefore, analysis involved looking beyond the meaning at face-value and for the meanings that might not be immediately apparent (Braun & Clarke 2006) to consider potential influences upon and, potentially, my own part in the reproduction of forms of inequality, mindful of my own positionality and checking that such observations were supported in the data rather than assumptions (Ryan and Bernard 2003).

Carrying out a study at my place of work, as an insider researcher (Mercer 2007), also informed the way the research was carried out (Robson 2002). There were advantages in being an insider researcher with access and familiarity with the research site which enabled negotiation of internal processes to obtain permission to carry out the research and access potential participants. Local knowledge was also valuable in attempting to mitigate some of the issues of data generation arising from the prolonged uncertainties caused by the Covid Pandemic which began in 2020 (the "Pandemic"). Nonetheless, as part of the research process it was also necessary to consider the mitigation of potential risks to the data generated relating to my familiarity with and access to the research site (Costley et al 2010; Mercer 2007).

Although access to the research site had been obtained, undergraduate and staff participants had volunteered avoiding any possibility of compulsion, helping to alleviate any imbalance in power relationships (Cohen et al 2011). When initially seeking volunteers, explanations of the voluntary nature of participation, confidentiality, and the capacity to withdraw at any time were provided and reiterated (Costley et al 2010). To mitigate potential issues of differential power as a member of Law School staff, and to build rapport, when seeking volunteers, my role as a doctoral student was declared and I shared brief details of my own working-class origins to reassure and encourage potential participants from low SEB. My positionality was also

acknowledged when I explained that I hoped that the research might contribute to future developments to enhance the student experience (Costley et al 2010).

The context of the research (Costley et al 2010) required consideration of the potential impact of undergraduate volunteers who had been taught by me previously. The request for volunteers did not exclude those I had taught previously as teaching them was unlikely to have engaged in more than the most general discussions of their career aspirations. Conversely, my role as Personal Tutor to some of the final year law undergraduates in the population could have involved more detailed interactions about their career aspirations, and which might have influenced their responses as participants, raising the potential of the Hawthorne effect (Cohen et al 2011). To mitigate this risk, if I was the Personal Tutor of any of the final year law undergraduates in the population, they were expressly excluded from volunteering.

A potential power differential arose with Law School academic staff ("staff") participants because I was a researcher who was also a staff member in a senior role (Costley et al 2010; Mercer 2007). To mitigate this, staff volunteers were sought and my role in the research as a doctoral student was also set out to exclude the possibility of compulsion. Explanations and reminders of the voluntary nature of participation, confidentiality, and the capacity to withdraw at any time were also provided to potential staff volunteers and then as participants (Costley et al 2010).

Student and staff volunteers who met the sampling criteria received an invitation to participate via email with information about and explanation of the research's purpose in the Participant Information letter, and the consent form which had been subject to ethical approval (see section 3.8). This also set out the voluntary nature of participation, confidentiality, and the capacity to withdraw at any time, to mitigate issues as an insider researcher. As a qualitative research design was adopted the next section will address other mitigations within the research design and process relating to the study's reliability and validity or trustworthiness (Bryman 2012).

3.4 Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness involves criteria “for assessing the quality of qualitative research” (Bryman 2012:717). Those criteria have been considered through the discussion of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability that follows (Bryman 2012). So that the research did not rely upon just one method of investigation for its credibility, triangulation involved two different qualitative methods of data generation amongst two different types of participants, to verify the findings in Chapter five (Bryman 2012; Cresswell 2014; Robson 2002). To confirm that the research has been conducted appropriately, expected techniques of data generation were employed (Lincoln and Guba 1985: Bryman 2012). Appropriate ethical and institutional approvals were obtained. During data generation, to avoid dependence upon notetaking alone, data was audio-recorded, transcribed and subject to member checking (Robson 2002). This enabled verbatim comments from the data generated to be used as the evidence for the research’s findings (Nowell et al 2017). Credibility was also addressed by adopting an approach to analysis appropriate to the interpretive assumptions underpinning the research’s design, seeking to identify the multiple realities elicited by the research from the participants.

Rich descriptions have been set out upon which the reader can make decisions about the transferability of the findings into different contexts (Bryman 2012). Although the research was not intended to be generalisable, because it aimed to investigate a single cohort of final-year law undergraduates in one post-92 university (Cohen et al 2011), its findings might be generalisable as they resulted in a conceptual model (see Chapter five) which could be applicable in other contexts (Robson 2002). To address dependability, appropriate qualitative research methods were utilised, and the research was underpinned by awareness that the research process would be subject to scrutiny. Therefore, contemporaneous notes, a research journal, and a staged, iterative approach to data analysis, using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke 2006) were used along with regular engagement with research supervision to reflect fairly the experience under investigation (Bryman 2012; Cohen et al 2011; Ryan & Bernard 2003).

Confirmability recognises that personal influences and potential bias cannot be completely removed from the research but that efforts have been made to acknowledge and minimise this (Bryman 2012; Robson 2002). My role in data generation was confined to asking questions, seeking clarification as appropriate and avoided engagement in discussions with participants (Mercer 2007). The multiple realities that the research sought were social constructions but my interpretations within analysis were also socially constructed, building upon the meaning attributed to the social interactions with the participants and therefore my positionality. Researching a familiar location would inevitably result in assumptions being made about the research problem, necessitating constant attention to the potential impact of my own bias.

The multiple realities from participants' descriptions of their perceptions of the experience and how that was meaningfully constructed within their social practice, represented their understanding of the experience rather than the experience itself, generating a double hermeneutic (Crotty 2003). Novice researchers are advised therefore to adopt a structured approach to analysis (Cresswell 2013) so a staged and iterative approach was adopted using thematic analysis (outlined in section 3.7). Within that iterative process of analysis, contemporaneous notes and a research journal enabled reflection upon my assumptions and management of any empathy towards student participants of a similar background or my familiarity with Law staff concerns (Mercer 2007; Robson 2002). Additionally, engagement with supervision supported the process of analysis and consideration of the findings to maintain detachment and to acknowledge the potential influences of my own position.

3.5 Methods of data generation

Reflecting the research's ontological and epistemological assumptions the methods selected form part of the qualitative design tradition to yield rich descriptive data (Cresswell 2014; Robson 2002) enabling exploration of the multiple and varied meanings created by the participants from their social interactions and experiences. Consequently, semi-structured interviews with final year law undergraduates

addressed research questions one, two and three and focus groups of Law School academic staff were used for research questions four and five, to generate data within a natural setting (Lincoln and Guba 1985).

3.5.1 Interviews

Interviews were utilised as a “social encounter” and as a method aligned to the ontological and epistemological assumptions underpinning the research (Cohen et al 2011: 411). Interviews offered the potential for participants, using their own words and from their own perspective, to discuss their understanding of the influences upon their original legal career aspirations to become or not to become a lawyer, to generate rich descriptions necessary for this methodology and for a qualitative research design (Cohen et al 2011; Denscombe 2003; Padilla-Diaz 2015). Semi-structured interviews were appropriate to generate consistent data via open questions to ascertain what participants had experienced and the circumstances which typically influenced those experiences of the phenomenon (Creswell 2013; 2014; Moustakas 1994). Interviews offered the flexibility to ask further questions to address any unexpected participant responses (Robson 2002) and to enable incorporation of themes emerging from initial data analysis (Bryman 2012; Cohen et al 2011). This flexibility was balanced with the necessity for consistency, which required constant attention to the potential impact of my own bias (Mercer 2007), so notes were kept of the rationale for any adjustments to questions, and the use of a research journal (Bryman 2012; Robson 2002).

My academic practice can involve both formal and informal interviews, sometimes utilising both a structured and semi-structured approach, which made this an accessible method because it did not require additional training or access to new resources. Interviews took place on campus at neutral venues using bookable rooms and arrangements were communicated using email. Interviews were estimated to be completed within an hour to one and a half hours, enabling participants to have time to become comfortable in discussing their beliefs (Robson 2002). Each interview was recorded using a portable digital recording device so that transcription was not dependent on personal notetaking (Robson 2002). Brief notes of interesting comments

or potential patterns were taken during each interview as field notes which were reviewed afterwards as data was analysed (Robson 2002).

3.5.2 Focus Groups

Initially in person focus groups were planned to ascertain individual and group viewpoints amongst Law School academic staff participants, because they offer “a deep and detailed understanding of broad patterns found among a group of participants within a social setting” (Litoselliti 2003:11) where “participants learn from each other, and things learned can shape attitudes and opinions” (Krueger 1998: 20). From multiple standpoints, focus groups “elicit perceptions, feelings, attitudes and ideas of participants about a selected topic” (Vaughn et al 1996: 5). Therefore, focus groups were utilised to reveal “beliefs, attitudes, experiences and feelings of participants” which were not necessarily accessible using other qualitative methods (Litoselleti 2003: 16), to generate the shared meanings within a social group, i.e. Law School academic staff. As a novice researcher there were also practical reasons for using focus groups because they are an efficient method of generating more data from a larger group of participants at one time (Robson 2002). This became even more significant because of the prohibition upon in-person methods of data generation caused by the Pandemic which necessitated moving the focus groups online.

Online focus groups offered a convenient and broadly similar, method of real-time, rich data generation (Abrams & Gaiser 2016; Archibald et al 2019). The online focus groups used MS Teams which was by then familiar to all staff participants because they had been using it as part of their daily working lives due to the Pandemic (Abrams & Glaiser 2016). Mitigating action was taken to minimise the potential disadvantages of moving the focus groups online. Constant vigilance was required while facilitating the online focus groups to ensure that everyone could participate, and to prevent technical issues disrupting data generation. In the event of internet dropouts, which were few and brief, participants were asked to repeat their comments to ensure that they were captured (Archibald et al 2019). Robson (2002) claims that the number of focus group questions that can be asked is usually limited to ten in an hour therefore with fifteen questions, it was estimated that the focus group would last for ninety

minutes. Two focus groups over-ran perhaps because participants seemed to take turns to contribute. When it became apparent that further time would be needed all participants were able to confirm that they could continue longer than originally expected. The next section will address the decision made regarding sampling, including the rationale involved in any adjustments necessary because of the impact of the Pandemic.

3.6 Sampling

Sampling decisions were made to generate sufficient rich, descriptive data to answer the research questions, (rather than generalisability) and to facilitate theoretical saturation (Bowen 2008; Guest et al 2006). As a Law School within a post-92 university in England, the study took place in a natural setting (Lincoln & Guba 2000). As the participants were taken from law undergraduates and academic staff within the Law School at my own institution, they were physically proximate and accessible, so convenience sampling also occurred (Robson 2002).

3.6.1 Interviews

Non-probability and generic, purposive sampling were used for the student participant interviews, and sampling was open-ended to ensure the flexibility necessary for theoretical saturation. Purposive sampling was used to create a sampling rationale. Fixed, a prioiri sampling criteria were employed, informed by the research questions, to generate participants with comprehensive knowledge of the experience being examined (Cohen et al 2011). Firstly, student participants were selected only from final year law undergraduates, as they were best placed to comment upon their entire undergraduate experience, to able to answer the research questions (Cohen et al 2011; Cresswell 2014). Secondly, they self-identified as coming from low socio-economic backgrounds (SEB), using proxies drawn from the literature, including receipt free school meals, or someone in their household had received means tested benefits, or they were the first member of their family to attend university, or they would describe themselves as someone who had been held back because of their social

and/or economic background. The final criterion involved student participants self-identifying as having started the degree aspiring to become a lawyer.

Factors in reaching theoretical saturation were drawn from the literature and balanced the necessity of generating data of sufficient quality as well as quantity, with practical considerations, as a solo, novice researcher. There are various definitions of theoretical saturation, as the point where new themes or concepts are no longer emerging, providing little numerical guidance as to the adequacy of non-probability sample sizes necessary to generate the rich descriptive data for the study (Bowen 2008; Cohen et al 2011; Guest et al 2006). In qualitative studies the adequacy or quality of the data is of more significance than the sample size in reaching theoretical saturation (Bowen 2008). The sample size should also reflect the complexity of the data, the nature of the investigator and the number of analysts (Guest et al 2006). Interviews generated a significant amount of rich, descriptive data, and within supervision, pragmatic considerations relating to constraints of time and resources were discussed resulting in a preliminary interview sample size of twenty law student participants.

Final year law undergraduates meeting the sampling criteria were invited to participate in the research using volunteer sampling (Cohen et al 2011: 160). While there are disadvantages in using volunteer sampling due to its lack of representativeness and uncertainty as to volunteers' motives for participating (Cohen et al 2011), it offered two significant benefits. Firstly, it would generate participants who had opted out of becoming a lawyer who were difficult to find by other means so were potentially a "hidden population" (Cohen et al 2011:159). Secondly, it helped to alleviate any imbalance in power relationships created in my senior role within the Law School, because volunteer participants chose to participate, avoiding the possibility of compulsion (Cohen et al 2011).

To reach as many potential participants as possible across the final year cohort, volunteers were sought via a brief presentation in two compulsory final year lectures.

A short form was distributed to source anonymous information about original legal career aspirations. This also enabled volunteering students to self-identify using the sampling criteria. Volunteers who met the sampling criteria subsequently received an invitation to participate via email with the information about and explanation of the research's purpose in the Participant Information letter, and the informed consent required. At the start of each interview, I reiterated my role as a doctoral student and participants were reminded that their participation was voluntary, so they could withdraw at any time. Although sixteen interviews had taken place by mid-March 2020 this coincided with the imposition of the first of the lockdowns and the resulting prohibition upon in-person data generation, because of the Pandemic. At this point there was prevailing uncertainty as to the duration of the lockdowns and therefore of the duration of the prohibition upon in-person data generation necessary to reach the original sample size of twenty interviews. After discussion in supervision accordingly, the sample size was reduced to sixteen interviews.

3.6.2 Focus Groups

The sampling frame for the focus groups involved teaching staff within the Law School, using purposive sampling criteria to generate volunteers who had taught law undergraduates over the previous three years and therefore those most likely to have taught some of the final year student participants. Based on the literature, initially four in person focus groups consisting of five to six participants were planned. However, because of the cessation of in-person data collection caused by the Pandemic this necessitated adjustments to the planned focus groups. Enquiries were made as to the implications of moving the focus groups online, to accommodate the pragmatic constraints imposed by the Pandemic, including an application to adjust the original ethical approval (see section 3.8).

Consequently, the target sample size was modified to three online focus groups, with four volunteer participants in each. This reflected the format of the online meeting system adopted to support remote working during the Pandemic. My understanding of the research site and the context within which staff participants were working during the Pandemic as an insider-researcher (Costley et al 2010) influenced the timing of

the request for volunteer staff participants and the need to balance challenging, competing priorities. On the one hand, after an unavoidable pause due to the impact of various lockdowns, progress in generating data was necessary however, this was a difficult time for academic staff navigating the multiple, novel demands of working remotely so the request for volunteers had to be timed carefully for optimum participation, which delayed the call for volunteers by several months.

Volunteers were sought in a whole School staff meeting but initial responses were very low. After reflection and subsequent discussion in supervision, the original purposive sampling criteria were adjusted to include any Law School academic staff who had taught undergraduate modules over the last five years. Over the following weeks further volunteer requests were made in a subsequent staff meeting, an invitation was added to the School's internal research bulletin and informal reminders about the research were made by me at an appropriate point at the end of any relevant online meetings. This increased the number of volunteers, but two further participants were required to meet the target sample size. A further invitation to participate was sent by email to individual staff, sequenced in alphabetical order of their first names. The first two staff contacted this way immediately agreed to participate, with one of them commenting that they had intended to participate but had not yet volunteered. Volunteers received an email with the informed consent form, the participant letter, with information about the research and the privacy notice, all of which had been adjusted to reflect the move to online focus groups because of the Pandemic.

Online focus groups took place over a period of seven weeks. Individual availability was a practical consideration in the composition of each focus group, to reach the maximum of four participants in each focus group, so that all four participants could be seen by each other on the screen. Individual availability shaped each online focus group which resulted in combinations of law academics and those who were or who had been practitioners which incorporated potentially differing perspectives (Cohen et al 2011). Once data from the audio recordings had been transcribed data analysis took place which will be addressed next before outlining the process of obtaining ethical approval.

3.7 Data Analysis

3.7.1 Initial considerations

Data was recorded on a portable digital recorder and transcribed by one private transcription agency. Each transcript was checked to deal with audio comments identified as inaudible or as “sounds like” and any discipline-specific terminology. Member checking (Robson 2002) took place with participants asked by email to review the transcript. Responses were limited and some participants did not reply at all. This could have been because student participants were anticipating and preparing for their final year assessments and because academic staff were involved in assessment periods and all participants were addressing the continuing challenges of the Pandemic.

3.7.2 Thematic analysis

Thematic analysis “is a method for developing, analysing and interpreting patterns across a qualitative dataset” (Braun & Clarke 2022: 4). It is a process of managing and categorising data, by creating codes as units of analysis which identify patterns or themes, from which to understand the data, in the context of the research questions and the research problem (Braun & Clarke 2022; Bryman 2012; Clarke & Braun 2017). It is an analytical method that it is not linked to specific epistemologies or theories (Maguire & Delahunt 2017; Peel 2020). It was recommended as a suitable approach for a new researcher (Peel 2020) and accessible to me because additional training was not necessary (Nowell et al 2017). As it does not have a definitive technique or tradition (Bryman 2012), thematic analysis has been criticised for being too vague, generating overly descriptive rather than critical approaches to analysis, and as inconsistent in the creation of themes, undermining its trustworthiness (Braun & Clarke 2006; Nowell et al 2017).

The analytical process adopted followed Braun & Clarke’s (2022) phases of thematic analysis as an iterative process. This involved repeated engagement with the data, the literature and the theoretical framework, to generate a narrative to address the research questions and the overall research problem (Braun & Clarke 2022). The

entire analytical process involved “critical engagement” with the data (Braun & Clarke 2022: 43) as I was mindful that I could be finding what I hoped to be looking for, so it was necessary to keep asking myself throughout the analytical process if analysis could be explained or interpreted in other ways. This was especially important when familiarising myself with data that was relatable to my own experiences or beliefs. An outline of that analytic process follows in the next section.

3.7.3 Analysis and coding

The first phase of this analytical process involved familiarisation with the data through detailed review of the written transcripts of the interviews and focus groups (Braun & Clarke 2022). This was done by line by line reading and re-reading of the transcripts, several times, to become familiar with the data, also using observations from contemporaneous notes taken at the time of data generation to capture potential noteworthy or interesting points. This phase of analysis resulted in the identification of repeated comments or phrases, and some initial ideas and potential meanings.

The next phase of thematic analysis set out preliminary codes. Line by line analysis of the transcripts was carried out, making manuscript notes on the transcripts. Semantic coding was used to reflect “explicitly expressed meaning” within the data, often reflecting the language used by participants and/or their own words (Braun & Clarke 2022: 57). For example, the coding label of “journey” reflected language used by participants about undergraduates’ progress towards entering the labour market. This list of initial codes was kept under review to ensure that nuance could be captured, to enable a broad range of meanings to be recognised and recorded through the creation of new codes or the adjustment of preliminary codes (Braun & Clarke 2022). For example, a series of separate codes relating to undergraduates’ motivations for becoming a lawyer included *helping others generally, helping family, helping community, to represent others, “changing the world”.* Also in this phase, while recognising that the interview and focus group participants had not been asked the same set of questions, the initial list of codes from the focus groups was applied to the interview transcripts, by way of manuscript analysis, to identify any similarities, patterns and/or differences. This developing list of initial codes was also discussed

during supervision meetings, along with early observations, preliminary analysis and key concepts in the literature as appropriate. These discussions enabled further development and adjustment of this initial list of codes, checking individual codes for meaning, combining codes which were similar and, creating new and/or more nuanced codes if initial codes were too broad. This phase of the analytical process resulted in the creation of a lengthy list of initial codes.

The next part of this phase of the analytical process involved moving to NVivo software. This software was used to apply the coding list from the manuscript analysis to unannotated transcripts, without accessing the written transcripts, as a means of setting aside assumptions and minimising the potential for bias in analysis and interpretation. Using unannotated transcripts also enabled existing codes to be tested and further refined as they were being applied, relating the data, research questions, theory and concepts within the literature (Braun & Clarke 2022) so that new codes were identified and adjustments made to initial codes. A preliminary coding framework was created and relevant extracts from the data were allocated to the code labels within this preliminary coding framework within the NVivo software (Braun & Clark 2022).

Analysis in the next phase involved generating initial themes by identifying relationships between codes, to generate clusters of codes with similar ideas or meanings (Braun & Clarke 2022). Codes with shared or patterned meanings were combined, creating clusters of codes as categories, which are a topic within the data connecting the data, the research questions and interpretation (Braun & Clarke 2022). For example, codes encompassing *motivations, helping others* and *social responsibility* were clustered subsequently into one category labelled as “Helping others”. Moving beyond individual codes to reflect more comprehensive meanings to understand the research problem, the next phase of the analytical process involved generating initial themes from the categories created (Braun & Clarke 2022). A theme is “a shared, multi-faceted meaning, patterned across at least some of a qualitative dataset” (Braun & Clarke 2022: 296). While recognising the inevitability of subjectivity in the interpretation involved in generating initial themes, rigour was required by

challenging assumptions, looking for the things that were not said by participants and remaining aware of my positionality, to check that initial themes were supportable in the data (Braun & Clarke 2022). Some initial themes included for example, an emphasis upon advocacy and oral communication and the course as a proxy for the labour market and its outcomes.

In the next phases of the analytic process, all the initial themes were reviewed, developed and in the following phase, were refined and defined (Braun & Clarke 2022), including in discussions within supervision meetings. Initial themes were reviewed to check that they were supported by the relevant extracts from the data, and to check that themes were interpretative, analytical and capable of being linked to the research problem, the research questions and theoretical framework. Each theme requires a "central organising concept" as the "concept or idea that all the analytic observations that constitute a theme relate to" (Braun & Clarke 2022: 284). However, in reviewing these initial themes, they did not seem to be sufficient to address the research problem. Therefore, in the next phase further development was necessary and these themes were refined and further defined. For example, the initial theme relating to communication was abandoned as too narrow and lacking a central organising concept.

As an exemplar of the analytical process, the following extracts are taken from data generated within one of the undergraduate interviews (with undergraduate participant UG11) moving from data to coding, to categories and then to themes.

> "You can directly benefit someone. You can directly benefit society, even if not someone, but you can change the world like, as we know it."
>
> "Understanding what a lawyer is and how that's changed, it's changed in the sense that, you know, after two years of doing essays, you don't find it as glamorous. You don't find it, you know as appealing as in the sense of like the movies and the idea of law."

After an initial phase of analysis involving familiarisation with all the transcripts and manuscript analysis, the next phase of analysis produced a lengthy list of preliminary codes some of which included *helping others, "changing the world"*, *any media influence*. Moving to NVivo software, further analysis took place and adjustments were made to the preliminary list of codes to generate a coding framework. Some of the relevant codes by this phase included *Helping others, Media Influence, Constraints: Career Management Skills: Knowledge*. Reviewing the relationships between the codes for shared or patterned meanings, codes were clustered into categories as a topic, with some of these clustered codes generating a category of "Helping others". This category, combined with other categories to generate an initial theme relating to idealised understandings of being a lawyer. After a further phase of analysis this initial theme developed into the theme of idealism and realism, reflecting the juxtaposition between seemingly idealised understandings of being and becoming a lawyer and understandings and perspectives of the realities of the legal labour market and becoming and being a lawyer.

From this phase of analysis, two broad themes developed, both involving juxtaposition. The first theme involves the juxtaposition of idealism and realism, incorporating idealised understandings of being and becoming a lawyer and understandings of the realities of the legal labour market and being and becoming a lawyer. The second theme relates to the juxtaposition of perceptions of constraints and choices, encompassing undergraduates' and staff perceptions of choices and constraints in undergraduates' career decision-making. The themes underpin the analysis of the data and the findings in Chapter Four. This chapter begins by using the theme of idealism and realism to analyse undergraduates' understandings of being a lawyer on starting the degree. The two themes combine in the analysis of undergraduates' perceptions of choices and constraints as they encountered more realistic representations of being and becoming a lawyer during the degree. The analysis of undergraduates' perceptions of the law degree's influence upon becoming a lawyer was informed by the theme of choices and constraints. Staff understandings have been analysed, using the first theme, to distinguish idealism and realism in their perspectives of undergraduates' career aspirations. Finally, the second theme of

constraints and choices has been used in analysing staff perspectives of the relationship between the degree and undergraduates' becoming a lawyer.

The last phase of analysis involved writing up the analysis and further refinement of the themes in the process. This involved bringing together what Braun & Clarke (2022) describe as an analytic narrative, using extracts from the data to explain the meaning of the data overall, to address the overarching research problem set out in Chapter One.

Having outlined the analytical process, the following section of this chapter will address the initial process of ethical approval and the later application for adjustment necessitated by the Pandemic.

3.8 Ethical approval and the impact of the Pandemic

Ethical issues were identified and discussed as part of the confirmation of research status process and during supervision, in relation to the University of Nottingham's (UoN) Ethical Code (UoN 2018). The research was designed as a small-scale study, which aimed to understand the experiences of law undergraduates, so that the research outcomes could be used in the future to inform potential pedagogical and pastoral interventions. As the research site was my place of work which provided accessibility I had obtained informal approval from senior staff within the Law School and the Faculty (Costley et al 2010; Mercer 2007). Once ethical approval was granted by UoN's Ethics Committee in March 2019, this was submitted to the Faculty at my own institution with a formal request for access which was approved. Subsequently, because in-person methods were prohibited due to the Pandemic, an application to UoN to amend the original ethical approval to move to online focus groups was granted and this along with a request to extend the initial period of access was also approved by the Faculty.

Data was recorded and therefore retained in a durable form on the UoN server. Voluntary informed consent was obtained from participants before data generation via a letter of invitation sent by email, explaining the nature and potential outcomes of the research. This explained what participants would be asked to do in the interview, their right to withdraw and how their privacy and confidentiality were ensured, using pseudonyms to establish the "shield of anonymity" (Christians 2000: 139; UoN 2018). Although participants were asked to select a pseudonym very few did so therefore, neutral pseudonyms have been used. To avoid unintended issues of power, marginalisation and the potential for discrimination (Kolankiewicz 2022), neutral pseudonyms have been used, which also provide the additional benefit of enhanced privacy for all participants and "internal confidentiality" (Toy-Cronin 2018: 707). Neutral pseudonyms have been allocated sequentially by name which for undergraduates are "UG" plus a number and for staff participants are "SP" plus a number. Participants were asked to sign and return a consent form (drafted using UoN's templates and approved by the UoN ethical approval process) confirming participants' understanding of the terms of their engagement with the research. Student participants' personal information in this research related to age and background (UoN 2018) using suitably amended UoN templates.

The invitation seeking student participants expressly excluded those under eighteen (UoN 2018) to avoid the inclusion of vulnerable participants. Additionally, my role as Personal Tutor to some of the final year undergraduates within the population could have involved previous interactions about their career plans, so to avoid the risk of the Hawthorne effect (Cohen et al 2011) these students were also excluded. The research involved a non-sensitive topic, and it was not anticipated that the discussion of career aspirations by student participants would generate a level of anxiety greater than that expected in usual social interactions (UoN 2018). Despite this, after discussions in supervision, the ethical approval application incorporated a separate wellbeing document which all student participants received during the interview which provided explanations and links to internal university support services and resources.

Originally the ethical approval application anticipated in-person focus groups however, their commencement was delayed because of the Pandemic which resulted in the immediate cessation of in-person data generation. In these unprecedented circumstances, having consulted with my supervisors, work then began to prepare for moving the focus groups online, as this offered a broadly similar method of data generation. Investigation of the nature and operation of online focus groups, including ethical considerations involved in hosting and securing recordings, took some time to complete while consulting with my supervisors about amending the original UoN ethical approval. Moving the focus groups online necessitated adjustments to the staff focus group Participant Information letter and consent form which had been submitted with the original ethical application. Additionally, the original plans for the duration of data generation also required adjustment, reflecting the prevailing uncertainty as to the duration of the Pandemic.

An application to amend the original ethical approval to move the focus groups online was submitted to the UoN Ethics Committee and the initial response sought clarification of some aspects of the application. That response also provided helpful feedback to support moving them online, enabling further adjustments to the Participant Information letter and the proposed online focus group protocol. The protocol operated as my structure to facilitate each focus group, including an introduction so that participants would know and agree when recording began and created expectations that participants would know and agree who would be present in their various spaces (e.g. children, partners). The feedback from UoN's Ethics Committee helped in relation to the recording of the focus groups which due to uncertainty surrounding storage and confidentiality associated with video recording, reverted to the original plan to use a portable audio-recording device to enable subsequent transcription. Having actioned the feedback from the UoN Ethics Committee, the application was resubmitted, and confirmation was received that the application to amend the original ethical approval had been granted. This was submitted and approval obtained from the Faculty to enable the process of seeking focus group volunteers to begin.

Chapter 4: Findings

Research questions one, two and three focused upon law undergraduate participants' legal career aspirations and enabled descriptions of their evolving habitus to explore their experiences of HE in relation to making career decisions. Research questions four and five were addressed through focus groups of volunteers from Law School academic staff to reflect upon their perceptions of students' career aspirations and the course's relationship to their professional identity development. This chapter begins with the findings from the interviews with undergraduate participants. Using semi-structured interviews, undergraduate participants described their beliefs and feelings about becoming a lawyer, resulting in rich descriptions in comparison to previous law student surveys (Hardee 2014; Sherr & Webb 1989). Research questions one and two explored participants' original legal career aspirations, their initial and current perceptions of the legal profession, being and becoming a lawyer and their experiences of their career decision making. Research Question three concentrated specifically upon undergraduate participants' experiences of the curriculum in relation to their legal career aspirations.

4.1 Research Question One: Why did students want to become a lawyer when they started the degree?

Undergraduate participants were asked to recollect the influences upon their original legal career aspirations on joining the degree as a starting point from which to analyse their current career aspirations. Additionally, these interview questions enabled participants to share their family and social networks within the legal profession, as a means of ascertaining the extent of their social capital on joining the degree, comprising social networks connected to the legal profession (profession) (Bourdieu 1986).

4.1.a. "Helping" others

"Helping people" was mentioned by nearly all undergraduate participants. "I just want to help people, make the system a bit better or to help people with their families as well" (UG15). In variations of, "making a difference to others' lives" UG2, UG14, UG12,

and UG6 enthusiastically described a career they believed would improve the lives of unspecified groups within society. Similarly, for UG11: “You can directly benefit someone. You can directly benefit society, even if not someone, but you can change the world like as we know it.”

For UG12, UG9 and UG6 prior family experiences of the legal system seemed to be formative in shaping their perceptions of the profession as a career that could help others. UG9 spoke movingly of how the circumstances surrounding the loss of a close family member had influenced her initial aspirations to become a lawyer to, “see what could have been done differently.” UG6 referred to the “legal support” her family had received as a motivation “to help others as well.” UG12 explained that her own family’s experiences had influenced her choice of a legal career and the impact upon her own identity: “It’s emotionally driven, I admit that, but I’ve come to terms with it, it’s who I am, it’s defined me.”

Some participants seemed to believe that helping people would generate personal satisfaction, suggesting a vocational component in their career choice. UG10 explained, “I’m very passionate about using the law to protect people and being able to put an argument together on behalf of people who might not be able to do it themselves.” UG2 said, “you help a lot of people as well and you're actually making use of your life.” UG3 expressed this as, “being able to help somebody else’s family, I feel like it would be an honour really.” UG11 said, “being a lawyer would be satisfying in the sense that I’d be doing something good.”

On joining the degree, most participants had chosen to become a lawyer, motivated by their belief that legal practice could generate social change. Habitus encapsulates the social actor’s “ways of acting, feeling, thinking and being” (Maton 2014) and by describing how they believed lawyers acted and behaved, participants seemed to share dispositions of their habitus which informed their perception of being a lawyer (Maggio 2017).

Expressing themselves as a lawyer in the future, and their expectations of the kind of work which this would involve, suggests the concept of 'possible selves' to express an imagined future self which motivated their actions in the present (Markus & Nurius 1986). Possible selves facilitate the exploration of imagined futures that are, "*impossible* as well as, and sometimes over and above, what is *possible"* (Henderson et al 2019:2). On joining the degree, undergraduate participants seemed to imagine a possible future as a lawyer which had prompted them to study law. The perceptions of legal practice used in envisaging their future as a lawyer, seemed to be vocational, valued, and idealised. This idealised perception of the profession aligns with Hardee's study, which showed that "desire to help people" was ranked at fourth and sixth across a selection of sixteen reasons for choosing to study law (2014:11). Hardee claimed that this desire to help people could be a "reflection of the idealism of first-year students" who formed a considerable proportion of that study's participants (2014: 11). Undergraduates' idealised view of the profession was also perceived by staff in the focus groups who commented upon students' "romanticised" view of the profession as unrealistic (section 4.4.a below). By their final year, some participants' awareness of legal practice seemed to have developed to varying extents, apparently influencing perceptions of being and becoming a lawyer.

4.1.b Social mobility expectations

More than half of the participants said that they also wanted to become a lawyer because they believed its prestige and status would generate change to their socio-economic circumstances, suggesting acceptance of social mobility outcomes connected to HE participation. This aligns with research from the Universities and Colleges Admission Service (UCAS) that when selecting degree subjects, "future employment prospects" are a highly significant factor (2021:13). Six participants believed that becoming a lawyer offered positive potential future earnings and projected an imagined future self as a lawyer with financial security that improved their current socio-economic status. For example, UG8 said:

> "I had this idea that lawyers were really well off and respected and intelligent and they had this kind of authority about them. I just really like the idea of having

> all those qualities, because I wasn't used to seeing anyone with those qualities, so I quite liked the idea of having that elevated status."

UG14 envisaged a lawyer possible self which connected respect and his current socio-economic background:

> "…you're not looked down on, you have, you know, you've worked hard, you've done well and you're in a career where it's well respected, yes, considering where you've come from. I think that is important to me."

Some participants seemed to assume a guaranteed progression from the law degree into the profession, noting the improved life-chances they anticipated, suggesting expectations of social mobility outcomes. UG4 and UG11 explained that their families valued the law degree, and the implicit positive, labour market opportunities they expected. UG14 said: "Education is long-term stability and that's the only thing that's going to get me anywhere, is by staying in education and progressing to university." Half of the participants believed HE offered them advantages in comparison to the experiences of their families, linking this belief to their career decision making. Awareness of their own circumstances seemed to sharpen their sense of personal responsibility for their own career aspirations. UG8 seemed to reject a negative possible self which did not fulfil the potential occupational opportunities she perceived available by engaging in HE, and law specifically: "I just grew up around people who hated their jobs and I just thought I can't do that" adding, "I think it made me realise that the background that I come from, I can't afford to let things go to waste." Similarly, UG5 said that she "wanted to do something different because my family doesn't come from high profession background."

UG11 described the "emotional attachment" of his circumstances, aware of the responsibility he felt due to his "privilege" of being at university in relation to his family, and he linked their support for his education to his career decision making:

> “So I think that’s a big aspect of why a lot of people become a lawyer. You’re fulfilling your parents’ wishes in the sense that you’re pursuing education, you’re pursuing a profession that they didn’t have the privilege to pursue due to their circumstances.”

UG14 talked of the impact of parental sacrifices, “My parents worked hard and seeing them struggle and seeing them with no education, opened to me that education is the stability I need.” For UG11 and UG14, this responsibility was further expressed in relation to their families’ immigration history, their heritage and ethnicity. UG11 said:

> “When you come from like an Asian background, when you come from like the first, second generation, where your parents come over from abroad and they didn’t get to do certain things because they had to work.”

This apparent sense of personal responsibility for the career opportunities they believed the law degree would generate, suggests widespread belief that their personal investment in HE prior to an expected legal career, would result in automatic improvement to socio-economic status, implying tacit acceptance of the narratives of HE’s social mobility function and broader human capital narratives (Bathmaker et al 2013; Brown 2013; Dalrymple et al 2021; Reay 2021). This suggests similarities with some of the characteristics of “*Naïve*” students who recognised HE, “as life-changing and offering a significant shift in how they anticipated their life unfolding” (Burke et al 2019: 1715).

Some participants developed this further, expressing motivations for their original legal career aspirations which demonstrated their personal agency and proving something to themselves (UG2, UG5, UG10, UG14). UG5 said, “I wanted to show not just myself but the outside world.” UG2 spoke of proving herself right, “That's the only reason, because I set myself a goal and I want to accomplish it.” This was mentioned by a quarter of the participants yet was not a motivation found within the previous surveys (Sherr & Webb 1989; Hardee 2012). This seems to align with a sense of personal

responsibility for achieving career outcomes within some of the employability literature (for example, found in Artess et al 2017) which was also suggested in the staff focus groups (see within sections 4.4 and 4.5).

By declaring an intention, through participation in HE and their legal career expectations, of distinguishing themselves from their original socio-economic background, participants seemed to have reflexive awareness of the potential for HE and their career choice to generate changed habitus (Bourdieu 1977; Byrom and Lightfoot 2012; 2013). Participants showed wiling acceptance of "trajectory interruptions" to their habitus (Byrom 2013:813), implicit within participation in HE. This involved changes to their original habitus which had been shaped by their prior classed experiences, through the exercise of their agency by entering HE and selecting an occupation that would create a social position different to that of their families (Byrom 2013). In doing so this suggests that habitus can be transformed to generate different practices (Reay 2004).

Participants' original imagined future as a lawyer seemed to have been based on the perceptions of HE and the profession they had on joining the degree. This imagined future as a lawyer seemed to generate an attractive possible self because of the status, stability, and financial security they envisaged and a likely possible self because they had believed that the degree would facilitate entry into the profession (Harrison 2018). This suggests that they elaborated a positively anticipated lawyer possible self (Erikson 2019). In recollecting their original imagined possible selves as a lawyer, participants did not seem to have been influenced by the endemic structural barriers to access faced by under-resourced students (Ashley et al 2015; LETR 2013), suggesting alignment with many of the characteristics of "*Naïve*" students at a post-92 university (Burke et al 2019). The dispositions of the habitus relevant to being a lawyer which seemed to have initially inclined them to study the law degree reflected their perceptions of improved life chances and social mobility that they believed being a lawyer would generate (Bourdieu 1977). However, their idealised perceptions of being a lawyer suggested that for many, on joining the degree their original habitus was not necessarily aligned to the field of legal practice.

4.1.c Family support.

When describing family, participants referred to one or both parents (UG5, UG10, UG12, UG13, UG14, UG15, UG16), siblings (UG2) and partner (UG3, UG16). All but one participant mentioned their family as some influence upon their choice of a legal career. Descriptions of family influences included “support” (UG2, UG3, UG13) and “encouragement” (UG16). However, participants did not seem to have chosen law because their family expected them to become a lawyer. Only UG3 expressed this as akin to a family expectation. However, she qualified her comments, immediately describing this as encouragement. Family was instead expressed as supportive. For example, UG9 explained that her parents:

> “…never necessarily forced the idea of a lawyer upon me, but once I put out there that I wanted to become a lawyer, they sort of not pressured, but they put their foot down and said, “If this is actually what you want to do, then you need to go ahead and actually do it.”

On joining the degree, family seemed to be a source of advice about career choices for some participants. For example, UG6 said, “I’m more of a family person, I take my family as priority more than anything. So if I need any advice, if I need anything, any help, I would go and ask them first.” However, UG6 and UG2 acknowledged reservations about the quality of advice that their family could provide. UG2 recognised the limits of advice from her parents, “But because they didn't know that much about the working world, or as much about the education routes that you needed to get a career, they couldn't help as much impacting the making of it.” UG6 said: “But then sometimes the advice that they would tend to give me is something that they wouldn’t know much about themselves.”

The absence of family expectations of a legal career contrasted with perceptions of some Law staff participants of the influence family had upon students’ motivations for studying law and becoming a lawyer (section 4.5). It also contrasted with Hardee’s study of expectations that, “family want me to study law” (2012:29). Family instead

seemed to be a significant source of support suggesting that these participants' aspirations might have been forged by their family habitus, founded upon an understanding that the degree would be enough for successful graduate outcomes (Burke et al 2019) with only two participants commenting upon the possible limitations of such advice. Again, this suggested similarities with the descriptions of "*Naïve*" students, whose families provided encouragement but were not able to offer more relevant advice tailored to the graduate labour market (Burke at al 2019: 1716) Burke et al claim, utilising Bourdieu, that working-class students rely upon family for their advice about the graduate labour market which is outdated because now, in effect, the "degree is not enough" to secure graduate work (Tomlinson 2008). This seems to suggest that for many participants on joining the degree they did not have a feel for the game to become a lawyer, as a disposition of the habitus (Bourdieu 1990b; Costa et al 2018).

As participants had self-identified that they came from a low socio-economic background (SEB), it was unlikely that many would have family ties to the profession, and this seems to have been borne out when participants were asked to name a lawyer. While most participants were able to name a lawyer, only UG3 responded to this question by mentioning a lawyer within their own family or as a close personal connection, but was keen to qualify this as, "distant family" who she could not name and hardly knew. UG12 later revealed a distant member of the family who had qualified who she could not name. Similarly, UG10 later revealed that her brother was a qualified lawyer, seemingly the strongest family connection to the profession of any of the participants. Other participants named lawyers from work experience, and two participants named Amal Clooney, the high-profile human rights lawyer and activist, familiar to them through the media. When participants named a lawyer, they were asked if that lawyer had inspired their legal career. Only UG12 said that they had been inspired by them and the remainder indicated some limited influence rather than inspiration, with UG8, UG3 and UG10 suggesting that the named lawyer had been a positive role model. This suggests that any family ties or social connections to the profession were weak.

For these participants family and social connections did not seem to generate social networks to access opportunities within or information about the legal profession, aligning with Bathmaker et al's study (2013). Except for UG10, even though participants had started the degree aspiring to be a lawyer they did so without seeming to have an accessible social network connected to the legal profession. This aligns with the findings of Reay et al where working-class student participants could have a professional career in mind, "even though no-one from their immediate family or social circle were professional" specifically here, legal professionals (2009b:1109).

4.1.d. Media influence.

As they did not seem to have accessible social contacts within the legal profession, some participants' perceptions of the profession seemed to have been shaped through media depictions of lawyers, reflecting the findings of Francis & Sommerlad (2009). Nearly half of the participants referred to media portrayals of lawyers, including television dramas or films, as an influence upon their legal career expectations, acknowledging the portrayals of helping others aligned with participants' personal motivations. UG1 said, "I think when you watch a TV show, you get inspired by how they handle things and how they can help other people and I guess I got inspired through that." UG15 said:

> "I kind of got inspired from TV shows, crime shows, or stuff revolving around law. Or like documentaries as well, so when you hear the police people talking you hear the lawyers talking as well at the same time. Kind of inspired me, yes, it's something that I want to do."

Only two participants acknowledged that these portrayals were not necessarily realistic. UG11 said, "The outward perspective you have of what a lawyer is, I feel like the idea is the big office, the idea is the cool suits, it's not the hard work." UG10 referred to portrayals of lawyers within an American television programme: "I mean, watching The Good Wife is entertaining but it's definitely not a reflection of what it's like."

Media depictions appear to have been used to create an idealised perception of being a lawyer, aligned to some participants' personal values, seemingly contributing to a desirable lawyer possible self (Harrison 2018). Media depictions may also have contributed to the development of participants' pre-professional identity as the "awareness of and connection with the skills, qualities, behaviours, values and standards of a student's intended profession, as well as one's own understanding of professional self in relation to the broader general self" (Jackson 2017: 833). Mindful of their imminent entry into the graduate labour market, these participants were not yet in the workplace, so as a "less mature form of professional identity" (Jackson 2016:926), pre-professional identity was an appropriate concept. However, their seemingly idealised perceptions of the profession were vulnerable from the start of their degree, as participants were exposed to different and more realistic representations of legal practice. This suggests alignment with the development of professional identity amongst Australian Law Schools, where students swap understandings of the profession shaped by television and "cultural stereo-types" and instead are "introduced to the genuine expectations of legal practice" (Field et al 2013: 18).

4.1.e What does being a lawyer mean?

Participants were in their final year when interviewed so, as they were approaching the end of their degree, they were asked what "being a lawyer" meant to them at this point, to capture any changes that had taken place during the degree and to enable them to describe developments in their habitus as their understanding of being a lawyer (Maton 2014). Many participants seemed to continue to attribute largely positive meanings to being a lawyer. Language was used that suggested vocational and idealised perceptions of legal practice, including "helping people" (UG15), "putting others first" (UG4), "changing lives" (UG11, UG5), and generally achieving social outcomes (UG1, UG3, UG5, UG6, UG11). Some participants seemed to envisage their possible selves as a lawyer, as the achievement of their personal career aspirations. UG16 said: "because that's what I want to do, so it makes me happy [laughs]". UG2 associated being a lawyer with "being successful." UG7 related it directly to the achievement of her longstanding personal career goal:

> "…it would be me achieving what I wanted to achieve if that makes sense, because obviously I haven't put in years of work to get nothing out of it really, I have worked very hard and I think probably being a lawyer is that achievement that I wanted."

This suggests that in the final stage of their degree, for some participants their lawyer possible self remained both desirable and probable (Harrison 2018).

However, in contrast to their original idealism, varied elements of negativity seemed to be introduced by some participants, even amongst those who still planned to qualify. UG2 and UG1 described it as a "hard" career to enter and UG1, UG2, UG7, and UG13 acknowledged the "hard work" they anticipated in qualifying as a lawyer. Two participants suggested negative connotations of being a lawyer at this point. Notably both participants no longer intended to qualify, having developed alternative career plans. UG9 now perceived being a lawyer in terms of "sacrifice":

> "When I was younger I never really thought about how much sacrifice a lawyer would have to make in terms of moral codes and just the personal time into work. But now that I'm older and now that I'm branching, I'm like sacrifice, you're considering is there certain things that I'm willing to sacrifice in order to get to that place."

UG13 seemed to believe that in the long-term being a lawyer would have a detrimental impact upon her own wellbeing. She suggested that implicit within a lawyer's work would be the weight of personal responsibility for the welfare of her clients, and she found this responsibility unsettling:

> "And I have always wanted to feel I am the type of person to help, or to really want to help people. But the reality of it is that it is very taxing on your mind, on your mental state, on your emotions, and not everyone can deal with that."

When asked if they now planned to become a lawyer, six participants confirmed that they had changed their original legal career plans (UG8, UG9, UG10, UG13 and UG15, with UG6 clarifying that she did not aspire to become either a solicitor or barrister but wished to work in law). UG11 and UG4 were undecided although they remained interested in qualifying. Half of all the participants confirmed that they had maintained their original legal career aspirations and intended to qualify (UG1, UG2, UG3, UG5, UG7, UG12, UG14, UG16).

As possible selves "comprise the self-knowledge that is the most vulnerable and responsive to changes in the environment" (Markus & Nurius 1986: 956) the lawyer possible selves that participants seemed to have when they began the degree, encountered a different environment during the degree. During the degree it seems that participants' original, idealised understanding of the legal profession had been augmented by a more realistic understanding of legal practice and how to become a lawyer. This suggests that they had developed career management information, specifically "career building skills" and information essential to enter the legal labour market as field (Bridgstock 2009:38). For some participants this seemed to affirm their lawyer possible self and additionally, their awareness of the qualification process and the legal labour market suggests that some participants seemed to have become conscious of the 'rules of the game', akin to Bourdieu's practical mastery as a disposition of the habitus, relevant to entering the field of legal practice (Bourdieu 1977; 1990a; Burke & Hannaford-Simpson 2019).

In subsequent interview questions some participants identified other considerations relating to the probability of achieving a possible self as a lawyer which they claimed had resulted in their changed career aspirations. For some participants as they had navigated the new environment of HE, their developing awareness of legal practice seemed to have generated feelings of discomfort, when related to their awareness of their own personal feelings and values. For UG9 and UG13 this seemed to reduce the attractiveness of their lawyer possible self, resulting in it becoming a possible self to

be avoided or even feared, apparently contributing to the decision not to become a lawyer and the motivation to change their careers (Erikson 2019; Harrison 2018; Papafilipou & Bathmaker 2019).

4.2 Research Question 2: Do students see themselves as a lawyer?

These interview questions explored the various considerations that participants believed had influenced their plans to become a lawyer during their degree. The findings suggest that participants used the lens of possible selves tacitly in making career decisions. The range of possible selves available to an individual is linked directly to their, "socio-cultural and historical context" and their "immediate social experiences." This seemed to shape what participants believed to be possible and impossible (Markius & Nurius 1986: 954). Participants seemed to access their experiences of the fields of HE, anticipating entry into the legal profession as field, when evaluating their lawyer possible selves.

Moving beyond "an abstract belief that the state is desired or undesired", participants' used their developing understanding of being a lawyer to experience, "being in a concrete future state" to elaborate this possible self (Erikson 2007:352). Participants seemed to use this to evaluate the attractiveness and the likelihood of achieving their possible selves (Harrison 2018). Positive evaluations of the desirability and the likelihood of achieving that possible self, therefore as one that can be imagined and realised, contributes to motivation towards that possible self as one to be "hoped for" rather than avoided (Erikson 2019: 15). Participants' possible selves seemed to operate as incentives, motivating conduct, influencing, academic performance and planning their careers (Henderson 2019; Stevenson & Clegg 2011), supporting the development of their like to be and like to avoid possible selves (Erikson 2019; Harrison 2018). This evaluation of participants' imagined future possible selves seemed to operate in the present as motivation for the actions they took to progress their career aspirations (Erikson 2019), suggesting this emanated from dispositions of their habitus inclining them to act (Bourdieu 1977) to accrue relevant capital to

enhance or sustain their position in the field (Grenfell & James 1998) whether they were becoming or not becoming a lawyer.

When asked about becoming a lawyer participants seemed to describe dispositions of the habitus. Habitus is “the system of structured, structuring dispositions” and seemed to be shaped by participants’ experiences within HE and legal practice as fields (Bourdieu 1990: 52). As habitus is, “durable but not eternal” those experiences sustained or transformed participants’ original habitus (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992:133), as their feel for the game to become a lawyer as dispositions (Bourdieu 1990b), influencing participants’ “choices, practices and imposed limits/barriers” in relation to their career decisions (Burke & Hannaford-Simpson 2019: 20). Their pre-professional identity seemed to inform the elaboration and the evaluation of the desirability and probability of a possible self as a lawyer (Harrison 2018). As identity is a “manifestation of habitus” (Crozier et al 2019:4) the findings seem to suggest that participants’ lawyer possible selves were also shaped, (as a disposition of the habitus) by their evolving pre-professional identity, defined as the “awareness of and connection with the skills, qualities, behaviours, values and standards of a student’s intended profession, as well as one’s own understanding of professional self in relation to the broader general self” (Jackson 2017: 833). This section will consider how participants seemed to evaluate the desirability of their original possible self but firstly will address participants’ evaluation of the probability of realising a lawyer possible self (Harrison 2018).

4.2.a Perceptions of how to become a lawyer

When they started the degree, many participants seemed to believe that their focus should be only upon their studies. For example, UG6 explained, “The only option that I had known of at that time is you should go to Uni to get a degree for law, and that will be the best way out of it.” UG7 said, “I think when you walk into university you just think oh I'll just do a degree.” This suggests that for some participants their feel for the game of becoming a lawyer, as a disposition of the habitus (Bourdieu 1990a), had been based upon a belief that their degree alone would be necessary to enter the profession, aligning with Burke et al’s findings (2019). This suggests an emphasis

upon investment in academic capital which did not reflect the reality of the process of becoming a lawyer and employers' expectation of other credentials (Francis 2015; Nicholson 2022). For these undergraduate participants, this perception seemed to encounter challenge as they navigated HE, and as they became aware of aspects of the process of becoming a lawyer (Burke et al 2019; Tomlinson 2008).

Despite all undergraduate participants aspiring originally to become a lawyer, eleven out of the sixteen participants said that they did not know how to do so when they started the degree. "The first thing is, I don't know how you do become a lawyer" (UG15). UG12 said, "I had no idea what I was in for. No clue." Seemingly, these participants had professional aspirations without knowing how to achieve them, echoing Reay et al's study of working-class students in HE (2009b). This suggests that for many participants, their feel for the game, as a disposition of the habitus when they joined the degree, did not reflect the reality of becoming a lawyer and was not aligned to the field of legal practice. Potentially, these participants began the degree at a disadvantage when it came to achieving a possible self as a lawyer in comparison to undergraduates with relevant dispositions of the habitus aligned to the field of legal practice.

By their final year many participants seemed to have become aware that a qualification process separate to the degree, would be involved in them becoming a lawyer. This suggests modification to the original perception of the "almost guaranteed linkage between a degree and graduate employment" as a lawyer (Burke et al 2019:1716). The costs associated with, and the duration of the qualification process seemed to be significant considerations for some participants in relation to their lawyer possible selves. UG12 connected qualification costs of the mandatory post-graduate course with her socio-economic circumstances: "It's far too expensive, people like me don't qualify for many scholarships, so that kind of sucks." UG4 said: "and just realising the cost of everything and actually analysis, okay I have to do this and pay for my rent and transportation." Some participants identified other unanticipated costs associated with the qualifications process. UG11 linked his doubts about his aspirations to the duration of qualification and his earnings potential:

> "I'm going to have no experience, I won't be able to get ahead, and it's going to be a lot later on in my life, or I can just choose another profession and like my salary could be higher, or it could be higher quicker. And because you don't know where you're heading, other things start to look appealing."

UG9, UG15, and UG10 believed the duration of the qualification process had contributed to their change of career plans, seemingly making their envisaged lawyer possible self less attractive and less likely. UG15 said, "it just seems too long in order to do what I wanted to do." The duration of the qualification process represented a lost opportunity for them to provide essential financial support. UG15 explained the cost/benefit analysis involved in her career decision making, "do I really want to put time and effort in order to do something, I'll be so much in debt, and not able to help my family out. So that kind of confirmed for me not being a lawyer." UG9 said, "I think it's the length of the education as well that also puts me off." She explained her family's expectations regarding the financial support she would provide as a graduate, which meant that, "becoming a lawyer, as of right now, just doesn't seem realistic for me."

During the degree participants developed some "feel for the game" regarding the process of qualification necessary to become a lawyer as dispositions of relevant habitus (Bourdieu 1990a: 9). This suggests disruption to participants' prior belief in the transactional nature of the degree, reflecting an adjustment in dispositions of the habitus since joining the degree (Burke et al 2019; Burke and Hannaford Simpson 2019). Unsurprisingly with limited economic resources at their disposal, the financial costs of the process of qualification, involving mandatory post-graduate vocational courses, was of concern to some participants. This aligns with the findings of the LETR (2013). For some participants, such costs in the context of their limited socio-economic circumstances, seemed to impact upon their evaluation of the desirability of their lawyer possible self (Harrison 2018). This awareness of how to navigate HE in relation to entering the legal labour market specifically, as a feel for the game as a disposition of the habitus, could also be described as "the abilities required to proactively navigate the working world and successfully manage the career building process and as "career

management skills" (CMS) (Bridgstock 2009: 35). The development of CMS seemed to occur during the degree but to varying extents suggesting varying apparent outcomes for participants' original legal career aspirations.

4.2.b Academic success

Academic success was also used in evaluating the likelihood of a lawyer possible self (Harrison 2018). Some participants used academic success to articulate their pre-professional identity as a lawyer: "Yes, doing well in our assessments and everything, it makes me feel, okay, I can do that." UG3 said that good assessment performance, "made me realise that I could and I will by the grace of God do good in real life." UG1, UG15, UG7, UG3, UG11, and UG5 concentrated upon the acquisition of relevant academic capital necessary to become a lawyer (Reay et al 2009b) to evaluate the probability of their lawyer possible self. Even though UG8 and UG15 had decided not to qualify, they continued to use academic achievement in their evaluation: "I'm still getting good grades that would allow me to go on and do training contracts and everything" (UG8). However, for some, their concerns about academic performance generated fear about the probability of becoming a lawyer. UG3 described a "stressful" and scary qualification process, where academic performance was crucial. A disappointing academic performance had made UG1 question her career plans: "If I become a lawyer, will I be a good one?" UG9 and UG13 both connected academic performance with their thinking about becoming a lawyer: "If studying the subject is going to bring me so much stress alongside personal problems, imagine what a career of this is going to do" (UG13).

Participants indicated that an albeit limited feel for the game, as a disposition of the habitus to become a lawyer, had developed by this point (Bourdieu 1990a: 9; Reay et al 2009b), through relevant CMS, expressed as awareness of the relationship between academic performance and entry into the legal profession. This suggests a disposition influencing their behaviour, indicating habitus transformation (Maggio 2017). They believed that the potential impact of academic failure upon their aspirations would be significant, suggesting "trajectory interruption", perceived as jeopardising the habitus transformation necessary to enter the legal labour market, and achievement of the

social mobility outcomes they expected of HE (Byrom & Lightfoot 2013). For some this continued belief that the degree would be enough to secure their career aspirations, with its focus upon the acquisition of academic capital alone, suggests the retention of original habitus (Reay et al 2009b; Tomlinson 2008).

4.2.c Competition

Twelve of the sixteen participants referred to awareness of the competitive nature of the profession, accrued during the degree, which had impacted upon their evaluation of the probability of becoming a lawyer (Harrison 2018). UG12, UG16, UG1, and UG3 identified competition with fellow students as part of becoming a lawyer, associating competition with negative feelings like “pressure.” UG12 described studying law as a “battleground.” Competition impacted upon UG1’s confidence: “when I’m struggling or when I see other people are doing really well, and I feel like I can be like them, but I’m not.” The competitive nature of legal practice generated doubts for UG7: “I had times where I just thought it's not going to happen, it's too competitive, I can't do it.” UG10 believed that this competition and the costs of qualifying amounted to a “big gamble” describing it as a “risk” that she was not “willing to take anymore.” UG11 believed this awareness had made him “maybe more realistic in terms of what the actual outcome is going to be of your law degree.” Conversely, competition motivated two participants because it affirmed the probability of becoming a lawyer. Although UG2 believed that as a Muslim and a woman, she would be faced with challenges in a competitive labour market, she was “willing to fight for it.” UG7 balanced her concerns about competition with an evaluation of other aspects of her lawyer possible self: “because I've done my extracurricular activities, I've built up my confidence a bit more, it kind of inspired me a little bit more to keep pushing myself.”

Most participants joined the degree knowing little about entering the legal labour market but had become aware of its highly competitive nature, illustrating relevant CMS development. This CMS development suggest a disposition influencing their behaviour, indicating habitus transformation (Maggio 2017). Competition was interpreted by many as a possible challenge to the likelihood of becoming a lawyer and seemed to reflect the tension between burgeoning awareness of the difference

between the reality of and their original idealised understandings of their chosen career. This also challenged their original expectations of the relationship between their participation in HE and their guaranteed progression into the labour market (Burke et al 2019; Tomlison 2008). UG2 and UG7 used this acquired CMS and the lawyer possible self it supported, to motivate themselves, suggesting the development of "practical sense" as an "ability to understand and negotiate positions" in relation to the field (Webb et al 2005: xiv).

4.2.d Work experience

Work experience provides insight into a workplace's culture and ideology and therefore fosters greater familiarity with the workplace, strengthening pre-professional identity (Jackson 2016; 2017; Tomlinson & Jackson 2021). The pre-professional identity suggested by participants' exposure to the legal profession was used to experience "being in a concrete future state" to elaborate their lawyer possible self (Erikson 2007:352), influencing its desirability (Harrison 2018). UG16's legal work experience had, "helped me because you see it from a professional side." Legal work experience confirmed the desirability of UG7's and UG12's lawyer possible selves: "I do see myself as a lawyer and I see myself as a good one because of the experiences that I've had" (UG12). Work experience enabled some participants to elaborate a lawyer possible self, by helping others and/or generating social change, values important amongst those intending (UG12, UG5) and not intending to qualify (UG6, UG10). UG6 said, "obviously to be able to help people, that is the main thing for me." UG12 realised: "I am making an impact." This suggests that for some participants work experience facilitated a pre-professional identity aligned with their values (Jackson 2017), which elaborated their possible self as a lawyer, increasing its desirability and probability (Harrison 2018).

However, for some participants familiarity with the workplace and exposure to the reality of legal practice, did not seem to generate a strong pre-professional identity as a lawyer, contrary to the claims of Tomlinson & Jackson (2021). This suggested disruption of the idealised perceptions of practice of some participants, and their evaluation of the desirability of their lawyer possible self (Harrison 2018). UG10

explained that her placement resulted in, “the rose-tinted glasses of a lawyer” coming off because, “the day in, day out is not what I imagined it to be.” Like UG3, UG13, and UG4, UG10 perceived a conflict between her values and lawyers’ representative function:

> “I don’t think I’m the sort of person who could stand there and defend someone who I, you know, had done, who had been accused of something, particularly heinous, and stand there and defend them.”

UG13 felt this representative responsibility would be intrusive, worrying about its enduring impact upon her: “I find it quite hard to think that that will be my life for like 40 or 50 years, you know just carrying the problems of someone else.” UG4 said: “I don’t want to feel too overwhelmed with some of the things that I would be experiencing.” For some, this tension was generated through their exposure to the reality of commercial legal practice. UG14 was uncomfortable with the prospect of charging clients for advice, “this is what puts me off. It’s very money orientated.” UG8’s developing professional self and values were in conflict encountering clients unable to afford legal advice: “I just thought there must be something else I can do to help these people that doesn’t require them paying an extortionate amount for that help.” For UG4 and UG14 work experience cast doubts upon the desirability of becoming a lawyer but they felt that they had no alternative, suggesting a habitus not entirely adjusted to the field and still undergoing transformation (Byrom & Lightfoot 2013). Whereas UG15, UG10, UG8, and UG13 seemed to link this clash between their idealised expectations and their experiences, contributed to their changed career plans. UG10 said: “I think the placement definitely secured in my mind that I didn't want to be a lawyer.” UG15 said: “I can see myself helping people, that’s something I still want to do. But maybe not as a lawyer. Because it can be quite restrictive sometimes.”

Work experience could confirm or disrupt original career aspirations, suggested through the evaluation of the desirability of a lawyer possible self (Harrison 2018). For some participants work experience seemed to demonstrate the alignment of their values with their evolving pre-professional identity, suggesting a habitus related to the

field (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992) which confirmed the desirability of becoming a lawyer in their evaluation of their planned career. However, doubts about the desirability of becoming a lawyer suggests some felt "habitus in tension" (Byrom & Lightfoot 2013:816). UG4 and UG14, felt that they had no alternative but to attempt to qualify, suggesting habitus in transformation, "where going back was not an option but going forward was particularly difficult" (Byrom & Lightfoot 2013: 817). Other participants experienced tension between their values and their evolving pre-professional identity as a lawyer akin to feeling a sense of fit (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992).

Participants who rejected the culture of legal practice based on their experiences of the workplace, deeming it incompatible with their understanding of their general self, suggest that their evolving pre-professional identity (Jackson 2016; 2017; Tomlinson & Jackson 2021) as habitus, was not necessarily shaped to enter the field of legal practice, seemingly influencing their perceived choices (Reay 2004). Work experience seemed to have diminished the desirability of their lawyer possible self, making it something to be avoided (Harrison 2018). Some participants explained that they now had a different graduate career in mind which they felt was more aligned with their values, and their evolving habitus. The strategy of selecting another graduate career in a field in which they would feel like a "fish in water", enabled them to sustain their expectations of HE's social mobility outcomes, by distinguishing themselves from their families, thereby transforming their habitus (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992). For example, UG8 said:

> "I wanted that money and security, and I still do, but I realise now that there's not just one way to get it and being a lawyer isn't the only option, whereas I thought it was before. I think that working with these vulnerable people would make me a lot happier than doing a nine to five in a solicitors."

4.2.e Fitting in

Many participants' perceptions of fitting into the legal profession seemed to influence evolving career plans and the probability of becoming a lawyer (UG11, UG14, UG10, UG15, UG13 and UG9). UG11 said, "I don't feel confident in the aspect of like what

I'm going to be doing in law in the future. I don't know where I'm going to fit." Fit was evaluated by some in relation to specific areas of legal practice, again suggesting a tension between the idea and the reality of practice. Reflecting upon his work experience in commercial legal practice, UG14 said: "I don't think I'd fit into that sort of environment." Perceptions of fit suggested self-imposed limitations by some participants. UG15's focus upon criminal practice and UG10's rejection of working with companies had contributed to their decision not to qualify. Concentrating only upon specific legal practice areas suggests that these participants were not aware of or able to explore other specialisms which might have offered greater alignment with their values (and their habitus). This suggested that they had opted out of other opportunities to develop familiarity other aspects of legal practice which could have fostered a stronger pre-professional identity (Tomlinson & Jackson 2021) and sense of fit. Their understanding of their preferred specialisms seemed to generate discomfort as expectations clashed with reality, suggesting that their habitus did not have "subconscious and pre-reflexive fit" in relation to their specific area of legal practice (Bourdieu 1990a:108). Habitus here reflected Bourdieu's description of acquired dispositions, influencing perceptions and as "organizing principles of action" (1990a: 13). As habitus enables or constrains what is possible, rejecting what is improbable (Reay 2004) it suggests that their consequent evaluation of their legal career aspirations and the desirability of a lawyer possible self, was structured by their original habitus which also had a structuring effect (Bourdieu 1977), generating actions to pursue their plans or to seek alternatives.

Potential fit using their perceptions of the legal profession incorporated representations of ethnicity. For UG9, UG13, and UG14 fitting in was linked to their belief in a lack of representation amongst the legal profession. UG9 said, "you also don't see your representation there. That puts doubt in your mind." UG14 believed that firms were, "not going to take on someone from my background" highlighting issues of representation in firms' recruitment materials:

> "if I did get a training contract in one of these big firms and then worked there, I feel like would I be treated differently? Or would I be looked down upon, because I was a different colour or because of my background."

UG9 and UG13 said that their ethnicity and the lack of representation had influenced their perception of the probability of becoming a lawyer, contributing to a decision not to qualify. UG9's perception of lawyers was that: "the majority aren't BMEs and so when you see that, it makes you wonder do I even have the same facilities and the same accessibilities as this person." Similarly, UG13 stated that her perceptions of gender and ethnicity within the legal profession had influenced her decision not to qualify:

> "I have been told my entire life, "Your best is just not going to be good enough because you are black and because you are female. You have to expect to work twice as hard to get to the same place." So, I think to myself, "Why would I go down the traditional route of passing all these assessments and exams and interviews just for a maybe?" It kind of seems like self-sabotage."

For these participants their perceptions of the legal profession's lack of diversity in relation to ethnicity and gender, presented a culture and pre-professional identity in which they did not believe they would fit, creating a further potential barrier to access, suggesting a habitus not shaped for the field (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992). For these participants this suggested that the desirability of their lawyer possible self had diminished. For UG13 and UG9 this created a possible self to be avoided (Harrison 2018).

4.2.f The emotional impact

Carrying out the evaluation of their original legal career aspirations seemed to be an emotional experience for most participants, aligning with Erikson's (2019) claims relating to the affective component of possible selves, also aligning with Reay's (2015)

contentions that habitus involves an affective, emotional component as social actors experience and interact with the social world. For some participants, evaluating career aspirations was unsettling. UG12 described a "huge pressure" "… to know exactly what you should be doing, to know exactly where you should be going, to know exactly what you need to get there." UG9 said, "I was putting a lot of pressure on myself that I didn't need to put on myself." UG11 noted that the significance of making career decisions now which would "affect you 20 years ahead" and went on to describe a cycle of distress and doubt:

> "You're upset in the sense like you're trying to figure out why it is you're doing what you're doing. Upset in the sense like you can't understand where it's going to lead me to, what is the end game, what is the end goal, where am I going to end up, you know."

UG3 and UG11 described the range of emotions they experienced about their careers: "It's stressful, it's like I said, scary, it's daunting, all kinds of words, it's just hard" (UG3). Both UG12 and UG14 described the process of career decision making as "overwhelming". UG13 also described the impact upon her wellbeing: "You know, it just seems so taxing on the mind and your self-worth."

For UG11, UG6 and UG12, this also incorporated feelings associated with a sense of personal responsibility for their situation in relation to the legal labour market. UG6 blamed herself for her lack of legal work experience: "I could have gained my experience along the way. I could have made changes to my decisions, which I didn't do and I have to deal with that now." UG12 said that she had considered blaming herself however, she recognised her lack of CMS as the issue, "As much as I want to say it is mine, at the same time I don't know what I don't know." Those blaming themselves indicate acceptance of agentic interpretations of employability with emphasis upon the individual's responsibility for their employability (Artess et al 2017; Clarke 2018; McCafferty 2022), without accounting for the influence of the labour market and its inherent "structural inequalities of access" (Brown et al 2003; Hordósy

and Clark 2018b: 173). Only UG12 raised the possibility that her situation was a consequence of socio-economic circumstances beyond her control which might generate differential access to graduate opportunities within the labour market.

All but one of the participants who had decided not to qualify described feeling disappointed. UG8 said, “I just don’t think it’s in my heart anymore that’s what I want to do.” Reflecting their original idealised legal career aspirations, UG3, UG5, UG13, UG15 and UG9 described them as a “dream.” UG9 described the difference between her expectations and her experiences, as opting out of her “dream” to become a lawyer: “a part of me does feel disappointed because I think I had this perception built around it that just wasn’t like that in reality.” UG13 described her change of career aspiration as: “letting go of that dream.” Of the sixteen participants, only two were undecided about their choice of career when the interviews took place, expressing misgivings about becoming a lawyer, potentially suggesting hysteresis of habitus, signalling the “structural lag between opportunities and the dispositions to grasp them” (Bourdieu 1997:87). Of the remaining fourteen participants most expressed relief in having reached a decision. UG5 said she felt, “more confident” having made the decision to become a lawyer. UG1, UG2, UG5, UG3, and UG7 were excited about becoming a lawyer albeit with some reservations. UG2 was able to, “see myself as a lawyer” and was “more willing to do it because I know there’s a chance at the end.” UG5 said, “I feel anxious about the future but at the same time excited.” UG7 said, “Exciting and motivating but also a little aside, probably a little bit daunting.” Those not qualifying (UG13, UG9, UG10, UG15 and UG8) described relief, having made a decision and acting upon it by formulating a career plan. UG10 and UG15 described this as feeling “good.” UG10 added that her new plans made her feel like, “I’ve got direction and I feel like I’ve found the area that I’m really passionate about.” UG8 said that she felt “a hell of a lot better” having the certainty of knowing, “this is what I’m going to do, this is where I’m going to go.”

For most participants, the evaluation of their possible self as a lawyer, suggested the use of dispositions of the habitus, including pre-professional identity, to decide to opt in or out of becoming a lawyer. The evaluation suggests that “self-conscious reflexivity in which self-awareness and a propensity for self-improvement become incorporated

into the habitus" had taken place (Reay et al 2009b:1105). Participants used their self-knowledge and awareness of the field reflexively, to determine actions they believed would advance their career aspirations either as a lawyer or in relation to their new occupational focus. The feelings of relief expressed, having decided upon their anticipated career, suggests that whether or not they had decided to become a lawyer, these participants had found a desirable and probable possible self which seemed to have motivated them, influencing actions in the present (Harrison 2018; Stevenson & Clegg 2011). This suggests their habitus had adjusted to "encounter a social world of which it is the product" (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992), either fostering their original or creating new career aspirations. This interaction between chosen field and habitus seemed to have structured habitus, "constituting the field as a meaningful world, a world endowed with sense and value, in which it is worth investing one's energy" (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992:127).

4.3 Research Question 3. How has the course shaped students' career aspirations?

Participants were asked about their understanding of the relationship between the degree and their career aspirations. Questions generated descriptions of what participants believed had enabled and constrained their original legal career aspirations. Participants continued to draw upon their subjective evaluation of their possible self, as "the ideal selves that we would very much like to become" (Markus & Nurius 1986: 954) which included becoming and not becoming a lawyer. In later interview questions they were asked to reflect upon their experiences of the curriculum, in relation to their career aspirations to identify what, if any, changes they felt were necessary in the curriculum.

4.3.a How has the degree enabled career aspirations?

Participants were asked initially to explain what had enabled their career aspirations before discussing what they believed were constraints. Interview questions dealt with course content, teaching and assessment approaches, and experiences as an undergraduate, including extra-curricular activities. Overall, participants felt that the

degree had a positive impact upon their legal career aspirations. “I feel like the course has done nothing but good for like learning law” (UG16) and UG13 felt that “there is not one thing I can think of that isn't available to me if I need it in terms of becoming a lawyer.”

4.3.b Degree content

The selection of optional subjects sustained some participants’ original legal career aspirations. Participants believed that they enhanced their understanding of specific areas of legal practice, enabling them to refine their career goals, sustaining the desirability of their lawyer possible selves, and providing motivation to achieve their original legal career aspirations (Harrison 2018). UG3, UG7, and UG2 chose optional subjects which had elaborated their envisaged future as a lawyer, generating an impetus for current action (Harrison 2018). UG2 said, “it's told me, well apart from what I don't want to get into and the ones I'm more interested in” and she had selected subjects, “that I think will be more suitable for what I want to do in the future. And actually provide a basis to the types of law that I might want to explore.” Likewise, UG3 selected subjects which “would help me further in my career or help me with my career.”

Optional subject selection was used similarly by UG8, UG15 and UG6 who had decided not to become a lawyer. UG8 selected subjects that provided, “a really good oversight of where I want to go and how I want to use the skills that those particular modules gave me.” Similarly, UG15 said her subject choices helped to shape the desirability of the career that they wanted or wanted to avoid, “and you know you don't want to go into this, or you want to go into this.” Some participants believed that subject choice had been constrained by the degree pathway, which they believed had enabled or constrained their career aspirations. UG1 felt that the absence of law options on the Criminology degree pathway could constrain her aspirations, resulting in a less well-paid legal career. Amongst those who had decided not to qualify there were mixed views. As the Law with Business pathway offered optional choices restricted to business rather than law, UG6 believed that this would be a constraint, but UG8 and UG9 said that the pathway had helped them towards their new career aspirations.

UG8 felt that the choice of “different topic areas” on the Criminology pathway, supported her new career plans and UG9 said that transferring to the Law with Business pathway allowed her, “to build and expand on this career aspiration that I'm pursuing now.”

Participants seemed to use optional subjects to exercise agency to explore specific aspects of legal practice to make choices about their career. This suggested the development of practical sense, as “an ability to understand and negotiate positions within cultural fields” (Webb et al 2005: xiv). This seemed to help participants to understand the field of legal practice as a “meaningful world” (Bourdieu 1992: 127), using an “internalized framework that makes some possibilities inconceivable, others improbable and a limited range acceptable” suggesting habitus (Reay 2004: 435). For some participants, this practical sense as habitus, seemed to support the maintenance of their original legal career aspirations, through exploration of the kinds of legal practice areas they hoped to join on qualification. For some other participants, this seemed to help in shaping new career aspirations in other professions. This knowledge of legal practice as practical sense, seemed to support the elaboration of their envisaged future as a lawyer, employed to evaluate its desirability as a possible self to be achieved or avoided (Harrison 2018; Markus & Nurius 2016), seemingly contributing to their career decision-making. Habitus therefore formed, “the basis of choices, practices and imposed limits” (Burke & Hannaford-Simpson 2019:20), contributing to individual plans to achieve aspirations (Tholen 2015).

4.3.c. Learning informed by legal practice

Many participants felt that learning informed by legal practice, enabled their career aspirations, using this experience to develop their pre-professional identity (Jackson 2016). The “practical” (UG14, UG11) and “hands on” (UG15) nature of the curriculum was valued. UG10, UG7, UG8, and UG11 felt that this advantaged them in the labour market in comparison to those with degrees focused upon theory. UG7 said: “it probably puts you one step ahead of people.” For UG1, UG4, UG3, UG5, UG7, and UG11 this type of learning enabled them to understand how they would personally experience being a lawyer in the future, seemingly influencing their understandings of

their personal agency to achieve their legal career aspirations, which elaborated participants' lawyer possible self, acting as impetus for current actions (Harrison 2018). UG7 explained that learning this way was, "almost like a mock exam at uni for what you're going to be doing in real life as a lawyer" which gave her the opportunity to, "break it down as a lawyer would break it down with a real-life client." UG3 described the experience of learning advocacy skills:

> "Being able to practice in an environment where you have to represent someone has enabled my own career experiences because obviously I want to be a barrister, you have to stand in the courtroom and represent someone."

This had boosted UG3's confidence to become a barrister as she felt, "capable of doing that in the normal courtroom and then going out and doing it in the real world." UG11 said, "I'm answering these questions as if I was sitting in a law firm" and felt that this was "an enabler without you even realising it, because once you get into the real world, you realise, okay I've done this before, I'm familiar with the format." UG1 believed that learning informed by practice, and particularly her experience of the University's Law Clinic assisting live clients, enabled her lawyer possible self, even when she was doubtful, as it made her feel: "I can do this. I can do the job of that specific kind of lawyer." Conversely, UG13 believed her assessment experiences did not reflect the reality of legal practice: "And when I think about the law profession, it is such a dynamic career, you are going to be doing so many types of things that to me don't even resemble an assessment."

With one notable exception, this suggests that for several participants this type of learning enabled them to "visualise and imagine themselves as a graduate and novice professional to develop their understanding of self," developing their pre-professional identity (Jackson 2016: 926). This evolving pre-professional identity created "more than abstract notions of future states" moving them beyond mere "hopes and fears" associated with becoming a lawyer (Erikson 2007: 350) and seemed to be used to provide a deeper, more detailed understanding of their envisaged future as a lawyer, developing and sustaining their possible self and motivating their current actions

(Stevenson & Clegg 2011). As with subject choices, this suggests that this type of learning shaped dispositions in relation to the field of legal practice, as habitus, helping them to make sense of it (Maggio 2017). These participants perceived that this learning offered insight into the field of legal practice, seemingly fostering the practical sense necessary for them to operate in this social world like “a fish in water” (Bourdieu 1992:127). This aligns with claims by Tomlinson & Jackson (2021) which relate this type of learning with pre-professional identity development and with development of relevant cultural capital valued by employers in the field. This learning seemed to be used to evaluate the desirability and probability of their lawyer possible self (Harrison 2018) sustaining their original legal career aspirations.

4.3.d. Tutors

Participants had positive perceptions of tutor influence upon possible selves and their career aspirations. UG1, UG2, UG10, UG13 and UG15 identified qualified tutors as a tacit source of social capital, relevant to the field of legal practice, confirming that social capital development could be formed during HE (Jensen & Jetten 2015). UG2’s, UG1’s and UG14’s descriptions of tutors suggested their function as role models. UG1, UG14, UG4, and UG7 valued tutors whose teaching was “passionate” as it motivated them, sustaining their legal career aspirations. UG1 and UG2 referred to tutors who shared their experiences of qualifying as a “motivator” (UG2). UG1 said it, “gives you a hope that, okay, I can be like that too.” UG14 was impressed by tutors who had been able to qualify and admired them for doing so. By implication, some participants suggested that tutors were able to provide relevant CMS that they did not already have. UG2 said that qualified tutors had raised her awareness, “of what I have to do to either achieve similar goals to them and end up in a similar position.” UG2 noted that her personal tutor had provided support in obtaining relevant work experience after she encountered some initial difficulties. This was not confined to those who intended to become a lawyer. UG10 noted that one tutor always had “time to talk to me about my career aspirations” in relation to her plans for an academic career. UG15 was inspired by the work of a Criminology tutor which had enabled her to envisage a career helping others outside of the legal profession: “So it’s like, oh, I could do that, I’ve done that. I could make something out of it.”

Tutors' qualified status seems to have been used by some participants to elaborate their lawyer possible self, particularly in terms of its probability, to sustain their legal career aspirations but could also enable some participants to elaborate other possible selves beyond the legal profession (Harrison 2018; Stevenson & Clegg 2011). Tutors' functions as role models and sources of CMS also suggest that these participants recognised tutors as a source of capital, contributing to pre-professional identity development (Farnese et al 2024) which could be utilised for positional advantage in the graduate labour market whether they were going to become a lawyer or not (Maggio 2017).

4.3.e. How has the course constrained career aspirations?

When asked if the course had constrained their legal career aspirations, initially this was rejected emphatically by UG16, UG14, UG15, UG12, UG8. For example, UG16 said, "I think the course has been really good. I don't think the course has stopped anything." However, UG14 qualified his remarks by explaining that he was not sure if his perception was due to the course or his legal work experience. Participants identified curriculum related career aspiration constraints which, coupled with changes to the curriculum proposed, suggest that by this point they had developed some relevant CMS and therefore some habitus development had taken place. Additionally, their comments suggest that they also believed that the curriculum could and should mitigate the barriers they perceived to their career aspirations.

4.3.f. Academic success

Although some participants had described academic success as a positive influence upon their legal career aspirations, UG1, UG9, and UG13 identified disappointing assessment experiences as a constraint, suggesting its use in evaluating the probability of their lawyer possible self. UG1 linked assessment performance to the likelihood of becoming a lawyer, prompting her to ask, "If I become a lawyer, will I be a good one?". UG9 and UG13 had identified other reasons for their decision to change career, but both identified assessment as a constraint. To a greater or lesser extent, academic success contributed to their lawyer possible self and making it one to be avoided (Markus & Nurius 1986), seemingly contributing to decisions to change career

plans. UG9 believed an assessment experience had finalised her decision to change her legal career aspirations. Without referencing her other reasons, UG13 said her change of career had been induced by the “stress” of high stakes, terminal assessments which made her think “what I write on this exam paper is going to determine how well someone thinks I have done, or my ability to do well in this career path.”

For these participants academic success was a credential (Burke et al 2019; Tomlinson 2008) essential in accessing and achieving success in legal practice. Academic success was used to evaluate the probability of their lawyer possible self. However, it appeared as disruptive to their evolving habitus, representing “trajectory interruption” of both their social mobility outcomes and potential positional advantage in the field of legal practice (Byrom & Lightfoot 2013:814).

4.3.g. Career management skills

There were differing views expressed as to the presence or absence of information within the curriculum about qualification and becoming a lawyer, previously referred to as career management skills or CMS (Bridgstock 2009) and its interpretation as a constraint. UG11 and UG4 believed legal career CMS was absent within the curriculum, operating as a constraint. Referring specifically to the post-graduate qualifications necessary to become a solicitor or barrister, UG11 said, “maybe constrained only in understanding what’s going to happen after university. I feel like you never really explained.”

There were mixed views regarding the provision of CMS for non-law careers. Contrary to UG4 and UG11’s views, UG15 described the dominance of legal careers CMS as a constraint because other careers had not been addressed, implying that legal CMS was within the curriculum. UG9 observed other students, unaware of alternative careers who she believed had no choice but to “battle it out” to become a lawyer, suggesting that habitus change for the students UG9 described meant that “going back was not an option but going forward was particularly difficult” (Byrom & Lightfoot 2013). As UG9 was sharing her observations of students who were not participants it was not

possible to explore this further. Conversely, UG8 and UG10 said that their non-law career aspirations had been enabled because the degree had increased their awareness of alternative careers. The provision of CMS within the curriculum is explored further within participants' proposed curriculum changes below.

4.3.h. Self-imposed constraints

UG3, UG10, UG9, UG6, UG13 believed themselves to have been a constraint upon the fulfilment of their legal career aspirations. Even though she knew that work experience opportunities would further her legal career aspirations, UG3 blamed herself for not applying for these opportunities because of what she described as her fear of rejection. UG6 blamed herself for concentrating upon her studies instead of obtaining relevant work experience, explaining ruefully that it had "constrained my ambitions…which is the decision I made myself." UG10, UG9, and UG13 had already given other reasons for opting out of their legal career aspirations but also said they saw themselves as a constraint.

Some participants spoke of external barriers beyond their control as constraints, seemingly raising a challenge to the pervasive narrative of employability as an individual responsibility. UG12 expressed frustration in securing opportunities due to limitations beyond her control because of her visa status. UG11 spoke of the tension he felt, "Is a university just a place you go to get a degree or is it somewhere that's helping you establish yourself for the real world?" and UG16 said her own socio-economic status was a barrier to her success, "where you come from, that holds you back."

Those participants who described themselves as a constraint suggest acceptance of perceptions of employability as an individual responsibility (Clarke 2018; Tholen 2015). Manifesting as a belief that at least in part, participants' success or failure was due to their personal choices and decisions, rather than connected to differential access to capital relevant for success in the field and/or the structure of the labour market, this

also suggests Bourdieu's misrecognition, concealing inequities while simultaneously maintaining them (James 2015; Thomson 2017).

After identifying their perceptions of the course's impact upon their career aspirations participants were asked specifically about their perceptions of extra-curricular activities upon their career aspirations.

4.3.i. Perceptions of the value of extra-curricular activities (ECA)

Employers value the articulation of a narrative of personal employability that involves more than an academic degree (Tomlinson 2008). Within the legal labour market, academic credentials act only as a "starting point" for employers, who are searching "for other means of distinction" (Francis 2015: 183). Legal recruiters use extra-curricular activities (ECA) as demonstrations of applicants' distinctiveness so possession of ECA has become necessary for legal labour market success (Morley 2007; Tomlinson 2008) and specifically represents cultural capital in the legal labour market (Bourdieu 1986). ECA can include "career-related employment, internships, volunteer work, study abroad or travel (Lehman 2012: 204).

On joining the degree participants had described limited understanding of the legal labour market's operation, and few had known that ECA was a necessary credential for legal labour market success, reflecting a lack of CMS or "practical mastery" (Bourdieu 1977). UG9 said, "I wasn't really aware or informed about any extracurricular activities." UG11 had believed initially that, "getting the grades or working hard to get the best grades is going to be sufficient" to achieve his legal career aspirations. This suggests that their original habitus did not generate a "feel for the game" relevant to the field of legal practice (Bourdieu 1990a: 9). Although during the degree many participants seemed to have developed some relevant CMS, the interview questions were not designed to ask specifically when and how legal career CMS development took place. Instead, participants were asked to describe their current understanding of the relationship between ECA and their career aspirations.

Many participants demonstrated CMS development by this point of the degree because they knew that the degree alone would not secure legal labour market outcomes and that ECA was a necessary credential for legal labour market success. UG2, UG7, UG8, UG5, UG4 and UG12 knew ECA was a valuable credential because they explained how this ECA enhanced their employability. UG2 balanced academic success with participation in ECA: “I'm also putting as much effort into gaining kind of experience or putting myself out there to maybe seek opportunities like that.” UG12 said: “So doing those extra-curricular things (a) broadened my scope of what human rights is, what my career goal is, (b) it showed me what I can do with my career.” UG7 linked ECA, and her legal career aspirations with her lawyer possible self and her current motivation: “because I've done my extracurricular activities, I've built up my confidence a bit more, it kind of inspired me a little bit more to keep pushing myself I think.” UG5 saw participation in ECA as a means of becoming more competitive in the legal labour market, enhancing the probability of her lawyer possible self, “if you do those things then you can add them to your CV and your CV will be exceptional with the other candidates.”

Some participants developed relevant CMS but for various reasons had not accrued ECA. Some of their reasons aligned with the findings of Hordósy and Clark (2018 a & b) of limited access to the time, finances, and chances to be able to do so, making ECA participation potentially exclusionary. UG16 and UG14 had encountered barriers in accruing ECA because of work commitments, suggesting that their socio-economic status acted as a constraint. UG10 had not engaged with some forms of ECA because of what she felt were, “harsh” academic pre-requisites for participation. UG15 said, “If I think about extra-curricular activities, I won't have time for the things that I need that’s going on in my life as well.” Having become aware of ECA’s importance UG6, UG3 and UG11 expressed regret that they had not accrued ECA previously, anticipating a detrimental impact upon their career aspirations. For example, UG11 discovered the value of ECA, “too late” because he had not understood “the importance of it alongside my degree” noting that “the degree is not enough.” This sense of regret suggests hysteresis of habitus, described as the original understanding which had determined their actions, but which had not kept pace with changes in the field of the legal labour market, where the degree alone would not be enough (Bourdieu 1997; Grenfell 2014; Tomlinson 2008).

UG1, UG13, and UG15 chose not to accrue ECA during the degree, placing a premium upon academic success. UG1 referred to “the efforts” she put into her studies, believing that demonstrated her interest in becoming a lawyer. UG13 and UG15 prioritised their studies because they felt that the ECA would endanger their academic success: “If I am going to do one thing, I need to ensure that I am doing it as close to perfect as I can” (UG13). UG15 said, “my focus needs to be 100% onto my degree and no distractions.” UG3 shared a complex view of ECA, articulating barriers to ECA accrual because “there’s a lot of different things going on outside” while stating that ECA was “just not something that I take an interest in, I don’t know why.” Conversely, she went on to say that she had participated in examples of ECA which would be highly valued by recruiters in the legal labour market, such as mooting and the Law Clinic. UG3 seemed to have developed some relevant CMS yet could not articulate its value as ECA in furthering her career aspirations. “I have done it but it hasn’t done anything for me in a sense, I haven’t been able to use it”, adding, “it didn’t really do much for my career aspirations.” This suggests development of dispositions of habitus regarding ECA but confusion as to its nature and deployment. This suggests that she was not aware of its use as part of the “rules of the game” for labour market success (Bourdieu 1990a), potentially constraining her aspirations.

During the degree, some participants’ original idealised expectations of the progression between HE into the labour market had evolved, through demonstration of relevant CMS as practical mastery (Bourdieu 1977), suggesting a shift from the characterisation as “*Naive*” students (Burke et al 2019: 1716). Building relevant CMS during the degree suggests habitus development relating to the field of legal practice, generating a sense of fit (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992) which facilitated the probability of achieving a lawyer possible self (Harrison 2018), sustaining their legal career aspirations.

The extent of CMS and relevant habitus developed during the degree varied amongst participants and so too the opportunity to act upon it by participating in ECA. This suggests potentially differential access to that CMS and ECA particularly, further constraining some participants’ chances of success in entering the field (Hordósy & Clark 2018a; Lehman 2012). Some participants’ legal career CMS, including awareness of “the reduced buying power of the degree” (Burke et al 2019: 1716),

seemed to motivate them to develop an approach to pursuing their lawyer possible self as they navigated HE. This involved the accrual of cultural and academic capital necessary for success in the legal labour market (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992), balancing academic success and ECA participation (Lehmann 2012). This suggested agency, directing their "own actions regardless of the circumstances of their own lives" (Webb et al 2005: ix).

Some participants' continuing belief in the buying power of the degree however suggested an approach to fulfilment of their career aspirations involving prioritisation of academic capital at the expense of the accrual of cultural capital via ECA (Bourdieu 1986; Burke et al 2019; Tomlinson 2008). This aligns with Reay et al's (2009ab) study that working-class students incline towards focussing entirely on academic success at the expense of the accumulation of cultural capital (like ECA), a decision likely to be contrary to achieving successful legal labour market outcomes but seemingly based upon their original habitus which, "predisposes individuals towards certain ways of behaving" (Reay 2004: 433). This might have been because they might not have participated in ECA at school, as differential participation amongst school children from low SEB was found, according to research commissioned by the Social Mobility Commission (2019). This prioritisation of academic capital acquisition might also be explained as the resilience of their original habitus, replicating the academic success which had facilitated access to HE. This might have influenced perceptions and actions, in relation to the legal labour marker, suggesting limitations on their developing CMS and transforming habitus (Maggio 2017).

Approaches adopted and the capital deemed necessary varied, depending upon participants' perception of the field (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992). For some participants, their ability to implement an approach to ECA participation seemed to be constrained by their access to the economic resources necessary to exploit opportunities to accrue ECA, as cultural capital valued in the field and as a means of developing pre-professional identity (Jackson and Tomlinson 2020). Consequently, for some participants, ECA participation seemed to sustain their legal career aspirations by generating credentials valued in the field whereas for others, unable to participate in ECA, it served "powerful social closure functions, while appearing part of a fair and meritocratic process" (Lehman 2012: 215).

4.3.j. Fulfilling career aspirations through changes to the curriculum: what do students suggest?

Participants were asked to suggest changes to the curriculum they believed would support students' career aspirations. Their proposals suggest that participants had developed some understanding of the legal labour market and reflected a shared perception of the curriculum as a means of creating opportunities to develop capital necessary for success in the labour market.

Irrespective of ultimate career destination, fourteen of the sixteen participants suggested that the curriculum be changed to include CMS to support career aspirations. UG7, UG11 and UG9 believed the absence of legal CMS in the curriculum could have caused some undergraduate participants to discard their original legal career aspirations: "If you want to keep people who are doing law in the profession, it needs to be put in the curriculum" (UG11). UG9 and UG4 implied that students lacked awareness of the importance of developing legal CMS, and that therefore needed to be prompted to pursue their career plans. UG11 said that without legal CMS the degree was "outdated" and doing students a "disservice." UG9 and UG7 said that legal CMS and ECA should be compulsory and embedded within teaching sessions otherwise, "students won't turn up" (UG9). Legal CMS included informing students that the legal labour market was highly competitive (UG10), signposting the support available from the University's careers team (UG7) and the importance of work experience and ECA as necessary credentials (UG10, UG14, and UG6). UG6 stated unequivocally that the curriculum should provide more than just subject knowledge, singling out how to gain a placement/work experience.

Providing access to networks within the legal profession was also suggested. UG2, UG4, UG6, UG11, and UG15 proposed greater engagement with legal professionals in the curriculum and UG4 suggested that practitioners could deliver legal career CMS. UG2 said, "I think networking and speaking to others is important," especially in connection to her extra-curricular experiences, which she felt would be the most influential factor in her legal labour market success. UG11 acknowledged that he did not have contacts essential for negotiating the legal labour market, "the problem I had was there was not an influence to get into law and there was not a blueprint" and suggested that networking should be embedded within the curriculum.

Although there were differing views of its extent within the current curriculum, UG8, UG10, UG15 UG9, UG6 and UG4 believed that the curriculum should also include non-law CMS. Echoing comments from other participants, UG15 said that the curriculum did not provide information, “on what I can do with my law degree if I don’t want to be a lawyer.” UG6 and UG8 suggested including information about the “other options available” beyond the legal profession. UG6 added that this should be provided from the first year of the degree onwards. UG4, UG6, UG5, UG7, UG9, UG10, UG15 and UG16 proposed this CMS should be delivered via tailored interactions with tutors, suggesting that they believed that tutors had a social capital function (Bourdieu 1986). Tutors should identify career concerns and provide targeted advice for both law and non-law careers. For example, UG9 suggested that tutors should initiate contact with individual students to establish:

> “whether they’re still happy with pursuing a legal career. If they’re not, what is it that’s putting them off and what it is they feel like they need to do in order to get to the right position where they feel comfortable to pursue that.”

Proposals for changes to the curriculum to make CMS a compulsory part of the curriculum suggest a significant and widespread change had taken place amongst participants during the degree. Embedding employability within the curriculum in this way to support career planning and decision making aligns with Bridgstock et al’s (2019) call to incorporate career development learning in the curriculum and is also recommended by Advance HE (Dalrymple et al 2021). Recognition of the necessity of understanding the operation of the legal labour market to generate changes in students’ behaviour suggests they viewed it as habitus, given its value in enabling them to gain a “feel for the game” (Bourdieu 1990a: 9). Their proposals suggest a tacit and widespread perception that on joining the degree their original habitus was not aligned to the field of legal practice and opportunities to address this could and should be provided by the curriculum, along with provision of relevant social capital (Bourdieu 1986). Their proposals suggest an expectation that the curriculum’s function was not just to provide subject knowledge but also to develop their personal employability in preparation for a law or non-law career. Participants’ perception of the curriculum’s

function in relation to employability was not necessarily shared by staff (see sections 4.4. and 4.5).

Having explored participants' understanding of their experiences of the law degree and their career decision making the research questions generated data from Law School staff to explore their perceptions of students' career decision-making.

4.4 Research Question 4: How are students' career aspirations perceived by staff?

Data to address this research question was generated from three volunteer focus groups of Law School academic staff participants (staff). Focus groups enabled staff to discuss their understandings of students' career aspirations, of professional identity, and its place within the curriculum and professional identity's relationship to students' career aspirations. The focus groups took place online with four staff participants in each. Of the twelve staff volunteers, eight possessed a legal professional qualification, five of whom were practising or non-practising solicitors. The other four staff did not have a legal professional qualification and were managers, teachers, and/or researchers. Staff discussed their perceptions of undergraduates' career aspirations, frequently drawn from anecdotal experiences rather than by citing specific data. During discussions some staff noted the challenges faced by students from low SEB. However, discussions referred or reverted to descriptions of students generally, rarely distinguishing undergraduates from low socio-economic circumstances specifically.

4.4.a. Staff perceptions of students' original career influences

No consensus was reached within or across any focus group about the number of students who join the degree knowing their career plans. Perceptions varied, for example, including, "a small handful" (SP11, Focus Group 3) to, "imagine it's quite high" (SP5, Focus Group 2). This was unsurprising considering that data addressing career aspirations on joining the degree is not collected locally or within the legal education sector. Despite this, when asked about "career plans" most staff interpreted this as legal career plans, and within all three focus groups there were shared references to non-law careers, using variations of the term "alternative careers",

suggesting a widespread assumption of a legal career as undergraduates' default choice.

Staff perceptions of students' motivations for selecting a legal career focused upon the influences of family and unrealistic media portrayals of lawyers. SP5 noted the influence of television portrayals of lawyers: "students will all be watching things like Suits" and in Focus Group 1, SP2 said that students had a "slightly romanticised view of things" taken from what they have seen on television. SP5, along with SP1 (Focus Group 1) and SP8 (Focus Group 2) noted that such representations of lawyers were unrealistic and therefore problematical for students' career plans as this did not reflect the true nature of legal practice. SP12 (Focus Group 3) said that such portrayals generated "an idealistic view of what they think a lawyer does" which was problematic because "I don't think they understand that the law is actually made up of the various types of law that obviously we teach in the modules." Staff belief in the influence upon career aspirations of media portrayals of lawyers aligned broadly with most undergraduate participants, nearly half of whom had said that the media portrayals had been influential.

There also seemed to be a shared understanding that students' families were an influence with staff in Focus Groups 1 and 3, indicating that they believed many students studied law because they had been directed to do so by family. In Focus Group 1 SP3 believed that family influence, "could be family pressure. It could be family expectations." In Focus Group 3, SP10 described a range of students:

> "from those that are enthusiastic about going into the law, but their parents are quite happy to encourage them anyway, right the way through to the other end of the spectrum, we have had some students in the past who openly admit that they are not really that interested and they are doing this because this is the subject that their parents told them to do at university. And you can understand why, because their parents are wanting them to enter a good, well-paid, stable profession."

Staff perceptions of family influence were different to UCAS's research into parental influence which found that when selecting degree subjects, "future employment prospects" are a highly significant factor (2021:13). Staff seemed to suggest that family had a strong influence upon students' decision to become a lawyer, framed in a manner that suggested they believed this might limit students' career choices and agency. Staff perceptions differed from the descriptions of undergraduate participants. Only UG3 made any mention of family influence as directive, with UG2, UG5, UG10, and UG14 suggesting that their choice of a legal career demonstrated personal agency, and other participants describing family as supportive. Only SP4 and SP10 (in different focus groups), described the influence of family in a way that corresponded with the descriptions of most undergraduate participants. Only SP2 and SP4 identified that students might have been motivated to become a lawyer because of their family's interactions with the legal system (aligning with the experiences of UG9, UG6, and UG12). Overall, this suggests that staff perceptions of students' original career influences were not aligned to the experiences described by some of the undergraduate participants.

4.4.b. Staff perceptions of students' career management skills

Discussions seemed to include unchallenged assumptions amongst staff that despite having legal career aspirations when they started the degree, students did not know how to become a lawyer and that the onus upon acquiring this knowledge during the degree rested with students (SP1, SP11, SP3, SP5, SP8). For example, SP3 said:

> "They're not actually sure of what a lawyer actually does or how to qualify as a lawyer, but they love the idea of thinking, "I want to become a lawyer. This is why I'm doing law." But they're not really sure what actually they do need to do and the journey, and what is actually involved."

Similarly, SP5 said:

> “They come and they choose law, they say they want to be a lawyer, and then they don’t actually know either what the different types of lawyers are, or they don’t actually know the process, they don’t know the steps to actually become a solicitor...”

These staff perceptions aligned with the experiences described by many students of joining the degree without knowing how to become a lawyer. This suggested that they did not have legal career management skills (CMS) (Bridgstock 2009) with students seemingly assuming an automatic progression from HE into the profession (Burke et al 2019).

Staff expectations of students’ awareness of how to become a lawyer also suggested a tacit expectation that students in this position should also know that it was up to them to develop this knowledge during the degree. For example, SP2 recalled a discussion with a student:

> “But I have a lot of students who say, “I really want to be a barrister,” and then have absolutely zero idea about what they’re meant to do. I say, “Well, have you not looked at the Bar’s website?” “No.” You know, this wouldn’t have occurred to them at all. So, I have a very kind conversation with them about, “Oh well, if you want to get there, you need to work out how to get there.”

SP5 described her perceptions of some final year law undergraduates:

> “They don’t know the steps to actually become a solicitor, and that even applies to some of our third-year students, which is quite worrying once they get to that level that they still are uncertain about what stages they need to take to become a solicitor or barrister.”

Discussions suggested a shared understanding amongst staff that many students joined the degree without the knowledge to pursue their legal career aspirations. This

understanding aligned with the descriptions of many undergraduate participants who had joined the degree wanting to become a lawyer, without necessarily knowing how to fulfil those aspirations, reflecting the findings of Reay et al (2009b). Additionally, discussions suggested an implicit understanding amongst staff that the responsibility to know how to become a lawyer rested with students. Discussions suggested that staff expected students to gain knowledge of this responsibility autonomously, and to know how to act upon it, as career management skills (Bridgstock 2009; Bridgstock et al 2019). Placing the onus upon students to develop knowledge to enter graduate work suggests an implicit understanding of employability as an individual responsibility (Artess et al 2017; Tholen 2015), without taking account of labour market issues (Clarke 2018; Tomlinson 2012). This aligned with undergraduate participants' understandings. Additionally, staff expectations that students should know how to become a lawyer, and act upon that, as a "feel for the game" suggesting expectations of dispositions of the habitus relevant to the legal labour market as field (Bourdieu 1990a: 9). This suggests that staff assumed that students would recognise the need to, and then exercise agency, to develop relevant dispositions of the habitus (Burke and Hannaford Simpson 2019). Underpinning this assumption seemed to be an acceptance amongst staff that individual employability development was also perceived as reflexive, demonstrated by students recognising and deploying their economic value to enter the field of legal practice (Francis 2015: 183).

Discussions referred to students in general, with little differentiation of the potential impact of socio-economic backgrounds (SEB) and limited discussion of the possible reasons why students did not know how to become a lawyer. For example, SP10 alluded to the position described by some of the student participants where academic capital was prioritised:

> "So, there is the bit that they need to know for now, which is that they are doing a law degree, but then they don't tend to have that much detail about what they need to do in order to kind of go onto the next step. I don't know, maybe in some cases they feel that, "Well, I'm not worrying about that bit yet. I'm focusing on this bit."

Only SP4 and SP2 (both in Focus Group 1) raised the possibility that students did not develop this knowledge because they did not know its value. Referring to students without a career plan SP4 said:

> "there's a smokescreen about what they have to do to get anywhere with anything, with what they have to do with their studies, how much effort they're supposed to put into it, what's expected of them, you know, motivations."

SP2 said, "there's a lack of awareness in thinking about how competitive the field is that they're going into." She went on to ask:

> "is it just they don't know because they haven't thought about it, or they don't know because they have thought about it and they think, 'Ah, but I don't have enough information.' Is it an informed position that they don't know?"

Descriptions of students with career plans indicated that they were those most likely to have family connections to the legal profession. SP2 said that undergraduates with career plans were likely to have "maybe the role models" or were able to draw upon family links, giving the example of "My auntie is a solicitor." In Focus Group 2, agreeing with comments by SP6, SP7 said that students' awareness of "what a lawyer is, what they do, how they do what they do is actually very surface level" unless they had family connections with the legal profession. These discussions did not expressly address students without access to relevant social networks or the potential impact that the absence of such networks might have upon their career planning. This suggests that staff perceived access to such contacts as social capital which could be deployed during their degree, with a view to entering the legal labour market as field (Bourdieu 1986). This suggested staff interpreted access to relevant social capital as a form of "inherent ability" (Reay 2020: 408).

Discussion of opportunities and events to support the development of students' career management skills, herein described as careers activities, seemed to generate a consensus that there was limited participation by students in such activities. Within

Focus Groups 1 and 2 there were shared perceptions of long-standing issue of limited engagement (expressed by SP8 and SP2). Initially discussions seemed to suggest that students made an informed choice not to participate in careers activities. SP1 and SP2 believed that considerable amounts of useful legal career information were made available to students. However, SP2 qualified her comments in relation to limited participation: “I think students do get a lot of information, and then we know that part of the problem is that they get too much information, so it gets buried or whatever it might be.” SP2 went on to question explanations for limited participation: “Are we saying apathy and actually it isn’t, they just don’t see that it applies to them at that point? I don’t know.” Only in Focus Group 2 were economic factors raised as explanations for limited participation in such activities. SP7 noted that some students did not have the resources to be able to participate. SP5 commented that some students were prevented from doing so by work commitments. Although these explanations suggested that students were constrained from participating in careers activities this was not explored further to distinguish the challenges students from low SEB might encounter in exploiting these activities to pursue their career aspirations.

Initially, staff perceptions of students’ participation in careers activities, as an aspect of CMS development, seemed to be underpinned by an understanding that students knew the value of such activities in relation to becoming a lawyer and were making a choice not to participate. This suggested a shared understanding that students should know how to become a lawyer by recognising relevant CMS opportunities and that “the individual is responsible for their own labour-market position and success” (Tholen 2015:768). Some other possible explanations for non-participation were raised, including economic circumstances generally, and as described by some undergraduate participants, the continued prioritisation of academic capital accrual, as a continuing belief in the transactional power of the degree (Burke 2016; Burke et al 2019). Only SP2 made a connection to the limited extent of students’ knowledge about becoming a lawyer discussed earlier. Specifically for students from low SEB, there was limited recognition of the potential difficulties that they might encounter in becoming a lawyer as they navigated HE, if dispositions of the habitus had not yet developed a sufficient ‘feel for the game’ (Bourdieu 1990a:9) to enable them to recognise and to participate in opportunities, to support their entry into the legal

profession. The focus group discussions moved on to address the next research question involving staff perceptions of professional identity and its place within the curriculum.

4.5 Research Question 5: Do staff believe that the course influences students' development of a professional identity as a lawyer?

Professional identity is a tacit component of the undergraduate curriculum in preparing for the workplace (Jensen & Jetten 2015; Tomlinson and Jackson 2021). Within each focus group there seemed to be implicit acceptance that identity work, aligned to a profession, could take place during the degree. This was suggested as staff mirrored the processual language used by undergraduate participants in describing their legal career aspirations: "process" (SP2, SP4), "journey" (SP1, SP3, SP7, SP5) "trajectory" (SP2), "route" (SP3, SP4), "path" (SP9). The language used by staff expressed professional identity development as processual, unfixed and incomplete because it was ongoing but connected to time and place during the degree (Lawler 2014; Trede 2023).

Staff were asked if they felt that during the degree students believed they were entering a profession. Discussions encompassed staff perceptions of and the curriculum's role in developing students' professional identity which enabled comparison with the proposals relating to the curriculum that had been made by undergraduate participants during the interviews.

4.5.a. Did staff think that when students joined the degree, they believed that they were entering a profession?

Initially there seemed to be a consensus within each focus group that students did not believe that they were entering a profession when joining the degree, seemingly based on observations and anecdotal experiences of student behaviour. Staff believed

students viewed the degree as an extension of their prior education. For example, SP7 said, “students see themselves as joining a university and joining a course, as opposed to a profession.” Similarly, SP5 said, “I think they see it as just part of their education, and then kind of the career happens after that.” SP9 believed that students saw university as a “continuation” of their education. The possibility that identity work related to entering a profession would be taking place during the degree seemed to be ruled out by some staff. SP4 said there was, “no clear ownership of who they are wanting to become or becoming”. SP5 said of first year undergraduates: “I don’t think they see it as part of some sort of professional journey to become a solicitor or barrister.” SP4 and SP8 commented independently that they believed that students did not feel they were entering a profession until later, during their post-graduate, vocational studies. However, some exceptions were subsequently identified.

SP5 and SP2 said that undergraduates returning from a placement or having had work experience might view their degree “in a more professional way” implying the development of professional identity during work experience (Jackson & Tomlinson 2020). Aware that he was deviating from the consensus, SP6 distinguished students who might, “have a perception that they think they are on the cusp” of entering the profession if they had access to family networks amongst the profession. Similarly, SP2 believed students with access to “role models” linked to the legal profession, “seem to be talking about a trajectory, that they feel they’re on a trajectory into a profession.” Both SP6 and SP2, in different focus groups, expressed the significance of access to social networks within the legal profession in shaping preparedness for the field of legal practice, suggesting relevant social capital (Bourdieu 1986). Continuing earlier discussions, which implied social capital’s value in preparing to enter the field of legal practice, suggests a shared understanding that students with such social capital would have dispositions of the habitus aligned to the field, enabling them to demonstrate actions to achieve positional advantage (Artess 2019; Bourdieu 1990). Discussions referred to students in general, without distinguishing those from the low SEB specifically and did not identify any potential issues of differential access to relevant capitals necessary for fulfilment of their career aspirations.

To support the assertion that students did not believe they were joining a profession during the degree, staff cited students' failure to meet expectations of professional behaviour. SP2 spoke of "professionalism" which she said was, "acting professionally" and "being courteous and all that kind of thing." SP12 said that despite the degree being the first part of the academic stage of training to become a lawyer, students were not aware that, "they are actually also trainee professionals." SP4, SP1 and SP3 all mentioned communications which lacked: "basic etiquette, basic pleasantries, how you would professionally speak to someone" (SP3). Only SP1 acknowledged that students might not know what these expectations were so guidance might be beneficial to signal: "This is the standard I expect from you."

Staff expectations of "professional behaviours" suggest a shared understanding that knowing and meeting such behavioural expectations rested upon individual students, suggesting dispositions of the habitus as a "practical sense", shaping their understanding of the world and how they acted (Bourdieu 1990; Maggio 2017). As dispositions of the habitus, these expectations of student behaviour connected to the legal profession, suggests implied expectations of students changing to fit (Archer & Leathwood 2003; Bourdieu 1990). Connections between professional behaviour and the legal profession specifically, could have been due to the degree's status (at the time) as a qualifying law degree forming the first part of the academic stage of becoming a lawyer (BSB & SRA 2014). However, these focus group discussions involved inconsistency as previously staff had claimed (with some exceptions) that students did not believe they were entering a profession. Yet, in subsequent discussions staff seemed to have expectations of "professionalism," describing behaviours seemingly connected with the legal profession. This apparent inconsistency suggests that staff could have been holding students to professional standards of behaviour despite the earlier views expressed by some staff that they did not believe students were entering a profession. This apparent inconsistency recurred when staff were asked to discuss their understanding of professional identity.

4.5.b. What does professional identity as a lawyer mean?

When asked about their own professional identity, initial reactions suggested that staff were a little discombobulated by the question. For example, the question about professional identity was, “the toughest one of the lot so far” (SP6) and it, “shut us all up (laughter)” (SP5). SP4 said, “I’ve never thought about it.” SP9 said, “I don’t think I have ever really looked at that question about myself because I don’t have an LPC or a BPTC” (SP9). That staff were not familiar with professional identity was perhaps unsurprising because the qualifying law degree, with its focus upon legal knowledge as part of the academic stage of training to become a lawyer (BSB & SRA 2014), did not explicitly include lawyers’ professional identity. It is a term that is absent from the professional bodies’ current frameworks for qualification within legal education in England and Wales (BSB 2016; SRA 2024a).

Most staff believed that their professional identity as a lawyer was important even if it was not something that they had consciously considered before. As several staff members had legal vocational qualifications, when describing their professional identity, it was perhaps unsurprising that connections were made to legal practice. SP11 said, “even though I am not a practising solicitor, I still uphold the Code of Conduct in everything that I do.” She added that the Code of Conduct was “part of me” and “constantly ingrained in you.” Even though she had not qualified, SP8 believed professional identity was, “anything” related to the legal profession, “so looking at ethics and things like that, that I follow and practice, endorse, teach, whatever.” Referring to values of the profession, SP8 would, “Live, sleep, eat, and breathe, those particular values” adding, “so I am those values.” SP4 described her professional identity as, “upholding the values” associated with being a solicitor. SP12 said her professional identity was, “upholding values, being trustworthy, acting with integrity.” For SP5 professional identity was, “something that becomes very much attached to you, and therefore it is there all of the time.” SP7 described it as “the approach I take to the world.” SP8, SP5, and SP7 all felt that professional identity was used “subconsciously” and SP6 described professional identity as a “mindset” adding, “it is literally everything I am.”

Although professional identity might have been a novel and thought-provoking concept when introduced into the discussions, staff seemed able to generate shared, socially constructed meanings of professional identity, making connections with legal practice, suggesting professional identity as a "manifestation of habitus" (Crozier et al 2019:4). The language used to describe professional identity suggested it was perceived as embodied, unconscious, and habitual. This suggests habitus, as an "acquired system of lasting and transposable dispositions which, integrating past experiences, functions at every moment as a matrix of perceptions and actions" (Bourdieu 1977:83). The importance of values suggested dispositions of the habitus, reflecting, "a way of being, a habitual state" (Bourdieu 1977: 214), incorporating the relationship between their internal and their external self, with habitus as both structured and structuring of their practices (Bourdieu 1977; Reay 2004). As habitus, professional identity seemed to be structuring their behaviour as practices, influencing their thoughts, feelings, and their current and future actions but was also structured, because their professional identity seemed to be a product of their individual previous experiences, as a framework, related to their understandings of the field of legal practice (Bourdieu 1977; 1992; Maton 2014). Discussions moved on to staff perceptions of students' professional identity.

4.5.c. Perceptions of students' professional identity

Staff did not distinguish between professional identity and pre-professional identity (Jackson 2016) which was unsurprising, given their earlier comments that this was a novel concept. Some staff used unchallenged proxies for professional identity. These proxies included skills (SP11, SP12, SP7, and SP5) and professionalism (SP5, SP7, SP12, and SP11) which can be a form of professional identity (Trede et al 2012). Staff believed that students' professional identity was shaped by "idealistic" (SP12) depictions of the legal profession within, "popular culture" (SP7). SP5 believed students thought: "actually, "I will do my degree and then I will become this person, I will be the next like Harvey Specter," you know in Suits." Such observations echoed the findings amongst Australian Law Schools, where students' understanding of professional identity had been shaped by television and "cultural stereotypes" (Field et al 2013: 18).

Discussions of students' professional identity included how to speak, dress, and behave, suggesting embodied habitus as, "ways in which the social world is in the body" again connected to the field of legal practice (Bourdieu 1977; Reay 2004). SP8, SP9 and SP11 connected professional identity with student behaviour. SP11 shared expectations of professional behavioural standards although she also acknowledged that some students might not know of these standards without explaining or questioning why that might be so:

> "if they want to become a solicitor, bearing in mind our Code of Conduct, you know acting with integrity, acting with honesty, what we have to follow, and a lot of them aren't aware of all of these, you know that you have got to act a certain way."

Professional identity was also, "the right way of talking" (SP4) and "how you would professionally speak to someone" (SP3). SP9 said, "being able to talk and reassure the client", echoing findings of employers' understanding of professionalism as, "whether they could put an applicant in front of a client" (Alexander 2023:146). Accents were deemed potential inhibitors of professional identity. SP2 described a student who was, "very much aware of her own class" who had believed that the way that she spoke meant that she did not see herself as a solicitor despite aspiring to do so. SP6 described students with accents which might not be attractive, "to Supreme Court Justices who have not heard many speak like that."

Professional identity also incorporated personal presentation and dress. SP9 said it included, "Can you dress well?" and SP12 said she wanted to take students into the local "legal district" to see lawyers because it, "would be useful to see how these people dress, how they talk". This suggests an implicit understanding that some students would not have access to the networks (as social capital) to facilitate such opportunities themselves. Additionally, SP12 spoke of employers' expectations of students during work experience: "that you need to speak the part, dress the part, present yourself as the part." SP10 believed personal presentation involved more than

a “superficial” idea of just “dressing smartly” because it demonstrated “the professional attitude that it then promotes in students.”

Staff perceptions of students’ professional identity suggested the adoption of socially constructed meanings of being a lawyer, including internalised beliefs and values, (Hall et al 2010; Nadelsen et al 2015). Embodied habitus, as speaking, dress and conduct (Bourdieu 1977; Reay 2004) was emphasised, and suggested that staff could have been replicating legal employers’ focus upon “personality and fit” where candidates are required to be “professional” and/or “appropriate” during the recruitment process” (2023:146). Incorporating embodied habitus within professional identity, such as looking and speaking “the part” (SP12), potentially indicated “social advantage” (Ashley et al 2015:11), which along with “the capacity to present a “polished” appearance” meeting professional customs could have influenced students’ ability to demonstrate the required habitus or fit, while also attributing this to individual responsibility (Alexander 2023:146-147).

Although SP11 noted that some students were not aware of expectations of professional identity, discussions did not explore these considerations further or comment upon the apparent tension within the differing staff expectations and perceptions described during the focus groups. Staff expectations of professional identity were framed in relation to the legal profession and used demonstrations of students’ behaviours when discussing their professional identity. This was despite earlier discussions within the Focus Groups which had suggested that staff did not believe students felt that they were joining a profession during the degree. Staff seemed to be holding two different beliefs relating to professional identity simultaneously. This suggests that staff might have been, unintentionally or unconsciously, applying standards of professional behaviour (as embodied habitus) while apparently simultaneously believing that students did not feel that they were entering a profession.

Discussions of professional identity seemed to refer to students in general. Those from low SEB were not distinguished in discussions as those likely to have differential access to the relevant social and cultural capital necessary to enable them to demonstrate the behaviours as embodied habitus that staff had described as professional identity. As demonstrations of such embodied habitus could be indicators of "social advantage" (Ashley et al 2015:11), potentially this raises the possibility of unintentional reproduction of inequalities. Discussions then moved to consideration of professional identity within the law curriculum.

4.5.d. How could the curriculum more effectively foster undergraduates' professional identity as a lawyer?

Most staff accepted that professional identity could be a feature of learning, teaching and assessment and therefore could be incorporated within the curriculum (Trede 2023) although SP6 felt strongly that the curriculum should be "unshackled from employability and training." Suggestions for curriculum development included staff as role models, experiential learning and, unexpectedly, extra-curricular activities.

Staff noted that they could contribute to professional identity development to support preparedness for students' careers in various forms which suggested role models, (Farnese et al 2024). Staff recognised that their conduct and behaviour could have an influence upon students' professional identity as a means of, "learning the cues of professional behaviour" (Bowen 2016:10) as embodied habitus (Bourdieu 1977). SP1 and SP4 said they used their knowledge of professional conduct to model behaviour. SP9 and SP11 were mindful of the way they spoke and dressed as being representative of the legal profession. However, some staff identified constraints upon their potential to contribute to professional identity development.

SP5, SP10 and SP3 suggested that the nature of the law curriculum which at the time was the qualifying law degree, could constrain its development (BSB & SRA 2014) because it could "actually focus more on an endpoint that is law" (SP3), potentially at the expense of graduate careers outside of the legal profession. SP2 recognised the

impact of any such messaging could be “potentially very wounding” albeit unintentionally. Not all staff had been aware of their potential influence upon students: “we perhaps don’t realise… what a significant impact what we say and what we do has on people” (SP8), a view endorsed by SP6. In Focus Group 1, staff cautioned that professional identity development work within the curriculum could be hindered by large class sizes, thwarting the staff student relationships they believed necessary for such development. Instead, SP4, SP1, and SP2 suggested that Personal Tutor interactions could offer opportunities for students’ professional identity development which corresponded with proposals made by some undergraduate participants.

Staff said that professional identity could be fostered within the curriculum though the teaching of skills (SP3 SP9, SP12, and SP11). Using professionalism as a proxy for professional identity (Trede 2012), experiential learning was claimed as a means of fostering professional identity, aligning with current literature (Jackson 2017; Reissner & Armitage-Chan 2024). SP12 said that playing the role of lawyers enabled students to, “start to get a glimpse as to being professional.” SP10 said experiential learning created, “a mindset in you of that professionalism.” SP1 said, “professionalism” could be incorporated into the curriculum. This suggests that staff believed that experiential learning and connecting it with professionalism, enabled students to develop relevant habitus necessary to fit within the field of legal practice (Maggio 2017).

Although referring to students generally, SP4 in Focus Group 1, recognised that students had “other priorities” including working. In her subsequent comments SP4 connected professional identity with embedding “careers” within the curriculum during the first year of the degree, so that students would understand “the realities” of their career aspirations, seemingly alluding to previous comments about staff beliefs about students’ idealised perceptions of the profession. In these later discussions, SP4 also raised the possibility that assumptions were being made by staff about the amount of knowledge students should have about becoming a lawyer:

> "Because I think we've all assumed that, because they're doing law, they know how to get there or they know what they need to do to get there, but I don't think a lot of them do."

SP4's suggestion of embedding careers information within the curriculum as career management skills (Bridgstock 2009) and career development learning (Bridgstock et al 2019), to foster "a sense of clarity about career intentions" (Artess 2019: 107), correspond with those made by some undergraduate participants. However, SP4's point about the potential differences between staff expectations and students' understanding of becoming a lawyer was not developed further. Her comments did not distinguish students from low SEB and did not address the potential equity issues that such students might encounter as they navigated HE to enter the profession.

In Focus Group 2 the suggestion was made that professional identity within the curriculum could be addressed by creating opportunities to engage in external events. This seemed to suggest activities that could be construed as extra-curricular activities (ECA) which by default, take place outside of the curriculum. Proposing ECA suggested that staff were cognisant of its importance as a credential for success in the labour market, as cultural capital (Lehmann 2012). However, student participation in external events, as a means of developing professional identity, was suggested despite previous discussions within this focus group which had noted low participation in existing careers activities (presumably also ECA). Discussions did not address whether students were aware that ECA participation was critical cultural capital, as a credential to enter the field of legal practice (Francis 2015). These discussions referred to students generally and did not distinguish students from low SEB or issues of differential access to such events that they were likely to encounter. Discussion of these external events and activities did not acknowledge that while seemingly, "part of a fair and meritocratic process" ECA operates as a form of "social closure," as cultural capital from which working class students can be excluded (Lehmann 2012: 214-215) and therefore, their part in potentially constraining professional identity development and access to the profession.

4.5.e. Can staff expand access to the legal profession?

Initially strong feelings were expressed in discussions relating to access to the profession amongst under-resourced undergraduates who want to become a lawyer. For example, the term “moral responsibility” was used by some staff in Focus Groups 1 and 3. In these discussions there seemed to be implicit awareness that some students faced issues of differential access to the profession, with staff describing their responsibility for “levelling the playing field” (SP12), or referring to students, to “give them a leg up” (SP2). These discussions also alluded to the previous implied understanding that the onus was upon individual students to address their own employability. For example, SP4 spoke of giving students, “the tools that they need to raise themselves or help them as much as I can to raise themselves.” SP7 talked about “every student who walks through our doors and wants our help, you know wants to be enabled”. SP1 noted that by the final stage of the degree staff should be able to tell students that “it’s up to them. They actually are mature enough now after three years.”

Staff were asked if they believed it was their job to expand access to the legal profession, but no consensus was reached across the focus groups. Responsibility for widening access to the legal profession rested unequivocally upon the relevant professional bodies (Focus Group 1), and upon the legal profession (Focus Group 3), although there was acknowledgement of some of the external barriers to access students faced, responsibility for successful outcomes fell to students remained with individual students. Some staff said that they felt that they had limited agency to effect change in relation to access to the profession and limited staff resource again was identified as a constraint. SP5 said, “I think we could do better, but I think we could always do better in certain things.” SP6 resolutely believed that staff had responsibility to expand access to the legal profession however, “I have no idea how I might achieve that, or institutionally what is behind me enabling me to do it” and went on to mention, with exasperation, external barriers like the “cost of qualifying” and limited opportunities in the legal labour market. SP6’s and SP5’s comments suggest that like the student participants, a tension existed between their hopes about widening access and the constraints that they perceived.

Despite specifically asking about students who were “disadvantaged” who wanted to become a lawyer, discussion referred to variations of “all of our students” (SP8). SP11 said, “I think it is our job to be there for all of our students.” SP12 said, “I think any opportunities we offer; we offer to everybody and make sure that everybody gets the same chance.” SP7 did qualify this approach, “I would like to think I approach every student the same”, unless there was an “evidence based systemic issue, and we are responding to something.” Discussions seemed to imply that addressing all students was an appropriate and equitable approach and this was mentioned at various points during the focus groups.

These discussions suggest some seemingly unacknowledged tensions or inconsistencies within the approaches staff articulated. Perceptions remained that the onus for achieving graduate outcomes rested upon students individually. A desire to support students into the profession was articulated, with recognition that staff efforts could be constrained by wider issues of access. This seemed to be under-pinned by an equality approach which implied that all students should be given equal access to resources. This broad notion of equality, as an “all students approach”, prioritising equality, potentially disguised or limited the possibility that students “do not all start from the same place” (Major & Briant 2023: 25). Staff had indicated earlier that they believed that students had insufficient knowledge of what would be involved in becoming a lawyer, as an awareness of the rules of the game to enter the legal labour market as field (Bourdieu 1990a). Yet the “all students” narrative was not connected explicitly to their earlier discussions about the students most likely to have habitus and capitals aligned with the field of legal practice and did not acknowledge potential equity issues encountered by those without such habitus and capitals, or specifically, the circumstances of students from low SEB as they navigated HE to become a lawyer.

The “all students” narrative potentially suggested that student success in accessing opportunities within HE and therefore, entering legal practice, would be based on perceptions of merit (Thomson 2017). It implied a shared belief that all students had awareness of how to become a lawyer and how to act upon this awareness during their academic and professional journey through HE. Further, this suggested implied

perceptions of individual ability and choices, reflecting the “taken for granted assumptions of a particular group of people” as “meritocracy (Thomson 2017: 18), rather than the possibility of issues of differential access. Meritocracy is a system founded upon “the basis that participants have an equal opportunity to prove themselves” (Reay 2020: 405). Meritocracy, articulated as notions of equality, has the potential to obscure “the inequitable nature of the game” (Thomson 2017:19), by seemingly defining what constitutes merit within HE and ultimately within legal practice, with demonstrations by those who already have the resources necessary for success (Bourdieu 1990b; Thomson 2017:19). Meritocratic approaches can result in the “reproduction of socio-economic inequalities” (Maggio 2017: 756). The “all students” narrative in discussions seems to align with these descriptions of meritocracy and so perhaps could have unconsciously and unintentionally contributed to forms of social exclusion

This could have occurred because of staff expectations that students should know how to become a lawyer and therefore should recognise and participate in relevant opportunities as they navigated HE (as demonstrations of relevant habitus), while simultaneously maintaining notions of equality as meritocracy (Ashley et al 2015; Sommerlad 2015). Potentially, by concentrating upon those able to demonstrate relevant habitus, the equality advocated by staff risked the possibility of “social closure and exclusion” (Reay 2020: 406), because by implication, those who did not demonstrate relevant habitus were seemingly doing so because of choices they had made rather than due to issues of differential access to relevant resources and habitus development. Even with the commitment to widening access to the profession, such meritocratic approaches, and expectations of relevant habitus, albeit unconsciously and unintentionally, suggests the potential to exclude those students without relevant habitus, contributing to the reproduction of inequalities (Bourdieu 1990b; Maggio 2017; Reay 2020).

Chapter 5: Discussion of findings

This chapter will initially review the research findings and discuss their implications in relation to the research's theoretical framework. This chapter will discuss the perceptions of the influences upon legal career aspirations, the differing approaches to becoming a lawyer that developed during the degree, and the different outcomes for lawyer possible selves and career decision-making amongst law undergraduates from low socio-economic backgrounds (SEB). It will then go on to propose a conceptual model to address some of the equity challenges encountered.

In the context of the segmentation of the legal profession on classed lines, as socio-economic circumstances (Ashley et al 2015; Krengel et al 2024) the research set out to understand the apparent attrition in legal career aspirations amongst law undergraduates from low SEB by exploring their perceptions of the experience of becoming a lawyer during the degree. This situated the research broadly within the concept of employability which involves a "contextual analysis" of structure and agency (Tholen 2015:781) because students compare their understanding of themselves to their understanding of the legal practice and its labour market as a structure. To explore agency, possible selves require self-knowledge of how we see ourselves in the present and in the future, shaped by our experiences and socio-cultural context, and are responsive to changes within the social world (Harrison 2018). As HE is a social space, experiences within HE can act as motivation to shape actions taken in the present towards or away from these envisaged occupational futures, so HE can be an environment which influences the development of possible selves. Using the concept of possible selves therefore in the context of these law undergraduates' employability, and specifically becoming a lawyer, enabled the research to explore how their "access to imagined futures in HE might differ along the lines of privilege and disadvantage" (Henderson et al 2019: 2).

The findings suggest that during the degree undergraduates' contextual analysis of employability, relating to becoming or not becoming a lawyer, involved elaboration and evaluation of their lawyer possible selves. Undergraduates used their subjective understanding of legal practice and its labour market as a structure, to evaluate the

desirability and probability of becoming a lawyer, as agency based upon their understanding of themselves (Harrison 2018). The findings suggest that during the degree evaluation of their lawyer possible selves was informed by variations in the nature and extent of dispositions of the habitus relevant to becoming a lawyer (Bourdieu 1977). As HE constitutes a new field for these undergraduates, habitus can adapt within that new field so can be developed through "students' university social and learning experiences" (Crozier et al 2019: 4). Undergraduates' habitus operates as a "structuring structure" so can influence actions and thinking in the present, motivating them to create opportunities to improve field position (Bourdieu 2005: 46).

An individual with habitus relevant to the field will have practical understanding enabling them to adapt and anticipate the actions necessary to engage successfully in the field (Bourdieu 1990a & b). Within the research, undergraduates' understandings of being and becoming a lawyer exemplify relevant dispositions of the habitus (Bourdieu 1977). The findings suggest that variations in the nature and extent of relevant habitus development were influenced by the circumstances, experiences and challenges they encountered as they navigated HE, based upon their socio-economic circumstances. Some could engage in HE in a manner which made a positive contribution towards their evaluation of becoming a lawyer while others had not been able to do so, contributing to a change in their career plans.

Applying Bourdieu's thinking tools and using previous studies, habitus is developed through prior educational and social experiences to generate the practical understanding necessary to adapt and anticipate the actions to engage successfully in the field (Bourdieu 1990 a & b). By the exercise of reflexive agency (Maggio 2017) habitus forms the "basis of choices, practices and imposed limits/barriers" (Burke & Hannaford-Simpson 2019: 26). Therefore, the research helps to understand the nature and extent of relevant habitus development amongst law undergraduates from low SEB. On joining the degree, the prior experiences of many of these undergraduates did not, to any great extent, include exposure to the legal profession to have generated relevant habitus aligned to the field of legal practice to anticipate and take action to support their original legal career expectations. Although some relevant habitus

development is suggested, the research helps to understand how the variations in its development during the degree amongst these law undergraduates, suggests differing consequences for the reflexive exercise of agency in the present, possible selves development relating to career decision making and the sustainability of their aspirations to become a lawyer.

5.1 Habitus and capitals relevant to becoming a lawyer.

Habitus aligned to the field of legal practice could be demonstrated by an understanding of the process of qualification to become a lawyer and demonstrations of relevant credentials valued by legal recruiters, described as career management skills (Bridgstock 2009). As a minimum entry point, a good degree classification is required by employers, so academic success as a credential constitutes a form of cultural capital (Nicholson 2022). Other indicators of relevant habitus can be a means of obscuring socio-economic privilege through the articulation of a personal employability narrative which meets employers' expectations of distinction and commitment to a legal career (Francis 2015; Knox & Stone 2018; Nicholson 2022). Distinction can be demonstrated by meeting expectations of merit as classed personal dispositions and attributes (Morley 2007; Nicholson 2022; Webley et al 2016). Ways of being and behaving as proxies for relevant dispositions of the habitus (Bourdieu 1977) are expected by employers as work-readiness. This is demonstrated by behaviours suggesting awareness of the reality of legal practice (Knox & Stone 2018; Nicholson 2022) so employers expect prior work experience (Alexander 2023) and preferably informal unpaid work experience, as an indicator of commitment to a legal career as relevant habitus and cultural capital necessary to access the profession (Francis & Sommerlad 2009; Francis 2015). That awareness of the reality of legal practice is often contingent upon prior exposure to the profession, accessed through relevant social contacts who can facilitate informal work experience opportunities (Francis 2015; Lehman 2012).

Undergraduates from low SEB therefore face equity challenges in accessing such opportunities to develop such cultural capital and often have differential access to

unpaid work experience because of their economic circumstances (Tibbs 2022). Recruitment criteria which require a good degree as a minimum academic credential or participation in extra-curricular activities, do not recognise issues of differential achievement which might exclude certain groups from the profession, or which can often be dependent upon access to economic capital (Bosch et al 2024; Francis & Somerlad 2009; Nicholson 2022). Therefore, these recruitment expectations suggest relevant habitus and capitals which could act as a proxy means of exclusion, obscuring socio-economic privilege (Francis & Sommerlad 2009). Consequently, as relevant habitus, awareness of the value of opportunities during the degree to develop appropriate cultural capital and undergraduates' choices about engaging in such opportunities (Burke & Hannaford-Simpson 2019) can shape how undergraduates behaved as they navigated their journey through HE.

5.2 Habitus on joining the degree.

Research Question one asked undergraduate participants why they wanted to become a lawyer when they joined the degree. Many described studying law at university as a gateway to becoming a lawyer, a profession they believed offered status and enhanced earnings in comparison to their families. This illustrates that many believed that their participation in HE would facilitate social mobility outcomes, aligning them with Burke et al's (2019) descriptions of '*Naïve*' students, who believed in a linear relationship between HE and access to graduate work. Due to their socio-economic background, many were positioned outside of the field of legal practice, with limited or no access to social capital (as professional networks) to improve their field position (Bourdieu 1986). Accordingly, for many, their feel for the game of becoming a lawyer, as a disposition of the habitus had been shaped by their prior social, family and educational background (Bourdieu 1977), without access to the profession and the "practical knowledge" relating to the profession (Bourdieu 1992:128).

When many of these undergraduates recalled the start of the degree their aspirations to become a lawyer reflected a belief in a positive, imagined occupational future, drawing upon idealised understandings of being a lawyer, as dispositions of the

habitus. This suggested their use of the concept of possible selves in career decision making (Henderson et al 2019). However, their original understandings about becoming a lawyer were idealised and were not aligned to the realities of entering the field of legal practice. Such understandings placed these undergraduates at a disadvantage in comparison to those who had relevant habitus, influencing the choices they made as they navigated HE and potentially jeopardising the fulfilment of their original legal career aspirations. To varying extents these undergraduates developed an understanding of the value of some opportunities within HE to support their aspirations to become a lawyer and acted upon that understanding during the degree. However, for some the variation in relevant habitus development seemed to differentially influence their evaluation of their lawyer possible selves, constraining the achievement of their legal career aspirations.

5.3 Relevant habitus and lawyer possible selves.

Having self-identified as coming from low SEB, undergraduates were likely to have encountered differential access to learning opportunities in their prior school experiences (Major & Briant 2023). This continued as they navigated their academic and professional journeys through HE. The second and third research questions asked if students continued to see themselves as a lawyer and asked about their perceptions of the law degree's influence upon their career aspirations. These research questions enabled undergraduates to reflect upon their undergraduate experiences from the perspective of their final year of study and their understanding of being and becoming a lawyer, as dispositions of the habitus (Bourdieu 1977). The findings suggest that most undergraduates' original, apparently idealised perceptions of becoming a lawyer had evolved to varying extents into a less idealised and more realistic awareness of what was involved in becoming and being a lawyer, suggesting the development of some relevant dispositions of the habitus (Reay 2004). For example, on joining the degree most undergraduates claimed to know little, if anything about the process of becoming a lawyer but, at least by their final year, most knew that further post-graduate qualifications would be necessary.

For some undergraduates relevant habitus development seemed to have a positive impact upon their career aspirations. Many had discovered that academic capital alone would not be enough to enter the field (Tomlinson 2008) and this motivated them to take actions to further their career aspirations during the degree, illustrating evolving habitus. Many were able to recognise and engage in opportunities to accrue relevant additional cultural capital like extra-curricular activities (Burke et al 2019) and used this to articulate a distinctive personal employability narrative (Francis 2015) in support of their positive evaluation of the probability of becoming a lawyer (Harrison 2018). Those undergraduates who had recognised that the degree would not be enough to become a lawyer and had acted upon that awareness (as relevant habitus) suggested that they had developed some characteristics shared with more "*Knowing*" students (Burke et al 2019), albeit without the social and economic capital such students could access.

Development of dispositions of the habitus relating to becoming a lawyer was not the same for all undergraduates however, with some demonstrating behaviours that reflected varied understandings of the processes involved in qualifying as a lawyer as career management skills (Bridgstock 2009). Potentially this differential habitus development shaped behaviours, and the equity challenges they encountered during the degree (Burke & Hannaford Simpson 2019). This seemed to constrain some undergraduates in maintaining their original legal career aspirations as it informed their subjective evaluations of their lawyer possible selves, specifically in how they assessed the continuing desirability and likelihood of becoming a lawyer (Harrison 2018).

Having self-identified as coming from low SEB, the economic circumstances of some undergraduates operated as a potential barrier to the fulfilment of their original career plans because of the duration and costs involved in obtaining the necessary post-graduate qualifications to become a lawyer. This aligns with the LETR (2013) which found the costs associated with such education and training as a potential barrier to access. Variations in relevant habitus development resulted in some undergraduates retaining an outdated belief that prioritising academic capital over cultural capital accumulation was necessary to become a lawyer (Burke et al 2019). The impact of

this variation in relevant habitus and the limitation or omission of cultural capital accumulation was to unintentionally limit their potential legal career aspirations as they would not be able to articulate the personal employability narrative sought by legal employers (Francis 2015).

As well as variations in the extent of relevant habitus development, timing of its development seemed to be problematical for some. In their final year, a few undergraduates realised that their decision to prioritise accumulation of academic capital could have thwarted their career expectations and they believed that limited time and their socio-economic circumstances precluded them from engaging in opportunities to accumulate necessary credentials before completing their degree. This suggests hysteresis of habitus (Hardy 2014) in stark contrast to the "*Knowing*" students in Burke et al's (2019) study with access to economic capital, who were able to access resources to spend time gaining relevant credentials after graduation.

Most undergraduate participants had indicated that when they joined the degree they did not have access to relevant social capital as a source of useful advice to support their legal career plans, to understand how to recognise and exploit opportunities available to them as they navigated HE. Some undergraduates became aware of the value of social capital as a source of guidance to recognise opportunities within HE to advance their career goals and described confident expectations in relation to their lawyer possible selves. Conversely, by their final year, the habitus development that had taken place left some undergraduates with regrets about the choices they had made to further their career aspirations as they navigated HE. They linked this to their lack of access to relevant social capital, believing that this could result in negative outcomes for their legal career aspirations. Although these undergraduates maintained legal career expectations with varying amounts of uncertainty, relevant habitus development seemed to have taken place recently, suggesting habitus in transition (Byrom & Lightfoot 2013). This habitus in transition generated perceptions of higher risk linked to their socio-economic circumstances, challenging their evaluation of the desirability and/or probability of their lawyer possible self (Harrison 2018; Papafilippou & Bathmaker 2019). Some expressed themselves as responsible

for the choices they had made to prioritise academic capital rather than recognising this as potentially due to the habitus that they had when joining the degree (Reay 2020; Thomson 2017). This also suggested their acceptance of narrow perceptions of employability with few alluding to the possible structural barriers to access they faced (Brown et al 2003; McCafferty 2022).

5.4 Pre-professional identity

Anticipating potential significance in undergraduates' career decision-making, pre-professional identity (Jackson 2017) had been adopted as a concept within the research however, the findings suggest that it was one of several dispositions of the habitus undergraduates used in evaluating their lawyer possible selves. As a disposition of the habitus in relation to becoming a lawyer, some described a personalised understanding of the "skills, qualities, behaviours values and standards" of the legal profession which they related to their perceptions of their self as pre-professional identity (Jackson 2017:833). The research illustrates how undergraduates' pre-professional identity was capable of development through aspects of the curriculum, with work experience making a significant contribution to its development. When they elaborated what it would be like to be a lawyer in the future, the pre-professional identity of some undergraduates seemed to facilitate perceptions of fit within the profession, described in terms akin to a being "fish in water" (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992:127) which informed perceptions of the desirability of their lawyer possible self (Harrison 2018).

Having experienced some of the profession's culture during work experience, the pre-professional identity suggested was not always positive and therefore did not always engender a sense of fit with the profession (as habitus). Some described a disconnect with their own values, illustrating that it left them feeling akin to being a "fish out of water" (Reay 2004). When this pre-professional identity was accessed to elaborate what it would be like to be a lawyer in the future (Erikson 2019), some expressed doubts and others perceived this lack of fit as contributing to or causing their decision to opt-out of becoming a lawyer. This was apparently based on an evaluation of their lawyer possible self as no longer desirable, resulting in it becoming a like to avoid possible self (Harrison 2018). This suggests that some aspects of the profession's

culture that they experienced could operate to generate perceptions that the profession was not for them, despite development of other relevant dispositions of the habitus, illustrating alignment with aspects of the profession's culture (amongst other things) as potential "barriers to inclusion" (Krengel et al 2024:3).

Some undergraduates perceived work experience as a time-limited, high stakes opportunity to understand legal practice. They did not appear to have the time, money or connections to obtain work experience in different areas so that they could experience other aspects of the profession's culture and practise. With limited or no access to relevant social capital or economic resources to engage in further work experience in other areas of legal practice, to experience other aspects of the profession's culture, which might have generated pre-professional identity aligned to their own values, these undergraduates appeared to be excluding themselves from their original legal career aspirations. This could have been compounded by their sense of responsibility for their personal employability, contributing to them choosing to opt-out of a legal career, in effect blaming themselves rather than recognising the possible influence of structural labour market conditions or their socio-economic circumstances (Brown et al 2003; McCafferty 2022).

5.5 The curriculum

Research Question three focused upon undergraduates' perceptions of the influence of the course upon their career expectations. The findings illustrate that undergraduates saw the curriculum as offering a means of generating relevant habitus to support career aspirations. Some undergraduates had positive perceptions of the curriculum's contribution to their developing pre-professional identity, valuing subject content and learning informed by legal practice as experiential learning. They believed this helped them to understand what being a lawyer involved, suggesting relevant habitus development. However, those who relied upon this academic capital accumulation to become a lawyer, were likely to be placing themselves at a disadvantage. Such learning informed by practice alone could be a poor substitute for the work experience employers expect applicants to have, as relevant habitus, to

enable them to demonstrate that they understood the reality of legal practice (Nicholson 2022).

Undergraduates' proposals for changes to the curriculum suggested their expectations that the curriculum could and should facilitate relevant dispositions of the habitus, tacitly acknowledging the equity challenges they had encountered as undergraduates from low SEB as they navigated HE (Bathmaker et al 2013). Their changes included the incorporation of career management and self-management skills (Bridgstock 2009; Bridgstock et al 2019), as compulsory components within the curriculum, supporting both law and non-law careers, along with provision of access to relevant social capital to build networks in the profession. These changes exemplify relevant habitus development within the curriculum which suggests that as they had progressed through the degree, these undergraduates found it to be absent or, they had not recognised it within the curriculum to be able to use it to support their career aspirations. For these undergraduates, the absence or lack of awareness of recognisable relevant habitus development within the curriculum constrained the elaboration of an authentic lawyer possible self (Erikson 2008) and which, albeit inadvertently, could have contributed to the perpetuation of the structural inequity they encountered in HE, attributable to their socio-economic circumstances.

For many of these undergraduates, during their journey through HE, their experiences of building relevant habitus to become a lawyer were mediated by the limited social capital available from academic staff as role models, and a curriculum which did not provide all of them with recognisable opportunities for relevant habitus development. Descriptions of their experiences of HE suggested that for many, the actions that they had taken to become a lawyer were often conducted autonomously. This autonomy was widely accepted and exemplified understandings that successful career outcomes were based upon individual effort, suggesting tacit acceptance of meritocratic attitudes (Thomson 2017) and understandings of graduate employability as an individualised responsibility (Artess et al 2017; Clarke 2018). Such perceptions also contributed to some undergraduates believing they might have thwarted their career expectations by making what they now perceived as inappropriate choices, motivated by original

habitus, prioritising academic capital accumulation at the expense of other credentials. Seemingly, as they accepted that their participation in HE would generate social mobility, some had accepted the inequity to which they were subjected. Very few undergraduates challenged this by expressing their awareness that some things were beyond their control.

Staff perceptions of undergraduates' career aspirations and the influence of the course upon professional identity development, connected non-engagement with employability activities during the degree as a choice rather than due to differences in relevant habitus. Undergraduates participating in such activities were perceived as demonstrating that they wanted to be helped, although there was acknowledgment that these undergraduates were more likely to have access to relevant social capital. What staff expressed as equality, through a narrative involving "all students", suggested meritocracy which as a means of distinguishing suitability for the legal profession, sustains advantages based on privileged socio-economic circumstances (Reay 2020; Thomson 2017). Staff seemed to suggest that students should know what would be involved in negotiating HE for successful entry enter the legal labour market, seemingly as relevant habitus (Reay 2020; Thomson 2017). Although based on apparent equality, such approaches had the potential to unintentionally and unconsciously generate possible barriers to students from low SEB (Francis 2015; Sommerlad 2011), constraining what they believed to be possible due to their differential relevant habitus, obscuring HE's function in reproducing inequality (Burke 2017).

5.6 Possible selves and career decision-making

Differential relevant habitus development seemed to influence the choices undergraduate participants made as they navigated their academic and professional journeys through HE, with varying influences upon the subjective evaluation of their lawyer possible selves and their career decision-making. The findings show that these undergraduates used their subjective understandings of being a lawyer in the future, combined with their knowledge of themselves, to generate personalised meanings of

being a lawyer. This informed the elaboration of their lawyer possible self, anticipating the desirability and probability of that possible self (Harrison 2018) which they used reflexively to incentivize their conduct in the present, and to make decisions about their career (Henderson et al 2019; Stevenson & Clegg 2011). However, because possible selves are a product of socio-cultural context, the extent of relevant habitus development experienced by these undergraduates during the degree could have limited their awareness of and engagement with opportunities to support their career aspirations as they navigated HE, making some possible selves more probable or improbable, raising the possibility of inequity (Harrison 2018). This could have contributed to the observed attrition in legal career aspirations by the final year of the degree. This chapter will move on to consider how the undergraduate experience of HE as socio-cultural context, constrained or facilitated the lawyer possible selves undergraduate participants envisaged and elaborated. The table that follows addresses the suggested impact of this for their career decision-making and specifically, becoming a lawyer.

Table 1: Summary of possible selves development and outcomes for career decision-making

Lawyer possible self Elaborated lawyer possible self, which remained desirable and probable when evaluated, and therefore a possible self they would like to become.	Could demonstrate a variety of dispositions of habitus relevant to legal practice, to varying extents, developed at various times during the degree. Could include some of the following dispositions: Awareness: • that more than academic capital required • of the process of and costs involved in qualification • of some of the external barriers. Accumulation of: • some relevant social capital • some relevant cultural capital Dispositions seemed to motivate actions in the present during HE, although for some the timing of habitus development impacted upon ability to act.
'Realisable alternative' possible selves (Papfilipou & Bathmaker 2019) Elaboration and evaluation of lawyer possible self as no longer desirable and/or probable. Lawyer possible self becomes one to be avoided and a realisable alternative is sourced.	Could demonstrate a variety of dispositions of the habitus relevant to legal practice, to varying extents, to elaborate their lawyer possible self. Outcome of this evaluation seemed to motivate action in the present to source a new 'like to be' possible self as a realisable alternative. Realisable alternative possible self was elaborated and evaluated as a desirable and probable possible self. The evaluation could incorporate habitus developed in relation to becoming a lawyer, seemingly adapted and adjusted to a new field(s).

5.6.1 Lawyer possible selves

By the final year of the degree, half of the undergraduates had reached a largely positive evaluation of their lawyer possible selves and although some anticipated future challenges, they had sustained their original expectations of becoming a lawyer. This group of undergraduates drew upon a variety of different dispositions of the habitus relevant to becoming a lawyer which they believed would support their career goals, to elaborate what they imagined they would feel like in the future as a lawyer. Some of these undergraduate participants described their envisaged futures with positivity and/or confidence.

However, within this group there were differences in perceptions of the desirability and probability of achieving their lawyer possible selves, seemingly linked to the differences in relevant habitus. For some, the relevant habitus developed had generated doubts about the nature of being a lawyer, and/or because of the timing of relevant habitus development, it had generated doubts about the probability of becoming a lawyer. Their limited economic capital also contributed to these reservations. Some expressed themselves as resigned to becoming a lawyer because of their investment in their education up to this point, suggesting habitus in tension (Byrom & Lightfoot 2013).

5.6.2 Realisable alternative possible selves

Some undergraduate participants had evaluated becoming a lawyer as a like to avoid possible self (Harrison 2018), motivating their actions in the present to identify a different graduate career, as a realisable alternative and like to be possible self (Papafilipou & Bathmaker 2019). Amongst these undergraduates there were variations in relevant habitus development that apparently occurred during the degree with some identifying several reasons for not becoming a lawyer, which contributed to an overall negative evaluation of their lawyer possible selves. Although having developed some career management skills (Bridgstock 2009) (as a disposition of the habitus during the degree), relating to how to qualify as a lawyer and the duration and costs involved in obtaining the necessary qualifications, for some undergraduate participants their socio-economic circumstances and limited access to economic capital contributed to

a negative evaluation of the probability of becoming a lawyer (Harrison 2018). Several had developed pre-professional identity from work experience as relevant habitus which had not generated a sense of fit with the profession. They described a disconnect between their own values and their understanding of the profession akin to being a fish out of water (Reay 2004), making becoming a lawyer a less attractive prospect which they believed had directly contributed to their decision to change career plans.

The research suggests that these undergraduates appeared to go on to utilise the habitus, academic and cultural capital already accumulated to be critically reflexive (Reay et al 2009b). They used their investment in HE and their social mobility expectations, to exercise agency by selecting an alternative graduate career that they believed would provide a better fit with their values (as habitus). In doing so they constructed a “realisable alternative” possible self that they perceived to be both desirable and probable” (Papafilipou & Bathmaker 2019:118). Having selected this realisable alternative possible self, some expressed renewed confidence in their career plans.

This perceived exercise of agency in relation to their career decision-making might also have been tacitly influenced by differential development of relevant habitus during the degree. Habitus “predisposes individuals to certain ways of behaving” (Reay 2004:433), making “some possibilities inconceivable, others improbable and a limited range acceptable” (Reay 2004: 435). The research suggests that what these undergraduate participants believed was an autonomous choice to change career, reflecting internal perceptions generated by the habitus, could instead have been their original habitus operating as a “structuring structure” (Bourdieu 2005: 46). Potentially this could have constrained what they believed was possible, anticipating the structural challenges and barriers they would encounter in becoming a lawyer, to self-limit their career aspirations by excluding themselves from the field from which they could be excluded (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992; Reay et al 2009b). This opting out of their original legal career aspirations might have been a form of symbolic violence with these participants limiting their legal career aspirations, willingly yet unknowingly

contributing to the reproduction of inequality by accepting the tacit and explicit barriers they encountered (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992; Webb et al 2005).

5.7 Lawyer Possible selves development: a conceptual model

This opting out of their original legal career aspirations could help to explain the observed attrition in legal career aspirations which prompted the research. In navigating their academic and professional journeys through HE, these law undergraduates from low SEB met equity challenges in developing their lawyer possible selves so a conceptual model is proposed which can be applied pervasively to the law undergraduate experience. This has been developed from Harrison's (2018) conceptual model to understand how young people from low-income backgrounds make decisions while at school about participating in HE. Harrison's conceptual model recognises the interplay between agency, socio-cultural circumstances, and systemic inequalities within the stratified nature of English HE. Therefore, given the focus of the research, Harrison's conceptual model became the starting point for the design of the conceptual model that follows later in this chapter.

Harrison's conceptual model (2018) addresses the development of a more inclusive elaboration of possible selves as a means of widening access to HE through a series of specific interventions, including curriculum development and careers support. The concept of targeted interventions of this nature was a significant influence from an early point in the development of the research's conceptual model. As Harrison's conceptual model was situated within possible selves' development, and therefore relevant to the research, aspects of that conceptual model were retained, reflecting the significance of sociocultural context, personal beliefs and expectations of possible selves. These retained aspects appear in the research's conceptual model which follows later in this chapter and are identified by an asterisk. To further reflect legal education as a context, because undergraduates already had a legal career in mind, rather than Harrison's "initial palette of possible selves" (2018:219), the conceptual model developed from this aspect and was changed to reflect the focus upon lawyer possible selves specifically. The themes of the interventions as suggested by Harrison

(2018) including curriculum development and careers support have also been retained within the research's conceptual model.

However, on reflection, Harrison's conceptual model could not simply be transferred into the research's context because it proposed specific points for intervention in relation to widening access HE, almost as a process, if not necessarily an entirely linear process (Harrison 2018). The research context differs from this as it explored the experiences of law undergraduates from low SEB, who were already at university. Therefore, the research's conceptual model had to this address this difference, locating it within undergraduate legal education in England. Reflecting upon this further, a more holistic approach to intervention, incorporating the whole undergraduate experience of legal education evolved. This holistic approach enables the conceptual model to offer flexibility as to the nature and timing of interventions and maximises the potential for habitus and possible selves' development at any point within the undergraduate HE experience. This is reflected in the structure of the research's conceptual model, which encompasses the interplay of undergraduates' socio-cultural context, experiences inside and outside of the undergraduate law curriculum, and the elaboration and evaluation of their lawyer possible selves.

Although the overall structure that evolved took a holistic approach, it also incorporated one specific intervention recommended in Harrison's (2018) conceptual model encompassing curriculum development intervention. Within the research's conceptual model, this curriculum development is implemented by the embedding of employability within the law undergraduate curriculum, reflecting comments from some participants and current trends within HE pedagogy. In response to Research Question three undergraduates had proposed that the curriculum be changed to include compulsory content to increase career management skills and career development learning, to support planning and decision-making (Bridgstock 2009; Bridgstock et al 2019). This reflects the trend towards embedding of employability within the HE curriculum. In a recent review of the employability literature commissioned by Advance HE, the accreditation body which promotes improvements in HE, embedding employability was recommended as a strategy to foster

individualised and tailored employability development, albeit recognising that inequalities might have an impact upon its effectiveness (Dalrymple et al 2021). Having adopted embedded employability within an initial draft design of the conceptual model, upon further reflection, this seemed to be a potentially problematic intervention, given the classed barriers undergraduates experienced. Embedding employability in the curriculum alone could be problematic because it takes an equality approach by assuming that all students will have the same access to curriculum-based resources and opportunities for employability development. This suggests it is underpinned by tacitly meritocratic assumptions. Accordingly on its own, it could potentially perpetuate, rather than mitigate, the equity challenges experienced by undergraduates from low SEB in the individualised process of identity development, and the elaboration and evaluation of their lawyer possible selves (Scanlon 2011; Harrison 2018).

Therefore, embedding employability within the law curriculum requires an approach that recognises that not all undergraduates start from the same point, reflecting Major & Briant's (2023) equity-based approach to education which has been advocated as a means of improving social mobility in schools. Equity-based education is based upon four principles: "equity not equality," prioritises capacity over deficit approaches, advocates the development of "authentic individual relationships" and recognises that individuals have "multiple not singular talents" (Major & Briant 2023: 23). This school-focused approach to education has therefore been transferred into the new context of HE, and specifically legal education within HE but has not been limited to embedding employability.

Consequently, equity-based education (Major & Briant 2023) influenced the research's emerging conceptual model as it was utilised to attempt to mitigate the impact of inequalities upon the effectiveness of embedding employability (Dalrymple et al 2021). Major & Briant's (2023) equity-based education principles were incorporated within research's developing conceptual model not by generating a series of granular, prescribed interventions but as a set of principles which could be applied pervasively to the academic and professional journeys through HE of law undergraduates from low SEB.

Accordingly, the conceptual model that has evolved builds upon Harrison's (2018) conceptual model of possible selves development which recommended interventions including curriculum development and careers support initiatives to facilitate more inclusive elaboration of their possible selves. The principle of interventions to support more inclusive possible selves development, contained within Harrison's (2018) conceptual model has been transferred into the new context of legal education within HE and applied specifically to support the maintenance of legal career aspirations amongst law undergraduates from low SEB.

Additionally, the conceptual model ("model") that has evolved from the research assumes that because of their socio-economic circumstances undergraduates from low SEB will encounter equity challenges in sustaining their original legal career aspirations and elaborating their lawyer possible selves. Therefore, it also incorporates the equity-based approach to education underpinned by its four principles (Major & Briant 2023), which has also been applied within the new context of legal education in HE. The equity-based approach enables the research's model to extend beyond curriculum content and embedded employability. The model can be applied pervasively to create inclusive conditions for law undergraduates from low SEB to experience HE and the development of their habitus relevant to the legal profession (Bourdieu 1990b; Costa et al 2017), to foster more inclusive in the elaboration and evaluation of lawyer possible selves.

By adapting Harrison's (2018) model and combining it with an "equity not equality" approach (Major & Briant 2023: 23), the model aims to promote conditions to mitigate some of the equity challenges these undergraduates experience as they navigate their academic and professional journeys through HE and to contribute to the development of personal employability narratives (Francis 2015) amongst undergraduates from low SEB. Taking an individualised and tailored approach to employability strategies reflects current recommendations from Advance HE for HE providers (Dalrymple et al 2021). By empowering the informed exercise of agency in the elaboration and evaluation of lawyer possible selves amongst law undergraduates from low SEB, it can support their aspirations to become a lawyer (Papafilipou & Bathmaker 2019).

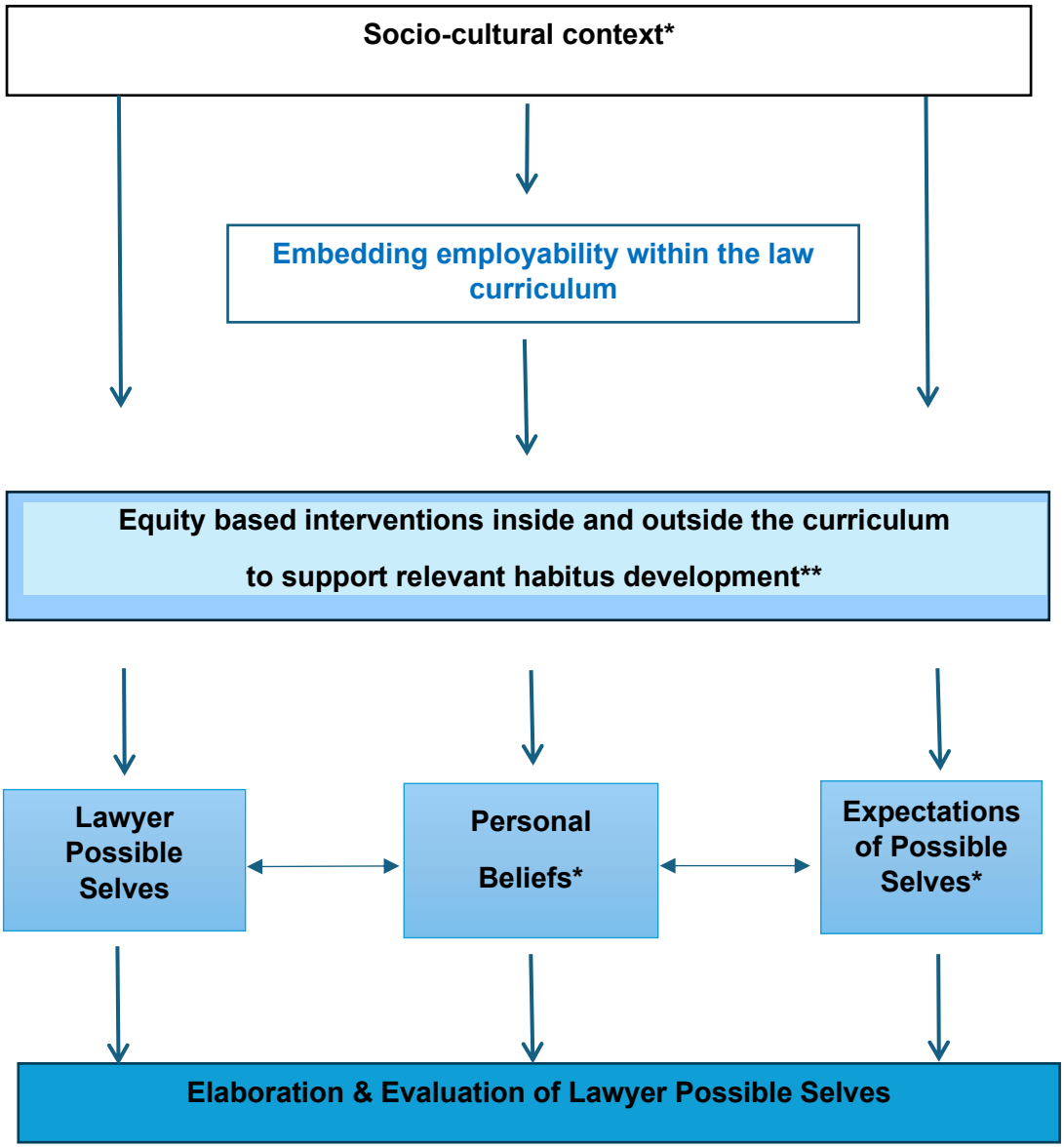
Additionally, by encouraging HE stakeholders to take an equity-based approach to the student experience and to do so pervasively, the model can be a starting point to foster interventions to alleviate some of the tacit structural barriers undergraduates from low SEB encounter within HE.

When embedding employability into the law curriculum, the model could support the creation of interventions within the curriculum, to reduce potentially exclusionary, unintended implications generated by more meritocratic approaches but the model is not limited to curriculum design. It offers an approach to enhance the experiences of HE of law undergraduates from low SEB by recognising that they are likely to encounter equity challenges, so that timely, individualised support can be designed to recognise and reflect upon their existing habitus and cultural capital, relevant to the field of legal practice and to help the development of an individualised "practical understanding" of the legal labour market, facilitating adaptability in their navigation of HE in pursuit of their career expectations, as relevant habitus (Bourdieu 1990). By facilitating the design of individualised support, the model enables law undergraduates from low SEB to be able to identify opportunities for relevant habitus development (or which yield relevant cultural capital), during their journey through HE, and to develop their own personal employability narrative to sustain their legal career aspirations. As the model aims to foster a more equitable and pervasive approach to support law undergraduates from low SEB, detailed interventions based upon application of the model are not set out here. The model has been utilised to inform some of the recommendations addressed in the conclusion (see section 6.5 below) and include the adoption of equity-based approaches to stakeholder engagement, curriculum design and enhanced pastoral support for the development of legal employability.

By attempting to mitigate some of the equity challenges law undergraduates from low SEB encounter as they negotiate their academic and professional journey through HE, the model promotes the elaboration and evaluation of their lawyer possible selves, based on more individualised and equitable access to resources and opportunities to develop relevant habitus, empowering the exercise of agency in career decision making (Maggio 2017; Burke & Hannaford-Simpson 2019). Therefore, the model could

be applied during the degree to support those law undergraduates from low SEB who decide not to become a lawyer, by applying the same equity-based approach to foster habitus development relevant to their realisable alternative possible selves and their alternative career plans (Papafilipou & Bathmaker 2019). Additionally, it has the potential to be adapted and then applied beyond the experiences of law undergraduates from low SEB, with scope for its wider use to support other undergraduates on courses with occupational connections, particularly those of the elite professions.

Conceptual model: Equity-based approach for lawyer possible selves elaboration amongst law undergraduates from low SEB



*from Harrison's (2018) conceptual model

**from Major & Briant's (2023) principles of equity-based education

Chapter 6 Contributions, Recommendations and Conclusions

This chapter will begin by reflecting upon the research problem and its corresponding research questions. It will then reflect briefly upon the findings, implications, and contributions to the literature, before identifying recommendations drawn from the research. Although the research's limitations are acknowledged, as a contribution to pedagogy within legal education the conceptual model arising from the research forms the basis of the concluding recommendations. The next section of this chapter will summarise and reflect upon the research problem and findings.

6.1 Summary of research questions and findings

Prior studies indicate that many students join undergraduate law degrees aspiring to become a lawyer (Hardee 2012) yet significant attrition of legal career aspirations amongst final year law undergraduates had been observed. To understand more about this observed attrition the research explored how law undergraduates from low socio-economic backgrounds (SEB) experienced and perceived socio-cultural influences upon their academic and career decision-making during HE, using the concepts of possible selves (Harrison 2018) and pre-professional identity (Jackson 2016). Bourdieu's analytical thinking tools (Wacquant 1989) and theory of practice (Bourdieu 1977; 1986) were used within the research to examine structure and agency within HE. This was contextualised within the process of career decision-making amongst law undergraduates from low SEB, exercising their individual agency as they experienced HE as a social structure (Burke 2017). This aligned with the approach to graduate employability recommended by Tholen (2015) as the contextual analysis of structure and agency.

Research questions were designed to explore law undergraduates' understanding and perceptions of their experiences of HE in relation to their legal career aspirations and preparedness to become a lawyer. Qualitative methods, including semi-structured interviews with undergraduate participants and focus groups of Law academic staff were used to answer the following research questions:

1. Why did students want to become a lawyer when they started the degree?
2. Did students see themselves as a lawyer?
3. How has the course shaped students' career aspirations?
4. How are students' career aspirations perceived by staff?
5. How, if at all, do staff believe that the course influences students' development of a professional identity as lawyer?

In relation to the first research question, at the start of the degree many undergraduate participants were attracted to the profession because they perceived it as prestigious, expecting it to enable them to achieve anticipated social mobility outcomes. Their reasons for becoming a lawyer seemed to be based upon largely idealistic impressions of what being and becoming a lawyer would entail (for example, via media portrayals) rather than upon realistic understandings drawn from sustained interactions with legal professionals. Research Question two examined undergraduates' legal career plans in their final year of study. As they had progressed through the degree, these idealised perceptions encountered more realistic representations of the profession, and because many were unaware of the relevant habitus, social, cultural and economic capital necessary to negotiate their academic and professional journey through HE, their original legal career aspirations became precarious.

Although during the degree many undergraduates developed some habitus relevant to becoming a lawyer, this was individualised and varied. This was suggested through their perceptions of and participation in career enhancing opportunities during the degree which could have supported their original legal career aspirations and their preparedness to enter the legal labour market. For some undergraduates, the development of such varied relevant habitus generated self-imposed limits upon the original legal career aspirations (Burke & Hannaford Simpson 2019) whereas for others it had sustained those original career aspirations. This varied and individualised nature of relevant habitus development aligned with the findings of Reay et al (2009b).

In the development of relevant habitus, these undergraduates encountered classed barriers which included differential access to work experience and limited or no access to relevant professional networks. The impact of this uneven habitus development echoes Stevenson and Clegg's (2011) findings of classed levels of participation in extra-curricular activities (ECA) within HE. It aligns with the findings of Hordósy and Clarke that extra-curricular activities "can exclude as much as they include" (2018a: 430). As a form of habitus, pre-professional identity can develop within work experience (Crozier et al 2019; Tomlinson & Jackson 2021) the research suggests that some undergraduates' sense of fit within the profession was constrained by their experiences of professional legal culture. The impact of this could have been to "reproduce an exclusionary identity" which for some contributed to a change in career plans (Francis & Sommerlad 2009: 79). Therefore, the research also aligns with previous findings that work experience is not neutral (Francis & Sommerlad 2009; Morley 2007; Tomlinson 2008). Such barriers could be compounded by undergraduates' economic circumstances which could discourage engagement with postgraduate legal qualifications.

Some undergraduates seemed to develop "reflexive habituses" (Burke et al 2018: 1115) which they acted upon to generate and to articulate a personal employability narrative that they believed would demonstrate distinction in relation to becoming a lawyer, suggesting Bourdieu and Passeron's (1977) exceptions that prove the rule. For some undergraduates this uneven habitus development seemed to contribute to the maintenance of understandings that they had reported at the start of the degree, relating to becoming a lawyer which focused upon investment in academic capital at the expense of relevant cultural capital, again aligning with the findings of Reay et al (2009b).

In relation to Research Question three, although many undergraduates believed that the degree had enabled their career aspirations through experiential learning amongst other things, uneven relevant habitus development seemed to have influenced the choices some undergraduates made during their academic and professional journeys through HE, in developing their personal employability in relation to becoming a

lawyer. Their changes to the curriculum suggested the embedding of employability as a compulsory component of the curriculum and a perception that the curriculum could and should address any gaps within relevant habitus and to facilitate relevant social capital.

The findings suggest that staff and undergraduates shared an understanding that responsibility for achieving career aspirations fell primarily to undergraduates, in relation to the fourth and fifth research questions. For undergraduates this seemed to support perceptions of resilience and independence (Crozier et al 2019; Reay et al 2009b) and perceptions of employability as an individualised responsibility (Brown et al 2003; Tholen 2015), focused upon human capital development (Clarke 2018; Dalrymple et al 2021). Staff seemed to be influenced by beliefs relating to equal access to opportunities within HE, suggesting meritocratic understandings (Thomson 2017; Reay 2020) and tacit assumptions that it is for working-class students to adjust to fit the field (Archer & Leathwood 2003).

The findings suggest that by their final year of the degree undergraduates drew upon their subjective understandings of becoming a lawyer as habitus, including their evolving pre-professional identity (Jackson 2016; 2017). They envisaged and elaborated their occupational futures, to evaluate the likelihood and desirability of becoming a lawyer, suggesting the use of the concept of possible selves (Harrison 2018) in career decision-making. For some undergraduates, relevant habitus that had developed by their final year of the degree seemed to contribute to a positive elaboration and evaluation of their lawyer possible selves (Erikson 2007). For others, differential relevant habitus development suggested negative perceptions of the desirability and probability of becoming a lawyer, making it a like to avoid possible self, influencing career decision making with the selection of a different graduate career. This aligned with Papafilipou & Bathmaker's (2019) descriptions of a realisable alternative possible self.

Accordingly, the research provides new insights into how law undergraduates from low SEB understand and experience their academic and professional journeys in relation to becoming a lawyer. It suggests that embedded structural barriers exist within HE which influence the development of these law undergraduates' career aspirations. To become a lawyer and to prepare to enter the legal labour market, during the degree they must do more to develop relevant habitus, with limited, if any access to relevant capitals, perpetuating existing privilege. Having reflected upon the research's findings, the next section of this chapter will consider the implications of the research, including contributions to the literature.

6.2 Implications and contributions to the literature

The research provides insight into the class-based inequalities which can impact upon perceptions of personal employability amongst law undergraduates from low SEB as they navigate HE, which influences the exercise of individual agency in career decision-making. Bourdieu's analytical tools and theory of practice enabled examination of HE as a social structure to provide insight into habitus transformation within HE on classed lines (Bourdieu 1986; 1990b).

By transferring Major & Briant's (2023) equity-based approach to schooling in the UK and applying it into a new context within legal education in HE, the research echoes their claims that students from different socio-economic backgrounds do not start from the same position and face classed barriers that hinder full participation in opportunities to support their career aspirations. The research reveals a lack of alignment between some undergraduates' understandings of and the realities of legal recruitment to enter the field, suggesting Bourdieu's concept of hysteresis of habitus (Hardy 2014). For some undergraduates this disconnect between their idealised expectations and the realities of becoming and being a lawyer, constrained their chances of navigating HE to develop an appropriate employability narrative to prepare to enter the legal labour market. This aligns with the findings of Reay et al (2009a) of working-class students who strive to be distinct through investment in academic capital at the expense of the accumulation of relevant cultural capital.

The research confirms the findings of Burke et al (2019) of class-based disparities amongst working-class students' preparedness for entering the graduate labour market, and specifically in this case the legal labour market. It contributes to the literature by applying Burke et al's (2019) descriptions of *Naïve* and *Knowing* students into the context of legal education to advance understandings relating to employability amongst law undergraduates from low SEB. Burke et al (2019) described two distinct categories of students, distinguishing *Knowing* students, who due to their socio-economic circumstances on a classed basis, possessed more habitus relevant to entering the field as a feel for the game. *Knowing* students were therefore better placed to act during their studies in a way to prepare to enter the labour market because they could draw upon other capitals like professional networks and economic resources. Distinguished by their socio-economic circumstances and as working-class students in a post-92 university, Burke et al's study described *Naïve* students, as believing in HE's social mobility and human capital function.

At the start of their studies many law undergraduates in the research shared understandings with the working-class students in Burke et al's (2019) study, described as *Naïve* students, believing that HE's social mobility and human capital functions would facilitate a linear journey into the legal labour market. The research builds upon Burke et al's (2019) findings by suggesting that law undergraduates from low SEB can develop aspects of relevant habitus during the degree and therefore could demonstrate some of the understandings of *Knowing* students. Such habitus development could support their preparations to access the field of legal practice, also suggesting similarities with Bourdieu & Passeron's (1977) exceptions that prove the rule. However, these undergraduates from low SEB could not become entirely *Knowing* students, because their preparations to enter the legal labour market were constrained on a classed basis. Due to their socio-economic circumstances, these law undergraduates from low SEB did not share *Knowing* students' access to relevant social and cultural capital which could mitigate the classed equity challenges encountered as they navigated HE. As such the research raises questions about the assumptions within government policy which relates participation in HE with social mobility outcomes and improved life chances (Artess et al 2017) and which continue to be used to justify students' financial investment in their studies (DoE 2024).

As the research focuses upon undergraduates' preparations to enter the legal profession specifically, it also contributes to the literature relating to legal education at a time of transition with the replacement of the qualifying law degree with a centralised examination for those intending to become solicitors (SRA 2024d). By exploring the development of legal career aspirations specifically amongst undergraduates from low SEB, as they negotiate legal education within HE, the research contributes to debates about fair access to the legal profession generally (Bosch et al 2024) and to ongoing debates relating to elitism and inclusivity within the profession (Hyde 2025; Krengel et al 2024).

The research incorporates law undergraduates' perceptions of their experiences of HE in relation to their preparedness to enter the legal labour market, so it also contributes to the literature relating to graduate employability. It confirms perceptions of employability as an individual responsibility (Artess et al 2017; Tholen 2015). Therefore, as the ostensible reflexive exercise of agency, it connects the understandings of these law undergraduates with their envisaged occupational futures, through the elaboration of a lawyer possible self (Erikson 2019; Harrison 2018), developing Francis' (2015) findings in the context of legal employability. Possible selves represent someone's beliefs about "what they might become, what they would like to become and what they are afraid of becoming" and the futures an individual can imagine are influenced by their socio-cultural circumstances (Markus & Nurius 1986: 954). Therefore, the research provides insight into how classed experiences of HE and the interaction of social and cultural capitals impacted upon perceptions of legal employability amongst law undergraduates from low SEB.

Although the lawyer possible self that could be elaborated seemed to be used reflexively in the present to motivate and incentivise conduct towards their original legal career aspirations, (Erikson 2019; Harrison 2018) it could also have tacit, exclusionary outcomes. The research suggests that differences in individual relevant habitus development seemed to influence the ostensible exercise of agency by some undergraduates. Some described the subjective evaluation of the viability of their lawyer possible self and connected this with their decision to opt out of their original

legal career plans and to identify a different graduate career, as a realisable alternative possible self (Papafilipou & Bathmaker 2019).

Amongst these law undergraduates becoming a lawyer was not a viable occupational future equally available to all (Francis 2015; Harrison 2018). To sustain their original legal career aspirations these undergraduates had to do more, in less time, with limited, if any, access to relevant capitals, potentially perpetuating existing privilege. Despite their efforts, as they lacked relevant capitals, these law undergraduates were in an invidious position as they navigated HE, making their lawyer possible selves and their original legal career aspirations precarious. Therefore, by expanding understandings of the possible class-based explanations for attrition in legal career aspirations amongst law undergraduates from low SEB, the research has implications for and contributes to the debates about issues of fair access to the legal profession and the maintenance of its elitism (Krengel 2024).

Rather than mitigating socio-economic inequalities, the research illustrates that HE and legal education within HE as a social structure, may unintentionally contribute to the reproduction of inequalities (Burke & Hannaford Simpson 2019; Bourdieu & Passeron 1977). The research raises questions relating to the dominant human capital narrative underpinning approaches to HE policy and employability provision, (Dalrymple et al 2021) which connects participation in HE with improved life chances for those from economically under-resourced backgrounds (DoE 2024). The research also challenges understandings of graduate employability which specifically advocate the embedding of employability within the undergraduate curriculum without adjusting specifically for the continuing impact of differential access to resources encountered by those from low SEB (Artess et al 2017). By removing optionality and the classed barriers implicit within extra-curricular activities (Lehmann 2019), embedded employability in the curriculum seems to be founded upon a tacit understanding that all students will benefit equally. Potentially this reflects meritocratic assumptions which can be exclusionary (Thomson 2018). The research suggests that due to their socio-economic circumstances not all students start from the same position (Major & Briant 2023) and so by adopting an equality approach, embedding employability alone might

not mitigate the issue of differential access to relevant capitals or the classed challenges law undergraduates from low SEB encounter in developing relevant habitus as they negotiate HE. Therefore, the connections between classed experiences of legal education, graduate employability and issues of access to the legal profession suggested by the research, contribute to current debates regarding HE's ability to deliver social mobility outcomes (Sangha & Snell 2024) and the regulation of the university sector via metrics relating to graduate work or further study (HESA 2024a).

It is evident from the research that undergraduate experiences of HE and legal education specifically, can be classed and potentially exclusionary and that these experiences can be compounded by differential access to relevant capitals. This has implications for the maintenance and attrition of legal career aspirations of law undergraduates from low SEB which undermine the ability of HE to be transformative through the delivery of anticipated social mobility outcomes. Habitus development as legal employability, by the elaboration of lawyer possible selves, seems to be an individualised, reflexive process which can be constrained for these undergraduates because of their differential access to relevant habitus and capitals.

Within England, the literature represents HE as a pathway to social mobility with its attendant improved life chances that rely upon assumptions of meritocracy to deliver fairness and inclusivity (Major & Machin 2020). This is used as the policy justification for student tuition fees, to persuade undergraduates to make a significant financial investment in their education (Hordósy & Clark 2018b). Although such representations incorporate contested concepts like aspirations and employability, which frame expectations of successful outcomes as merit, aptitude and hard work and therefore as an individual responsibility, they do not account for the impact of structural inequalities (Allen 2014; Brown et al 2003; Spohrer 2011). For the law undergraduates in the research these assumptions and expectations seemed to inform their initial belief in HE's role in their endeavours to become a lawyer and their idealised understandings of what this would involve.

However, the principles of equity-based education (Major & Briant 2023) applied to legal education, challenge these representations of HE as a genuinely inclusive and fair means of access to the graduate labour market, and the assumptions that underpin such representations. The research suggests that while they navigated their academic and professional journeys through HE, law undergraduates from low SEB encountered class-based challenges, with differential impacts upon their chances of becoming a lawyer and upon their legal career aspirations. Informed by the principles of equity-based education, the research suggests that for some undergraduates from low SEB, HE is not the fair and inclusive vehicle of social mobility that it is portrayed to be. Accordingly, equity-based education has highlighted the flaws within the policy justifications for HE participation presented to students from low SEB because HE does not fulfil its purported promise of improved life chances for all undergraduates as it does not offer all students fair and equitable access to all its opportunities and resources. Therefore, it can be argued that HE's ability to deliver these expectations of fairness and equity is being mis-represented to those from low SEB because of the classed barriers that they may encounter as they navigate their academic and professional journeys within HE. As initiatives continue to encourage students from this socio-economic background to participate in HE, the research raises questions about what happens to these students after they start the degree and, more specifically, how the equity-challenges they encounter might influence all aspects of their undergraduate experience and their career prospects.

Notwithstanding the recent changes to the process of qualification, law remains an academic discipline with a widely understood occupational connection. Therefore, with its focus upon the experiences of law undergraduates from low SEB, the thesis contributes to the field of study surrounding legal education within HE and its function as a means of fostering fair access to the legal profession. Law is not the only academic discipline within HE with a clear occupational connection and consequently, the thesis also has the potential to contribute beyond law, to fields of study in other academic disciplines within HE which act as a form of professional qualification. Additionally, the thesis has the potential to contribute to wider study and debate surrounding equitable access and participation within HE, given the class-based

barriers that law undergraduate from low SEB encounter as they navigate their academic and professional journeys within HE.

Reflecting upon HE as an environment for facilitating social mobility Crozier et al (2019) called for fair access to relevant resources. Therefore, if legal education is to facilitate these undergraduates' legal career aspirations, in addition to embedding employability, these classed inequalities could be recognised and attempts made to alleviate them by adopting an approach to legal employability which is inclusive and fosters conditions within HE to support the elaboration of viable lawyer possible selves (Harrison 2018). From this standpoint, the research generated a new conceptual model combining two different concepts, Harrison's (2018) model of possible selves development and the principle of equity-based education (Major & Briant 2023) to support these undergraduates' experiences of legal education and HE generally.

The conceptual model developed from the research assumes that for law undergraduates from low SEB, some classed aspects of current HE experiences can adversely impact upon their preparations for entry into the legal labour market. It offers a perspective from which to consider these undergraduates' experiences of HE, not limited to the curriculum, to develop specific interventions based upon equity rather than equality, to enable law undergraduates from low SEB to have fairer and earlier access to career planning and appropriate opportunities to further their legal career aspirations. Therefore, the conceptual model is a starting point for the development of interventions and is not intended to be exhaustive. The conceptual model has informed the recommendations in section 6.5 of this chapter.

6.3 Limitations

This research has limitations implicit in a qualitative study of this kind which aimed to explore the experiences of a particular cohort, at a particular university at a particular time. It is the product of a particular place, conducted in the Law School at a post-92 university in England, focused upon one cohort of final year law undergraduates from low SEB. Data generation took place just before and during the Covid Pandemic which

had unanticipated impacts upon the sample size of undergraduate participants and one of the methods of data generation, requiring an amendment to the original ethical approval. To mitigate these potential limitations actions were taken during data generation and data analysis to address issues of trustworthiness (Cohen et al 2011) which were set out in Chapter three.

Engaging a potentially hidden population of low SEB undergraduates who had decided not to become a lawyer, was likely to create a small sample of possible undergraduate participants. That small sample size was also subject to various constraints as a novice, solo doctoral researcher with limited time and resources. Volunteers generating data about their undergraduate experiences by self-report raises the possibility that the data generated represented their interpretation of their experiences and the possibility of a double hermeneutic. As such the research did not aim to offer generalisability. However, the conceptual model proposed might be generalisable (Robson 2002) to a broader population of law undergraduates from low SEB and, potentially, across undergraduate degrees which offer access to other professions perceived as elitist.

The research provided a means of exploring a phenomenon in a manner not available to me within my normal academic practice to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of undergraduates which could have contributed to the apparent problem of attrition in legal career aspirations during the degree. The research provided the opportunity to take a critical view of academic staff and undergraduate beliefs that might not otherwise have been identified or accessible to me within my normal academic practice. It surfaced beliefs about undergraduates' career aspirations which I had not anticipated and enabled me to recognise my unconscious assumption that undergraduates would be responsible for their own employability.

Using Bourdieu's analytical tools, the research offered insight into albeit unintended inequity and social reproduction within HE. In relation to the development of relevant habitus, the research illustrated the classed challenges undergraduates from low SEB

encounter in achieving the social mobility outcomes they expect from their participation in HE. Bourdieu's analytical tools and theory of practice are theories of social reproduction (Harker et al 1990) and their use within the research enabled exploration of potential issues of inequity which might otherwise have remained hidden within my normal academic practice. Bourdieu's thinking tools offered a lens through which to gain a more critical view of inequity within HE, but it should be acknowledged that Bourdieu did not offer theories to address that inequity (Harker et al 1990).It could be argued that using Bourdieu's thinking tools within the research would lead inevitably to claims of social reproduction and inequity within HE (Harker et al 1990) and therefore their use could amount to a type of limitation. Nevertheless, finding inequity using Bourdieu's analytical tools does not mean that such inequity did not exist.

6.4 Future research

Current HE policy continues to be underpinned by assumptions of human capital and social mobility outcomes (Dalrymple et al 2021; DoE 2024) so graduate employability within HE is likely to remain a significant area of future research. Therefore, the research and the conceptual model within Chapter five offer the potential for future studies. From this deeper understanding of undergraduates' experiences and the attrition in legal career aspirations during the degree, the research and the conceptual model could be used to analyse the effectiveness of future interventions generated by the application of the conceptual model to mitigate some of the issues of inequity encountered by these undergraduates as they navigated HE.

As the research aimed to examine the experiences of career decision-making, it was informed by my unconscious assumption that law undergraduates would be responsible for their own employability, during their academic and professional journeys through HE. As it focused upon issues of class due to the longstanding issues of elitism within the legal profession, it did not address issues of intersectionality and other potential sources of inequality. Future research therefore could focus specifically upon the exploration of issues of intersectionality and other inequalities in relation to legal employability and becoming a lawyer.

6.5 Recommendations

Focussing specifically upon law undergraduates from low SEB the research explored their experiences of HE in relation to becoming a lawyer and the observed attrition of legal career aspirations. The research provides insight into the impact of class-based inequalities upon these undergraduates' academic and professional journeys through HE and although some sustained their aspirations, these classed barriers within HE caused some to self-limit their legal career-aspirations. It suggests that HE cannot always deliver the social mobility outcomes to all undergraduates anticipated by policy makers. As the research provides possible explanations for maintenance, as well as the observed attrition of legal career aspirations, recommendations follow in relation to legal employability within the law curriculum and the law undergraduate student experience generally, to mitigate these classed based inequalities by adopting an equity-based, pervasive approach to law undergraduates' experiences of HE. Although the research focused upon the undergraduate law degree, the conceptual model and these recommendations might be adaptable to other degree courses with a clear professional occupational outcome, especially those deemed to be elite, given the issues raised by Ashley et al (2015).

6.5.1 Curriculum design and legal employability

Classed barriers to relevant habitus development, along with differential access to relevant capitals have an impact upon the academic and professional journeys of law undergraduates from low SEB who aspire to become a lawyer, with potentially exclusionary outcomes. Embedding employability within the HE curriculum has been advocated (Dalrymple et al 2021) but this is potentially problematic for law undergraduates from low SEB because its assumption of equality does not recognise that not all students "start from the same place" (Major & Briant 2023). Embedding employability within the law curriculum as part of the design process, based on an equality approach might not address the impact of the differential access to relevant capitals faced by law undergraduates from low SEB, in pursuing their legal career aspirations.

Therefore, recognition of the existence of such classed barriers could be a starting point from which to design the law curriculum in a manner which alleviates those classed barriers. Once classed barriers are acknowledged, the model identified in Chapter five, incorporating the principle of equity-based education (Major & Briant 2023) can be applied to curriculum design and embedding employability. Adoption of the principles within the conceptual model could frame discussions within the curriculum design process to alleviate unintended exclusionary experiences that undergraduates from low SEB might encounter during the degree, to support their original legal career aspirations.

6.5.2 Pastoral support for legal employability development

Undergraduates in the research suggested enhanced pastoral support in a manner which reflected a form of social capital to support their evolving legal employability and career aspirations. This aligns with Flynn et al's (2023) calls for tailored reflexive approaches to employability development and access to supportive networks. Adopting as a recommendation the undergraduates' proposals for structured interactions, via enhanced pastoral support for undergraduates from low SEB, would also be compatible with the iterative, processual nature of identity development in becoming a professional (Lawler 2014; Scanlon 2011). This enhanced pastoral support could also facilitate the building of networks to support law undergraduates from low SEB thereby incorporating incorporate one of the principles of equity-based education (Major & Briant 2023) underpinning the conceptual model. This enhanced pastoral support would involve structured and customised opportunities for reflection and reflexivity, enabling these law undergraduates to recognise and to act upon opportunities to further their legal career aspirations as part of their academic and professional journey through HE. Along with Law Careers Tutors and well-being advisers, this support would be delivered during the degree by interactions with one named academic personal tutor for consistency also enabling law undergraduates to build professional networks.

This enhanced support would be available specifically to law undergraduate from low SEB, operating in conjunction with employability interventions embedded within the

law curriculum. By taking a “capacity not deficit” approach (Major & Briant 2023: 23) to these interactions, facilitating individualised habitus development, this support would provide an inclusive opportunity for these law undergraduates to learn about and then to recognise new opportunities for relevant habitus development during the degree, while also providing opportunities for them to reflect upon and be able to articulate positively the richness and value of their original habitus in relation to their legal career aspirations. Additionally, this enhanced support could incorporate access to wellbeing resources to address the seemingly autonomous and emotional nature of the process of elaborating a lawyer possible self (Erikson 2007).

6.5.3 Equity-based approaches to stakeholder engagement

Access to legal practice via work experience can support the development of pre-professional identity as a lawyer (Jackson 2016) but often occurs via informal opportunities which can depend upon having access to relevant social networks within the profession (Francis 2015; Krengel et al 2024). Access to these informal opportunities is constrained further because increasing numbers of students cannot engage in unpaid opportunities as they must work longer hours to support themselves financially while at university (Neves et al 2024). So, the unpaid nature of such opportunities and the necessity of relevant social networks to access them, can have potentially exclusionary outcomes for law undergraduates from low SEB.

Changes to the nature of these informal work experience opportunities, prompted by applying the research’s conceptual model could be implemented to mitigate some of the classed barriers encountered by those from low SEB in accessing these types of work experience opportunities. This could be done by legal education providers actively engaging with relevant stakeholders within the profession to encourage paid work experience opportunities which implements Lehmann’s (2019) call for subsidised internships. Additionally, providers could review the provision of financial support available to those undergraduates from low SEB who are unable to engage with unpaid opportunities, specifically by enabling access to additional financial support to help with day to day living expenses during the time spent gaining this work experience, an intervention to foster inclusivity advocated recently by Finn (2025).

The equity-based principle could be implemented by making these paid work experience opportunities available only to law undergraduates from low SEB. Furthermore, legal education providers could encourage stakeholders within the profession to review the application criteria for such opportunities, which are more likely to reflect the opportunities candidates have been given rather than their inherent abilities (Krengel et al 2024). For example, this could be implemented by encouraging stakeholders to reduce emphasis upon or, to dispense altogether with criteria based on academic achievement. Inclusivity and accessibility could be enhanced further by encouraging work experience providers to adopt flexible approaches to the scheduling of work experience opportunities to enable them to fit around undergraduates' studies and work commitments, including offering opportunities for participation remotely.

Application of the model would also enable legal education providers to work with law undergraduates from low SEB supporting them to recognising the value of such opportunities and providing advice and guidance during in the application process through the enhanced pastoral support outlined at section 6.5.2 above. This enhanced pastoral support could also incorporate structured opportunities for reflection, after the work experience has taken place, enabling these undergraduates to be able to articulate how such experiences have enhanced their legal employability benefits as part of their preparations for entering the legal labour market.

Additionally, similar approaches could be taken to mitigate differential access to relevant social capital via engagement with professional mentoring opportunities. Interactions with professional mentors in the legal profession operate as a source of advice and provide relevant and accessible social capital. Professional mentoring offers law undergraduate from low SEB an opportunity to accumulate relevant social capital through interactions with stakeholders in the profession, to support developing legal employability. Such schemes could be made more accessible to those from low SEB to enable them to participate. For example, mentoring interactions like this can be used reflexively to support law undergraduate from low SEB to make informed choices about the opportunities available to them as they progress through the degree, to develop relevant dispositions of the habitus.

Equity-based approaches to stakeholder engagement could extend beyond work experience opportunities to the recruitment of graduates into the profession. Although the profession has become more diverse, several forms of inequality persist (Krengel et al 2024), and this recommendation dovetails with recent calls for equality, diversity and inclusivity initiatives to become more effective by implementing changes to the perceptions of merit used in legal recruitment. Such perceptions of merit are more likely to reflect the opportunities candidates have been given rather than their inherent abilities (Krengel et al 2024). Unlike Scotland and Wales, within England no socio-economic duty exists to influence approaches to recruitment (Meers 2024), because socio-economic background is not a protected characteristic under the Equality Act 2010 (Equality Trust 2025). So, to be effective in addressing the classed barriers law undergraduates from low SEB experience in accessing the profession, this recommendation would require widespread engagement by stakeholders within the profession.

While anecdotally it seems that some stakeholders within the profession are applying more inclusive recruitment criteria, this would represent a change of approach to recruitment into the profession, which for more widespread uptake would seem to require support from the professional bodies and the legal profession's oversight regulator, the Legal Services Board (LSB). Despite some prior indications that it was open to the possibility of regulation (LSB 2024a) no specific actions for regulation were outlined in its plans for 2025, with equality and diversity in the legal sector described as an area of focus rather than a specific policy priority (LSB 2024b). However, this position might change imminently given recent reports within the legal press. It has been reported that the LSB might be planning to strengthen current requirements on the professional bodies to encourage diversity because of "deep rooted systemic barriers to equality and diversity" within the profession (Hyde 2025), including "financial hurdles and elitist attitudes" (Rose 2025). The reports in the legal press indicate that such changes will also be subject to a period of consultation, so the full extent of change and timing of its implementation is not yet known.

The conceptual model assumes that law undergraduates from low SEB will encounter equity challenges and adopts an equity-based approach to foster individualised trajectories through HE, so the recommendations set out above could offer opportunities to support these law undergraduates in fulfilling their legal career expectations. These recommendations could support them to develop a “practical understanding” of the legal labour market, as relevant habitus (Bourdieu 1990), facilitating adaptability in their navigation of HE in pursuit of their legal career expectations. Finally, although the research focused upon law undergraduates from low SEB and fair access to the legal profession, the research and the recommendations are pertinent to other disciplines within HE which offer access to graduate professions, particularly those that are also perceived to be elitist. Recommendations could be adapted to other undergraduate degree with clear professional occupational outcomes which are also subject to class-based issues of access (Ashley et al 2015).

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Extracts from interview and focus group transcripts with initial manuscript coding

Interview extract

Initial Coding	Transcript extract:	Initial Coding
	I: **Thank you. So thinking about that description that you've just set out, do you see yourself as a lawyer?** R:	
"PROCESS OF"	I see myself in the process of becoming a lawyer, in the simple definition of going into the profession, and maybe in the fulfilling the emotional aspect, the parents' aspect of, okay, I will have the degree, I want to go into the profession, I want to become a lawyer. A part that I don't feel like I'm a lawyer or I'm going to become a lawyer in	
DISADVANTAGED STATUS AS "STIGMA"	the sense is that the benefit to society is – you don't know any lawyers, and you're always told – this is a stigma that gets thrown around, like if you don't know anyone then you won't be able to get somewhere, or to get into a good job, a good role in the lawyer profession, you have to know people. As well as what you know academically, you have to know people. You have to network. Or, you know, like if you haven't got someone in your family who can help you through it then you're going to struggle a lot.	SOCIAL CAPITAL
"HARD"	So, in that aspect, I feel like it's hard because you don't know. So you're told to go to university to pursue law and then, you know, you can do the solicitor course to become a solicitor, but then as you're going through this whole process, people are telling you, "That's not enough." And	
"DEGREE IS NOT ENOUGH"	you don't know where the goalposts are. Like suddenly the game moves. Like I was supposed to pursue the university, I was supposed to go through the system and at the end of it I'm supposed to become a lawyer with a good job and like prospects waiting for you at the end of it,	
BARRIER IS PERCEIVED & FELT	but you're getting told at the same time, "We don't know anyone who are lawyers. You're Asian. There are Asian lawyers, but like you don't know anyone personally, so how are you going to make it?" And it feels like, okay, what are we doing this for? So there is that aspect of – when you're thinking about, alright, am I becoming a lawyer, am I actually going to be in a job where I feel like I'm fulfilling the aspect that I'm benefiting people, or am I just going to be like a pencil pusher. Am I just going to sit there doing something that I don't think I'm being of service to the profession that I'm going into.	HELPING

Focus group extract

Initial Coding	Transcript extract:	Initial Coding
STRANGE DEFINITION? SELF EVIDENT? N.B. DISSONANCE HERE AGAIN	SP9: I think, building on that SP11, I think the hard skills of learning how to present and all that good stuff, I think if anything the curriculum does need to go onto the more soft side as well. That is my opinion. Because say if they are reading a good case, like in Tort Law and they are looking at the Donoghue case, and they are going into say the reasoning. They will think about it, they will think about what that judge was talking about, because that is going to be an absolute fundamental part of what is going on. Because if you think, your writing gets better, your reading gets better, your reflection gets better, everything becomes easier the better you can think about something. So, I think yes, the hard skill of presenting is really, really important, and understanding the procedures and the standards, that is really important, but the other important part is you have got to now think of, "What am I thinking, and what is that individual thinking in that particular case who has now made that judgment?" Because that is just as important, and you have got to step into that shoe and think like them to understand how they arrived at that. I think that is one thing, I think it almost supplements the hard skills really well. SP11: I have like given them a case, pulling it apart, and then presenting showing them … because that is what they are required to do if they go into practice anyway. You know, you have to look at case law, you have to be able to understand it to apply it to your argument in front of a judge. It all blends together to help them in the future, and they don't … like, all they are thinking is, "I want to pass my assessment. What do I need to do to pass my assessment?" rather than, "Actually, I need to learn how to read judgments and understand them." And also a very important part of that, "I need to be able to be confident. I need to be able to speak in a certain way." And I don't think that those links are there are level 4 at the moment.	SKILLS AS PROFESS. IDENTITY PROXY SKILL? CRITICAL THINKING STUDENTS AS ASSESSMENT DRIVEN HABITUS: SPEECH

Appendix 2: Coding tables

Interviews

Motivations • Faith • Inspirational lawyer • Self-motivation • Personal experiences • Media influence • Disadvantage as motivation • Social responsibility motivation • Status of legal profession • Helping others • Family motivation • Nature of work involved	**Meanings of being a lawyer** • Status and respect • Time • Social justice • Helping • Academic identity and links between academic success and legal career • Professional identity – what? • Benefits of being a lawyer • Emotions • Risks of becoming a lawyer • Identity salience
How do you feel about becoming a lawyer? • Career management skills and outcomes of knowledge • Fear and scary • Doubts about career path • Uncertainty • Financial issues • CMS and duration and nature of qualification • Evidence of calculation • Disappointment • Career Management Skills and inevitability • Outcomes of calculation • Disadvantage and lack of network • Emotional impact of the calculations • Feelings • Their identity • Career Management skills and little on arrival • Agency	**Course shaping career aspirations** • No impact • Habitus • Role models • Alternatives • Tutors • Constraints -non-law related • Enables – non-law related • Extra-curricular activities and career aspirations • Constraints – law related • Enablers – law related • Changes to the curriculum
Professional identity as novel idea	**Uncertainty as to career aspirations**
Second Year	**Identity work**
Competition	**Value of representation and advocacy**
Habitus	**Assessment**
Time	***Knowing* typology**
Dream	***Naïve* typology**

Focus Groups

Motivation • Idealistic motivation • Assessment driven • Family • Social capital impact • Media and glamour	**Career Management Skills** • Reality of legal work • Year 2 • No career plans • Where to take place • Scope • Alternative careers and deficits • Extra-curricular activity • Through personal tutoring • Tutor expectations – amount of knowledge-*Naïve* or *Knowing* • Deficit Analysis
Resources • Impact upon students • Constraints upon staff plans due to resourcing	**Tacit communications** • Positive impact • Dawning realisation • Through assessment • Possible • Negative impact and nonlaw second best • Law as default career choice
Meritocracy • As part of staff professional identity • What - opposition to all students narrative • What - all students narrative • Deficit analysis • Responsibility of tutors or not?	**Barriers to access to the legal profession** • What is a barrier?
Professional identity • How - context specific and suitability of modules • Journey • Where is professional identity developed? • What is professional identity?	**Social capital references**
Opportunity to think about this noted	**Solicitors Qualifying Examinations**
Focus group – self as a lens	**Habitus**