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**A multiple case study of pedagogical relationships in  
different disciplinary areas in a  
research-intensive university in the UK**

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PhD Education  
The University of Edinburgh  
2023

## **Declaration**

I, Xiaomeng Tian, declare that this thesis has been solely composed by myself. Additionally, the thesis has not been previously submitted, in part or whole for a previous degree qualification. The work in the thesis is my own, except where there are references or where it is stated as such.

Xiaomeng Tian

31. 01. 2023

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## Abstract

This thesis is a study of the nature of pedagogical relationships between academic teaching staff (ATS) and students at Master's level in a research-intensive university in the UK. There is a growing, but still limited, number of empirical studies on how ATS and students conceptualise pedagogical relationships. However, none have focused, as this one does, on Master's programmes against the backdrop of marketisation of UK higher education. More specifically, this study aims to gain understanding of the features of ideal pedagogical relationships from ATS's and students' perspectives. It also aims to explore the factors that facilitate and hamper the development of positive pedagogical relationships.

A multiple-case design was adopted which drew on qualitative data gathered through one-on-one semi-structured interviews with 11 ATS and 19 full-time MSc students in three disciplinary areas within one research-intensive university. This was followed by a detailed and thorough thematic analysis.

The first key finding can be summarised into an eccentric repetition – pedagogical relationships need to be *pedagogical*. This study suggests that while students value ATS's approachability, immediacy, and caring, they indicate that ultimately, they hope the positive relationships with ATS can facilitate their learning.

The second finding is about the features of ideal pedagogical relationships. The study suggests that there is a consensus between ATS and students on the nature of ideal pedagogical relationships pertaining to Master's study, namely, an equal relationship but within a hierarchy. The students want the relationships with ATS to be equal in terms of respect and recognition. This indicates the importance for ATS to acknowledge students' emotional investment during their Master's study and to pay attention to students' feelings during any pedagogical encounter. On the other hand, the students recognise the hierarchy between them and ATS regarding knowledge and experience. Instead of serving as an obstacle for students' learning, I draw on my analysis to argue that this hierarchy has the potential for facilitating Master's students to achieve 'mastersness'.

Furthermore, this study sheds light on the factors that constrain the development of positive pedagogical relationships. ATS and students had a common view that it is not each other's fault. Rather, there are structural constraints, such as class-size, student-staff ratio, and ATS's workloads, which are attributed by the participants to the marketisation and massification of higher education. Furthermore, this study provides unique insights into the influence of the diversity of postgraduate taught (PGT) student body, including their diverse motivations, expectations, and language competency, on building and maintaining pedagogical relationships. Practical implications for the improvement of pedagogical relationships are provided accordingly.

This study also contributes to the literature and understanding of ATS's and Master's students' teaching and learning experiences. The study suggests the complex nature of pedagogical relationships experienced by ATS and students. Indeed, the popular conception of 'students as customers' is not supported by my data. The findings show that these students and staff have had experience of a whole range of relationships, some positive and others less so. One individual student may feel more like a customer in one class, and less like one in another. This thesis discusses the factors that seem to contribute to this.

Although this study was conducted in only one research-intensive university, through detailed accounts of the research context together with detailed and nuanced discussions of the research process, the findings and practical implications provided in this thesis can be confidently transferred and applied to other conceptually related settings, such as other universities, undergraduate programmes, and schools.

Keywords: pedagogical relationships; teacher-student relationships; higher education; Master's study; postgraduate taught (PGT); caring; marketisation

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I would like to point out that it is very difficult for me to further express my gratitude to Prof. Gale Macleod without repeating what I wrote for nominating her as the Supervisor of the Year for Edinburgh University Students' Association Teaching Awards, given that I have nominated her every year since 2018. Thus, I think the best way to express my gratitude to her is to say, simply and heartfully, thank you.

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Finally, I would like to express my gratitude to my family and friends who have always supported me and helped me out of difficulties without a word of complaint.

## **Dedication**

I dedicate this thesis to myself. I dedicated the prime of life to working on it.

# **Chapter One**

## **Introduction**

This thesis takes a qualitative approach to the exploration of the nature of pedagogical relationships between academic teaching staff (ATS) and Master's students in a research-intensive university in the UK. It provides insight into the features of ideal pedagogical relationships from ATS's and students' perspectives and elucidates the complex nature of relationships that ATS and students experienced. This thesis also explores and analyses the factors, both personal and structural, perceived by ATS and students to influence the nature of pedagogical relationships. The aim of this introductory chapter is to provide background information to this study, present the rationale of the study, clarify the terms used in the study, and introduce the structure of the thesis.

### **1.1. Introduction to Topic**

Pedagogical relationships between teachers and students, for better or for worse, are important, because relationships are located at the heart of any teaching and learning encounter (Giles, 2011). Relationships which are pedagogical in nature can be found in countless settings: parents teaching their children how to use cutlery; a friend showing another certain dance steps; or Socrates having a conversation with his students. In the higher education context, as Taylor (2019) pointed out, it is impossible for lecturers and students to not relate to each other. For instance, during a lecture a student might enter a status of daydreaming without engaging in what the lecturer said at all, but still, a relationship (in this case, a speaker-half listener relationship) was formed. Pedagogical relationships to teachers and students are like water to fish - the relationships are often experienced by teachers and students without their conscious awareness of them (Giles, Symthe and Spencer, 2012). Perhaps because of this pervasiveness of pedagogical relationships, and their taken-for-granted importance, there is a dearth of research on exploring and examining the nature of teacher-student relationships and the factors that foster the development of positive relationships between teachers and students, as stated by a few scholars who did look into this topic (Hagenauer, Glaser-Zikuda and Volet, 2016; Hagenauer, Muehlbacher and Ivanova, 2022; Hagenauer and Volet, 2014; Karpouza and Emvalotis, 2019).

By locating relationships at the centre of teaching and learning and being informed by the notion of caring (Noddings, 2013), the concept of relational pedagogy or pedagogy of relation (Bingham and Sidorkin, 2004) emerged. It promotes the notion that “Each student-teacher relationship is a unique pedagogical space: it is a one-on-one teaching situation, a partnership of sorts, that can lead to learning exchanges that enliven both individuals” (Hinsdale, 2016, p.1). Relational pedagogy, whose origin can be traced back to ancient Greece, has been described by scholars such as Hinsdale (2016), Noddings (2004; 2013), and Bingham and Sidorkin (2004) as a response to the school reforms which happened in many Western countries, such as the United States, which were based on a limited view of pedagogy as being simply about the effective teaching of mandated educational content. An anthology, *No Education Without Relation*, was published against the backdrop of those education reforms, in which the contributors generated a manifesto of relational pedagogy and claimed that “meaningful education is possible only when relations are carefully understood and developed” (Bingham and Sidorkin, 2004, p.2).

In the higher education context in the UK, although there is a lack of empirical studies on pedagogical relationships, the concept of pedagogical relationships seems to have moved into the limelight in recent years, mainly since the introduction of tuition fees for undergraduate studies in England and Wales, which resulted in a widely discussed consumerist culture developing in the UK higher education sector (Regan, 2012). Such consumerist culture, in turn, as Naidoo and Jamieson (2005) anticipated, may change the nature of pedagogical relationships. As for the PGT sector, the scarcity of studies on pedagogical relationships is in congruence with the lack of empirical studies on teaching and learning in the PGT sector in general. This may be partly because PGT students have been assumed by academics to be ‘expert students’, thus there is no substantial need for understanding the experiences of this particular body of students (Tobbell and O’Donnell, 2013). It may also be because PGT teaching is assumed to be no different from teaching at undergraduate level (Morgan and Direito, 2016). After navigating existing literature related to pedagogical relationships, it is evident to me that the issues around pedagogical relationships in the UK PGT sector have yet been sufficiently explored.

## **1.2. Development of Research Ideas**

My decision to do a PhD on this topic was not solely based on the awareness of the dearth of literature. The motivation to commence this project stemmed mainly from my intellectual curiosity and from the enjoyment of doing my Master's dissertation. I have always been fascinated by the role that teachers play in students' lives. Throughout different stages of my student life (i.e., kindergarten onwards), a recurring observation made by my classmates and I has been 'that teacher simply cannot teach'. I have often reflected on what makes an excellent teacher stand-out from their colleagues. There has to be something more than their professional knowledge at work, this is exemplified by two fictional educators. Both Albus Dumbledore and Master Yoda had profound knowledge in their respective areas, but the former usually gave his audience a sense of warmth and caring, for example, he could recall a student's name during a Christmas Eve dinner which was attended by many students, whereas although Master Yoda engaged in one-to-one tutorials with Luke Skywalker, he still gave people a feeling of coldness and distance. It seems that there are so many factors which contribute to becoming an excellent teacher and to being perceived by students as an excellent one.

While a nuanced discussion of the research context will be provided in Chapter 2, the decision to conduct this study in the PGT setting needs to be explained in this chapter. On a personal note, regarding any formal education I have experienced, no matter whether undergraduate or doctoral study, I view the process of receiving education as an important stage of my life, rather than merely an intellectual activity of learning something new. Thus, I always maintain the hope of fully engaging in student life and obtaining a sense of belonging to the universities. However, perhaps because of the short duration of my taught Master's programme in the UK, and other factors, such as a large number of free-riding classmates who participated in group projects with minimum effort, which possibly resulted from the expansion of the PGT sector, my sense of belonging was not fully developed. Instead of feeling belonging as a student, I felt like a visitor attending dispersed courses which were roughly glued together into a programme. In a nutshell, my sense of being a student at Master's level was undermined and marginalised. Against this backdrop of an enlarging PGT sector and the importance of Master's study for students' further academic development and career (as will be discussed in Chapter 2 and Chapter 6), PGT students' experiences merit further consideration, which is indeed an under-researched area (Macleod,

Barnes and Huttly, 2019). Therefore, I decided to locate my study in the PGT sector in the UK.

One issue I faced at the preliminary stage of this study was that the aforementioned thoughts on teachers and teaching were merely scattered ideas based on my experiences as a student and as a keen knowledge pursuer, rather than being a research topic. Before I returned to my home country in 2016, I had a meeting with one of my potential supervisors and she mentioned a concept named 'pedagogical relationships'. With great excitement I brought this concept home and started working on writing a research proposal. This initial excitement soon turned into a 'nightmare', because when I started constructing the research proposal, I could find only one empirical study using the phrase 'pedagogical relationships' in its title, which was a doctoral thesis conducted in the context of secondary education in America (Girard, 2010), rather than conducted in the higher education sector, let alone in the PGT setting in the UK. Due to this lack of empirical studies, I decided to use alternative term such as 'teacher-student relationships' (For examples, see Frelin, 2010; Hagenauer and Volet, 2014; Karpouza and Emvalotis, 2019) to search for relevant literature.

The empirical studies I found by searching using alternative terms subsequently informed my research design. At an early stage of designing this study, the use of alternative terms was justified, because of the lack of guidance from existing empirical studies. It was also because, as Garside (2020) and Griffiths (2013) noted, scholars used 'pedagogical relationships' and 'teacher-student relationships' interchangeably. However, at the later stage of my research (e.g. when I engaged with literature to interpret the findings), with deepened knowledge on the concept of pedagogical relationships, I realised that, as I shall explain in the following section, the conflation of the two terms is an oversimplification. Moreover, by examining the relevant conceptual articles and comparing them with empirical studies, I noticed that the majority of empirical studies on teacher-student relationships in a higher education setting were not based on conceptual discussions on pedagogical relationships. This disconnection could be a reason why, as Hagenauer and Volet (2014) claimed, there are difficulties in conceptualising teacher-student relationships in higher education, given that there is a lack of a consistent theoretical framework for analysing and

comparing findings across empirical studies. This disconnection, as I shall explain, presents both challenges and opportunities for this study.

### 1.3. Clarification of Key Concept

In this thesis, the term ‘pedagogical relationships’ is defined as *teacher-student relationships which are pedagogical in nature*. As I mentioned earlier, the concept of a pedagogical relationship is much more complicated than most empirical studies would suggest. A further discussion of this concept will be provided in Chapter 3, while for the purpose of the current chapter, a brief introduction to the concept is included in this section, which shows its complexity. According to a number of conceptual/theoretical articles (for example, see Aspelin, 2010; 2012; 2021; Assiter, 2013; Griffith et al., 2015; Hinsdale, 2016), ‘pedagogical relationship’ is a philosophical concept which has its root in Levinas’ philosophy of otherness, Buber’s relational ontology, and ethics of care promoted by Gilligan and Noddings (Hinsdale, 2016).

The German philosopher Herman Nohl, who is commonly deemed as the first scholar who theorised pedagogical relationship, defined pedagogical relationship as “a passionate or loving relationship between a mature persona and one who is becoming, specifically for the sake of the latter, so that he [*she*] comes to his [*her*] life and form” (Nohl, 1933, p.22, cited in Friersen, 2017). Spiecker (1984, p.208) described a pedagogical relationship as a relationship which is *sui generis* and fundamentally “makes human development possible, and which makes it possible to become a person”. This description echoed with Nohl’s (1926, p.153, cited in Friersen, 2017) early description of a pedagogical relationship as a “unique (*eigene*) creative or generative relationship that binds educator and educand.” It is not difficult to discern that the focal point of these definitions is on the term ‘pedagogical’ and on depicting a relationship which can generate “a kind of ‘leading’ that often walks behind the one who is led” (Van Manen, 1991, p.37). In other words, it is a relationship with great educational value.

In contrast, the majority of empirical studies focus on the second half of the term, namely, relationships (rather than pedagogical) and how the relationships are valued by the educator and the learner. Many of these studies are based on Baumeister and Leary’s (1995, p.522) postulation that “human beings are fundamentally and

pervasively motivated by a need to belong, that is, by a strong desire to form and maintain enduring interpersonal attachments”. Following this line of inquiry, numerous studies have been conducted in school settings by drawing on self-determination theory (Deci and Ryan, 2002), which evidenced by the positive effects of positive teacher-student relationships. Hattie (2009) synthesised more than 800 meta-analyses, involving 52,637 empirical studies, in relation to the influences of teacher-student relationships. He concluded that “throughout the chapters of this book, the importance of relationships, trust, caring, and safety have been emphasized” (p.47). Furthermore, a growing number of studies which focus on the quality of teacher-student relationships have emerged in recent years (for example, see Hagenauer, Glaser-Zikuda and Volet, 2016). A number of features associated with positive teacher-student relationships have been constructed, such as teachers’ approachability (Hagenauer, Muehlbacher and Ivanova, 2022), closeness and immediacy (Frymier and Houser, 1999), frequent interactions (Cotten and Wilson, 2006), mutual respect (Rossiter, 1999), and reciprocity (Karpouza and Emvalotis, 2019).

Those empirical studies, to some extent, have departed from the focus on the *pedagogical* nature of teacher-student relationships. It is reasonable to argue that a teacher-student relationship without a focus on its pedagogical nature would be as food without nutrition - it would still be comforting and satisfying, but its value may be in question. This is supported by the evidence produced by this study which is discussed in Chapter 6 and 7.

#### **1.4. Rationale, Contributions to Knowledge, and Research Questions**

The above discussion indicates that there is a disconnection between conceptual/theoretical discussions on pedagogical relationships and the empirical studies. The design of this research, including the interview questions asked, was mainly informed by previous empirical studies, whereas the conceptual papers were drawn on to interpret and make sense of the research findings. By so doing, one contribution of this thesis is that it has bridged this gap and has provided a nuanced conceptualisation and understanding of pedagogical relationships in a sector in which pedagogical relationships were not previously explored.

Secondly, pedagogical relationships are not built in a vacuum. They are highly contextually situated and influenced by sociocultural context (Griffith et al., 2015). There are many factors, both personal and structural, that can influence the building of positive relationships. Chapter 5, 6, and 7 demonstrate that both ATS and students in this study experienced a wide range of relationships. By exploring these factors, this thesis provides explanations for why the same student may perceive the pedagogical relationships they experienced differently at different time. As will be discussed in Chapter 5, 6, and 7, one important factor is ATS's pedagogical caring.

The ideal and actual pedagogical relationships explored in this thesis aim to offer educational practitioners a direction to head in, instead of serving as a prescription that they must follow. The practical implications of this thesis, thus, lie in readers' own reflections on the findings with the help of detailed descriptions of the research context (Chapter 2), process (Chapter 4), explanations based on the previous literature (Chapter 7), and their own contexts in which teaching and learning happen.

The aims of this study can be synthesised in the following three research questions:

- (1) What are the key features of ideal pedagogical relationships conceptualised by ATS and students in one-year full-time Master's programmes in a research-intensive university?
- (2) How are pedagogical relationships experienced by ATS and these students in a marketised learning context?
- (3) What factors influence the way in which these pedagogical relationships are built and experienced?

Furthermore, unlike tangible objects such as cakes or trees, pedagogical relationships are intangible. As can be seen from my research interests, research aims, and research questions, I was trying to explore and gain understanding of ATS's and students' experiences and perceptions on pedagogical relationships, rather than merely observing their behaviour, such as the frequency of their interactions, which can be quantified and analysed statistically. Thus, as I shall explain in Chapter 4, I locate my own philosophical stance within the interpretivist paradigm (Crotty, 1998; Pring, 2015). The study is qualitative in nature, which applies a multiple case study design (Stake, 2006) in which one-on-one semi-structured interviews were conducted

with 11 ATS and 19 students from three disciplinary areas in one research-intensive university.

### **1.5. Clarification of Terms Used in the Thesis**

Before proceeding to introduce the structure of the thesis, some further clarification of the terms used in this thesis is needed. First, although I have argued that the term 'pedagogical relationships' and its alternatives such as 'teacher-student relationships' are not entirely the same, due to the lack of empirical studies using 'pedagogical relationships', I have, unless explained otherwise, used these terms interchangeably throughout the thesis. Especially in the literature review chapter, I tended to keep the original terms used by the authors of the previous literature.

Secondly, in some places, I used the term 'ATS's', 'teachers', 'academics', 'lecturers', and 'tutors' interchangeably, partly because in the UK, academics usually have multiple roles (Macfarlane, 2016; Yale, 2019). For example, a lecturer apart from their teaching duty would also work as a researcher and a personal tutor of students as well as having administrative duties. To be clear, the word 'teachers' in this thesis is not only referring to teachers in school settings. Although my research was conducted at Master's level, the majority of students used the word 'teacher' as a synonym of 'academic teaching staff'. Thus, when I reported the findings in Chapter 5 and 6, I decided to keep the terminology applied by the participants. Moreover, in Chapter 3, when I discussed the concept of pedagogical relationships in general, the word 'teachers' had a broader meaning which referred to educators in any formal academic settings.

Thirdly, although this study was mainly trying to get insights into the nature of pedagogical relationships at the taught stage of students' Master's study, it was difficult to disentangle the taught stage from the whole Master's study which includes the dissertation stage, partly because some of the interviews with students were conducted during the period of their dissertation writing. Furthermore, although the focus of this study is on pedagogical relationships at Master's level and all students who participated were on Master's programmes, during most of the interviews ATS and students used both terms 'PGT study' and 'Master's study'. Therefore, whilst acknowledging that PGT is a much broader term which includes students on

certificate and diploma routes, I used the term 'Master's study' and 'PGT study' interchangeably, especially in chapters on presenting and discussing the findings.

## **1.6. Structure of the Thesis**

Following this introductory chapter, this thesis is structured as follows:

Chapter 2 starts with a journey through literature back to Medieval times when the first universities were established. 'What universities are for' throughout history is discussed. The discussion of the purpose of university education from a historical perspective serves as a prelude for the discussion of the emergence of neoliberalism, human capital theory, and the marketisation of higher education in the UK. Bringing these discussions back to the present, this chapter concludes with a rich depiction of the landscape of the UK PGT sector, which is the context in which this study is located.

In Chapter 3, I review the relevant literature on pedagogical relationships. This chapter contains two parts. In the first part, I synthesise and evaluate conceptual/theoretical articles, while the focus of the second part is on empirical studies. The gaps which exist within the literature are explained. Furthermore, the reviewed literature informs my research design and helps me to interpret and make sense of the research findings.

In Chapter 4, I explain my ontological and epistemological positions. This chapter elucidates the research design and defends the methodology and method chosen. A rich description of the research process is also provided. This includes the lessons I learnt from the pilot study, challenges I faced during the data collection, and importantly, the ethical considerations. A description on thematic analysis of the research data is also detailed. This is followed by discussion of the limitations of the study and my reflections on the whole research process, including the evaluation of the quality of this research.

Chapter 5 is the first of the two chapters that present the findings of this study. The chapter starts with reporting ATS's understanding of Master's study, which is followed by their perceptions of students' preparedness of Master's study. These findings set out the context in which ATS conceptualise the ideal pedagogical relationships and

the factors, perceived by them, that can facilitate or constrain the development of positive pedagogical relationships.

Chapter 6 reports the findings from the students' perspective. It demonstrates the importance of the pedagogical nature of teacher-student relationships and the pedagogical care from ATS. This chapter highlights that similar to ATS, students recognise the impeding impacts of structural factors which are a result of marketisation and expansion of the PGT sector.

Chapter 7 draws together the findings from the ATS's and students' perspectives and discusses the findings in the light of previous literature. The chapter stresses the complexity of the nature of pedagogical relationships that are experienced by ATS and students. Furthermore, it engages in an extensive discussion on the factors influencing ATS's and students' perceptions of pedagogical relationships. The implications for practice, policy, and future research are discussed throughout this chapter.

Chapter 8 summarises the key findings of this study. The chapter provides concluding remarks and considerations on the direction for future studies.

## **Chapter Two**

### **The Landscape of UK Higher Education Sector**

#### **2.1. Introduction**

To locate the nature of pedagogical relationships within their broader context this chapter provides a critical analysis of the landscape of the UK higher education sector. The changing landscape of the UK higher education sector is likened to an iceberg with three layers. The size of the sector and student demographic features are at the top, the stakeholders' (e.g. students, teachers, and society) perceptions and experiences of higher education are in the middle, and the theories (i.e. neoliberalism, human capital theory, the purposes of higher education) which underpinned these changes are at the base. The discussions in this chapter mainly focus on the top and the base layer. More empirical studies on students' motivations and experiences of pursuing higher education will be incorporated in the discussion chapter (Chapter 7).

Universities are one of the most long-lasting institutions in human society (Perkin, 2007). Since the birth of the first modern universities in Medieval times, universities have experienced and/or have played a leading role in the Reformation, Renaissance, the Scientific Revolution, Enlightenment, Industrial Revolutions, and the knowledge-based economy (Palfreyman and Temple, 2017). Bourner (2008) identified three goals of universities, namely, providing higher education of students, advancing knowledge, and serving society. At different points in history, the pendulum might swing farther towards one goal, with the other two as supplements, but these three goals have always been co-existed (*ibid.*). Furthermore, it is reasonable to argue that it is the people (i.e. students, teachers, administrators) that keep universities functioning. However, in recent decades there have been some changes in the context in which universities operate. For instance, as pointed out by Tomlinson (2017), a range of policy initiatives have been implemented which aimed to regulate the higher education sector more strictly, while assigning the sector more market freedom. These initiatives reflect the inherent contradictions contained in the notion of neoliberalism (Bessant, Farthing and Watts, 2017). Moreover, under the market discourse, the concept of 'student-as-consumer' is in character self-fulfilling (McMillan and Cheney, 1996), and it may undermine students' self-formation and self-understanding they may have developed through higher education (Barnett, 2016;

1990). These contextual changes may hinder relationship building among the people who study and work in universities. For example, the continuing expansion and massification of higher education in the UK (Tight, 2019) has led to increasing academic workloads, which in turn could significantly change the nature of academic identity (Perkins, 2019) and the nature of pedagogical relationships. Thus, it is crucial to have a deep understanding of the context in which pedagogical relationships are built and maintained or otherwise.

This chapter opens with the discussion of the key concepts underpinning the evolution of higher education. These include the notions of neoliberalism, human capital theory, and the debate on the purposes of higher education. More importantly, the chapter explores how these concepts are intertwined and shape the changes in the higher education sector. Next, the chapter proceeds to focus on the UK context. It provides a critical evaluation of the current landscape of the PGT sector in the UK, and explores how the UK higher education sector has evolved since the end of World War II.

## **2.2. Key Concepts**

Brown (2011) suggested that a trend towards marketisation is visible almost everywhere. Many areas of public life, and even private life, have been reshaped by market-driven agendas (Braedley and Luxton, 2010). Higher education sectors around the world are not exempt from this trend (Connell, 2013). “All cross the world, higher education has become a large enterprise” (Teixeira et al., 2004, p.1). Indeed, a considerable number of articles related to higher education open with a very similar sentence: “In the last [two/three] decades, the higher education sector in [country/countries] has undergone a significant change.” (for example, see Connell, 2013; Foskett, 2011). Following the steps of these authors’ and tracing back through three decades, significant change (such as marketisation) seems to have started in the 1970s, the decade in which governments in the Western world adopted a neoliberal political and economic agenda (Steger and Roy, 2010). The changing landscape of the UK higher education sector since the late 1970s was also influenced by the force of neoliberalism (Mayhew, Deer and Dua, 2004). Many words for describing the current features of higher education, such as privatisation, marketisation, corporatisation, commercialisation, consumerisation, accountability, efficiency, audit, managerialism, competitiveness, productivity, and entrepreneurialism, have their roots in neoliberalism (Davies and Peterson, 2005).

However, as Clarke (2005) has reminded us there is a potential overuse of the concept of neoliberalism, since the term suffers from perceived omnipotence as it is “identified as the cause of a wide variety of social, political and economic changes” (p.135). This is echoed by a concern raised by Maskovsky (2012) that people should be cautious about the taken-for-granted-ness of neoliberalism as the cause of social change, since there are various other forces at work. This section recognises the variety of the factors for social change and provides a discussion of three intertwined basic forces (and their derivatives) that underpin the change of the UK higher education sector since the end of World War II. Namely, neoliberalism, human capital theory, and the ongoing debates on the purposes of higher education.

### *2.2.1. Neoliberalism*

Neoliberalism is a social-economic theory (Saunders, 2007) that links liberal political philosophy and neoclassical economics together (Bessant, Farthing and Watts, 2017). The concept deems individual freedom and dignity as the core value of civilisation (Harvey, 2005). Harvey (2005) provided a definition of neoliberalism, which has been widely adopted by scholars such as Sauntson and Morrish (2011). Harvey’s (2005, p.2) description is as follows:

*Neoliberalism is, in the first instance, a theory of political economic practice that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterised by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade. The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices.*

This definition indicates that neoliberalism embraces the “free market principles of neoclassical economics” (Harvey, 2005, p.20). Neoliberalism, therefore, could also be seen as a revival of classical economic liberalism (Olssen and Peters, 2005) which holds the notion that through price mechanism, markets have the compacity of achieving self-equilibrium (Bessant, Farthing and Watts, 2017) and the market can respond more efficiently than any state interventions to the change of supply and demand of products (Hayek, 1945). Other features of classical economic liberalism, which are partially shared by neoliberalism, include assuming individuals can be the best judge of their needs and interests; allocating resources through markets; distrusting state intervention (*laissez-faire*); and commitments to free trade (Olssen and Peters, 2005). It is important to distinguish the difference between classical

economic liberalism and neoclassical economic liberalism (although they share many similarities) in that the latter stresses more on the markets' own capacity to achieve equilibrium and the individual consumers' choice in a market (ibid.).

The defining feature of neoliberalism is an inherent contradiction it contains (Bessant, Farthing and Watts, 2017), specifically, the role of the state. Neoliberalism, on the one hand, is against the concept of big government which was promoted by Keynesianism (Steger and Roy, 2010). On the other hand, neoliberalism deeply relies on governments to provide an environment to promote its policies (Crouch, 1997; 2011; Harvey, 2005). To a large extent this inherent contradiction led to the confusing and contradictory discussions of the impacts of neoliberalism on higher education reform in some literature. For instance, some articles might mix up the concept of government intervention and institutional framework (provided by the government). Consequently, some scholars such as Tomlinson (2016) have argued, and complained about, the reduced (financial) supports from the state (i.e. lack of an institutional framework and protection from the government), but others complained about a state's undue influence upon universities through managerialism (i.e. over intervention). Notably, these two aspects are not mutually exclusive, but they highlight the importance of understanding neoliberalism and defining it clearly for analysing the process of neoliberalisation.

#### 2.2.1.1. Different dimensions of neoliberalism

Clarke (2005) and Barnett (2008) maintained that neoliberalism contains different meanings. Clarke (2005) suggested that there are three ways of understanding neoliberalism. The first one is to understand neoliberalism as a new way of achieving capital accumulation (Harvey, 2005). The second way emphasises neoliberalism as a political and ideological project that promotes a rhetoric which legitimises the economisation of various aspects of social life. The third way links to French thinker Michel Foucault's idea of governmentality. Neoliberalism promotes the establishment of NGOs (Non-governmental organisations) and encourages people to deem themselves as entrepreneurs.

Rather than agreeing with Clarke's (2005) classification of different meanings of neoliberalism, in this thesis neoliberalism is conceptualised as having 3 dimensions (Steger and Roy, 2010, p.11), namely, it is "an ideology", "a mode of governance",

and “a policy package”. These three intertwined dimensions highlight the difference between neoliberalism and the actual neoliberalisation process (Harvey, 2005).

Steger and Roy (2010) understood ideologies as widely shared beliefs and ideas that are accepted by significant social groups as truth. An ideology aims to provide a holistic picture of the world. It also provides a blueprint of what the world ought to be (ibid.). Neoliberalism as an ideology thus disseminates an idealised version of consumerism and free markets to the public. The second point made by Steger and Roy (2010) overlaps with Clarke’s (2005) third way of understanding neoliberalism, namely, governmentality. Governmentality can be “understood in the broad sense as techniques and procedures for directing human behavior” (Foucault, 1997, p.82). This understanding provides an explanation of the internalisation of market principles in individuals’ daily lives. Steger and Roy (2010, p.13) noted that “A neoliberal governmentality is rooted in entrepreneurial values such as competitiveness, self-interest, and decentralization. It celebrates individual empowerment and the devolution of central state power to smaller localized units.” In the higher education sector, such governmentality is manifested in the assumption that the size of the higher education sector has become too large and it was difficult for government to provide funding to the sector. Consequently, higher education institutions are expected to engage in market competition in order to function more efficiently and effectively (Dill, 1997; Naidoo and Williams, 2015). Moreover, there was a new management model raised in the 1980s, which dominated the public management sphere in the Western world known as “new public management” (Steger and Roy, 2010). It outlined several government objectives such as meeting customers’ needs, involving competition into government service, and funding outcomes rather than inputs (Osborne and Gaebler, 1992). The latter can be seen as a justification for reducing funding for the higher education sector. The UK government started to distribute research funding according to universities’ performance via the Research Excellence Framework (previously known as Research Assessment Exercise). Universities have felt pressure to brand themselves and to pursue a higher rank on a variety of league tables (Chapleo, 2011; Sauntson and Morrish, 2011). The third point made by Steger and Roy (2010) regarded the concrete policies that manifest in neoliberalism, such as cutting taxation and reducing public spending.

#### 2.2.1.2. The rise of neoliberalism

After World War II, most countries around the world underwent a period of economic prosperity and the development of welfare states (Carpentier, 2010). These positive changes were largely attributed to Keynesian ideas which featured the active role of the state in using various policies to intervene in the economy. More specifically, a state should promote full employment as well as provide welfare to its citizens (Harvey, 2005; Steger and Roy, 2010). However, beginning in the early 1970s, many Western countries, such as the US and the UK faced constant economic crises and were trapped in a status known as stagflation (i.e. the concurrence of high unemployment and high inflation rate) (Harvey, 2005). In the UK, the government suffered from serious economic deficits (Bessant, Farthing and Watts, 2017). Meanwhile, as will be discussed later, under the influence of human capital theory, the government still attempted to expand the higher education sector, because it saw it as a route out of stagnation. Thus, the government had to go looking for an antidote by reviving the doctrine of neoclassical economics and promoting the idea of free market (ibid.). Higher education, as with other areas of the public sector, had to seek new ways to secure funding.

Moreover, the rise of neoliberalism can also be seen as an attempt to fight socialism in the face of the Cold War (Harvey, 2005). The intellectual origin of neoliberalism can be traced back to 1940s. In 1947, the Mont Pelerin Society was established, which included members such as Friedrich von Hayek, Ludwig von Mises, and neoclassical economists such as Milton Friedman (Bessant, Farthing and Watts, 2017). The tenet of this society was to be against government planning and intervention. They were opposed to both socialism and Keynesianism (Harvey, 2005). Notably, two colleagues of Milton Friedman at the Chicago school of economics, Theodore Schultz and Gary Becker, were two major promoters of human capital theory which will be discussed in a later section.

As mentioned earlier, neoliberalism has many manifestations in the social world. The following section focuses on one of these manifestations - Marketisation (Williams, 1995).

#### 2.2.1.3. Marketisation

According to Brown (2011, p.11), "a market is a means of social coordination whereby the supply and demand for a good or service are balanced through the price

mechanism.” Marketisation of higher education can be seen as an attempt to provide higher education provision on a market basis (Brown, 2009). A term associated with marketisation is consumerisation which was defined by Jabbar et al. (2018, p.86) as “a social phenomenon that empowers buyers and consumers, keeping a check on companies to ensure that the customers receive quality products and or services at the correct price”. The idea of consumerisation has been intensified by the introduce of tuition fees for higher education in England. In the UK context, the reduction in direct government funding for higher education forced higher education institutions to seek alternative ways to secure their incomes. The concept of “academic capitalism” emerged (Rhoades and Slaughter, 1997) in which education has become a product with an exchange value (Naidoo and Williams, 2015). However, this product of ‘education’, is certainly a unique one. As Scott (2016) pointed out students are the co-producer of the product. More importantly, whether they can successfully gain the product is subject to their performance in assessments (e.g. exams, essays, or other assessment projects) imposed on them. Another aspect that can be added to this list could be that the pace of students’ “shopping” is out of their control (e.g. studying in an intense 12-month full-time Master’s programme in the UK).

#### 2.2.1.4. League Tables and University Brand

Under the influence of neoliberalism, among higher education institutions, there has been an intensified competition for students, researchers, lecturers, and funding both nationally and internationally (Hazelkorn, 2011). Similar to the desire of students to stand-out in labour markets (Walkeling and Savage, 2015), higher education institutions also try to stand out in the higher education market. As noted by John and Fanghanel (2016), one characteristic of the market is consumer choice which is often exercised through judgment of reliable information about the quality of the product. League tables and various rankings aim to provide such information to prospective students, although the reliability and validity of the information has been questioned (Brown, 2006; Hazelkorn, 2011). League tables refer to “weighted combinations of performance indicator scores” (Morrison, Magennis and Carey, 1995, p.128) which can be used to rank institutions such as hospitals, schools, and universities. As noted by Morrison, Magennis and Carey (1995), the use of league tables for ranking universities can be traced back to the Jarratt committee (1985). The then Conservative government adopted the ranking system in seeking to intensify competition among institutions, and in turn created a regulated market in higher

education. The government believed that the performance indicators used in league tables could benefit educational standards, taxpayers, and students. However, the ability of league tables to increase the quality of education has been questioned elsewhere (Brown, 2006; Gibbons, Neumayer and Perkins, 2015; Tight, 2002). For instance, Brown (2006) pointed out that the over-reliance on league tables could lead to a phenomenon in which people believe that “the best judge of quality, and the best safeguard of quality, is the market” (p.38). This could have a detrimental impact on improving educational quality as academics could emphasise pursuing higher rankings and neglect other obligations such as providing students with intellectual challenges.

There are two major exercises for assessing research and teaching quality in higher education (Tight, 2002), namely, the RAE (Research Assessment Exercise) and the TQA (Teaching Quality Assessment). The RAE was renamed as the REF (Research Excellence Framework) in 2008. In addition, the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) was introduced in 2017 (OfS, 2020). It aimed to better inform students’ choice, increase the competition among universities, and is a tool for government to regulate university finance. For example, a better ‘provider’ of higher education is allowed to charge a higher tuition fee. This suggests that TEF is an instrument for implementing neoliberal ideology (O’Leary and Wood, 2019; Tomlinson, Enders and Naidoo, 2020) and also a catalyst that facilitates the marketisation of higher education in the UK (Deem and Baird, 2020; Gunn, 2018; Matthews and Kotzee, 2021).

The government’s attempt at raising the standard of teaching has been praised by various scholars (for example, see Matthews and Kotzee, 2021). However, similar to any newly implemented policies, it received a considerable amount of criticism. Matthews and Kotzee (2021, p.19) highlighted that compared with the REF which assesses the *actual* [emphasis in original] research, the TEF does not evaluate actual teaching, but only assesses what students (through the NSS) and institutions (through providers’ self-statements of their teaching) say about teaching. Indeed, both the TEF and league tables in general are *prima facie* a good strategy which aim to increase the quality in teaching. However, as mentioned earlier, there are some negative consequences involved in the ranking system, such as increasing competition rather than cooperation among institutions and serving as a tool for increasing tuition fees. Scholars such as Gunn (2018) and Matthews and Kotzee (2021) pointed out the that

external assessment actually lowers the quality. This is echoed by Trow (1994) who questioned whether teaching quality can ever be evaluated. Trow (1994) maintained that “the quality of teaching is not a quality of a teacher but of a relationship ... teaching is not a performance but an emotional and intellectual connection between teacher and learner” (p.14). Therefore, the validity and reliability of the performance indicators used by league tables and the TEF is questionable (Yorke and Longden, 2005), given that the indicators are normally drawn from one-side of the teacher-learner relationships (Brown, 2006)

### 2.2.2. Human Capital Theory

Schultz (1960, p.571) stated at the beginning of his article *Capital Formation by Education* that “I propose to treat education as an investment in man and to treat its consequences as a form of capital. Since education becomes a part of the person receiving it, I shall refer to it as human capital.” Human capital theory deems people’s abilities and knowledge as assets which can be improved by education (Becker, 1971; Schultz 1960; Wiles, 1974). The theory highlights the economic value of education (Maringe, 2011). Indeed, it suggests a positive causal relationship between an individual’s schooling and their future pay (Becker, 1971; Gillies, 2011). In modern days, ‘schooling’ can be understood as the time one spends receiving formal education. This could be a factor in the expansion of the PGT sector in recent years, as students seek to stand-out in employment markets (Wakeling and Savage, 2015).

The tenet of human capital theory is that the time spent on receiving education, in school or on the job, has a direct effect on increasing employees’ productivity and therefore is associated with a higher wage. However, it is questionable whether receiving more education will directly result in higher productivity (Weiss, 1995). Weiss (1995) reminded us that human capital theory only considered the measurable inputs such as the time in schooling. He continued by arguing that there could be non-measurable personal characteristics associated with a longer period of schooling, such as lower absence rate in employment. The time spent in education only provides a likelihood of desirable qualities leading to higher productivity rather than actual high productivity. However, it is crucial to note that what counts as human capital is in constant change. Those unobservable characteristics mentioned by Weiss (1995) had been included in human capital. Human capital can refer to the knowledge, skills, and capabilities of the population of a country or the workforce in a firm (Blair, 2011).

It also includes the networks people have formed that enable them to be more productive (ibid.). Human capital was defined by the OECD (2011, p.29) as “the knowledge, skills, competencies and attributes embodied in individuals that facilitate the creation of personal, social and economic well-being”.

Although human capital theory emerged in 1960s, and was proposed by neoclassical economists (they are also neoliberal thinkers) such as Jacob Mincer (1958), Theodore Schultz (1960; 1961), and Gary Becker (1963; 1971). The concept of human capital can be traced back to as early as Adam Smith (Burton-Jones and Spencer, 2011; Perrotta, 2018). Adam Smith in *The Wealth of Nations* (1776) deemed an individual's acquisition of talents as ‘a capital fixed and realized, as it were, in his person’ (cited in Burton-Jones and Spencer, 2011, p.2). Perrotta (2018) provided a comprehensive discussion of the historical development of the idea of productivity. He listed several 19th century thinkers who observed the association between a nation's wealth, individuals' productivity, and the growth of education. Indeed, even the emergence of the first university can be deemed as students proactively seeking to increase their human capital. For instance, the origins of the University of Bologna were in a gathering of students to employ masters to train them to practice subjects such as medicine and law (Perkin, 2017).

#### 2.2.2.1. Neoliberalism and human capital theory

The two main promoters of human capital theory, Theodore Schultz and Gary Becker, were neoliberal economists associated with the Chicago School. According to Quiggin (1999), the neoclassical analyses of the impacts of education, labour market, and economic growth were based on human capital theory. In turn, neoliberalism reinforces the influence of human capital theory on the reform of public sectors. Indeed, Saunders (2007) maintained that “Neoliberalism sees education as extrinsically good as it enables the student (customer) to purchase a product that will increase his or her human capital and thus allow the student to secure a better job, as defined by salary and wealth” (p.5). Thus, human capital theory is said to provide two promises, namely, a higher economic return rate (in the form of higher wages) for individuals, and the increased overall productivity and economic competitiveness of a country (Bessant, Farthing and Watss, 2017). Human capital theory seems to create a common-sense ground for both individuals and because if this governments invested more in education. When the theory meets the neoliberalism agenda, we

could deem them as two ends of a seesaw. On the left end, it seems the government *ought to* invest more (through funding and teaching grants) in higher education, on the other end, the right end, students *ought to* pay their own tuition fees according to neoliberalism ideology. From the late 1970s (when economic stagnation started) to the present, it appears the right end won. There were sharp cuts in teaching grants for universities, compared to the relatively well funded expansion of higher education in 1960s (Mayhew, Deer and Dua, 2004).

Both of the two aforementioned promises cannot be sustained any longer, or they are, at least, under severe threat (Bessant, Farthing and Watts, 2017). First, the ability of (higher) education to increase a country's overall productivity is questionable, because of the signalling effects (Weiss, 1995). What individuals learn in formal educational settings may not contribute to the growth of their productivity. In other words, there is no necessary direct causal relationship between learning and productivity. Individuals receiving a higher wage could be a result of softer skills (e.g. team building skills) they acquired during their university study rather than the actual contents of their subject areas. Second, as pointed out by Bessant, Farthing and Watts (2017), by investing in human capital, young people in the UK nowadays may be more educated, however, investing in human capital can only solve supply-side problems (e.g. a lack of highly-skilled workers) and cannot create demand. Graduates still face the issue of unemployment and underemployment, because there are not enough graduate jobs available for them. Indeed, new university graduates could "remain equally unemployed and earn comparatively less than earlier generations did at a comparable point in history" (ibid., p.103), although they may hold a higher level of degree than the previous generations. Therefore, the second promise (i.e. a guarantee of a better job and higher wages to individuals) made by human capital theory is also broken.

### *2.2.3. The Purposes of Higher Education*

Writing on the purposes of higher education would easily fill several bookshelves in libraries. An attempt to provide a detailed discussion of the purposes of higher education within one section would be overambitious. However, it is crucial to have an overview of how the debates on the purposes evolved over time, given that focusing solely on the contemporary concepts of higher education involves the risk of missing the wood for the trees (Bourner, Rosigliosi and Heath, 2017). Kromydas

(2017) pointed out that nowadays human capital theory has become deeply embedded in people's views that a higher level of education is associated with a higher wage in the labour market. Thus, young people around the world tend to invest time and money in pursuing higher levels of education. Nevertheless, as outlined in the previous section, human capital refers to "the knowledge, skills, competencies and attributes embodied in individuals" (OECD, 2001, p.18). Such skills, knowledge, and competencies could be achieved by other ways than attending university or other higher education institutions (Palfreyman and Temple, 2017). Thus, the remaining questions are: why do people still attend universities and why did the higher education sectors around the world undergo constant expansion and change? This section aims to provide a short but intensive discussion of the development of universities with the aim of deepening the understanding of the current landscape of higher education.

#### 2.2.3.1. The origin

In present day, when people hear the word "university", the image that appears in their minds is perhaps neither a diligent professor providing written feedback on students' coursework nor a group of drunk students idling on streets, but a physical building which features a quadrangle, red bricks, or plate glass. In contrast, in the 12th century when the first universities emerged, the word "*universitas*" was simply referring to a guild/society of masters or students (Moore, 2019; Pedersen, 1998; Perkin, 2007; Rashdall, 1936; Willinsky, 2017). In Paris, masters (teachers) organised and protected themselves against the cathedral clergy and local citizens. This guild was termed as "universities of masters" (Perkin, 2007). They operated as a *stadium generale* with the function of teaching and examining apprentices/students (Palfreyman and Temple, 2017). According to Rashdall (1936) the early English universities such as "Oxbridge" (Thackeray, 1849) were in line with the Paris model which included the development of college system (Perkin, 2007). In contrast, in Bologna, it was the students who gathered to seek protection against local citizens, while employing masters to provide a higher level of training to meet their career goals. The students, as the dominant group, even had the power to set the salary of the masters. This student-governed group was termed "universities of students" (Perkin, 2007). Notably, the early Scottish universities resembled the Bologna model (Rashdall, 1936) in terms of the governing of the university. As explained by Palfreyman and Temple (2017), the current student-elected rectors who work closely

with students in Scottish universities reflect this medieval 'student dominating' tradition.

There were various factors which led to the establishment of universities. These factors included economic and political changes (Pedersen, 1998) as well as the need for training young clergy to read, understand, and disseminate the content of the Bible to the non-clergy (Moore, 2019). In addition, the translation movement led to the proliferation of works of ancient Greek and Islamic culture (Willinsky, 2017). Within this period (i.e. twelfth and thirteenth century), scholars in Europe were exposed to the sudden profusion of works of Islamic and Greek thinkers (ibid.). Italy, because of its advantaged geographical location, attracted scholars from other parts of the Europe to study, discuss, and teach those thinkers' works (ibid.). Palfreyman and Temple (2017) pointed out that at this early stage, universities were far from being an "ivory tower", they were highly vocational and utilitarian. Students paid fees in order to receive education to pursue a professional life in areas such as law or medicine. Meanwhile, these early universities encouraged students to use reasoning skills to understand and synthesize different views (Moore, 2019). This could be seen as the early notion of critical thinking which is crucial for higher learning. Moreover, the structure of the university system emerged as early as the 13th century. Programmes which could be deemed as undergraduate study were based on liberal arts, namely, the *trivium* (grammar, rhetoric, and dialectic) plus the *quadrivium* (music, arithmetic, geometry, and astronomy). At graduate level, there were faculties of theology, medicine, and law (Moore, 2019). Notably, these higher faculties were identified by their speciality. It is reasonable to argue that the way in which the levels of study are differentiated can still be seen in the current degree structure that most of Master's degrees are aiming to provide more advanced and specialised courses.

In summary, the Medieval universities fulfilled the purposes of (1) advancing knowledge (by disseminating and interpreting knowledge from ancient thinkers' works); (2) advancing students by equipping them with skills for entering professions; and (3) serving the society by providing potential clerics to the churches.

#### 2.2.3.2. The evolution of the university

There has long existed the question of what universities are for. Bourner, Rospigliosi and Heath (2017) noted that this question normally surfaces "when existing

conceptions of the university are challenged by significant change” (p.8). Indeed, Newman’s book (1996), in which he rejected the idea that research should be the main function of university, was published against the backdrop of the establishment of Humboldt University which was ‘research intensive’ (Shumar and Robinson, 2018). Jaspers (1953) appealed for academic freedom in the face of his friend Heidegger (1933a cited in Burwood, 2020) who argued that universities should serve the interest of the state. More recently, Collini (2012) stressed the importance of studying humanities in the context of government cuts to funding for humanities subjects. The emergence of these works partly demonstrates that universities, since their first appearance, have always been influenced by, and in turn, influence economic, political, and cultural changes. In this regard, after World War II, with the proliferation of neoliberal ideology, human capital theory, and the consequent cut in state funding for universities, there was a considerable amount of academic work which discussed the value and the functions of universities (e.g. Fisher, 2006; Jonathan, 1997; McCowan, 2016; Tilak, 2008; Tomlinson, 2018). Most of these works have paid special attention to the changing nature of universities as a public good (Marginson, 2011; 2016; 2018; Williams, 2016).

Bourner (2008) identified the tripartite missions of universities, namely, the advancement of knowledge, the advancement of students (through teaching), and the advancement of society (through knowledge sharing). These are echoed by McCowan’s (2016) notion of the triad of teaching, research, and community engagement. Marginson (2011) also noted that the existence of universities rested on an antinomy. This antinomy contains two elements, namely, a place-bound identity (i.e. universities are embedded in communities and nations) and universal-mobile knowledge (i.e. international networks for creating, studying, and transmitting knowledge). By synthesising these scholars works, it can be concluded that the essence of universities is related to knowledge. “Knowledge is the unique claim of higher education. It is at the core of every public and private good that is created in the sector” (ibid., p.414).

According to Bourner, Rospigliosi and Heath (2017), the tripartite missions of universities has existed since Medieval time. However, in different periods of time, one mission can dominate the other two. For instance, during Medieval and Renaissance periods, the prime mission for universities was to transmit knowledge.

Since the Industrial Revolution, universities have increasingly fulfilled the purposes of advancing knowledge and contributing to the development of the economy (McCowan, 2016). The nature of the value contained in the university in turn changed overtime from intrinsic (i.e. being worthwhile at its own end) to more instrumental (i.e. as means to reach social and/or economic goals).

As mentioned earlier, the current debates are largely around whether higher education is a public or a private good. According to Samuelson (1954), public goods are non-rivalrous (i.e. goods can be consumed by unlimited number of people, such as air) and non-excludable (i.e. the benefits of the goods cannot be confined to any particular buyers, such as rules of law). Public goods can have private benefits and *vice versa* (Tilak, 2008). In this thesis I follow Williams' (2016) argument that the normative purpose of higher education as a public good has never changed. What has changed is the concept of a public good. Indeed, in the 18th century, scholars such as Kant (1979) held the notion that the university was a place for cultivating critical reasoning. Then, under the influence of the Enlightenment, the public good of higher education was seen as providing cultural and moral training to social elites who might become the leading persons of the society (Williams, 2016). Furthermore, scholars such as Newman (1996) held the notion that the pursuit of knowledge had its own end. Moreover, scholars who upheld liberal arts tradition highlighted that higher education could cultivate humanity (Nussbaum, 1997). However, after World War II, at least in the UK context, under the influence of human capital theory and neoliberalism, policy documents started to emphasise the private benefits of higher education. This change of emphasis, to a large extent, prompted people to take part in higher education. In turn, it was believed that the benefits of higher education could only be enjoyed by its participants, as Marginson (2011) maintained the public benefits of attending universities were reconceptualised as "the mathematical sums of the private benefits" (p.413). Ironically, whether higher education can increase workers' productivity is still in question (Hyslop-Marginson and Sears, 2006; Weiss, 1995), given that it might only act as a positional good (Marginson, 2011) for individuals to get a higher paid job rather than equip individuals with enough skills to increase their productivity. Other public benefits of higher education such as increasing the public's awareness of environmental crises have to give way to the private benefits such as increasing the employability of the students (Marginson, 2018).

In addition, Barnett (1990; 2016) maintained that the purpose of higher education is to make students engage in a higher-level of critical self-reflection and ultimately achieve a higher-level of self-understanding. Such critical aspects and academic freedom are said to be under threat in the face of factors such as funding from private companies for commissioning research (Williams, 2016). It has been argued that the purpose of higher education has diminished from 'educating people' to 'training high earners' (Gibbs, 2019). However, this is not a time for nostalgically arguing for the revival of 19th century universities. Indeed, as MacIntyre (1999) argued the universities which are not able to provide students with enhanced career possibilities can hardly survive in this day and age. In fact, as this section has shown universities have never excluded this function of preparing students for a better career. Furthermore, elucidating the purposes of higher education cannot be achieved by philosophical debates alone (White, 1997). As pointed out by White (1997), compared with students in compulsory education sectors, students in the higher education sector bring different purposes with them. Some of them may see university education as a way for upward social mobility, some of them may try to live life in the way that they like, and others (even for PGT students) may merely want to have some extra time to think about what they really want to do in the future. It is reasonable to argue that all these different purposes could influence the ways in which they engage in learning, as well as the relationships they build with their teachers and their peers. Therefore, as will be discussed in Chapter Four, the student interviews conducted for this thesis included questions regarding their motivations for pursuing a Master's degree.

Notably, most philosophical discussions to date focus on the purposes of higher education in general. There is no literature which solely explores the purposes and functions of PGT study. However, before proceeding to the critical analysis of the current landscape of UK PGT sector, it is worth documenting here the purposes of PGT study from UK government's perspective. One report, which was chaired by Harris (1996, p.8), describes the purposes of PG education as:

- (1) To stimulate individuals' minds, and enable them to learn new skills and ... to develop intellectual and cultural appreciation;

- (2) To create intellectual capital for industry and the economy through the preparation of qualified people;
- (3) To assist in the processes of innovation and technological development;
- (4) To increase the stock of knowledge.

By reviewing other reports on PGT education, it seems that PGT study sustains the tripartite missions of university. However, discussions on the benefits of PGT study are focused more on employment competitiveness and monetary return. For example, Universities UK (2014) stated that:

*Postgraduate taught (PGT) education is a diverse area of higher education provision that brings enormous benefits to individual graduates, to the economy and to society.*

*Graduates from PGT courses take their high-level skills into the widest range of employment sectors, and the average postgraduate earns more than the average graduate from an undergraduate course. At the same time, postgraduate education opens new doors, enabling individuals to achieve their full potential. In doing so, postgraduate education supports social mobility.*

### **2.3. The Changing Landscape of the PGT Sector in the UK**

#### *2.3.1. Master's degrees*

In the UK, Master's degrees can be categorised into three forms: (1) Research Master's degrees; (2) Specialised or advanced study Master's degrees; and (3) Professional or practice Master's degrees (QAA, 2015). Although each of the three forms of Master's degrees has its own emphasis, the Master's degree in general aims to equip students with in-depth and advanced knowledge of a subject/professional area by informing students with cutting-edge scholarship and research (ibid.). Despite the fact that some non-dissertation Master's programmes have emerged worldwide in response to market-related pressures and students' needs (Hasrati and Tavakoli, 2019), most forms of Master's degrees involve training on research methods, and they are awarded on the completion of a piece of independent research. In addition, according to the QAA (2015), integrated Master's degrees, which are commonly delivered through a programme that combines study at Bachelor's level with study at Master's level, can occur across all three forms of Master's study.

Two qualification frameworks, The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (FHEQ) and The Framework for Qualifications

of Higher Education Institutions in Scotland (FQHEIS), were introduced in 2001 and were revised respectively in 2008 and 2014 (QAA, 2014). According to these frameworks, Master's degrees are situated at level 7 in FHEQ and at level 11 in FQHEISF. For postgraduate qualifications, the award of taught Master's degrees typically requires a minimum of 180 credits. Diplomas are generally awarded for 120 credits, Certificates for 60. The main difference in the volume of credit awarded in Scotland and the rest of the UK lies in Master's degrees which are called a Master's, but is actually a undergraduate degree.

### 2.3.2. The current setting – numbers and beyond

#### 2.3.2.1. The numbers of student enrolments

According to the data from Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), in the academic year 2018/2019, there were 2,383,970 students enrolled in UK higher education institutions. One fifth (20%) of the higher education population were PGT students (472,915) of which 354,445 were enrolled in taught Master's programmes (HESA, 2020). Table 1 summarises the changes in the number of postgraduate enrolments from the academic year 2010/2011 to 2018/2019. The pattern of the change is much more complicated when taking students' domicile status into consideration. There are three features which need to be highlighted: (1) Between 2010/2011 and 2012/2013, there was a decline in student enrolments across all three domicile groups. (2) The UK domicile enrolments continued to fall until 2015/2016 followed by a gradual increase 2016/2017 onwards. (3) Since 2016/2017, there has been a decrease in the number of enrolments of EU domiciled students. There are considerable amounts of factors that may influence student enrolments. While providing a thorough list of these factors is slightly beyond the scope of this chapter, it is worth offering some speculations on the reasons for the changes.

**Table 1 UK HEIs PG student enrolments by domicile between 2010/2011 and 2018/2019**

Domicile Group	2010-2011	2011-2012	2012-2013	2013-2014	2014-2015	2015-2016	2016-2017	2017-2018	2018-2019
UK	375,030	358,800	337,575	335,145	333,445	332,420	355,670	363,755	368,410
EU	49,795	49,465	45,835	46,455	46,230	45,265	45,985	45,065	44,235
Non-EU	163,890	160,240	153,030	157,840	158,265	153,060	149,565	157,720	173,020
Total	588,720	568,505	536,440	539,440	538,175	531,235	551,595	566,555	585,730

Source: HESA (2011-2020)

Between 2010/2011 and 2018/2019, the patterns of changes were generally similar among PGT student enrolments and first degree enrolments. However, there was an

exception, namely, the changes between 2010/2011 and 2012/2013. While the enrolments of PGT student witnessed a constant decline (a decrease from 300,945 to 271,475), the first degree student enrolments showed a different picture. There was a sudden rise from 518,090 to 552,235 (a 7% increase) from 2010/2011 to 2011/2012. This was followed by a sharp decrease from the figure in 2011/2012 to 495,325 (a 10% decrease) in 2012/2013. The unique pattern of first degree student enrolments may have been caused by the Browne Review (Browne, 2010). Following this review, in December 2010 the UK government announced a new funding regime for funding English universities. Higher education institutions were permitted to charge tuition fees up to £9,000 from academic year 2012/2013 onwards. The repayable government-backed loan is income contingent, which means that students only start to pay back when their individual income is more than £21,000 per annum (GOV UK, 2023). The students need to repay 9% of their individual gross income above £21,000 (ibid.). Any outstanding payment will be written off after 30 years (ibid.). The sudden increase of student enrolments for a first degree was possibly due to applicants (especially students from England) trying to avoid paying higher tuition fees in 2012 (Callender and Mason, 2017). A similar trend was observed between 2005/2006 and 2006/2007 by Crawford and Dearden (2010). During that period, the government raised the cap for undergraduate tuition fees in England to £3,000.

It remains unclear that why there was a constant decline in the number of PGT student enrolments from 2010/2011 to 2012/2013. This could be because of the natural fluctuation of student numbers. Or as Allen et al. (2013) speculated, the influences of rising tuition fees and student loans can be more obvious in PGT settings, given that the financial pressures may discourage students from continuing their learning journey and doing a Master's degree. In addition, changes in visa policy may have had an impact (Alderman, 2016). For example, since 2012 students studying on a visa were no longer eligible to be employed in the UK for up to 2 years after their graduation and this could have influenced the decision of non-EU students coming to the UK to do a postgraduate degree. The postgraduate working visa was reinstated in 2019. In terms of the second and third features mentioned earlier, the implementation of postgraduate study loans might have contributed to the increase in the number of UK PG enrolment since 2016/2017. Meanwhile, the uncertainty caused by Brexit might have discouraged EU students from studying in the UK.

### 2.3.2.2. PGT students' areas of study

This section explores trends in the subject areas that full-time PGT students choose to study. Tables 2 and 3 show the top three popular subject areas in which full-time PGT students enrolled between 2014/2015 and 2018/2019, with Table 2 summarising STEM areas, and Table 3 showing 'non-science'.

**Table 2 Science subject areas**

2014/2015	2015/2016	2016/2017	2017/2018	2018/2019
<b>Engineering and Technology: 16,195</b>	Engineering and Technology: 15,510	Engineering and Technology: 15,690	Subjects allied to medicine: 16,465	Biological sciences: 17,300
<b>Subjects allied to medicine: 11,695</b>	Subjects allied to medicine: 12,905	Subjects allied to medicine: 15,090	Biological sciences: 16,435	Subjects allied to medicine: 17,115
<b>Biological sciences: 10,795</b>	Biological sciences: 11,275	Biological sciences: 14,650	Engineering and Technology: 15,920	Engineering and Technology: 16,475
<b>Total science subject areas: 66,580</b>	Total science subject areas: 67,320	Total science subject areas: 75,160	Total science subject areas: 81,145	Total science subject areas: 86,520

Source: HESA (2020)

**Table 3 Non-science subject areas**

2014/2015	2015/2016	2016/2017	2017/2018	2018/2019
<b>Business and administrative studies: 61,585</b>	Business and administrative studies: 58,920	Business and administrative studies: 60,690	Business and administrative studies: 66,670	Business and administrative studies: 70,825
<b>Education: 29,255</b>	Education: 28,610	Education: 28,790	Education: 30,895	Education: 33,010
<b>Social studies: 23,295</b>	Social studies: 23,440	Social studies: 26,050	Social studies: 27,235	Social studies: 28,490
<b>Total non-science subject areas: 155,060</b>	Total non-science subject areas: 151,545	Total non-science subject areas: 161,430	Total non-science subject areas: 174,185	Total non-science subject areas: 184,590

Source: HESA (2020)

It seems that in both clusters, students tended to choose to study in subject areas which are more “applied” in nature (e.g. ones which are closely associated with professions), rather than those largely involve “pure” knowledge. In addition, for the ‘non-science’ cluster, the area with the least student enrolment number was historical and philosophical studies across four years, and the numbers were going up for the academic year 2018/2019. Table 4 summarises the trend.

**Table 4 Historical and philosophical studies**

	2014/2015	2015/2016	2016/2017	2017/2018	2018/2019
<b>Historical and philosophical studies</b>	4,750	4,485	5,285	5,710	5,800

Source: HESA (2020)

### 2.3.2.3. Summary

The data presented above not only shows changes in the number of students studying at different levels, but also indicated changing features of the student body. There are now a larger number of students who are from outside the EU. When they study in the UK, they may face academic discourses which are new to them, and thus they may need supports from academic staff. Indeed, the latest Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (Neves and Leman, 2019) showed that students would like to receive more constructive feedback on their academic works. The students would also prefer to have more contact time with teachers to support their learning.

### 2.3.3. *The expansion of UK higher education – beyond the numbers*

Higher education in the UK includes various types of institutions, including universities, colleges of higher education, and (before 1992) polytechnics (Allen, 1988). This thesis focuses on the PGT students in one Russell Group university.

There were only seven universities in the UK before the nineteenth century. Oxford and Cambridge in England, and the universities of St. Andrews, Aberdeen, Glasgow, and Edinburgh in Scotland. The University of Dublin was established in 1592 in Ireland. Notably, the Scottish universities had a civic tradition and had closer ties with

the local communities than their English counterparts (Keating, 2005). Additionally, there was a higher participation rate in Scottish universities than in English universities which adopted a more specialist and elite model.

It wasn't until the nineteenth century, and then mainly because of worldwide industrialisation, that more universities emerged in the UK. According to Collini (2012), many of these universities were established in big cities and aimed to serve local needs. For instance, new universities were established in Leeds, Manchester, and Liverpool. These universities offered both traditional curriculum and practical subjects. Collini (2012) observed that there were at least three types of universities existing in the UK by the beginning of the twentieth century. One was the Oxbridge model: character-forming and residential. The second was the London/Scottish model: professorial and metropolitan. And the third was the civic model: practical and local. It seems that up to this point, different types of universities had already developed with different emphases in terms of their function. However, as highlighted by Allen (1988), until the publication of the Robbins Report (1963) (discussed in detail later), at national level, there were no official discussions (in other words government reports) about the purposes of higher education. In fact, a system of higher education did not really exist in the UK before 1945 (Scott, 1995).

The major growth of the UK higher education sector (in terms of the numbers of students as well as the numbers of institutions) started after the Second World War (Allen, 1988; Collini, 2012; Scott, 1995). There were multiple reasons for the expansion. For example, the increased student demand for entering higher education, the national need (as a consequence of the war) to improve technological and industrial training, as well as the need for more applied research. Moreover, the post-war social democratic ideals also appealed to wider access to education at different levels (Bathmaker, 2003). Furthermore, Scott (1995) pointed out that the two World Wars changed the relationship between the state and the university. The establishment of University Grants Committee (UGC) in 1919 marked the point that universities in the UK, which were largely privately funded previously, became publicly funded institutions (ibid.). The UGC served as an intermediary body between the Treasury and the universities. It took charge of distributing funding to the universities (ibid.). The UGC played a very important role during the expansion of higher education.

#### 2.3.3.1. The expansion in the 1960s

Notably, although some scholars (such as Bathmaker, 2003) still deemed the emergence of new universities to be an outcome of *Robbins Report* (1963), the plan of establishing new universities was made by the UGC in late 1950s (Collini, 2012). In fact, there were no new universities created as a result of *Robbins*. In Scotland, a new university was established in the Robbins' era, namely, the University of Stirling. In fact, Lord Robbins was appointed as the first chancellor of the University in 1968 (Robbins, 1980). In England, universities in Sussex, York, Essex, and Warwick were established to accommodate the growing public needs for access to higher education. The remaining question is, why there was an increasing need for access to higher education. The human capital theory (Becker, 1993; Schulz, 1960) could offer an answer.

#### 2.3.3.2. Robbins Report

A committee appointed by the UK government and chaired by Lord Robbins conducted a review of the full-time higher education provision in the UK. It aimed to make recommendations on how higher education should be developed in the UK. As highlighted by Allen (1988), the *Robbins Report* (1963) was the first official document that discussed the purposes of higher education. The purposes of higher education outlined by the Report includes (Robbins, 1963, p.6-p.7):

- (1) Instruction in skills suitable to play a part in the general division of labour.
- (2) What is taught should be taught in such a way as to promote the general powers of the mind. The aim should be to produce not mere specialists but rather cultivated men and women.
- (3) The search for truth is an essential function of institutions of higher education and the process of education is itself most vital when it partakes of the nature of discovery.
- (4) The transmission of a common culture and common standards of citizenship.

It can be inferred that the first point addressed the contribution of higher education to the growth of individuals' productivity and the national economy. The third point related to the function of doing research to advance knowledge. It was the second and the fourth points that contains the liberal arts tradition of higher education – to

develop peoples' minds and to cultivate citizenship. Although the Report called for more postgraduate study in general, it did not mention PGT study in particular. The era for the expansion of PGT sector had yet to come.

Notably, Robbins Report called for widening participation: "Courses of higher education should be available for all those who are qualified by ability and attainment to pursue them and who wish to do so" (Robbins, 1963, p.8). Consequently, expansion in the Robbins era (1960s-1970s) was well funded. However, on the other hand, as pointed out by Seville and Tooley (1997), the report tried to justify increasing government intervention in universities. The danger was that there was excessive control, but reduced support (through funding).

#### 2.3.3.3. The expansion since 1980s

Compared with the relatively well funded expansion in Robbins era, the expansion in the 1980s featured reduced financial support from government to higher education institutions (Mayhew, Deer and Dua, 2004). Guided by market principles, students themselves had gradually shared the burden of supporting the higher education sector. As early as 1985, the government recognised the "fee paying function" of overseas students. *Jarratt Report* (1985, p.16) stated that:

*Income for universities from private sources also now includes the tuition fees from overseas students. There are no UGC limitations on the number of overseas students and indeed there is implicit encouragement by Government to attract such visitors. Overseas students are welcomed by universities as an important contribution to the international character of the institutions. They are also a valuable source of income as they can often be educated at marginal cost to the university. Universities must, however, ensure that they are not being subsidised from other income.*

This fee-paying function of overseas students still exists in the current higher education sector, and in the PGT sector in particular. The non-EU students are subjected to much higher tuition fees than their EU and UK counterparts.

#### 2.3.3.4. A binary system

Two years after the publication of the *Robbins Report*, early in 1965, the Secretary of State for Education announced the creation of a binary system – "a high cost 'university' economy built round a defence of the unit of resource and a low-cost 'polytechnic' economy based on productivity gains" (Scott, 1995, p.18). The new

sector of higher education was led by polytechnics and other technical colleges, as well as teacher-training colleges (Allen, 1988). As Walford (1991) noted polytechnics and colleges were under the control of local education authorities. The power of awarding degrees lay with a nearby university or the Council for National Academic Awards. Polytechnics and colleges were more tightly controlled by the government compared to universities (Bathmaker, 2003). And in fact, this increased level of government control was one of the aims for creating the binary system (Allen, 1988). Furthermore, the polytechnics and colleges were the major arena for accommodating growing student enrolments in higher education from 1980s onwards (Collini, 2012). The binary system was abolished (in theory at least) by the enactment of the *Further and Higher Education Act 1992* after which the polytechnics gained the title of university and had the power to award their own degrees (Shattock and Horvath, 2020).

As above Scott's (1995, p.18) quote indicated that the other aim for introducing the binary system was to provide more vocational and professional training in order to produce more skilled workers. However, in practice, both Allen (1988) and Collini (2012) pointed out that many polytechnics offered traditional curriculum, while many traditional universities had vocational oriented courses. Thus, the binary was not very clear. This ambiguity of the functions of different types of higher education institutions led to an important question, namely, what are the purposes of higher education? It is important because, for example, many government financial policies related to higher education institutions were based on the debate on whether higher education should benefit the individual or society more.

#### 2.3.3.5. Financial policy in England and Scotland

This section briefly introduces relevant funding policy in terms of UK higher education to demonstrate the financial burden students may face.

The Dearing Report (1997) outlined the future shape of higher education sector in the UK. This includes the discussion of who should pay for higher education. It recommended a £1,000 tuition fee repaid after graduation on an income-contingent basis. However, in 1999, what the government actual introduced was a £1,000 tuition fee to be paid "up front" by the undergraduate (Teaching and Higher Education Act, 1998). Furthermore, maintenance grants were replaced by repayable loans. Notably,

at this point, Scotland also followed the Act and charged the tuition fee for undergraduates. After devolution, an enquiry was commissioned by Sir Andrew Cubie. In 2001, the £1,000 up front tuition fee was replaced by a graduate endowment scheme. Scottish graduates were expected to pay back £2,000 when their income reached £10,000 a year.

From academic year 2006/7, the aforementioned £1,000 tuition fee increased to £3,000. The payment was deferred until graduation. And there were more loans available for students from lower-income backgrounds (Carasso and Locke, 2016). The graduate endowment was continued in Scotland (Bruce, 2016). Students from the rest of the UK studying in Scotland would be charged £1,700 (an increase of £625 than the previous arrangement) upfront fee. In 2012, the UG tuition fee in England increased to £9,000, and has been capped at £9,250 since 2017. The main reason for the increase of fee level, according to Carasso and Locke (2016), was that the private benefits to the individuals were said to be higher than the public benefits. This together with the neoliberal ideology mentioned above makes students become the bearer of the costs of their education. In Scotland, the higher education sector resisted the neoliberal ideology better and retained many non-market features (Bruce, 2016). Free education for full-time undergraduate students was re-established in 2008 in Scotland (ibid.).

As for the PGT setting, the UK government launched the Master's Degree Loan Scheme in 2016. The first cohort eligible to take out the Master's loan were students who enrolled in eligible Master's degree programmes in 2016/2017. As indicated in the section on student enrolments, the Master's loan indeed increased PGT enrolment. This was confirmed by a review conducted by Adams *et al.* (2019, p.13) on Master's loan provision that "Nearly three-quarters (72%) of students starting their course in 2016/17 felt that they would have been unable to undertake their specific Master's course without the Master's Loan."

#### *2.3.4. Master's students' enrolments at Scottish higher education institutions*

In this chapter, I have provided in-depth discussions on the landscape of the UK PGT sector in general and the possible reasons driving its changes. Before proceeding to review the literature on student experience, a discussion on the latest statistics of students' enrolments is provided in this section, with a particular focus on Master's

students' enrolments at Scottish institutions, given that it is crucial to delineate a clear picture of my research context.

To obtain the latest statistics, I sent a request for information in late 2023 to the Office for Students, the Higher Education Statistics Agency, and the Scottish Funding Council regarding the characteristics of Master's students enrolled at Scottish institutions. This includes information on the numbers and demographic features of the students (with a particular request for information on Master's students from mainland China) as well as the types of institutions (Ancient HEIs, Old HEIs, Open university, Post-92 university) they enrolled in. The request for information received positive responses. The data presented in this section were based on a workbook prepared by the Scottish Funding Council (2024).

As shown in Table 5, since the academic year 2015/2016, Master's enrolments has increased steadily, with a sharp rise between 2020/2021 and 2021/2022. Despite this overall upward trend, when the statistics are broken down according to students' domiciled status, the pattern of Master's student enrolments appears to be more complex (see Table 6).

**Table 5 Number of enrolments on Master's courses at Scottish HEIs**

Masters Type	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22
Masters (research)	745	865	835	860	785	790	840
Masters (taught)	30490	32600	35740	38400	41390	49765	64480
<b>Total</b>	<b>31235</b>	<b>33465</b>	<b>36575</b>	<b>39255</b>	<b>42180</b>	<b>50555</b>	<b>65315</b>

**Table 6 Number of enrolments on Master's courses at Scottish HEIs by domicile**

Masters Type	Domicile	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22
Masters (research)	Scotland	325	360	310	305	330	350	325
	rUK	130	175	180	190	155	155	190
	EU	110	130	145	150	110	100	90
	Non-EU	180	200	200	215	195	185	235
Masters (taught)	Scotland	10745	11955	13160	13580	13430	15890	15825
	rUK	3800	4240	5055	5050	5330	6215	6690
	EU	3845	3985	4160	4235	3860	3675	2935
	Non-EU	12085	12415	13360	15530	18770	23985	39025

It seems that for both research and taught Master's degrees, the number of EU students who enrolled at Scottish HEIs has been decreasing since the academic year 2019/2020. One possible reason behind this could be Brexit uncertainty (Macleod, et al., 2023). In contrast to the downward trend of EU students' enrolments, there was

an increase in the number of UK domiciled students. This increase, according to Morgan (2023), may have been influenced by the lengthy lockdown caused by the Covid-19 pandemic and the increased accessibility of studying (e.g. courses had been moved online). I also requested the information of the modes of delivery (online and on-campus), but I was informed that the data on the mode of delivery were not available. Surprisingly, despite the fact that international (No-UK/EU) students were not able physically study in the UK, the enrolments of international students kept rising during the pandemic. This was followed by a dramatic growth in 2021/2022, which contributed to the sharp increase in the total number of Master's enrolment. Furthermore, it appears that the pandemic has had a more negative influence on international students' enrolment in research Master's degrees than on taught Master's degrees. The downward trend for research Master's degrees from 2019/2020 to 2020/2021 is also evident in the statistics regarding students from mainland China (see Table 7) despite the continuous growth of taught Master's enrolments.

**Table 7 Number of Chinese domiciled enrolments on Master’s courses at Scottish HEIs**

Masters Type	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22
Masters (research)	55	55	50	60	70	55	75
Masters (taught)	4605	4970	5570	6870	8685	10805	13625
<b>Total</b>	<b>4660</b>	<b>5030</b>	<b>5620</b>	<b>6930</b>	<b>8750</b>	<b>10860</b>	<b>13700</b>

In terms of the different types of institutions<sup>1</sup>, as shown in Table 8, taught Master’s students’ enrolments continued growing across all three types of institutions (ancient, old, and post-92).

**Table 8 Number of enrolments on Master’s courses at Scottish HEIs by University group**

Masters Type	University Group	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22
Masters (research)	Ancient HEIs	525	615	590	615	585	570	635
	Old HEIs	190	210	185	170	110	110	110
	Post 92	30	30	50	60	85	90	80
	Specialist	0	5	10	10	10	15	10
Masters (taught)	Ancient HEIs	12470	12945	14355	16175	17660	21620	27900
	Old HEIs	9260	10155	10465	10795	11870	13300	16530
	Open University	325	340	450	535	560	600	550
	Post 92	7805	8415	9670	10070	10495	13375	18605
	Specialist	630	740	795	825	810	875	895

In summary, similar to the UK PGT sector in general, there is an overall upward trend in students’ enrolments at Scottish institutions. As discussed earlier in detail, the reasons behind these increasing numbers are complex, and encompass economic, political, and social factors. Notably, the influence of funding and loan schemes for taking on postgraduate study merits significant attention and further study (Morgan, 2023). The contribution of such schemes to widening participation has been explored recently by scholars such as Mateos-Gonzalez and Wakeling (2020). A thorough review of literature regarding widening participation is beyond the scope of this thesis, and the topic merits a myriad of doctoral studies in its own right. Nevertheless, as Wakeling and Mateos-Gonzalez (2021) noted, widening participation needs go beyond numbers of enrolment, and students’ needs and adaptation to the Master’s studies must be taken into consideration in order to improve their learning experience. Thus, the following section will review and discuss the literature regarding student experience and transitions.

<sup>1</sup> Ancient HEIs include Aberdeen, Edinburgh, Glasgow, and St. Andrews; Old HEIs include Dundee, Heriot-Watt, Stirling, Strathclyde; and Post-92 HEIs include institutions such as Abertay, Edinburgh Napier, Glasgow Caledonian, Queen Margaret University, Robert Gordon, Highlands and Islands, and the University of the West of Scotland.

## 2.4. Transition into Master's Study: Being adventurers in *terra incognita*

Thus far in this chapter, I have provided in-depth analyses of the changing landscape of UK higher education sector, the discourses which have caused these changes, and the theories which offer explanations for the changes. The PGT sector in particular has undergone significant expansion (Morgan, 2014). Such expansion is, in part, due to the expansion of the undergraduate sector which has resulted in the inflation in numbers of first degree holders (Wakeling and Mateos-Gonzalez, 2021). According to Wakeling and Laurison (2017), pursuing postgraduate qualifications has become a new frontier of social mobility, because existing evidence shows that holders of a postgraduate qualification would fare better in the labour market compared with their first-degree-only counterparts (Wakeling and Mateos-Gonzalez, 2021). However, research suggests that despite the introduction of Master's loans, postgraduate qualifications have also become a frontier of widening social inequalities, especially in the face of increasing tuition fees for postgraduate studies (Cagliesi and Hawkes, 2023; Morgan, 2014; 2023; Wakeling and Mateos-Gonzalez, 2021). A thorough review and discussion on these issues is beyond the scope of this thesis. Rather, the focus of the subsequent sections will be on the influence of massification and expansion on the teaching and learning experience at Master's level, which is an important, but under researched, area (Morgan, 2014).

It has been 15 years since O'Donnell et al. (2009) highlighted that there is a gap in existing educational transition literature related to postgraduate students. They suggested one possible reason behind the lack of literature (ibid., p.27) is:

*Perhaps there has been an assumption that, once students graduate with their first degree, postgraduate-level study simply represents 'more of the same', or 'taking things to the next level', thus that there is little (if anything) in the way of a transition to be undertaken.*

According to Tobbell, O'Donnell and Zammit (2010), there seems to be an assumption that postgraduate students are 'experts' in learning tactics which they acquired from their first degrees and this may enable them to succeed in postgraduate studies. However, an increasing number of studies on Master's students' transitions and experiences, from both staff and student perspectives, have shown that this is not the case (Baker et al., 2021; Bamber et al., 2019; Coneyworth et al., 2020; Evans et al., 2018; Heussi, 2012; Liu, 2009; 2010; Macleod, Barnes and Huttly, 2019; Macleod et

al., 2020; Macleod et al., 2023; Matheson and Sutcliffe, 2018; McPherson, Punch and Graham, 2017; Morgan and Direito, 2016; Packer and Thomas, 2021; Poobalan, et al., 2020; Temple et al., 2016; Tobbell and O'Donnell, 2013; West, 2012; White, 2023; Zhou and Todman, 2009). One recurring theme among the key literature is that in the process of adapting to a new learning environment, Master's students have encountered challenges and expressed various concerns relating to both their academic studies and their lives outside the classroom. Thus, higher education institutions have a crucial role to play in designing and implementing targeted measurements to ease students' transitions in, through, and out of Master's study (Coneyworth et al., 2020; Morgan and Direito, 2016).

Indeed, students who are pursuing a Master's degree may have improved competences regarding, for example, independent learning. But this does not mean that they would automatically and smoothly apply the competences acquired in their prior learning experience to the new learning context (Bamber and Tett, 2000), let alone applying them at a higher level (Bowman, 2005). Briggs, Clark and Hall (2012) pointed out that students need time and guidance to successfully transfer what they have learnt in their previous educational experience to the current learning environment. Therefore, rather than viewing Master's students (and PGT students in general) as 'experts', it seems to be more appropriate to view them as 'adventurers' with certain expertise and aspirations, who set their feet in *terra incognita* in which they need the same (if not a higher) degree of support as undergraduate students.

Bearing the abovementioned issues in mind, in order to gain a greater understanding of the student experience at Master's level, the following sections are framed around two closely related themes - student transitions into Master's study and student experience. It is crucial to incorporate educational transition literature into this review, because transition literature does capture more than just the early stages of Master's level study. Indeed, educational transition is an ongoing process which encompasses transition in, through, and out of Master's study (Jindal-Snape and Rienties, 2016; Morgan 2012; 2014). By envisaging the literature, it appears that the Master's students' experience has largely been explored in the transition literature. Thus, a thorough review and discussion of the transition literature has been included in this section. Throughout the review of literature, issues related to students' motivations, expectations and prior learning experience are critically discussed as they are likely

to impact on teacher-student relationships. Towards the end of this review, the challenges and opportunities for building positive pedagogical relationships between ATS and students are discussed in the light of a greater expectation of independent learning at Master's level which this review identifies.

#### *2.4.1. Educational transition is an ongoing and complex process*

The concept of transition is usually associated with people's experience of change (Schlossberg, 1981) and its origin can be found in counselling psychology. As a psychological concept, Anderson, Goodman and Schlossberg (2012, p.33) defined a transition as "any event or non-event that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles." They stressed that transition is a subjective concept - "a transition is not so much a matter of change as of the individual's own perception of the change." (ibid., p. 33). In other words, a transition occurred only when the people who experiencing it defined it so. In turn, this way of defining the term, to some extent, justifies the use of qualitative data in exploring individuals' transition experience. The definition also indicates that in the process of a transition, individuals need to envisage new contextual factors, build social connections, and negotiate new roles. This could explain why scholars in numerous empirical studies in the domain of educational research tended to draw on theories of identities, communities of practice, and different forms of capital in explaining the student transition experience (For example, see Bowman, 2005; Tobbell and O'Donnell, 2013).

Studies on transitions in educational contexts highlight that transition is a multifaceted and dynamic process (Gale and Parker, 2014). According to Jindal-Snape and Rienties (2016, p.2), an educational transition "is an ongoing process that involves moving from one context and set of interpersonal relationships to another." Students usually experience multiple transitions at the same time (ibid.). For example, a student pursuing a Master's degree may need to move to a new educational system, a new programme, or stay in the same programme but at a higher level. Moreover, the impact of transition is not only related to the student in transition, but also to their families, friends, and the new context to which they move (Jindal-Snape and Ingram, 2013). Furthermore, according to Schlossberg (1981), individuals' abilities to adapt to change are as different as the same person's ability to adapt to different types of changes and to the same type of change at different times in life. Put what Schlossberg said in the context of Master's studies, it indicates that different students

would react and adapt to Master's studies differently. Pursuing a Master's degree is an emotional event for most students (Robb and Moffat, 2020; White and Ingram, 2020). Thus, despite the increasing focus on international and non-traditional students' transitions into Master's study in the UK, the experience and the emotional input of UK-domiciled students should not be ignored. Indeed, although home students may be slightly more familiar with the academic culture in the UK than their international counterparts, it still requires them to make some adjustment to the new context. For instance, it may take a while for a student who was born and brought up in Somerset to adapt to a Scottish winter during their study. Thus, apart from the evidence contained in empirical studies, the definitions are compelling in themselves to show that transition is a complex concept and requires that all students make adjustments. Furthermore, the empirical evidence strongly shows that transitions at Master's level are not a straightforward process in which students are always confident and independent learners (White, 2023).

Numerous empirical studies to date have shown that instead of being 'expert students', many students' experiences of Master's study have featured anxiety, confusion and self-doubt (McPherson, Punch and Graham, 2017). It is important to note that it is not my intention to lament the provision of Master's programmes in the UK. Instead, in line with Jindal-Snape and Rienties (2016), I view transition to Master's study as an overall positive process in which students strive to fulfil their aspirations in the highly competitive environment to which they gained admission. However, such optimism needs to be read with caveats, given that what usually accompanies transitions are multiple uncertainties (Gravett and Winstone, 2021). According to Thomson, Pawson and Evans (2021), transitions may affect how students interpret their past learning experiences and how they expect the future studies to be. During this interpretation process, uncertainty around their academic achievement may cause anxiety (ibid.). Moreover, when there were mismatches between students' expectations and the reality they encounter, the confusion, anxiety, and self-doubt would rise (Leese, 2010). Students are not always clear about what is expected from them during their studies (Coneyworth et al., 2020). This could also cause anxiety and self-doubt (Bamber et al., 2019). Bearing Schlossberg's (1981) assertion of the subjectiveness of transition in mind, it is important to explore students' motivations and expectations for doing a Master's degree. In turn, a good understanding of students' expectations may result in a smoother transition in, through, and out of

Master's study, which would positively influence students' retention, resilience, and success (Morgan, 2012; 2014). Thus, in the following sections, literature relating to student motivations and expectations will be discussed in detail, with a particular focus on the challenges facing the Master's students.

#### *2.4.2. Master's students' motivations and expectations for study*

In the existing literature, one salient theme regarding Master's students is the diversity of their motivations and expectations (Morgan, 2014). A number of reports, such as Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (PTES) (See Neves and Leman, 2019; Leman, 2020; 2021; 2022; 2023), have shown that one key motivator for students embarking on a Master's journey is to enhance their career prospects, including making progress in their current career path and developing new career opportunities.

However, as Morgan (2014; 2015) and Morgan and Dirieto (2016) stressed, enhancing career prospects is by no means the only reason students decided to do Master's degrees. Liu's (2010) study, which drew on data obtained from questionnaires with 95 students in Marketing, showed that there was a combination of intrinsic goals (e.g. a desire for gaining more in-depth knowledge of a certain subject) and career-related motivations in Master's students' decision making process. This was echoed by findings of Bowman's (2005) and Mellors-Bourne et al.'s (2014) studies, in which students' strong personal interests in their subject areas were highlighted. Moreover, factors influencing students' choice of higher education institutions, which summarised by Tabrizi (2021) thoroughly in her PhD thesis, include the reputation of the institution and subject areas, the influence of significant others, and the costs of the study and funding opportunities.

The significance of Bowman's (2005) study lies in two areas. First, the participants were students on six Master's courses across multiple disciplines (e.g. applied sciences, business, and philosophy). The inclusion of students from humanities subjects is particularly valuable, given that, as Macleod et al. (2023) in their systematic review of 693 studies concluded, studies on Master's students' experience in the disciplinary area of humanities are extremely scarce. Secondly, despite its small-scale, Bowman's (2005) study was conducted in two different types of institutions (i.e., research-intensive university and teaching-focus university) and provided detailed analyses of Master's students' decision-making processes for pursuing their studies.

She concluded that “The complexities of the students’ decision-making appear to be a far cry from the narrow policy notion of students as rational actors seeking economic gain” (ibid., p.233). The findings of Bowman’s (2005) study seem to be at odds with more recent studies, such as the one conducted by Smith (2016), which highlighted students’ self-perceptions as customers of higher education. This inconsistency indicates the complexity of students’ decision-making processes and their various motivations and expectations for pursuing Master’s degrees.

More specifically, Bowman (2005) found that students’ decisions for commencing a full-time Master’s study stemmed from their distinctive personal circumstances, and suggested that Master’s students are far from a homogeneous group. This was supported by more recent studies by Morgan (2014; 2015), who provided illuminating insights into the characteristics of PGT students and highlighted that the differences in expectations were associated with students’ differing domicile status and the generations of studies. Moreover, Bowman (2005) classified students’ reasons for doing Master’s study into three categories: *staying on* (students who were pursuing Master’s degrees immediately after completing their undergraduate degrees); *moving in* (students who changed their subject area); and *coming back* (students who return to formal education setting after a few years of work). She highlighted that even within one category, the same student may experience tensions between their passion in a given subject and the concern about the potential lack of job opportunities upon their graduation. This has added to the complexity of exploring student motivations and expectations.

In terms of expectations, the concept is a complex construct. There are broadly two categories of expectations which may be helpful in gaining in-depth insights into student experience, namely, forecast/predictive expectations and ideal expectations, with the former referring to what individuals think will occur, whereas the latter refers to what individuals would like to occur (Tomlinson, Simpson and Killingback, 2023). The lack of clarification of the use of the concept, to some extent, might give rise to the diverse findings among empirical studies, ranging from students who were not clear about what to expect (Coneyworth et al., 2020) to expectations that were largely fulfilled (Wu and Hammond, 2011).

As highlighted by Morgan (2015), students in her study expected a higher quality of teaching and service at PGT level than at the undergraduate level. This was supported by Macleod, Barnes and Huttly (2019) who found that students expected to be treated differently to undergraduate students. However, their study found that despite the expectation of being treated differently, the degrees and kinds of support the students needed were similar to those needed at undergraduate level. This reinforces Morgan's (2014) appeal for more structured and specific support at Master's level. Moreover, according to Morgan and Dirieto (2016), UK domiciled students were clearer about their learning expectations compared to their EU counterparts, which may be due to their relatively better understanding of the educational system in the UK. More specially, in terms of learning and teaching, the respondents in Morgan and Dirieto's (2016) study expressed that they value timely and regular academic feedback from their tutors. This is reflected in recent literature by Macleod, et al. (2020) that developing constructive academic feedback is important for developing independence. The issues around independent learning will be examined in detail below.

#### *2.4.3. Challenges facing Master's students*

As mentioned earlier, a good deal of studies to date have shown that Master's students face numerous challenges. The sources of these challenges are diverse, given that taught Master's students embark on their studies with various knowledge and skills, different expectations, and wide-ranging prior working and learning experience influenced by cultural norms and personal dispositions (White and Ingram, 2023). This calls for a more comprehensive understanding of Master's students' experience and recognise its complexity. Potschulat, Moran and Jones (2021, p.4) commented that:

*Higher education policy, university rankings, promotional material and academic literature all refer to the student experience as an index of something that needs to be borne in mind, safeguarded, improved...Academic uses largely take 'the student experience' at face value, in the process muddling measures of student satisfaction, socialisation outside the university and pedagogy.*

Furthermore, Tobbell, O'Donnell and Zammit (2010) argued that all educational transitions require students to negotiate new roles and identities and apply existing knowledge to a new context. Thus, these transitions could impose enormous challenges on postgraduate students in particular due to the increasing complexity of

their life compared with life during undergraduate study (*ibid.*). In light of this, it is not surprising that there is an increasing number of studies aimed at addressing international students' (Non-UK/EU domiciled students) adaptation to the UK context. Within the international student group, Chinese students' experience has been largely explored, mainly because Chinese students form the largest cohort of international students (Universities UK, 2023) in the UK. However, 10 out of 19 student participants of this study were from outside mainland China. Thus, although this demographic feature of the student body is significant for the sector in general, it is less so for this thesis. Nevertheless, the requirement to address international students' needs is indeed important, because being an international student is not only about trying to have success in academic study, but also including adapting to new lifestyles, relationships, and academic cultures (Skyrme, 2016). In considering this, and the large amount of tuition fees paid by this student group, some further attention on this student group is necessary.

However, it is important to stress that, just as it is not accurate to assume PGT students are a homogeneous group and are 'experts', it is also not accurate to assume international students are a homogeneous group. International students' adaptability to their UK study largely depends on the cultural distance between their home countries and the UK. Moreover, it is not right to assume Chinese (mainland) students are a homogeneous group in which is indiscriminately labelled as rote, passive, and uncritical learners (Ryan, 2010). There are in fact a wide variety of higher education institutions in China in terms of curricula and pedagogies. For example, there is a growing number of joint-venture higher education institutions established in mainland China at which complete Western curricula are adopted. It seems that scholars may have rightly highlighted a common phenomenon regarding Chinese students' learning behaviour, but some of the conclusions may have been overgeneralised. Thorough discussions about the misperceptions of Chinese students can be found in research conducted by, for example, Biggs (1996) and Ryan (2010). Chinese students' quietness during class were mainly attributed to their low levels of confidence in using English language rather than their way of thinking (Wu and Hammond, 2011). This has, to a large extent, explained why improving English language and communication skills was a main expectation held by Chinese students (*ibid.*).

Nevertheless, one tool which can be useful in analysing challenges facing Master's students and their needs is the concept of 'mastersness' (QAA, 2013). Seven facets were highlighted which were associated with teaching and learning at Master's level, namely, level of complexity, degree of abstraction, depth of learning in a subject, salience of research and enquiry, degree of learner autonomy and responsibility, complexity and unpredictability in an operational context, and professionalism. The following section will focus on one particular facet – autonomy. The notion of independent learning will be explored for two reasons. First, research has suggested that UK-domiciled and international students seem to have different expectations regarding the degree of independent learning required (For example, see Morgan, 2015). Secondly, the notion of independent learning indicates a sense of 'distance' (Moore, 1973) which implies a reduced degree of teacher-student interactions and contact hours. Thus, the notion could become problematic amid increasing levels of complexity and abstraction of the learning contents at Master's level, given that students need a high degree of support from ATS. Therefore, students' and ATS's understanding of this concept may have impacts on the nature of the relationships that they are aiming to build or avoid.

#### 2.4.3.1. Challenges facing international students and home students: balancing independence and support

Master's students are expected to study in an independent manner (Macleod et al., 2020) and the competence of being autonomous learners is aimed to be further developed during the Master's study. However, independent learning does not mean the absence of teaching or teachers. On the contrary, teachers need to do more in supporting students to develop such competence. It would be an oversimplification to break down the concept of independent learning to a quantifiable measurement, such as certain hours that the students are expected to study on their own (Mckendry and Boyd, 2012). Such conceptualisation may cause what Tobbell, O'Donnell and Zammit (2010, p.274) referred to as "the practice of independence is encouraged by an absence of information rather than an active facilitation of helpful practices." As Tough (1971) pointed out, in developing independent learners, teachers need to guide students by making the students realise different options and possibilities through conversations. In turn, it is possible that a learner maintains their control and responsibility for learning, while receiving a great deal of help. Such help is what Master's students needed as ATS and students could articulate expectations to each other at an early stage of their study (Coneyworth et al., 2020). This is further

supported by Packer and Thomas (2021, p.212) who argued that “Emerging independence and exploration of self-identity are fundamental in adulthood; however, individuals often need guidance and support during this process.”

Notably, students’ expectations of pedagogical relationships during their Master’s studies may be influenced by their prior experiences regarding their perceptions of independent learning. For example, Morgan and Direito (2016) highlighted that despite the advancement of IT technology, taught postgraduate students expressed their preference for receiving face-to-face feedback. This indicates that students value the opportunities of interacting with their academic tutors. Coates and Dickinson’s (2012) study shows that, for some students, the teaching hours they experienced during their undergraduate studies was reduced by half during their Master’s studies. Research suggests that Master’s students value the contact hours with their tutors (Bamber et al., 2019). However, this seems to be countered by the reality that there is usually not enough time available for ATS to fully address students’ needs (Macleod, Barnes and Huttly, 2019). This mismatch between student expectation and the reality could be a source of student dissatisfaction.

Macleod, Barnes and Huttly (2019) found that from programme directors’ point of view, one challenge facing all types of students (full-time, part-time, UK, EU and non-EU) in different types of programmes (research, specialised, or professional) is the lack of preparedness in terms of criticality, confidence, and academic skills in general and, in particular, essay writing skills. The unpreparedness for academic writing is particularly prominent among international students, including EU students, given that prior to their studies in the UK, most of them did not have experience of writing essays of more than 1,000 words in English (Coates and Dickinson, 2012). For students from English speaking countries, academic essay writing can also be a problem, particularly because of the demand of writing essays at a higher (i.e. Master’s) level and dealing with greater complexity of ideas and this is usually associated with the fact that students are not clear about what they expected of Master’s study (Bamber et al., 2019). This implies what Beeler (1991) referred to as ‘unconscious incompetence’. Indeed, some UK home students in Bamber et al.’s (2019) study expressed that although the students expected the differences between postgraduate and undergraduate studies, they are still shocked by the reality. Thus, more specific

and additional supports are needed to support students' learning at Master's level (Morgan, 2022).

#### 2.4.3.2. Targeted support through positive pedagogical relationships

Various studies reviewed in this chapter have highlighted Master's students face numerous challenges and need more support. This is by no means to say ATS must respond to any and all demands made by students. For example, more than half of the eight participants in Wu and Hammond's (2011) study expressed dissatisfaction about the food in the UK, finding the food unappetising. ATS had very limited ability to address such issues, but it indicated that support for Master's students need to be a collective effort among all university departments (academic and non-academic). In an academic context, it is also very difficult to satisfy every student's preference, given the diversity of the student body. For example, students in the same workshop may have different learning habits. Some students may prefer to receive more explanation from the tutor, whereas others may prefer to have more discussions with their peers. It is difficult (if possible at all) to meet every student's request, but it is important for ATS to recognise students' learning needs and to bear these needs in mind when they prepare for the course. As Temple, et al. (2016, p.40) pointed out that "it was important for students to appreciate that the university was listening – even if it did not accede to every request." As I will discuss in the next chapter, this process of listening and rejecting students' requests, while maintaining positive pedagogical relationships, has been conceptualised as a manifestation of pedagogical caring (Brookfield, 2006; Noddings, 2013). Interventions aiming at providing specific student support can be based on, for example, the recent development of Student Experience Transitions model (Morgan, 2022), which was known previously as Student Experience Practitioner model (Morgan, 2013). It has provided valuable insights into the higher education student experience and has enormous potential for helping higher education institutions to develop interventions to ease students' transitions at all levels of study. The model highlighted that student support needed to be provided throughout the entire learning journey, ranging from pre-arrival stage to becoming alumni.

Based on the reviewed literature, it seems that, on the one hand, ATS need to recognise students' unpreparedness for Master's study, but on the other hand, instead of focusing on how unprepared the students are, ATS, together with the wider

university community, need to work on building connections between students' prior learning experience and knowledge to the current learning context by deliberately encouraging students to draw on their previous experience in classroom activities (Pearce, 2023). This is indeed an implicit theme which cut across most studies which aim to address the issue relating to student transitions.

Furthermore, it appears that applying prior learning experience to the current context requires guidance from tutors. A qualitative study conducted by Matheson and Sutcliffe (2018), which utilised data obtained from focus-groups, semi-structured interviews, and reflective journals with 52 participants, suggested that students valued the help and guidance from ATS in building connections between their past experiences with current learning, as well as making connections between their experiences and that of their peers. Indeed, another implicit theme that ran across studies on student experience is the importance of the relationships between Master's students and ATS, as well as student peer relationships. Those relationships are important for building a sense of belonging (Evans, et al., 2018). It is important to highlight that none of these existing studies explored in-depth the nature of relationships between students and ATS. And this is a literature gap that my study aims to address.

## **2.5. Chapter Summary**

The review of literature of Master's student transitions and experience has shown that embarking on Master's study is not a straightforward process. This is the case for both home and international students. More targeted supports are needed for easing students' transitions into, through, and out of the Master's study. Perhaps it is a time to reflect on the hymn that begins "Lead kindly light amid the encircling gloom". Amid myriad encircling challenges faced by Master's students, ATS and non-academic staff need to lead students by the kindly light of their support. What situates at the centre of the 'lead' is the positive relationships among students, ATS, and the wider learning environment (Friersen, 2017; Noddings, 2013; Van Manen, 1991). In turn, the exploration of the nature of positive pedagogical relationships is at the centre of this thesis. The literature relating to pedagogical relationships will be reviewed in the next chapter.

## **Chapter Three**

### **Literature Review**

#### **3.1. Introduction**

This chapter reviews and synthesises literature on pedagogical relationships and discusses the gaps in literature that this study aims to address. The literature reviewed in this chapter has helped me refine research questions, informed my research design, and shaped interview questions. As I have kept reading literature throughout the whole research process, some literature has also shaped the data analysis.

Given the pervasiveness of pedagogical relationships (Giles, 2011), although the empirical studies on this topic are scarce, studies on other topics related to teaching and learning have often touched upon the discussion of relationships between students and teachers. This pervasiveness has imposed some challenge to draw limits around the literature to review in this chapter. Despite this challenge, I have decided to focus on discussing previous literature in which pedagogical relationships/teacher-student relationships are their research foci. It is important to state at the outset that there are numerous studies on teacher-student relationships which are inappropriate in nature. For instance, the recent systematic review conducted by Tight (2023) highlighted the issues of bullying in higher education, including student-on-staff cyberbullying. Moreover, Holmes et al.'s (1999) study discussed the hierarchical nature of teacher-student relationships in which the student participants viewed overly close relationships (such as a teacher going shopping with students) as inappropriate. I recognise the contribution of studies on 'inappropriate relationships' to safeguarding and improving both student and staff wellbeing. Indeed, as Tight (2023) contended, neoliberalism, managerialism, and student-as-customer discourse has imposed pressures on academics who are facing unwarranted complaints from students. Despite the recognition of the significance of literature on inappropriate teacher-student relationships, as I elucidated in Chapter 1 (Introduction), the focus of this study is teacher-student relationships which are *pedagogical* in nature.

### *3.1.1. Searching the literature*

The construction of this chapter started in early 2018 and has been an ongoing process. The earlier literature reviewed shaped the research design, but I have also included here literature that I have found subsequently as my emerging analysis led me to look for further literature. Therefore, in Chapter 7 (Discussion), I introduce and discuss some literature (in further depth) which is not included in this chapter. Regarding the searching process, first, I systematically searched relevant literature through accessible databases of the University of Edinburgh, such as JSTOR and Social Sciences Citation Index by searching key terms such as teacher/faculty-student and student-teacher/faculty (with and without hyphen) relationships. Then, I adopted a snowballing approach for searching literature, as suggested by Hagenauer and Volet (2014b), namely, identifying relevant literature by following up references in other studies. Most importantly, during my study I have kept my habit of walking along the bookshelves in libraries. As a result, some relevant materials which were not available in digital form were found. During the process of constructing the literature review, I uphold the notion that a good literature review advances our understanding of what is already known by integrating previous studies into a coherent story (Jesson and Lacey, 2006).

### *3.1.2. The organisation of the chapter*

I introduced the key concepts in Chapter 1. This chapter starts with a recap and further discussion of the key concepts. Then, the philosophical foundations of pedagogical relationships are discussed. This is followed by the discussion of empirical studies. The existing empirical studies can be synthesised into two broad thematic clusters: (1) The importance of pedagogical relationships. The studies in this cluster were mainly conducted in school and nursery settings. These studies commonly involved using quantitative data and theories related to students' motivations; (2) The characteristics of teacher-student relationships, which including the discussions of the quality of teacher-student relationships (for example, see Hagenauer and Volet (2014). A number of studies in the second cluster were conducted in higher education settings, which has greater relevance to this research than the studies in the first cluster. Thus, based on the purposes and nature of the current study, the focus of the review of empirical literature is on the research belongs to the second cluster.

## 3.2. Understanding the Key Concepts: Pedagogical relationships and teacher-student relationships

To briefly recap, as I mentioned in the introductory chapter, pedagogical relationships are defined as relationships between teachers and students, which are pedagogical in nature. Despite the importance and the pervasiveness of pedagogical relationships, there was no definition that can be found of this term in empirical studies. This could be because, as I noted in Chapter 1, most empirical studies on this topic conflated the term 'pedagogical relationships' with 'teacher-student relationships'. Since I have already provided a discussion of pedagogical relationships in philosophical papers, I start this section with the discussion of the terms 'pedagogy', 'relationship', and 'teacher-student relationships'.

The word 'pedagogy', according to Watkins and Mortimore (1999), has its roots in Latin and French adaptations of the Greek word 'pedagogue', which literally means a person guides/leads a child. Papatheodorou (2009, p.4) provided a relatively modern interpretation of the term that it:

*suggests that two (or more) people walk side-by-side and hand-in-hand along a route or path that has been walked before by one member of the group, and that member has now taken the role of guide and facilitator in the new journey.*

It can be understood from the definition of pedagogy that it is a concept that contains a great sense of relatedness. A relatedness that exists between an experienced person, such as a teacher and a child.

### 3.2.1. Teacher-student relationships

As to the second half of the phrase - relationships, according to Surrey (1985, p.6), it can be defined as:

*an experience of emotional and cognitive intersubjectivity: the ongoing intrinsic inner awareness and responsiveness to the continuous existence of the other or others, and the expectation of mutuality in this regard.*

This definition indicated that relationships featured emotional involvements, responsiveness, reciprocity. In line with Surrey's (1985) definition of relationships, Pianta (1999) described the teacher-student relationship as a kind of experience which is emotion-based on on-going interactions between teachers and students. This

description echoed Newberry and Davis's (2008) description that the teacher-student relationship is the emotional bond that is shared between students and their teachers.

The descriptions provided by Pianta (1999) and Newberry and Davis (2008) can be deemed as a definition of teacher-student relationships. A number of existing empirical studies looking into the quality of teacher-student relationships, to a large extent, reflected these definitions. For instance, the quality indicators, such as closeness (Hagenauer, Muehlbacher and Ivanova, 2022) and immediacy (Dobrasky and Frymer, 2004), reflected the emotional aspect of these relationships. Moreover, these definitions showed that building and maintaining a relationship requires both parties to recognise each other (Murphy and Brown 2012). It also requires those involved to have a mutual expectation of being emotionally bound (Fosen, 2016; Quinlan, 2016). The definitions discussed so far, by focusing on emotional bonds between teachers and students, have provided crucial insights into the concept of teacher-student relationships. However, these definitions also highlight the difference between 'teacher-student relationships' and 'pedagogical relationships'.

### 3.2.2. *Pedagogical relationships*

As I have already introduced in Chapter 1, German philosopher Herman Nohl is commonly deemed to be the first scholar that theorised pedagogical relationships (Friesen, 2017). Nohl defined pedagogical relationships as "the unique (*eigene*) creative or generative relationship that binds educator and educand ..." (Nohl, 1926, p.153, cited in Friesen, 2017). In a later work, Nohl (1933) defined pedagogical relation as "a passionate or loving relation between a mature person and one who is becoming, specifically for the sake of the latter, so that he comes to his life and form" (p.22, cited in Friersen, 2017). This definition indicated that, pedagogical relationships contain two elements: the first element was in line with the definition of teacher-student relationships - emotional bonds as the basis for a positive relationship. However, it was the second element that stressed the pedagogical nature of teacher-student relationship, namely, teachers' crucial role in students' academic and personal development. Moreover, the concept pedagogical relationships has its roots in philosophy, which is discussed in the next section.

## 3.3. The Philosophical Foundations of Pedagogical Relationships

The concept of pedagogical relationships has its philosophical roots in the writings of Buber (1944), Levinas (1969), and more recently Noddings (2013). It is worth noting that at the early stage of writing this chapter, I only mentioned Buber's works briefly. However, the emerging analysis made me realise that it is important to discuss Buber's (1944; 1965) works in more detail, not only because they provided a philosophical foundation for pedagogical relationships, but also because his writings helped me interpret the data analysed when addressing my research questions. Thus, a further discussion of Buber's works is incorporated in Chapter 7, while in this chapter I introduce Buber's works briefly.

### 3.3.1. *Buber's works*

Martin Buber (1944) in his *I and Thou* argued that "On the far side of the subjective, on this side of the objective, on the narrow ridge, where *I* and *Thou* meet, there is the realm of 'between'" (1944, p.1). Buber (1944) hold the notion that *the in-between* space between people is the ontological basis for human existence. Hinsdale (2016) explained that this in-betweenness reflected Levinas' (1969) ethics of otherness that our sense of responsibility for other people constitutes our existence as subjects. In other words, the ethical imperatives precede existence in the sense that "we become who we are in the moment of relating." (Hinsdale, 2016, p.6).

Furthermore, according to Buber (1944), humans have two basic types of relationships with the world, namely, *I-It* and *I-Thou*. An *I-It* relationship primarily referred to humans' relationships with objects, such as trees. But Buber (1944) extended the concept of *I-It* relationship to the description of relationships between humans. For example, the objectification of each other. As Friedman (2002, p.xii) explained, the differences between *I-It* and *I-Thou* relationships "is not the nature of the object to which one relates ... rather is in the relationship itself." In an *I-It* relationship, people may treat each other as nameless faces and ignore each other's uniqueness. In contrast, an *I-Thou* relationship featured openness, trust, immediacy, and mutuality (Friedman, 2002; Rossiter, 1999), in which people embraced each other fully. It was this *I-Thou* relationship formed the basis of Buber's (2002; 1944) view on education and the basis of the concept of caring (Gilligan, 1982; Mayeroff, 1977; Noddings, 1984; 2001; 2005; 2013).

### 3.3.2. *Noddings' vision of caring relations*

Based on Buber (1944), Noddings (2013) took relation as ontologically basic and the caring relation as ethically basic, meaning that the caring relation constituted the basis of ethical good. More specifically, relation was defined in Noddings's works as "a set of ordered pairs generated by some rule that describes the affect – or subjective experience – of the members" (Noddings, 2013, pp.3-4).

A caring relation is established between two parties (A, B), as Noddings pointed out (2005, p.69), when:

1. *A cares for B (A is experiencing a state of engrossment and motivational displacement); and*
2. *B recognises that A cares for B.*

The essence of the caring relation is attention (Noddings, 2005). This attention, which Noddings called engrossment, is receptive. In other words, (especially in educational settings) the one caring (carer) sets aside her/his temptation to plan for the other, receives the other into herself, and sees and feels with the other (Nodding, 2003). In turn, this attention leads to motivational displacement. Motivational displacement, which was defined as our "motive energy begins to flow toward the needs and wants of the cared-for" (Noddings, 2005, p.2). However, at this stage, the caring relation hasn't been established. The caring "is completed in the other" (Noddings, 2013, p.4).

Indeed, an important feature of the caring relation is the reciprocity of the cared for. This means the cared for needs to recognise the caring and respond to the one caring in a detectable way that she/he has received the caring honestly (Noddings, 2003). It is reasonable to conclude that when this reciprocity feature is missing, the *caring* still exists, but there is no *caring relation*. This could, to some extent, explain why sometimes teachers thought they have made great efforts to care for their students, but the students (commonly) asserted that "nobody cares" (Bingham and Sidorkin, 2004). Of course, this complaint from students may also arise from the situation that the educator has experienced motivational displacement, but lack of attention (active listening). The importance of active listening is closely related to Noddings' (2012; 2013) contention that educators need to make efforts to gain understanding of students' expressed needs as opposed to the needs assumed by educators.

For Noddings, caring was not a strategy or a set of techniques for teaching, but was a type of relation within which teaching and learning occur. Notably, although caring involves engrossment and motivational displacement, this did not mean that educators should take over students' problems or give students whatever they want. Indeed, by drawing on Noddings' notion of expressed needs, Dall'Alba (2009) promoted the notion of 'attuned responsiveness'. The attunement not only emphasised that the response from an educator needs to be in accord with students' expressed needs, but also required the educator to adjust their responses to let learning happen. The notion of care and its components held by Noddings (2013) was opposed to spoiling students, in the sense that the educator "take over the learner's problems and hand them back sorted out, for this would simply be to displace the learner from his unique engagement, to leave him [them] free-wheeling – disengaged and dependent" (Bonnett, 2002, p.240).

Similarly, Noddings (2012) contended that when students' needs cannot be met because the educator disapproved of the needs expressed, maintaining the caring relation was essential. By maintaining the caring relation, the channels for communication were still open (ibid.). It can be understood that in this scenario, the caring relation became a pedagogical space in which the educator was able to explain to students why their needs cannot be satisfied. This space for communication was echoed by Brookfield (2006, p.14) who pointed out that:

*we must never confuse responsiveness with capitulation to majority wishes or always doing what students say they want. Instead, we must understand responsiveness as fully addressing learners' concerns and questions, even if this means justifying why we can't do what they say they want us to do.*

Teachers' responsiveness which maintained the communication, according to Brookfield (2006) was important for obtaining long-term interests for students. It is not difficult to note that for both Noddings and Brookfield, relationships and pedagogy interwove with each other.

### 3.3.3. *Embracing others' uniqueness*

A common theme can be synthesised from the literature discussed thus far - the importance of recognising, accepting, and respecting the uniqueness of the person we relate to, as well as the uniqueness of ourselves. Indeed, for Buber, this uniqueness reflected in his notion of inclusion. He distinguished inclusion from empathy, in the sense that empathy sometimes may make the carer lose their own perspectives in the process of feeling for others (Buber, 1944; 1965), whereas inclusion maintained both parties' perspectives. This could be a reason why Buber's *I-Thou* relationships called for openness and full embracement of each other. Aspelin (2021, p.591) provided an explanation of how the notion of inclusion was manifested in educational settings – “through inclusion, the teacher becomes directly involved in the student's reality, while remaining active as a pedagogical subject.” To sum up, the concept of uniqueness was also reflected in empirical studies on the characteristics of pedagogical relationships, which highlighted the importance of trust and mutual respects (for example, see Rossiter, 1999).

### 3.3.4. *The hierarchical nature of pedagogical relationship*

Before moving on to delve into the discussion of empirical literature, another common feature implicated in the philosophical literature needs to be introduced. Based on the meaning of the word 'pedagogy' as well as Buber (1944) and Noddings' works, it can be discerned that pedagogical relationships are inherently asymmetrical and hierarchical (Bovill, 2020; Karpouza and Emvalotis, 2019; Schwarz, 2019). Indeed, Buber (1964, p.36, cited in Spiecker, 1984) noted that:

*He [the educator] experiences the child's growing up, but it [the infant] cannot experience the education by the educator. The adult stands at both ends of the shared situation, the child at only one.*

Similarly, Noddings' (2013) also noted that the caring relation was not entirely reciprocal, given that the cared for may not be able to perceive what the one caring wanted. Consequently, the cared for was incapable of experiencing motivational displacement. However, I argue that this hierarchical nature of pedagogical relationships must read together with the contention of respecting each other's uniqueness. The co-existence of respecting others' individuality and the hierarchical nature of relationships between teachers and students has formed a crucial lens through which I interpret the data (see Chapters 6 and 7).

### **3.4. Theoretical Frameworks Adopted by Previous Studies**

As I discussed above, I have decided to mainly use Buber and Noddings' writings, together with literature I reviewed in Chapter 2 and introduced in Chapter 7, to make sense of my data. However, two theoretical frameworks adopted by some of previous studies need to be introduced briefly.

#### *3.4.1. Interpersonal theory*

Interpersonal theory holds the notion that human perceptions and behaviours can be described along two dimensions: communion and agency (Horowitz and Strack, 2011; Sullivan, 1955). The communion dimension can be used to describe the affection one person showed to the other person. The agency dimension highlights the authority and power relationship. Claessens, *et al.* (2017) interviewed 28 high school teachers in the Netherlands and analysed teachers' comments on their interactions with students. Their findings showed that teachers tended to define the quality of the teacher-student relationship through the communion dimension rather than the agency dimension. Moreover, another theory related to interpersonal theory is the relational schema theory (Baldwin, 1992), which emphasised the difference between interactions and relationships. Wubbels, *et al.* (2014) noted that repeated interactions are the basis for relationships, so for instance, negative relationships were formed due to repeated unfriendly interactions. However, Docan-Morgan and Manusov's (2009) studies showed that there could be a turning point event that changes students' perceptions of relationship despite the *repeated* friendly/unfriendly interactions.

Despite the relevance of interpersonal theory on the topic of teacher-student interaction/relationships, it was a theory mainly used in pre-university contexts. The degree of its relevance in my study was in question, especially because my study was not merely aiming at looking into interactions, but the features of the relationships at Master's level.

#### *3.4.2. Relational cultural theory*

Relational cultural theory is closely associated with positive psychology (Taylor, 2019). The theory has been drawn on by Schwartz (2019), Schwartz and Holloway (2012), and Taylor (2019) in studies conducted in higher education settings. As

Schwartz (2019) noted that there are three fundamental assumptions held by relational cultural theory: first, relationships are the primary source for learning; second, the importance of uncovering the hidden power imbalance in the relationships; and third, relational clarity (which means the carer needs to maintain a boundary between themselves and the care seeker). By maintaining this boundary, the carer can maintain the mental soundness to help the cared for. This last assumption is linked to Noddings' (2015) concept of self-care and serves as a prevention of over-caring.

Relational cultural theory has been applied to pedagogical relationships both in theory and in practice. For instance, relational pedagogy which deems teaching and learning as a process of building relationships (Sidorkin, 2002). Banta (1966, p.438), in his article *The Goals of Higher Education: Reaching Students through Autonomous Teacher-Student Relations*, stated that "I am convinced that the university does not educate. It is the student who does the educating; he[/she] educates himself [themselves], and he [/she] stimulates the faculty to educate themselves." This claim shows the influence of positive teacher-student relationships on *both* teachers and students. Indeed, Taylor (2019, p.74) emphasised that the positive outcomes of positive teacher-student relationships, which outlined by Miller (1988), are mutually effective on both parties:

*(a) a "zest" or energy, where both parties feel empowered to act beyond the relationship; (b) a desire to engage more relationships with others because of this positive relationship; (c) an increased knowledge in oneself and the other person; (d) a motivation to take action within this growth-fostering relationship; and (e) a greater sense of self-worth.*

Thus, it is reasonable to infer that an investigation into pedagogical relationships, which uses principles outlined by relational cultural theory, ought to consider both learners' and teachers' perspectives. However, many studies, maybe due to the constraints of time, failed to consider both teachers' and students' views in the same piece of research.

In their influential article, Hagenauer and Volet (2014) asserted that "TSR (teacher-student relationships) in higher education have been less comprehensively and less systematically examined by researchers" (p.371), due to the lack of a clear conceptual/theoretical framework. I would like to further argue that there is also a

difficulty in comparing and synthesising the available studies, because of the different theoretical perspectives which they adopted. While acknowledging this diversity of theoretical perspectives, I now turn to the review of empirical studies.

### **3.5. Reviews of Empirical Studies**

I have pointed out in Chapter 1, most empirical studies on pedagogical relationships/teacher-student relationships were informed by Baumeister and Leary's (1995) contention that the need to belong, featured by a desire to build and maintain interpersonal attachments, constitutes the basis of human motivations. Another significant claim from them was that teacher-student interactions do not presuppose the building of teacher-student relationships (*ibid.*). Indeed, Wubbels *et al.* (2014, p.364) described teacher-student relationship "as the generalised interpersonal meaning students and teachers attach to their interactions with each other." It can be discerned from this description that, the teacher-student *relationship* is a type of interpersonal relationship (Frymier and Houser, 2000) in which moment-to-moment interactions were the building blocks of the relationship between teachers and students (Baldwin, 1992; Claessens *et al.* 2017). Moreover, as indicated in Wubbels *et al.*'s (2014) description which was echoed by Karpouza and Emvalotis (2019), relationships differed from interactions in the sense that relationships were connections and social bonds which were modified in the ongoing process of interaction. In other words, for forming relationships, interactions were necessary but not sufficient. However, as pointed out by Hagenauer and Volet (2014), the two terms, teacher-student relationships and teacher-student interactions, sometimes were used interchangeably in empirical studies. In considering the important role of interactions between teachers and students, when I was searching for literature, I also searched terms such as teacher-student interactions.

Notably, in the UK higher education context, instead of exploring relationships between academic teaching staff and students, many studies have focused on relationships between students and their personal tutors (Yale, 2019; 2020). Furthermore, there are a number of studies on student-supervisor relationships for PhD study (e.g. Baker and Pifer, 2011). Moreover, there is a growing number of studies which have demonstrated the positive outcomes of developing positive pedagogical relationships (see, Cress, 2008; Dobransky and Frymier, 2004; Groves *et al.*, 2015; Snijders *et al.*, 2020; 2021). For example, in the context of the

Netherlands, based on the data collected through questionnaires with 454 undergraduate students, Sinijders et al., (2020) found that there was a positive correlation between students' perceived relationship quality with the faculty members and their engagement in the courses.

Despite calls to study the nature of pedagogical relationships in the current marketised education context (Taylor, 2019; Schrock, 2019; Molesworth, Scullion and Nixon, 2011; Naidoo and Jamieson, 2005), there is still no empirical study so far which seeks to understand pedagogical relationships in the context of Master's study in the UK. This study is aiming at addressing this gap in literature.

### *3.5.1. Building and maintaining pedagogical relationships in higher education*

Three pieces of literature are of great relevance to this study. They were conducted by Hagenauer, Muehlbacher and Ivanova (2022), Anderson et al. (2020), and Karpouza and Emvalotis (2019). This section focuses on the review of these three studies in the light of other relevant literature.

Karpouza and Emvalotis' (2019) paper was important to the designing of this study for three main reasons: (1) the same paper was available online since early 2018 when I was designing my own study; (2) it was the only paper that I could find at that time, which was focusing on teacher-student relationships in Master's programmes, although the research context of their study was in Greece; more importantly, (3) by having detailed reading and reflecting on their paper, several limitations were identified. And these gaps and limitations informed my own research design.

By interviewing 20 university teachers and 25 Master's students in an Educational Sciences programme in Greece, Karpouza and Emvalotis (2019) found that the teacher-student relationship is a complex dynamic process which continues over time and evolves gradually. The findings echoed Gehlbach, Brinkworth and Harris's (2012) research in a school setting, which found that relationships between teachers and secondary school students would change during a school year. In the higher education setting, factors such as a mismatch between students' and university teachers' personalities, teachers treating students unfairly and unequally, and teachers not respecting students, may undermine teacher-student relationships or even lead to the prematurely ending of teacher-student relationships (Karpouza and

Emvalotis, 2019). Students' perceptions and experiences of the teacher-student relationship can change, given that they reappraise and reappraise their teachers, especially during the period of writing their dissertations.

The significant of Karpouza and Emvalotis (2019) was that it delineated the dynamic process of relationship building and maintaining by identifying antecedents for building, deepening, and ending of the relationships between students and their university teachers. However, with close scrutiny, some gaps and limitations can be identified.

First, the antecedents identified by the researchers were at a rather superficial level. For instance, they found that when university teachers treated their students unfairly and when teachers and students failed to meet each other expectations, the relationships were undermined. But the reasons behind these unfair treatments and the reasons of why the expectations were failed to be met remained unexplored.

Secondly, the participants were from education related programmes, and according to (Delgado et al., 2020), faculty and students from education related programmes might be more familiar with concepts such as teacher-student relationships than people from other disciplines (Delgado et al., 2020). As a result, it seemed that all participants assumed that teacher-student relationships were important. However, the possible reasons why they deem pedagogical relationships as important were not examined.

Furthermore, while on the one hand they argued the importance of the contextual factors, on the other hand they did not provide any information about the context in which they completed their study, such as students' demographic features, the features of their programmes, and students' fee-paying status. In personal correspondence with one of the authors, Karpouza, it was revealed that the duration of participants' study was longer than I originally thought. In Greece, a Master's degree normally involves a full year of course work plus a further minimum of six months dissertation period. And the Master's study in Greece is free (at least for the participants in their study). This was in contrast with postgraduate taught Master's degrees in the UK, which typically only last a year with dissertation period included.

Moreover, it is reasonable to argue that the dynamic process of relationship building identified by them can be used to describe any relationships. In other words, their study was more of a study of relationship building and maintaining in an educational context, rather than an exploration of *educational* relationships. This, to a large extent, is echoed by the superficial factors on building and maintaining teacher-student relationships.

As I have explained previously, my study aims to integrate empirical findings and theoretical articles on pedagogical relationships into a coherent framework so as to provide in-depth insight into students' and ATS's understanding of pedagogical relationships.

### *3.5.2. Pedagogical relationships as a multi-dimensional concept*

Hagenauer, Muehlbacher and Ivanova (2022) conducted a qualitative study in Australia. By interviewing 15 university teachers, the aim of their study was to explore teachers' perceptions of building relationships with undergraduate students. The participants were recruited from a teacher education programme. The results of their study shown that the quality of teacher-student relationships consists of two dimensions: a professional dimension with key indicators such as enthusiastic about teaching, classroom management skills, approachability; and a personal dimension with indicators such as closeness, which was featured by remembering students' personal details and telling personal anecdotes. Notably, in an earlier publication, professional and interpersonal dimensions used the terms 'support dimension' and 'affective dimension' respectively (Hagenauer, Glaser-Zikuda and Volet, 2016). Moreover, Tormey (2021) extended this two-dimensional model of teacher-student relationships to a three-dimensional model – Affiliation (warmth/affection), Attachment (safety/security), and Assertion (position within a social hierarchy).

The findings of these studies mainly informed my interpretation of my data, given that these dimensions, to a large extent, elucidated how teachers and students perceived the relationships they experienced. Tormey (2021) provided an example that a student may view their professor as trustworthy and fair which were indicators of high attachment, meanwhile the same professor did not communicate warmth to the student, which indicated low affiliation.

Hagenauer, Meuhlbacher and Ivanova's (2022) study also explored the factors that may influence the quality of teacher-student relationships. However, similar to Karpouza and Emvalotis' (2019) study, the factors explored by them were not extensive. This could be because of the characteristics of students participants, which was relatively homogenous, in contrast with the diversity of Master's student body outlined in Chapter 2 and discussed in Chapter 6.

### *3.5.3. Factors influence the formation of pedagogical relationships*

Some common themes can be synthesised from the existing literature on students' perceptions of teacher-student relationships. These themes include respecting students' individuality; students' perception of teachers' busyness; and genuineness and authenticity (Brookfield, 2006).

In the UK context, Gravett and Winstone (2022) interviewed 11 first year undergraduate students to explore how students' relationships with staff and peers influenced their experiences. The authors identify the most important finding of their study was the "students' desire for their individuality to be recognised" (ibid., p.11). Although the authors did not mention Buber's works, the recognition and respect of students' individuality reflected his thoughts. Moreover, the respect from teachers made students perceive the relationships they experienced as genuine. Moreover, their study highlighted the importance of authenticity in teacher-student relationships (Brookfield, 2006; Cotten and Wilson, 2006; Yale, 2019; 2020). Authenticity includes teachers expressing genuine interest in students as people, as well as certain self-disclosure, which is a way of building trust (Kreber, 2014). Similarly, Yale (2020) conducted interviews with six female first-year undergraduate students in the psychology department of a post-1992 university. Her study also underlined the importance of authenticity and the importance of communicating teachers' expectations clearly to the students. Notably, showing genuine interest in students was an element for building caring relationships (Walker-Gleaves, 2019).

Before proceeding to delve into the literature on caring, the findings of Cotten and Wilson's (2006) study is worth reviewing, since it provided insights into the factors that influence the building blocks of teacher-student relationships, namely, teacher-student interactions.

Cotten and Wilson (2006) gathered qualitative data from nine focus group interviews with a total of 49 students from various disciplines in a medium-sized research university in the US. They found that the frequency of teacher-student interactions was relatively low, despite the fact, as the students reported, that their teachers welcomed students to seek help from them. In contrast with what suggested by relational cultural theory (Schwartz, 2019), the authors noticed that the frequent interactions between teachers and their students did not necessarily lead to high quality learning, given that students approached their teachers only for very specific course-related issues, rather than to fulfil intellectual curiosities. In addition, one of the deterrent factors for students not to interact with their teachers was that students always perceived that their teachers were very busy. Yale (2020) made a similar observation in her study that students demonstrated anxiety which stemmed from uncertainty regarding their teachers' availability. Where the students got this idea from was unclear, but probably because "some teachers seem like they're always in a rush." (Cotten and Wilson, 2006, p. 504).

The final point mentioned in the previous paragraph referred to teachers' action. I would argue that the teacher's behaviour which indicated they were busy (e.g. rushing out of the classroom) has created an inconsistency with their prompts for students to seek help. It is reasonable to argue that this inconsistency not only gives students the impression that their teachers are busy, but also, according to Brookfield (2006), created a sense of falseness and inauthenticity, given that the congruence between teachers' words and actions has failed to be achieved.

Furthermore, Anderson and Carta-falsa (2002) explored the factors, perceived by university teachers and students, that may influence the development of teacher-student relationships. They highlighted the importance of mutual trust, mutual respect and appreciation of each other. Indeed, respect is a fundamental and recurring theme in developing positive relationships. (Edwards and Richards, 2002; Rossiter, 1999; Walker, 2015). In addition, Schwartz (2019) noticed that when teachers and students recounted the teacher-student relationship, they expressed the relationship differently. For students, a positive relationship with a particular teacher was very significant. In contrast, for the teacher, a positive relationship is just one of many positive relationships with a group of students. Schwartz's (2019) shed some light on

why students in Gravett and Winstone (2022) appealed for more individualistic and personalised help from teachers.

#### *3.5.4. Caring in higher education*

There is inconsistency in the empirical literature in how the relationship between caring and pedagogical relationships is understood. Some scholars see caring as a way to achieve a positive pedagogical relationship (Schrock, 2019), others deem it as an idealistic end which could be achieved by putting relationships at the centre of the teaching and learning process (Walker and Gleaves, 2016; 2019; Zembylas, 2017). This inconsistency could come from two main sources: (1) as discussed earlier, a loosely defined term - pedagogical relationship; and (2) another loosely defined term – caring. Indeed, caring could refer to ethics of care (Held, 2006; Noddings, 2013), or an everyday meaning that one person has concerns for others. As demonstrated in Section 3.3.2., caring is a complicated notion. Schrock (2019) maintained that caring can be seen “as a relationship between teacher and student, care as a personal belief system, care as a juxtaposition to the institution, and the construction of care as ‘less than’ other valued pedagogical activities” (p.189).

Caring is a popular research topic in school settings (Frymier and Houser, 2000; Gholami and Tirri, 2012; Meyers, 2009). For instance, a large-scale (248 student participants in middle school) longitudinal study conducted by Wentzel (1997) showed the significant positive influence of pedagogical caring on students’ academic and social outcomes. In this study, the caring teachers were identified as those who proactively engaged their students in dialogues, modelled caring behaviour, and those who were concerned for, and held high expectations of, their students. Arguably, these characteristics should also exist in the pedagogical relationship in postsecondary settings. Indeed, during a person’s education journey, one at some point may complain that “the professor doesn’t care!” (ibid., p.45). The role of caring is worth gaining more insights into, and there is growing interest in research into caring.

Anderson et al.’s (2020) study has been drawn on to inform my data analysis. Notably, caring in Anderson et al.’s (2020) study was construed by their participants as pedagogical. This study was conducted in New Zealand with 55 undergraduate students in a Health Science and Humanities related subject. The aim of their study

was to see how students conceptualised good teaching and a good teacher. The authors found that students construed good teachers as those who care about discipline, which manifested in their enthusiastic approach to the subject; care about teaching and learning; and care about students through showing an interest in knowing students as a person. Delgado, McGill and Rocco (2020) conducted a qualitative study with 17 Master's or Doctoral students in a school of education in the US. Their findings also showed that when instructors demonstrated interest in students as an *individual*, the students would see instructors as a caring person. These two studies both, again, highlighted the importance of respecting students' individuality.

Anderson et al.'s (2020) paper can be supplemented by Walker and Gleaves' (2016) study on constructing caring teachers in higher education from the teacher's perspective. The findings of Walker and Gleaves (2016) suggested that a caring university teacher always put relationships at the centre of their teaching. Also, they respond to the personal and institutional environment. Notably, Walker and Gleaves' (2016, p.71) pointed out that "participants indicating that in their everyday relations with students they wished to distance themselves from the economic motive and construct themselves as autonomously caring, rather than customer caring." Autonomously caring can be understood as naturally caring which associated with Noddings' (2013) ethics of care. Walker and Gleaves' (2016) study, to a large extent, provided an explanation to the resistant force that can be found in literature on consumerist culture (for example, see Tomlinson, 2017) in the UK higher education.

To sum up, the existing empirical literature on caring recognised the importance of caring in students' learning in higher education. As the discussion so far has shown that caring is a complex concept. It is not only a concept associated with adults and children, but any people who are caring and who are cared for. Thus, at Master's level, although PGT students have been assumed as 'expert students', literature on PGT students' experiences (for example, see Bamber, *et al.*, 2019; Macleod, *et al.*, 2019) showed the diversity of PGT student body. It is reasonable to conclude that these students have diverse 'expressed needs' that need to be heard and addressed through the lens of caring. And this is the reason why I have paid extensive attention to explore caring in this study and I decided to draw on literature on caring to interpret the findings of this study.

### **3.6. Marketisation, Consumerisation, and Pedagogical Relationships**

The nature of pedagogical relationships is highly contextual situated (Newberry, 2010), meaning that it is influenced by sociocultural contexts (Griffiths, 2013). Meanwhile, education itself has its socio-economic base (Love, 2008). As I discussed in Chapter 2, the purposes and the nature of higher education seems always to be influenced by economic and political concerns. Paterson (2003, p.84) pointed out that “universities were social institutions, not secluded colleges, they had to pay attention to the changing character of the economy and the changing structure of employment.” Barnett (2011) observed that universities worldwide have already moved into markets and this particular genie (i.e. marketisation of higher education and neoliberalism) is less likely to be put back into the bottle. Following this line of inquiry, scholars speculated that the marketisation of higher education would change the nature of pedagogical relationships (Naidoo and Jamieson, 2005). Similarly, Love (2008) maintained that the policy direction at higher education level seems more concerned with cultivating the individual’s right as a consumer rather than concerning the formation of educated citizens. He further argued that student-teacher relationship has reduced to a relationship between a customer and a service provider. The knowledge has been packaged, ready for sale at a certain price. In his view, educators should not behave as a service provider to satisfy student-customers’ needs, but to challenge students. This notion echoed with Biesta’s (2012, p.1) idea that there is “no education without hesitation.”

It has been about 15 years since Naidoo and Jamieson as well as Love made their speculation. Recent studies, such as aforementioned Tomlinson (2017), found that students tended to describe themselves not just as customers. A recent published PhD thesis by Garside (2020), which will be discussed further in Chapter 7, aimed at using critical discourse analysis to examine undergraduate students’ and staff’s constructions of pedagogical relationships in two post-92 universities in the UK. The results of her study, similar Tomlinson’s (2017) showed a complex picture of market-related discourse.

Furthermore, both Barnett (2011) and Love (2008) noted that the reconceptualization of higher education along business lines was not necessarily generating exclusively negative effects. For instance, Barnett (2011) suggested that from the lecturers’

perspective, the market urges may lead to heightened attention on teaching. He concluded that “the market may lead to a mutually reinforcing attention to the pedagogical relationship for both student and teacher” (ibid., p.47, italic in original). However, what is dangerous is, as discussed earlier, the reduction of an educational relationship to a customer-service provider relationship. Against this background, I aim to explore the nature of pedagogical relationships in PGT sector.

### **3.7. Summary**

The literature reviewed in this chapter has shown the nature of pedagogical relationships and the philosophical foundation for this concept. The review pointed out several gaps exist in the literature. The most obvious gap is that there is no empirical study has been conducted so far, which aims to gain an in-depth understanding of pedagogical relationships in PGT sector in the UK. Given the importance of positive pedagogical relationships on students’ learning, and PGT students’ diverse needs, this study aims to address this gap.

Moreover, it can be found in the previous literature that positive pedagogical relationships are featured by teachers’ respect to students’ individuality, genuineness, approachability, and mutual trust. In turn, these descriptors are deemed as antecedents of positive pedagogical relationships. However, it is reasonable to argue that those descriptors can be used to describe any positive relationships, rather than being peculiar to teacher-student relationships. This study aims to gain an in-depth understanding of how ATS and students conceptualise pedagogical relationships.

Furthermore, against the backdrop of marketisation and the expansion of the higher education sector in the UK, it is important to explore the factors that influence the quality of teacher-student relationships. In other words, the previous studies have identified the antecedents of building positive pedagogical relationships, whereas my study takes the exploration further to explore the factors that influence the fulfilment of the antecedents. Notably, a suitable research design is crucial in exploring the factors in-depth. The next chapter elucidates the research process and establishes the rationale for conducting a multiple-case study to gain in-depth understanding of pedagogical relationships and the factors that influence their establishment.

## **Chapter Four**

### **Methodology and Research Design**

#### **4.1. Introduction**

This chapter articulates the methodology of my study. It establishes the rationale for a qualitative multiple case study design (Stake, 2006) and using one-to-one semi-structured interviews (Arksey and Knight, 1999) as data sources. The decision to use a multiple-case design was based on my combined consideration of the purpose of the study and my own philosophical stance. Thus, in the first section of this chapter, my ontological and epistemological positions are outlined. Then, the processes of selecting the cases and recruiting the participants are described. This is followed by detailed discussions of the methods for data collection and data analysis. Throughout the discussion, the consistency between my philosophical stance, research methodology, and methods is highlighted, which leads to the critical discussion of the strength (trustworthiness) of my study. In the next section, limitations and obstacles pertaining to the research design are recognised and discussed. Last, but not least, ethical considerations are critically presented. The overarching aim of this chapter is to provide a detailed account of the research process and to justify the methodology and the methods used for answering my research questions.

#### **4.2. Philosophical Positions**

##### *4.2.1. Ontological position*

“Ontology is the study of being” (Crotty, 1998, p.13). In other words, it is concerned with the nature of reality (Ormston, Spencer and Snape, 2014). It raises questions such as what is possible to know about our world (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005). It stimulates debate on whether there is a single reality that exists independently of people’s mind, or the existence of the reality is mind dependent, and therefore, there are multiple realities (Levers, 2013). In terms of my own ontological position, I am most closely in line with subtle realism (Blaikie, 2007; Hammersley, 1992). I acknowledge the existence of an external reality, but epistemologically I believe that such reality is only knowable through people’s mind, experience, and socially constructed meanings (Ormston, Spencer and Snape, 2014). As outlined in Chapter

2, the UK PGT sector is a feature of the external reality in which Master's students and their teachers are studying and working. The meaning of this reality is constructed by both parties' engagement. Also, more often than not, students and teachers may attach different meanings to the same reality they experienced. This notion is reinforced by my own experience, as both a student and a student tutor, at my institution. It is also confirmed by my Master's dissertation in which I explored students' and teachers' perceptions of the written feedback received and given, which showed that they can perceive the same piece of feedback differently. This view of the meaning of the reality is closely related to my constructivist epistemological position (Crotty, 1998).

#### *4.2.2. Epistemological position*

Epistemology is the study of knowledge (Levers, 2013). It is concerned with the nature of knowledge, or in other words, it is about "how we know what we know" (Crotty, 1998, p.12). It is about the ways in which we learn about reality or realities. More specifically, it raises questions such as what kinds of knowledge are adequate and legitimate, who can be the knower, and how knowledge can be produced and communicated (Harding, 1987). In addition, Ormston, Spencer and Snape (2014) noted that there are three sets of key issues pertaining to a researcher's epistemological position, namely, the process of knowledge generation (deduction, induction, or both), what counts as truth, and the relationship between the researcher and the researched.

In terms of the issue on knowledge generation, I mainly adopted an inductive approach of generating knowledge. However, I recognise and accept that there were also deductive elements in my study. Blaikie (2007) highlighted that pure deduction or pure induction rarely exist. Similarly, Gray (2014) also pointed out that deductive and inductive reasonings are not mutually exclusive. "An issue has been selected for research implies judgements about what is an important subject for research, and these choices are dependent on values and concepts" (ibid. p.18). Regarding my study, the research questions were formulated after a systematic and critical review of the pre-existing ideas and theories contained in previous literatures. In turn, my research questions guided and helped structure the discussion of the findings. Moreover, as will be explained later, the process of data analysis also implies some deductive elements. However, this study did not set out to verify or falsify any theories

or hypotheses. Rather, through data collection and analysis, it tried to establish patterns, themes, and meanings. Given the exploratory nature of this study, for example, to get in-depth understanding of the condition in which meaningful pedagogical relationships are established and maintained, I tried to bracket my presumptions on the matter and construct themes based on the data (Charmaz, 2014). Therefore, my research can be described as an exploratory study (Gray, 2014) based mainly on inductive reasoning.

As for the second and the third issues, I believe that in social science, the truth is not achieved by discovering universal laws, but the truth consists “of perceptions and understandings that come from immersion in and holistic regard for the phenomena” under study (Stake, 2000, p.21). The knower (researcher) and the known (research phenomena) interact and shape each other (Denzin and Lincoln, 2008). As noted by Willig (1999), individual participants make meaning of the social context in which they are living, whereas the social context also influences participants’ meaning making.

In summation, I believe that knowledge is generated by a subject’s interaction with the world and other people and the interpretation of it (Pring, 2015). There exists an external reality, but different people may have different perceptions and understandings of this reality (Gray, 2014). This, in turn, as will be discussed later, helped me decide to adopt a qualitative methodology.

#### *4.2.3. Research paradigm*

The ontology and epistemology together form the basic set of beliefs or “world view” of a researcher, which guides their actions (Guba, 1990). Such a basic belief system is termed a paradigm (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). I locate myself in the interpretivist paradigm (Bryman, 1988; Guba and Lincoln, 1994) in which my subtle realism ontological position and constructivism epistemological position is embedded. I hold the notion that “any attempt to understand social reality has to be grounded in people’s experiences of that social reality” (Gray, 2014, p.24). In turn, I am attempting to “understand, explain, and demystify social reality through the eyes of different participants.” (Cohen et al., 2007, p.19). Therefore, this study can be described as an interpretive study which adopts a qualitative design (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016). The aim of the study is to pursue thick descriptions of people’s perceptions and experiences.

Husen (1988, p.18) noted that “The paradigm determines how a problem is formulated and methodologically tackled.” After reflecting on my own ontological and epistemological position, I began to form my research interests into research questions. The following research questions are constructed and to be addressed:

- (1) What are the key features of ideal pedagogical relationships conceptualised by ATS and students in one-year full-time Master’s programmes in a research-intensive university?
- (2) How are pedagogical relationships experienced by ATS and these students in a marketised learning context?
- (3) What factors influence the way in which these pedagogical relationships are built and experienced?

### **4.3. Reflexivity**

Boyatzis (1998) highlighted that doing qualitative research inevitably involves value-laden, theoretical, and emotional preconceptions, and the researchers’ preferences. These preconceptions, on the one hand, equips researchers with “theoretical sensitivity” (Strauss and Corbin, 1990) which help us recognise what is important in the data. But on the other hand, they may form bias during the research process. After all, I had been a Master’s student myself and I did have preferences for some teachers’ ways of relating to the students over others. By constantly reflecting on the whole research process and the decisions I made during the process, my experiences as a former Master’s students can be an asset rather than a bias for this study. Reflexivity is the researcher’s deliberate and continual efforts to better understand their role in knowledge creation (Berger, 2015). Achieving a high level of reflexivity requires that researchers carefully monitor the impacts of their beliefs, personal experiences, and bias on their research (ibid.). In other words, in qualitative research, “strong objectivity” is achieved by the recognition of the subjectivity (Harding, 1993). Dodgson (2019) asserted that reflexivity is probably the most important way to ensure the trustworthiness of qualitative studies. Thus, at each stage of my study, I tried to bracket my preconceptions on the topic and tried not to project my own preferences onto the research participants. For example, I actively sought out contradictory themes when I analysed the data in order to reveal an impartial picture of the phenomenon (i.e. pedagogical relationships) under study. All these efforts are

considered to be effective ways of conducting reflexive activities (Finlay, 2002). In turn, as will be discussed later in detail, the trustworthiness of this study is strengthened.

#### **4.4. Methodology**

This section provides an overview of the methodology chosen. Methodology is the study of methods (Thomas, 2013). It is a critical discussion of the methods that a researcher is going to use, and more importantly, the rationale for the methods chosen (ibid.). This rationale was referred to by Crotty (1998) as a *link* between paradigm-related questions and the research methods. To address the research questions outlined above, I adopted a qualitative methodology (Silverman, 2013) to explore the nature of pedagogical relationships from students' and ATS's perspectives. As Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2017) highlighted, the word "qualitative" implies the nature of the data, and in a qualitative study, researchers tend to use words rather than numerical data (Bryman, 2008). Through interviews, I explored the perceptions and experiences of pedagogical relationships of 19 students and 11 ATS across three MSc programmes in three different disciplinary areas (Humanities, Social Sciences, and STEM) at one research-intensive university in the UK. Notably, as Schwandt and Gates (2017) pointed out, a case study design closely aligns with interpretive philosophical assumption of social life, which aims to achieve an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under study from multiple perspectives (Baxter and Jack, 2008). In turn, case studies have the ability to catch the complexity of the context (Hamilton and Corbett-Whittier, 2013). It is particularly suitable for the current study given the contextual-situatedness feature of pedagogical relationships (Griffith, 2013) in the sense that there are various factors, both personal and structural, need to be explored.

#### **4.5. Case Study**

Stake (1995, p. xi) defined case study as "the study of the particularity and complexity of a single case, coming to understand its activity within important circumstances". The important circumstances referred to by Stake (1995) could be understood as the contexts in which the case is located. This definition highlights the importance of exploring the features of the contexts in a case study. Indeed "by choosing a case, we almost always choose to study its situation" (Stake, 2006 p. 2). This is also a

rationale for why I have provided a critical and detailed account of the UK PGT sector in Chapter 2. Furthermore, Stake (1995), echoed by Creswell (2013), described a case as a 'bounded system' and highlighted the importance of setting up the boundaries between cases and their contexts. However, Yin (1994) provided a *prima facie* contradictory description of case study in which he argued that case study is an appropriate approach to investigate a phenomenon in depth when the boundaries between the phenomenon and context are not clear (Yin, 1994). This contradiction was also pointed out by Verschuren (2003) that for Stake (2006; 1995) and Creswell (2013) the boundary is clear, while Yin (1994) holds an opposite view. In my opinion, the contradiction can be reconciled by further reflecting on Yin's writing. I understand Yin's (1994) point of view as that he was trying to highlight the *power* of case study design in *setting up* explicit boundaries by the researchers, rather than merely describing the *nature* of the boundaries between the phenomenon and the context. This power is saliently useful for the current study, not only because it set a boundary for me to collect empirical data, but also facilitated the participants to reflect on their experiences. Indeed, as demonstrated in the literature review, 'pedagogical relationships' is, as with many concepts in social science, very abstract in nature. During the pilot interviews (see Section 4.6.5.1.), I noticed that the participants tended to talk about their experiences and perceptions of pedagogical relationships in a very broad sense. For instance, they were keen on talking about the pedagogical relationships they experienced in secondary school and/or during their undergraduate studies, since they spent relatively longer time in those educational settings. It was, therefore, crucial to set a boundary for them to reflect on their experiences of pedagogical relationships within a certain time and space (i.e. their respective Master's level programmes).

A recurring theme in previous literature on case study is its in-depth nature (Flyvbjerg, 2011; Gerring, 2007; Ruddin, 2006; Yin, 1994). Case study research tends to use multiple methods for data collection and analysis to explore multiple perspectives (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2017). However, as noted by Robson and McCartan (2016), the defining characteristic of a case study design is not the use of multiple types of data collection, but the in-depth study of the particularity and its context. This justifies my use of in-depth interviews as data collection method. Moreover, as I mentioned in the introductory chapter, my research purposes are to gain understanding of ATS's and students' experiences and perceptions of pedagogical

relationships, rather than merely studying what happened in the classroom which may require me to use classroom observations. Thus, although I did consider using other methods for collecting data, given the research aims and questions, semi-structured interviews were the most suitable data collection method. This decision was further supported by Bassey (1999) who presented an example of case study research in which the interviews were the sole data collection method. Indeed, one of the features of case study is its flexibility (Robson and McCartan, 2016). The key point is to recognise the integrity and wholeness characteristic of our social world (Gray, 2014). In turn, case study researchers aim to conduct in-depth investigations of the individual parts of the social world and to gain a holistic understanding of social phenomena under study with any appropriate methods (Verschuren, 2003).

This in-depth nature has contributed to answering my first research question, namely, to conceptualise the features of the ideal pedagogical relationships from both ATS's and students' perspectives. As pointed out by Punch (2014, p.152), based on the in-depth study of the case(s), researchers develop "one or more new concepts to capture and explain some aspect of what has been studied". Although my study is not aiming at developing new concepts, it does aim at understanding a concept (i.e. pedagogical relationships) in its context (1-year full-time PGT programmes in the UK) which has never been explored before. Furthermore, the contextual-situatedness of case study research aligns with all my three research questions, as Lewis and Nicholls (2014, p.67) maintained that case studies "are used where a single perspective cannot provide a full account or explanation of the research issue, and where understanding needs to be holistic, comprehensive and contextualised."

#### *4.5.1. Type of case study*

There are different types of case study, and I adopted an instrumental case study design (Creswell, 2013; Stake, 1995; 2006) for this thesis. Adelman *et al.* (1980) noted that there are two ways of setting up a case study: (1) a case (or bounded system) is given, in which issues are studied to gain a full understanding of the case; or (2) an issue is given, a case is selected as an instance for studying the issue in detail. Stake (1995) referred to the former as intrinsic case study, in which the case itself is of the interest and it is studied because of its particularity (Baxter and Jack, 2008), whereas he referred to the latter as instrumental case study in that researchers used the case as a ladder to pursue the understanding of something else. In my research, the cases

are selected within which the understanding of the concept of pedagogical relationships can be maximised.

A multiple/collective case study (Stake, 1995) refers to a design in which a group of cases are selected to gain a fuller picture of the situation. A fuller picture of the issues under study would be revealed by analysing the differences and similarities among the cases (Baker and Jack, 2008). Because of this comparative nature, researchers need to select the cases carefully (Stake, 2006). More specifically, “the cases in the collection are somehow categorically bound together” (ibid., pp.5-6). Stake (2006) termed such collection of cases as *quintain* with the key concepts/issues as the target of the study. Regarding my study, the pedagogical relationships between ATS and students in full-time Master’s programmes are the main *issues* (Stake, 1995, p.16) of the study, and these relationships are at the micro level. The programmes under study are located in a research-intensive university (meso level), and the university is located in the current marketised and commercialised higher education setting (macro level). Whereas a nested case study requires data collection and analyses at each level (Yin, 1994), my study is focused on students’ and ATS lived experiences and their conceptualisations of pedagogical relationships at the micro-level, with the meso and macro levels providing context rather than being the focus of the study. Therefore, the present research is better described as a multiple case study. I investigate the experiences of ATS and students on three programmes (i.e. three cases) at the same time, and they are compared with each other. Then, the presentation and discussion of these three cases as a whole aims to contribute to the understanding of pedagogical relationships in one-year full-time Master’s programmes in a research-intensive university in the UK.

#### 4.5.2. Selection of the cases

##### 4.5.2.1. Selection of the institution

There were two preliminary considerations when I selected the institution at which to conduct my research. One reason was that I was a Master’s student at a research-intensive university myself. I did enjoy the teaching I experienced but still thought there were many aspects that could be improved. In other words, I have been driven by the intellectual curiosity on pedagogical practices which appeared to work (or otherwise) on facilitating Master’s students’ learning in a research-intensive university.

Secondly, according to previous literature (for example, Karpouza and Emvalotis, 2019), pedagogical relationships need time and effort from both sides of the relationships (i.e., teachers and students) to be built up. However, too often students received clues from their teachers that the ATS are very busy. Indeed, doing research was recognised by many academics as having greater significance in the promotion process (Gonzales, Martinez and Ordu, 2014). Also, in research-intensive universities, although some academics would like to devote more time to teaching, they were not allocated enough time and resources for teaching (Kinchin and Winstone, 2017). It is in a research-intensive university where the pressure of balancing research and teaching might be most likely to emerge (ibid.). Thus, it would be worthwhile to explore the concept of pedagogical relationships in such a highly time and resource constrained context, given that the preliminary criterion for selecting cases is “to maximize what we can learn” (Stake, 1995, p.4).

#### 4.5.2.2. Selection of the programmes

After selecting the institution, I aimed to excise a degree of control (Bechoffer and Paterson, 2000) to ensure the story contained by each case is comparable to each other in some respects, while allowing for variation in others. I planned to identify three medium-sized programmes - one from each of three disciplinary clusters, namely, Arts and Humanities, Social Science, and STEM. The following criteria (See Table 5) were developed to facilitate identifying the programmes.

**Table 9 Selection of Programmes**

Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria
Full-time	Part-time
On-campus	Online distance learning
SCQF level 11, with components of a Dissertation; Taught Master's	Integrated Master's degrees; Research Master's, dissertation only
1-year	2-year MSc
Student numbers: 20-30	
	Explicitly express caring in the course description; nursing

I tried to use the institution's degree information and regulations website to identify programmes which meet the criteria listed above in each disciplinary cluster (18 in total). During this process, facilitated by information on the university database, student numbers on each programme were identified. There were four programmes that met the criteria listed above for Humanities, seven for Social Sciences, and three for STEM. Unfortunately for the three STEM programmes, the programme directors refused to participate in the study. So, I had to expand the criteria to include other programmes with less students. Eventually, I gained a green light from the programme director from one STEM programme. Table 6 shows the characteristics of the three selected programmes.

**Table 10 Characteristics of the Selected Programmes**

	Programme Social Science	Programme Humanities	Programme STEM
Teaching activities of the core courses	1 lecture + 1 tutorial	1 online lecture + 1 tutorial every 2 weeks	1 lecture immediately followed by 1 tutorial
Student numbers	35	24	15

#### 4.6. Data Collection

The data collection was mainly conducted in the second semester of academic year 2018/2019. But the field work, as will be articulated below, was started in the first half of that academic year. In-depth semi-structured interviews with 19 students (nine,

four, and six in each programme respectively) and with 11 lecturers (four, four, and three in each programme) are the sources of data for this study.

#### *4.6.1. Negotiation of access*

“Gaining access to most organizational settings is not a matter to be taken lightly but one that involves some combination of strategic planning, hard work, and dumb luck” (Van Maanen and Kolb, 1982, p.14). Indeed, gaining access to do fieldwork is one of the fundamental tasks of empirical qualitative research (Shenton and Hayter, 2004). This section articulates the strategies that I applied to gain access to the programmes and their staff and students.

The potential participants of my study were students and ATS in three Master’s programmes in a research-intensive university. Because I intended to join a core class for each programme in order to become familiar with, and to, the staff and students, I had to negotiate access and gain consent with three Heads of department, the Programme directors, the course organisers, and the students.

After securing ethical approval in principle from the University of Edinburgh (see Section 4.10. on ethics), I made contact with the respective programme directors and received an immediate positive response from MSc Social Science. The response from the MSc Humanities was delayed due to the heavy workload of the programme director. But I managed to reach them in the middle of the first semester and scheduled a face-to-face debrief meeting with them to introduce myself, as well as my study. I received the green light from him as well. Notably, due to the delayed reply from the gatekeeper of MSc STEM, I was afraid of a potential delay to data collection. I therefore considered including only the two programmes I had already gained access to. However, as Section 4.8. on limitations and obstacles will show, the low response rate from the students in MSc Humanities required me to include more participants. Therefore, I endeavoured to make contact with the programme director of MSc STEM again before the beginning of the second semester and they eventually allowed me to include their programme in the study. Details of the final achieved participants were given in Table 7 and Table 8 below.

#### 4.6.2. *Into the field*

Stake (2006) maintained that understanding the case “requires experiencing the activity of the case as it occurs in its context and in its particular situation” (p.2). It is unrealistic to conduct a case study without developing a considerable level of familiarity with the natural setting. Therefore, I decided to sit in on a core course in each of three programmes to (1) get insights into the settings under study and therefore to facilitate me describing the case; and (2) build rapport with potential participants to facilitate the in-depth interviews. Indeed, I needed to get a deeper understanding of the pedagogical phenomena experienced by participants.

It is important to stress that the participation in the class discussions and the notes I took (including my own reflections on the settings) were mainly for providing nuanced descriptions of the cases and for facilitating the interviews. The notes were *not* part of the data set of this study. This ‘sit-in’ stage was about familiarisation with the research setting which allowed me to experience things first-hand myself. This is crucial for the current study as I was not familiar with the academic discourses of the three different programmes. Furthermore, the process of ‘sitting-in’ facilitated rapport-building between potential research participants and I.

There were two main concerns in terms of sitting in on the core courses. First, Bechhofer and Paterson (2000) suggested that rapport may only be built with a small group of students. Consequently, other potential participants may be ruled out. I tried to mitigate this by articulating the purposes of my study to the whole cohort of students at the beginning of the semester. Another concern was that the presence of the observer may affect what is being observed (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016). However, Merriam and Tisdell (2016) also pointed out that the presence of researchers may at first elicit more formal, guarded, and polite behaviour, but the social setting could return to its typical and normal functioning over time. Thus, I tried to attend at least five sessions of lectures and workshops for each programme. However, in order to maximise the chance to speak with all students on the courses, I decided to attend all the remaining lectures/workshops for the semester (approximately seven in total for each programme). More importantly, based on ethical consideration, I started to join in the sessions not from the beginning of the semester, but deliberately delayed it until the third week at the earliest to give the chance for students and ATS to gel as a group without any ‘outsiders’ present.

### *4.6.3. Research participants*

#### *4.6.3.1. Recruitment of student participants*

As mentioned earlier, in the first session of sitting-in, I introduced my research to the students. I also highlighted that there would be an invitation for them to participate directly in my study at a later stage. I handed out the information sheet (see Appendix A) of my study. For MSc Social Science, at the penultimate session of the first semester, at which the course evaluation/feedback was collected from the students by the programme directors, I gave an open invitation to the whole class. I chose the second last session because it might give students more time to decide whether to participate in my study or not. In turn, they could contact me and ask me questions during the final session. Another reason was that at a session about course evaluation, I assumed that the attendance rate could be the highest, and therefore more students in the programme might have the chance to receive the invitation face-to-face. However, this effort, together with the follow-up email sent by the programme director on my behalf was fruitless. I then changed my strategy and gained permission from the Chinese students on that programme to join the Wechat group. I made another two open invitations in that group. This led to the recruitment of nine interviewees. However, I paid attention to the methodological implication of joining the social media of a particular group, given that this might rule out the potentiality of recruiting non-Chinese students who did not use Wechat. In order to mitigate this, I actively asked the Chinese students' for help to contact more non-Chinese students, although the effort was, again, fruitless.

In terms of the MSc Humanities, I made an open invitation at a session on introducing the dissertation process. I attended this session in particular because the student attendance rate would be high. Having learned from the unsuccessful experience in MSc Social Science, I tried to contact students individually in addition to the open invitation. Because I had previously, as an MSc student, had an unpleasant experience of being harassed by PhD students to participate in their interviews, out of ethical considerations, I did not take a very intense approach to chase the potential participants. This together with the busyness of the potential participants' academic study, only four students from MSc Humanities participated in my research.

As for MSc STEM, I joined their sessions at a rather late stage (i.e. the second semester), thus I made an open invitation while introducing my study at the beginning of my 'sitting-in'. I contacted the students individually and the programme director also helped me to send follow-up emails to the students. A total of six participants recruited from this programme.

The use of open invitation can be justified in the sense that it ensured that the participants were those who were genuinely eager to share their knowledge related to the topic (Bernard, 2002). Therefore, this practice can increase the credibility of the study (Nowell, *et al.*, 2017; Shenton, 2004). Furthermore, there were three main considerations for scheduling interviews in the second semester, rather than the first semester in the academic year 2018/2019: (1) ethical considerations: giving students and teachers time to gel as a group; (2) methodological considerations: having enough time to build rapport with participants; and (3) methodologically, my research is about exploring students' perceptions of the relationships, so they needed to be given time to experience the relationships first.

#### 4.6.3.2. Recruitment of teacher participants

For MSc Social Science and MSc Humanities, I emailed an invitation (see Appendix C) to take part in an interview to all academic staff teaching the core courses that I had attended. For MSc STEM, I attended a moderation meeting and therefore got chance to meet several academic teaching staff. I introduced my research to them and invited them to participate in my study. The result of participant recruitment is shown as follows:

**Table 11 Student participants**

<i>MSc Social Sciences</i>				<i>MSc Humanities</i>				<i>MSc STEM</i>			
<i>Name</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Region of origin</i>	<i>Interview language</i>	<i>Name</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Region of origin</i>	<i>Interview language</i>	<i>Name</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Region of origin</i>	<i>Interview language</i>
<b>Xinyi</b>	F	East Asia	Chinese	<b>Sally</b>	F	South America	English	<b>Quan</b>	M	East Asia	Chinese
<b>Lan</b>	F	East Asia	Chinese	<b>Elisa</b>	F	Europe	English	<b>Mike</b>	M	South Asia	English
<b>Xiaotong</b>	F	East Asia	Chinese	<b>Katie</b>	F	UK	English	<b>Tom</b>	M	South America	English
<b>Jinming</b>	F	East Asia	Chinese	<b>Peter</b>	M	North America	English	<b>Alice</b>	F	UK	English
<b>Yi</b>	F	East Asia	Chinese					<b>Hugh</b>	M	North America	English
<b>Jiawen</b>	F	East Asia	Chinese					<b>Alana</b>	F	West Asia	English
<b>Weiwei</b>	F	East Asia	Chinese								
<b>Shi</b>	F	East Asia	Chinese								
<b>Lei</b>	F	East Asia	Chinese								

Note: For Alana, Elisa, Mike, Sally, and Tom, neither Chinese nor English is their first language, thus the interviews with them were conducted in English. They were also encouraged to use their native language if needed to express the meaning fully.

**Table 12 ATS participants**

<i>MSc Social Sciences</i>				<i>MSc Humanities</i>				<i>MSc STEM</i>			
<i>Name</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Region of origin</i>	<i>Tenure</i>	<i>Name</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Region of origin</i>	<i>Tenure</i>	<i>Name</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Region of origin</i>	<i>Tenure</i>
<b>Liam</b>	M	North America	Senior Career	<b>Neil</b>	M	North America	Senior Career	<b>Ann</b>	F	UK	Senior Career
<b>Charlotte</b>	F	North America	Early Career	<b>William</b>	M	UK	Senior Career	<b>Kirsty</b>	F	Europe	Senior Career
<b>Gabriel</b>	M	Europe	Senior Career	<b>Elizabeth</b>	F	UK	Senior Career	<b>Robert</b>	M	UK	Senior Career
<b>Rion</b>	M	East Europe	Early Career	<b>Nicola</b>	F	UK	Early Career				

Note: Early Career denotes tutors, teaching fellows, and lecturers. Senior Career denotes senior lecturers and professors.

#### 4.6.4. In-depth semi-structured interviews as a data collection method

The present study used one-to-one semi-structured interviews (Arksey and Knight, 1999) as its data collection method. This section aims to provide detailed accounts of the interview practices and my reflections on interviews as a data collection method.

Interviewing is one of the main data collection methods in social science research (Arksey and Knight, 1999). Interviews have been widely used in research disciplines such as business, social psychology, and education (Rosalind and Holland, 2013). A one-to-one qualitative research interview is a special type of conversation through which one person, i.e. the interviewer, gains an understanding of another person, i.e. the interviewee (Gray, 2014). It is special in the sense that it is a “conversation with a purpose” (Burgess, 1984, p.102). As Rapley (2004) pointed out that interviewing is *conversational* (emphasis in original), but it is never just a conversation, given that it

is routinely up to the interviewer to control the directions of the talk. Thus, even the unstructured interview is never structure-free, because interviewer and interviewee's presumptions of the research topic will inevitably influence their interactions (Mason, 2002). This, again, indicates the importance of researchers' reflexivity (Harding, 1993; Seale, 1999).

#### 4.6.4.1. The purposes of interviews

By conducting interviews, researchers attempt to get to know other people (the participants) and their lived world through the participants' points of view. Interviews are not only used to learn about participants' feelings, attitudes, and experiences, but also to unfold the meanings of participants' experiences (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015). It was a way to get a rich and nuanced understanding of participants' opinions and attitudes on certain issues (Roller and Lavrakas, 2015). This is in line with the purposes of the current research, which is to get understanding of students' and ATS's perceptions and experiences of pedagogical relationships. Brinkmann and Kvale (2015) regarded interviews as "InterView" which implied that interviewing is a process for co-constructing knowledge. This notion was echoed by Babour and Schostak (2005) that the interviewing provides a space for participants (both interviewer and interviewee) to express and exchange their views. I uphold this notion in the present study, because it is in alignment with my interpretivist's philosophical stance that knowledge is generated by a subject's interaction with and interpretation of the world (Pring, 2015). Moreover, it is reasonable to argue that I have adopted, in Roulston's (2010) words, a constructionist style (i.e. both parties co-construct the data through semi-structure and/or unstructured interviews) of conducting interviews. I see "interviewing as a social production of knowledge" (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015, p.21).

A recurring theme in methodology literature about interviewing is its power to generate rich, detailed, and comprehensive talk about a certain topic/phenomenon from the participants' points of view (Babour and Schostak, 2005). However, this power can only be generated when the interview is conducted in a flexible and fluid way. Indeed, an interview is distinguished from an open-ended questionnaire by its *interactional* nature (Rapley, 2004, emphasis in original). In other words, the purpose of generating in-depth data is achieved by the active engagement of the interviewer and the interviewee around the relevant topics, issues, and experiences (Mason, 2002). In this study, I took the view that interviewers are "persons" (Rapley, 2004), so during

each interview, I tried not to act as a mere passive observer, but ready to share my own opinions and experiences. Moreover, I tried to act as an active listener (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995), and thus, posed my questions responsively by following up what the interviewees had said. After all, participants are not, and should not be treated as, a data machine, but as co-constructors of knowledge (Iphoten and Tolich, 2018).

Indeed, the researcher and the participants need to respect each other before and during the interview. The face-to-face interview has the potential to foster an environment featured by trust, in which extensive conversations can be generated (Roller and Lavrakas, 2015). Compared to other methods, such as surveys or telephone/video interviews, face-to-face interviews allow the interviewer and the participants to spend time together, and in turn, a rapport can be built-up (ibid.). It is this friendly and trusting relationship that leads to the flow of in-depth information that addresses the issues under study. Moreover, face-to-face interviews also provide a researcher with nuanced non-verbal clues of participants' responses, and therefore enables the researcher to adjust the process of the interview accordingly (Yeo *et al.*, 2014).

Furthermore, the use of interview guides (see Appendices D and E) indicated that I applied semi-structured interviews in this study. Semi-structured interviews ensures that the questions asked are still governed by the research purpose, while providing the freedom to tailor the interview according to each interviewee's responses (Cohen and Manion, 1985). In practice, I had an interview schedule in mind (and also printed out), but I tried to let the interviews flow in a natural way. The in-depth data are, therefore, generated by conversations with probing and prompting rather than by asking sequenced questions.

#### *4.6.5. Interviews in the current study*

##### *4.6.5.1. Pilot interviews*

"Better interviews will result only from practice and interviewer self-development (Berg, 2001, p.99)." As this quote shows, the basic way for improving the quality of interviews, and the data generated from it, is to practice. This is most commonly achieved by conducting pilot interviews (Robson and McCartan, 2016). Piloting tests the appropriateness and clarity of the questions in an interview schedule, to get a general sense of how long an interview might take, and is used to gain feedback on

pilot participants' feelings about the interviews. Piloting is not merely about being prepared for the formal interviews, but about being *better* pre-prepared for the data collection (Sampson, 2004).

Before commencing the formal data collection, I conducted eight pilot interviews, including four pilot interviews with students and four pilot interviews with ATS. The student participants were drawn from three overlapping groups, namely, my friends, Master's students at my home institution, and my PhD colleagues. They had different demographic, cultural, and learning backgrounds. Two of them were native Chinese speakers, whereas the other two participants had English as their first language. As for the ATS participants, three of them were lecturers (one native Chinese speaker and two native English speakers) at my home institution. The other teacher participant was a student-tutor, who was doing her PhD at the same institution as I am. English was her second language.

The pilot interviews were all audio-recorded with the participants' permission. I listened to each recording several times and took notes of possible changes of the interview guide and the interview process. For instance, I noticed that I should let the interviews flow more smoothly instead of relying too much on the interview guide. Furthermore, after each pilot interview, there was a debriefing session in which I asked the interviewee to discuss the interview as a data collection method in general. For instance, immediately after the interview, I asked the participant to summarise my research topic as they understood it according to the interview. This was an attempt to increase the credibility of the research by ensuring that the contents of interview questions concentrated on the research aims (Arksey and Knight, 1999).

Importantly, these pilot interviews contributed to the refinement of the interview questions and improvement of my interview skills. For example, in terms of interviews with students, the question "What are the tutors like in your programme?" was considered vague by some of the pilot interviewees, given that their immediate thoughts went to the appearance of their tutors. I kept this question in the interview schedule for the formal interviews but prompted students to reflect more on their teachers' dispositions, communication styles, and personalities.

Furthermore, as I briefly mentioned in Section 4.5., I noticed that student participants tended to talk about the pedagogical relationships they experienced during their undergraduate study. Because of this, during the interviews, I paid particular attention to student participants' responses and asked more prompting questions specifically about their Master's study. As to interviews with ATS, the ATS sometimes talked a lot about their experiences as students. I acknowledged that what they have said was illuminating and had broadened my insights into how pedagogical relationships were experienced in the past. However, although this was an interesting area to explore, it was not the focus of my thesis. Therefore, during the formal interviews with teachers, I did not stop them from talking about their experiences as students, but I did nudge them to talk more about their experiences as academic teaching staff at university.

### ***The language used in the interviews***

The pilot interviews changed my perceptions of the language (English or Chinese) to be used in interviews when the interviews were conducted with native Chinese speakers. Two pilot interviewees were native Chinese speakers. One of them (a PhD student) highlighted how challenged she felt in expressing her ideas in English. For instance, we discussed the same interview topic initially in English and then in Chinese. There was a significant difference between her responses in terms of both quantity (amount of information given) and quality (level of detail of her experiences) of what she said. A similar debriefing session was held with another Chinese pilot interviewee. After the language switched from English to Chinese, the participant tended to provide more examples, and more importantly, the interview flowed more fluidly. Their feedback was in line with previous literature on the language choice for interviews. As Burnett and Gardner (2006) highlighted in their study, some Chinese students encountered difficulties in expressing their views on complex issues in English. In contrast, when the interviews were conducted in the interviewers' and interviewees' first language, the communications between them were more free and more open and expressive (such as using more metaphors) (Cortazzi, Pilcher and Jin, 2011). The more expressive communication may also be a consequence of the interviewer and interviewee's shared cultural background (Goldstein, 1995). Consequently, more information was elicited and the whole interview process was more efficient (Cortazzi, Pilcher and Jin, 2011). Combining these concerns, and my experience from the pilot interviews, I decided to use Mandarin Chinese as the language for the interviews with native Chinese speakers. Notably, previous literature

suggested that participants may be inclined to use their second language for the interviews, because they can practice their second language usage (Shen, 2001). This was also an ethical consideration, namely to respect the participant's choice. Therefore, I did offer the opportunity for participants to choose which language they would like to use for the interview, and they all chose Chinese.

The choice of language to use was not straightforward. There were some compromises need to be made. Nine out of 19 student participants were not native Chinese speakers. So, the language used in those interviews had to be English. This raised a difficulty for analysing the data, more specifically, for comparing the themes that emerged from different interviews, because during the translation process, there may have no obvious equivalent words in the target language (Twinn, 1997). Moreover, the ATS's interviews were all conducted in English. So, it may have been easier for me to compare the themes between students' and ATS's groups if I used English for all interviews. Therefore, using English to conduct interviews was a *prima facie* logical and natural option. However, as the previous paragraph illustrated I should not seek an easier way of analysing the data at the cost of obtaining richer information from participants.

I took some measures during the formal interviews to limit my own bias. When interviewing Chinese participants, where a potential key concept emerged, I encouraged the participants to pursue an English word/phrase/expression which was closest to the meaning of the Chinese term they mentioned. By so doing, I was aiming to avoid my own bias slipping into the translation process, otherwise I might misinterpret what participants said and unduly make the translated words fit into the themes in previous literature. In addition, I invited non-Chinese participants who were not native English speakers to use their mother tongue to describe their feelings and experiences if they feel there is no equivalent English words for expression.

#### 4.6.5.2. Formal data collection process

The date, time, and place for all interviews with students and teachers were arranged with each participant by email. The length of each interview ranged from about 50 minutes to 100 minutes. The interviews with students were conducted either in a pre-booked seminar room or in a soundproof group study room in libraries. The time reserved for using these rooms was much longer than the actual interviews. This was

an attempt to make sure the interviews were uninterrupted and to ensure confidentiality. As to the ATS's interviews, most of them were conducted in the participants' offices, with some exceptions that were held in seminar rooms at the participants' convenience. All interviews were audio-recorded by using two digital voice recorders.

#### 4.6.5.2.1. Interviews with students

An interview guide with necessary probes and prompts was created and further developed based on the literature reviewed, my research questions, and pilot interviews. The final interview guide used with students is in Appendix D.

Although I had sent a well-developed participant information sheet to each participant before the interview (either delivered in-person during the sit-in sessions or by email), prior to each interview, a summary of the main issues that my research aimed to address was provided to the participant verbally by highlighting the research purposes mentioned in the participant information sheet (Appendix A). Apart from this brief introductory section, there were five blocks of questioning in the interview guide. The first block aimed to serve as an icebreaker to warm up the conversation.

The second block of questioning was about why the participants decided to do Master's study. This was an important part of the interview, because pedagogical relationships were embedded in and constitutive of day-to-day educational encounters (Griffiths, 2013). Thus, it is a highly contextualised concept which needs to be elicited and understood in context. The third block, about students' experiences of learning at Master's level, was closely related to the second research question as they both aimed to get insight into students' experiences of Master's study. I tried to approach to the topic of pedagogical relationships from a broad angle. I wanted to know to what extent the students considered the importance of ATS in their learning process. Thus, at the end of this block, there were some transition questions such as "Are there any teachers really stand out during your Master's study?" These transition questions aimed to lead into the main section (block four) of the interview, namely, students' conceptualisation of pedagogical relationships.

In the fourth block, the sequence of questioning was highly flexible, because all these questions were highly related to each other. Given the dearth of empirical research

on this topic in the PGT sector, there were questions to explore, from the students' perspective, whether the features of the ideal pedagogical relationships may change at different academic levels. Notably, in the pilot interview, as well as during my daily communications with Master's students, I noticed that the students were not familiar with the word *pedagogy* or *pedagogical*. Thus, apart from an explanation in the participant information sheet and the introduction at the beginning of each interview, during the interview I sometimes used the term *teacher-student relationships* instead. Such practice is acceptable since the flexibility of semi-structured interviews allows interviewers to change the wording of a question without changing the meaning of it (Marshall and While, 1994).

In addition, I tried to avoid asking about a narrower concept related to the research topic. Part of my research interests is to see the role of caring at PGT level. However, informed by previous literature, I decided to ask: "What are the features of pedagogical relationships at PGT level", rather than using the word caring explicitly in the question. This was an attempt to avoid asking leading questions, because caring might not have a role, or the students might not experience or realise it. Nevertheless, many participants did mention care/caring in the interviews. When they did not, I would add some probing questions such as: "Do you think caring has a role during your study, or not?".

The fifth block of questioning was about the contextual factors (the factors beyond students' and ATS's control) that may influence the building and maintaining of pedagogical relationships. It also included some concluding questions which aimed to build a positive tone for the whole interview, such as "What do you enjoyed the most so far during your Master's study?"

Notably, I was aware of the "hand on the door" phenomenon (Robson and McCartan, 2016, p.290) that many interesting materials may be generated after the formal interview was closed. Thus, after gaining the consent from each participant, I kept the audio recorders running until we finally said goodbye and walked towards the exit of the room.

Furthermore, the sequence of the questions was adjusted according to the participants' responses. For example, immediately after the interview started, some

participants expressed how much they were interested in the topic. Then, I would ask them questions such as “What is your preliminary understanding of the term pedagogical relationships?” which was not originally included in the interview guide with students. Their motivations for doing a Master’s study would come into the conversation in a later section of the interview.

#### 4.6.5.2.2. Interviews with teachers

Although the details of the interview guide with teachers can be found in Appendix E, there are several aspects of the guide that need to be highlighted here. The second section of the guide explored ATS’s understanding and motivations for university teaching. This set of questions was also designed to gain ATS’s views on their balance of teaching and doing research. Block three was about ATS’s preliminary understanding of the concept of pedagogical relationships, which led to the main questions in section four about how they conceptualised pedagogical relationships.

Sections five to seven were designed to investigate academic teaching staff’s views of the influence of demographic features of students on pedagogical relationships and ATS’s experiences of undergraduate and postgraduate teaching, which in turn, to explore whether they built different kinds of relationships with students at different academic levels differently. Section seven was about ATS’s understandings of caring at Master’s level. Section eight closed the interview with some very general questions about ideal conceptions of universities and academic teaching staff.

#### 4.6.5.2.3. Sequence of student’s and teacher’s interviews

Within each case, during the design stage, I aimed to interview students first, and then take what students said as points of reference in interviews with teachers. However, in the actual data collection process, given the heavy academic workloads for both students and ATS, such a design was not feasible. In effect, it was also unnecessary to maintain this sequence. This is because by conducting a relatively high number of pilot interviews, I had already established a reasonable understanding of the typical students’ views. My impression after the first student interviews was that there was no need to add further reference points for the interviews with ATS. Therefore, the formal interviews did not follow any specific sequences, but were held in accordance with the participants’ convenience.

## 4.7. Data Analysis

The process for analysing the data was informed by the analytical framework devised by Boeije (2010), and Braun and Clarke's (2006; 2019; 2021) guidance on doing thematic analysis. In this study, the analysis of the data involved five main stages: (1) data transcription and familiarisation; (2) open coding and codebook generating; (3) generating categories by axial coding; (4) generating themes by selective coding; (5) reviewing and naming the themes. While qualitative data analysis is an iterative process within which the researcher moves back and forth among stages, this section is mainly organised and presented in a linear way with necessary references across stages.

Thematic analysis has been widely used in qualitative research to analyse, identify, and report patterns within data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Boyatzis (1998) refers to it as "a process for encoding qualitative information" (p.4). As the word encoding suggests a basic and crucial tool for conducting qualitative data analysis is coding (Miles and Huberman, 1994; Boyatzis, 1998; Charmaz, 2014; Gibbs, 2007; Robson and McCartan, 2016; Richard et al., 2021). Following Richard et al.'s (2021) suggestions during the data analysis, I constantly reflected on what was interesting in the data, why it was interesting in the context of my research. More specifically, I was informed by Boyatzis (1998) and Saldana's (2016) writings on generating meaningful and useful codes. These processes are explained in detail below.

### 4.7.1. Stage one - data organisation, transcription, and familiarisation

A brief overview of the steps in the coding process is provided here. By listening and re-listening to the interview recordings many times, I acquired an initial impression of the data contained in each interview. When I was listening to each recording, I also checked the notes I made during the interviews. After this initial process, for the students' interviews, I obtained full transcripts of nine (out of the 19) interviews, four of which had been carried out in Chinese and five in English. The transcripts were created in the language in which the interview was conducted. These fully transcribed interviews were selected as they provided the richest information and contrasting viewpoints, and were across all three programmes. However, the data from all 19 interviews were included in the analysis, these nine interviews were selected to develop a coding frame that was then applied to all interviews. The initial coding frame for analysis was developed on the basis of five English transcripts. The next step was

an open coding of the Chinese transcripts in which I had the preliminary coding frame in mind, but was not limited by it. Although the student participants had different mother tongues, they were sharing experiences as students at the same university. So, while there might have been no directly equivalent words, the equivalent concepts were still found during analysis. The congruence of the meaning could also be a result of using interview guide. After the open coding of these nine transcripts, I developed a coding frame (in English) and applied them to remaining recordings. In terms of ATS interviews, a professional transcriber fully transcribed ten (out of the 11) interviews with staff. And I transcribed the remaining one interview with staff. Based on ten transcripts of ATS interviews, a coding framework was developed.

I read and re-read the transcripts in a proactive way, I tried to immerse myself in the data. This practice enabled me to become familiar with the depth and breadth of the content of the data. It also helped me to identify possible patterns among responses from the interviewees. At this preliminary stage, I highlighted and took notes of ideas for the subsequent formal coding. I also listened to the interview recordings many times and took note of interviewees' emphasis of the word(s)/phrases, which were then highlighted in the transcripts. Furthermore, I tried to ensure the accuracy of the transcription. By re-listening to the recording many times some minor corrections were made.

#### *4.7.2. Stage two – open coding*

Coding means “naming segments of data with a label that simultaneously categorizes, summarizes, and accounts for each piece of data” (Charmaz, 2014, p.111). A good code captures the qualitative richness of the phenomenon under study, which should be conceptually meaningful to the research, concise and clear, and close to the data (Boyatzis, 1998). Open coding is a process in which all data were broken up into fragments, then the segments of the data were compared and labelled (Boeije, 2010). At this stage, I gave full and equal attention to each data item and tried to code for as many patterns as I could (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The coding practice at this stage was highly data-driven. However, while adopting an inductive approach, I tried to maintain the conceptual meaningfulness of the codes (Boyatzis, 1998) which was achieved by engaging with theoretical sensitivity (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). Strauss and Corbin (1990) referred to theoretical sensitivity as an ability which enables researchers to recognize what is important. To retain theoretical sensitivity, and in

turn name the segments of data accurately, a researcher needs to have insight into existing literature of the research issues (Boeije, 2010). After all, “a code is not merely a name for a category, it has to lead a meaningful interpretation of the data (ibid., p.88). Thus, some labels/names of codes were derived from previous literature. For instance, “approachability” was a recurrent theme across student interviews and a key element of positive pedagogical relationships mentioned in previous literature.

Several specific coding methods were used during the open coding process. Guided by Saldana (2016), descriptive coding was used to summarise the basic topic contained in a passage. Values coding was used to reflect participants’ attitudes, beliefs, and values they attributed to others, themselves, and the events they experienced. Process coding was used to record how the pedagogical relationships were enacted in the field. Moreover, In Vivo coding was about using participants’ own words as the label of a code. It was particularly efficient when non-native English speakers decided to use a word in their native language to express their views. In addition, structural coding, which “applies a content-based or conceptual phrase representing a topic of inquiry to a segment of data that relates to a specific research question” (Saldana, 2016, p.395), was used as indexes. I also tried to apply concept codes which transcended description to interpretation (Richard et al., 2021). Notably, the same data segment could be assigned different codes.

As mentioned earlier, coding frames/codebooks (Gibbs, 2007) were developed based on nine students’ interviews and seven interviews with ATS. Then the open coding process continued by applying coding frames to the remaining interview data. Although there were coding frames, when coding the remaining interviews, I “remain[ed] open to all possible theoretical directions” suggested by my reading of the data (Charmaz, 2014, p.114). The coding frames consisted of three parts, a label (i.e. the name of a code), a description (i.e. the definition of a code and the criteria against which it will be applied), and an example (i.e. segments of the data which was assigned the code).

#### *4.7.3. Stage three – generating categories*

After the initial coding, I constantly compared all the codes of all different types which had been generated across the data set and arranged the codes into a hierarchy (Gibbs, 2007). Boeije (2010) suggested the use of axial coding to implement

hierarchisation. Axial coding is “a set of procedures whereby data are put back together in new ways after open coding, by making connections between categories” (Strauss and Corbin, 2007, p.96). During this process, some codes became the main codes, whereas others became sub-codes or were removed. Salient categories (the axes) were identified and named. Most importantly, the relationships between different categories were established.

#### *4.7.4. Stage four and five – Generating themes*

Based on the categories generated in the previous stage, I used selective coding (Boeije, 2010) to further explore the connections among key categories and to generate main themes in relation to the research questions. As Braun and Clarke (2006, p.82) highlighted that the “keyness” of a theme depends on whether it contains illuminating ideas in terms of research questions. The codes used for selective coding were highly abstract. In this stage, I actively engaged with previous literature and compared the themes that constructed in my study and the themes identified in previous research. My research aims and specific research questions were used as guiding principles for integrating the data.

### **4.8. Obstacles and Limitations**

Bechhofer and Paterson (2000) maintained that there is no perfect research design. The detailed discussion of the research process above pointed to certain weaknesses of this study. The major weakness of this study pertained to the recruitment of participants. As I detailed in Section 4.6.3., the recruitment of participants was one of the main obstacles I faced during this study. Due to the low response rate from students, especially from students in MSc Humanities, as shown in Table 7, there was an imbalance in terms of the amount of participants across the three programmes. *Prima facie* this obstacle limited the extent to which I can confidently claim that any differences in the conceptualisation of pedagogical relationships were due to different disciplines. However, it is important to stress that the three programmes (as cases) were selected to provide a richer picture and in-depth understanding of ATS’s and students’ perceptions and experiences of pedagogical relationships, rather than using them with a narrow focus on finding and comparing differences. In effect, after I had completed initial coding, I got a sense that although the participants (both ATS and

students) were from different disciplines and from different gender groups, their reflections on pedagogical relationships were not confined by disciplinary differences.

Furthermore, the open invitations were sent to the whole targeted potential student participants. This practice on the one hand ensured that the students participated in my study voluntarily and were really interested in the topic. But on the other hand, it was possible that the students who participated in this study were those who had extreme views (either positive or negative) of the pedagogical relationships they had experienced. Consequently, the students in a middle ground might not be heard in this research. However, given that part of the purposes of this study was to gain in-depth understanding of students' experiences and perceptions of pedagogical relationships, the two extreme ends of views were necessary and sufficient for addressing the research questions.

The other main obstacle was related to the lack of empirical studies which could have provided further guidance to me on analysing the data and forming categories regarding the concept of pedagogical relationships. There were several empirical studies published in the later stage of my study (for example, Anderson *et al.*, 2020). Due to these papers' high relevance to my study, I decided to make some rearrangements of the categories and the themes. As a result, the process of data analysis was longer and more complex than I expected.

I acknowledge that this study was conducted in three MSc programmes at only one research-intensive university in the UK. On the one hand, conducting research at one institution allowed me to explore the concept of pedagogical relationships in great depth. This is necessary due to the dearth of research on this topic in the context of the UK PGT sector and in PGT programmes at research-intensive universities in particular. On the other hand, similar to many other qualitative studies, the extent to which the findings can be applied in other contexts calls for further discussion. I incorporate the discussion into the next section on the strength of my study.

#### **4.9. The Strength of the Study - Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness was used as the criterion for assessing the quality of current study (Gray, 2014). There are four sub-criteria for trustworthiness (Guba and Lincoln, 1994), namely, credibility (i.e. the degree to which the research findings reflect what the

research claimed to investigate), dependability (i.e. the stability of findings over time), confirmability (i.e. the degree to which the research steps can be replicated by other researchers), and transferability.

In relation to credibility, contacting potential participants at an early stage in a face-to-face way can enable that the participants recruited are those who genuinely willing to participate and eager to share their views regarded to research topic (Bernard, 2002). As pointed out by Shenton (2004), this technique, together with rapport building, may make informants more likely to be honest and open when they contribute to data. The sit-in period of my study was also an effort to achieve prolonged engagement with the research context (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) which would in turn increase the credibility of the study.

In terms of dependability, Yin (1994) suggested that it is important for researchers to create a case study database and keep a chain of evidence. I took this suggestion and provided detailed narratives regarding to data collection and analysis processes in my final report to increase the dependability. Furthermore, during data analysis, for each transcript I conducted coding many times and the first coding and second coding had at least seven days' interval. This practice can increase the dependability of the study, given that the code-recode strategy with a proper time gap gives the researcher a chance to see whether the results are different or the same over time (Chilisa and Preece, 2005). Moreover, the use of coding frames for assigning codes to data, which was checked by at least two experienced researchers, was also an attempt to increase the dependability of the study in a way that it has provided a clear and detailed trail of evidence for my data analysis (Nowell *et al.*, 2017).

In terms of confirmability, I recognise that researchers' own values, feelings, and previous knowledge may influence the conducting of research. Therefore, I tried to maintain a high level of self-reflexivity (Harding, 1993) to increase the confirmability of the study. Moreover, during each stage of data analysis, I checked and re-checked the codes and the associated data to make sure the themes generated were rooted in the data rather than basing on my preconceptions (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

In terms of transferability, by providing a nuanced description of the targeted cases, readers can recognise similarities among the cases. Furthermore, by comparing the

findings of this study with findings contained in previous literature, such as studies conducted in post-92 universities in the UK as well as in universities in other countries, naturalistic generalisation was pursued (Stake, 2006). Indeed, statistically the findings of this study cannot be generalised (Bechhofer and Paterson, 2000), and generalisation of the findings to the whole population of Master's programmes is not the purpose of the present case study research. The nuanced description of the research context and research process allows readers to relate results of this study to their own situations (ibid.). After all, "the ability to relate to a case and learn from it is perhaps more important than being able to generalize from it" (Wellington, 2000, p.96). Furthermore, despite the debates around generalisability or transferability of a study, a research study needs to be *useful* (Bassegy, 1999). Indeed, if we can learn something from reading a good novel, there is no reason to deny the usability of a case study research which was rigorously carried out as explained above. It can be confidently asserted that a high level of transferability can be assured for the current study.

#### **4.10. Ethical Considerations**

I uphold the notion that ethics is one of the most important things to consider when conducting an empirical study. It is not only about 'ticking the boxes' in the ethical clearance form, but also about, more fundamentally, respect for other people (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004). "Strong ethical practice depends on thinking through what your research means for the participants and, if necessary, deviating from prescribed rules to make the most relevant and helpful ethical decisions" (Webster, Lewis and Brown, 2014, p.83). Indeed, as Guillemin and Gillam (2004) and Biros, Hauswald and Baren (2010) noted, it is important to attend to both procedural and practical ethics. Procedural ethics refers to seeking ethical approval from a relevant ethical committee before commencing the research, whereas practical ethics refers to the ethical issues that arise during the actual process of research (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004). This section is structured by the ethical guidelines for doing education research initiated by British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2018). But in each sub-section, the ethical issues in practice are also explained. Notably, apart from gaining the ethical approval from the relevant Ethical Committee and following the ethical codes indicated in previous literature, I tried hard to put myself in the shoes of potential participants before, during, and after data collection. I also carried out in-

depth self-reflections on my own experiences as a research participant to consider participants' feelings from their perspectives.

### ***Ongoing voluntary informed consent***

All participants were provided with clear and sufficient information about the purpose of the research, which enabled them to make informed decisions to participate in my study or not. I provided detailed information of the study through verbal explanations during the face-to-face meetings with potential participants as well as through a carefully constructed participant information sheet (see Appendix A). All participants signed the written informed consent form (see Appendix B), which acknowledged that they were clear about the nature and purposes of this research (no deception) and indicated that they participated in the research voluntarily.

### ***Potential harm arising from participating in the study***

There is no foreseeable harm (physical or psychological) to the participants and the researcher. I have tried to minimise any potential discomfort, distress, or pressure that may arise. For instance, as a former MSc student myself, I deeply understand how stressful an MSc study could be. Thus, during participant recruitment, I left a certain gap (e.g. at least four weeks) between the initial email invitation to participate in the study and the follow-up emails. I also avoided sending communications during the assessment window.

I also paid particular attention to the role of the gatekeepers in recruiting participants. The gatekeepers in this study were programme directors and course organisers. I acknowledged the possible power imbalance between the gatekeepers and the potential participants (Webster, Jane and Brown, 2014) and the possible pressures faced by the participants. Therefore, after gaining the access to approach potential participants from the gatekeepers, I asked them to take a role as a facilitator to help me pass the invitation to participate in my study, rather than as the programme director to ask students and ATS to join in the research. During the debriefing sessions with the students and the staff, I highlighted and reassured them that my study was not aiming at *evaluating* and *judging* the quality of the relationships they experienced. By so doing, the possible pressure on participants was minimised and the voluntary nature of participation was guaranteed. Moreover, the participants were

also informed, reassured, and reminded before the interviews that they were free to withdraw at any stage of the study without any repercussion.

### ***Respect for privacy and confidentiality***

Given the features of the data collection methods in qualitative research, for example, gathering people's verbal accounts through interviews and/or focus groups, one challenge is to protect participants' privacy and maintain the confidentiality of their identities. Therefore, two important steps were taken. First, the interviews with students were conducted in booked seminar rooms. The time slots booked (three hours) for interviews were much longer than the actual interview time (around one and a half hours). By so doing, there were no interruptions from other people so the privacy of the participants was protected. Moreover, pseudonyms were applied to present participants in the final report. Notably, the previous literature suggested that the pseudonyms should retain and indicate participants' cultural background (Saunders, Kitzinger and Kitzinger, 2015; Given, 2008). This is also in line with Flinders' (1992) view on research ethics that researchers need to be sensitive to participants' native culture. I therefore assigned participants with pseudonyms based on popular baby names in their respective countries for the year 2019 (i.e. the year I commenced the data collection). The decision based on both ethical considerations that I need to respect their identities, and methodological consideration that it may facilitate comparing cultural differences related to their perceptions on pedagogical relationships.

Before the start of one teacher's interview, the participant raised concerns about being identified in the final report. I therefore reassured him that I would follow the ethical procedure strictly. Furthermore, I have been deliberately vague on some demographic information on all the academic teaching staff participants where it is not relevant to the study.

### ***Ethical considerations for sitting-in seminars***

While written opt-in consents were gained from both student and ATS participants for conducting interviews, I was seeking and obtained verbal opt-out consents for sitting in the seminars/workshops and taking notes about the settings. This is partly because I was not going to collect any data from individual students through the observations and the field notes I took. This was approved by the school ethics committee. I

highlighted this issue to the gatekeepers and suggested to them that it might be better for them to introduce the possible sitting-in activities to the students first without my presence because the students might feel more comfortable saying they want to opt out to them rather than to me. After further discussions with the gatekeepers, the programme directors and course organisers of the core courses for MSc Social Science and MSc Humanities decided to let me introduce myself and asked the permission from the students for sitting-in the courses. For MSc STEM, the programme director and course organiser asked students for permission on my behalf. Both students and teachers on these programmes agreed to let me join them and no requests to opt out were received.

#### **4.11. Summary**

In this chapter, I have presented in detail of the methodological considerations associated with the research design. I have characterised this study as an instrumental multiple case study which is qualitative in nature. Apart from the contribution it makes to understand how ATS and Master's students perceive and conceptualise pedagogical relationships in three MSc programmes at a research-intensive university, this multiple case study is important for understanding the concept of pedagogical relationships and the factors, both personal and structural, that influence the building and maintaining these relationships.

I have also provided detailed account of the main data collection method – one-on-one semi-structured interviews, and how I applied thematic analysis to analyse the data I collected. Furthermore, I have discussed the research process in light of research literature, the purposes of my study, and the lessons I learnt from conducting pilot interviews.

To sum up, my choice of research design and method stemmed from my philosophical stance, my research purposes, and the discussion and evaluation of literature. I hope that the discussion thus far has allowed the conclusion of this study to be considered as trustworthy. The next chapter is the first of the two chapters on reporting the findings of this study. It presents and discusses the issues on pedagogical relationships from ATS's perspective.

## **Chapter Five**

### **Teachers' Perspectives**

#### **5.1. Introduction**

In this chapter, I report the findings based on my analysis of interview data with 11 ATS. The four main themes were constructed:

- (1) The liminality of Master's study;
- (2) An equal relationship within a hierarchy;
- (3) 'Not what I want': factors beyond teachers' control;
- (4) 'I'll do my best': teachers' input.

This chapter begins with a discussion of ATS's perceptions of what Master's study ought to be, their expectations of the intellectual outcomes of Master's study, and their perceptions of students' preparedness for Master's study. These perceptions and expectations form the first theme of this chapter.

The second theme concerns the ATS's views on the features of ideal pedagogical relationships at Master's level – an equal relationship within a hierarchy. All ATS participants pointed out the functional aspect of such relationships, which is to create optimal conditions for achieving the intellectual outcomes of Master's study. Notably, two of the participants, whose academic duties were mainly teaching-oriented, stressed the emotional and personal aspects of pedagogical relationships and the wish that the relationships could be closer and less formal. Other participants also expressed their willingness to get to know their students better and a preference for establishing relationships which are more personalised.

It is perhaps not surprising that both functional and personal aspects of the ideal relationships were experienced as hard to achieve, especially in the face of growing programme and class size. Themes three and four focus on the factors that may hinder or facilitate the development of positive pedagogical relationships. Theme three concerns the external factors which are beyond ATS's control: student's actual preparedness for Master's study, structural factors such as class size and academic workloads. While all participants recognised that the features of their disciplines could influence the type of relationships they were trying to build with students, those

features were largely blended with the features of Master's study in general, such as short course duration. Consequently, there were no notable differences in terms of ATS's accounts of ideal and actual pedagogical relationships across the three disciplinary areas. My analysis also suggests that these external factors may also influence teachers' input (theme four) for building positive relationships with their students.

Theme four concerns ATS's input and includes ATS's passion for teaching, ATS's efforts in creating a trusting environment, their efforts to prioritise time for students, and caring about their students as people. According to Anderson et al.'s (2020) notion of caring teachers, many of these efforts can be seen as a manifestation of ATS's pedagogical caring. In contrast to my preconception that caring relationships could be an ideal type of relationship at Master's level, the analysis suggests that caring is not an ideal type but a necessary condition for achieving the ideal. In other words, caring is necessary but not sufficient, since the ideal pedagogical relationships involves more than just caring. The ATS's articulations of their efforts in facilitating students' learning are in line with Noddings' (2003) concepts of engrossment (e.g. teachers made efforts to know and understand the difficulties that students face) and motivational displacement (e.g. teachers were genuinely happy to see students' improvements). Moreover, ATS constantly referred back to their experiences as students indicating another concept introduced by Noddings (2003) that a crucial way of realising the ethical ideal (i.e. to care others) is to draw on the feelings of being cared-for.

## **5.2. The Liminality of Master's Study**

Despite its complex origin in philosophy and sociology, liminality, in the simplest terms, refers to "the experience of finding oneself at a boundary or in an in-between position, either spatially or temporally" (Horvath, Thomassen and Wydra, 2015, p.40). Using an analogy, a Master's programme is the main runway of an airport at which the airplane (Master's student) has already gone through the taxiing stage (Bachelor's degrees) and is ready to take off (pursuing Doctoral degrees or professional careers). It is important to emphasise that in this thesis, I used the term 'liminality' as a multi-faceted concept which not only indicates an in-between stage located "at the threshold of experience" (Conroy, pp. 7-8), but also includes the perceptions, assumptions, and expectations held by people who are experiencing it.

This is a theme that was structured at a very late stage of data analysis. During initial coding, topics such as *ATS's expectations of their students* was a category of the factors that may influence the building and maintaining pedagogical relationships. By rereading and refining the initial codes and potential themes, I determined that these topics should be grouped together to form a theme indicating the in-between nature of Master's study. I observed that most ATS in my study had firm ideas about what Master's study should be, based on their understanding of the liminal nature of the Master's degrees. In turn, these ideas shaped ATS's expectations of their students, and these expectations subsequently influenced ATS's conception of the features of ideal pedagogical relationships. Therefore, there is a strong rationale to report this as the first theme, given that the liminality of Master's study provides a fundamental explanation of how pedagogical relationships are experienced and understood by ATS, which profoundly addresses the research questions.

#### *5.2.1. The purposes of Master's study*

When ATS were prompted to explore "what are Master's studies for", the first answer given by most of them was: to help students pursue further academic qualifications. Viewing pursuing further academic qualifications as the primary purpose is perhaps a consequence of the fact that I was looking at a one year full-time Master's rather than a mid-career professional development one. I acknowledge that if I had been interviewing ATS teaching on MScs with different cohorts, I might have had a different response (e.g. ATS on very large programmes with 95% of students from areas outside UK). More than half of the participants stressed explicitly that taught Master's degrees serve as a 'stepping stone' for students who want to pursue an academic career via a doctoral degree. Moreover, ATS believed that Master's study should not only equip students with the necessary intellectual skills, but also the mentality for taking on more challenging academic work. For example,

*It [Master's study] is trying to create that stepping stone so that students, when they start postgraduate research they already feel a bit more of a level playing field. They know how to frame an argument and discuss it. (Ann, STEM, Senior lecturer)*

*In a PhD, no one knows what a PhD is going to do when you start it. You come out the other end completely different person from what you went in. And its ... so [Master's study] in terms of preparing people for thinking about ... for deciding*

*whether or not they are willing to make that commitment. (Robert, STEM, Senior lecturer)*

*I guess you still want a divide between masters and PhD but in a way I see the masters as more of a training to become a good PhD student. (Elizabeth, Humanities, Senior lecturer)*

Despite the strong focus on the development of academic competence for further study, some participants recognised that there are diverse reasons for doing a Master's degree and not every student aims for a career in academia. Thus, Master's degrees should not disproportionately be focused on training future academics. This view was well summarised by Charlotte and Neil,

*Why it is we push everybody towards narrowing their interests and their focus and adding to their qualifications in this way [pursuing a PhD] ... Everybody is good at different things and humans and communities rely upon a diversity of talents and a diversity of interests. (Charlotte, Social Sciences, Tutor)*

*But what we need to be better at is seeing the way our discipline can, at a more advanced level, MSc, can be valuable to sort of 'normal' people. People who have aspirations in their life, that are not like the ones we had, which is to be become a professor. That is not going to be ... that is going to be by having MSc programmes that are more worldly. (Neil, Humanities, Senior lecturer).*

It seems that ATS hold the notion that there are different ways of viewing the value of Master's degrees. Whilst there was agreement on the value of Master's study as cultivating future scholars, ATS resisted accepting this as the sole purpose of Master's study and argued for recognising and designing Master's programmes which embrace students' aspirations and needs.

### *5.2.2. Advocacy for specialist MSc programmes*

Based on my analysis of ATS's accounts, there was a critique of the trend towards large scale general MSc programmes which were aimed at the international market. The ATS questioned the inherent value of these general MSc programmes and the challenges these programmes imposed on developing positive pedagogical relationships with students. The participants agreed that the course contents covered in Master's study should be more advanced, focused, and specialised than in undergraduate studies. ATS believed that students would gain advanced training in a more focused area by taking specialist MSc programmes. For example,

*There is a lot to learn at once, so I suppose what I like is to see that when they arrive they don't know much about it but when they go they are definitely specialist. That is the ... the aim of the masters. (Kirsty, STEM, Senior lecturer)*

*They [the students] want to spend an entire year studying it because they want to be a specialist in it. So that is more reasonable I feel. So I think MScs have a place in that sort of area [becoming a specialist]. (Robert, STEM, Senior lecturer)*

The advocacy for specialist MSc programmes was echoed by the critiques and anxieties expressed by the majority of ATS participants in relation to the programmes which were aiming at the international market. This was exemplified by Rion, whose view also indicated a concern of the negative influence of marketisation on students' learning.

*I could see how in five years' time, if things don't change structurally probably I think there will be a bigger problem because I think more and more students will get restless because they are paying so much money and they are often ... what matter especially if you are doing a Master's degree, which is a one year programme, is basically getting a degree from a prestigious university that can serve you in life in terms of employment without really thinking about the actual gains of the degree. So what are the gains that you are making during that period of study? (Rion, Social Sciences, Lecturer)*

The similar concern was indicated in other participants' accounts. Two ATS participants were in their early career, the other nine participants all served as programme directors and/or course organisers at some stage in their career, and most of them argued that programme designers should consider the inherent value of a programme. For example, as Neil expressed, in order to establish relationships which are pedagogically valuable, the programmes themselves need to be valuable. If the programme designers do not consider enough of the value of Master's studies, the Master's programmes could be "*pointless and fraudulent*". For instance,

*[We need] more MSc programmes that are like that ... and that are conceived for what I will call 'good reasons' rather than opportunistic 'I want to get a promotion so let me start a bullshit MSc that will get me a promotion and who cares if it is well conceived' or 'who cares what happens with it cause I will go and get a grant and disappear and someone else can run it, maybe a teaching fellow'. (Neil, Humanities, Senior lecturer).*

In addition, Neil expressed some very strong views on how academics perceived the value of Master's programmes then influenced their commitment to the programmes.

The way he articulated his feelings showed his disappointment of some of the current Master's programmes. Although such opinions were not expressed as strongly and directly by other ATS participants, Rion's words showed that most of the ATS felt the same as Neil did. Thus, it is worth reporting that Neil said,

*I think what I have said sounds very negative about our MSc programmes, what I really want to see is our develop ... you know, one of our challenges now is that academic staff mostly have no faith in the value of our programmes so don't want to commit to them ... I think what we need to do, a lot of this is our fault, what we need to ... we need to design programmes now that we are proud and excited to teach ... having programmes, that we are excited about and believe are good for the students. (Neil, Humanities, Senior lecturer)*

To sum up, while ATS's reflections on the primary purpose of Master's study is to prepare students' for pursuing future academic qualifications, they recognised that Master's programmes should be designed to be more valuable for students and be able to embrace students' diverse aspirations. The following section explores ATS's expectation in respect to the intellectual outcomes of Master's study and students' preparedness for their studies.

### 5.2.3. ATS's expectations of intellectual outcomes

Almost all ATS participants highlighted that at Master's level, students not only learn new content but also learn to have a deeper reading of the learning materials. One of the participants mentioned that at Master's level the learning materials covered are research-based and more open to debate. For example,

*The teaching we have with Master's is much more relying on research so the ... in a way it is more open to debate, discussion, up to date information so I suppose we engage with the matter in a different way. (Kirsty, STEM, Senior lecturer)*

*I think at the masters level it is about making ... it is about pushing them to further their kind of analytical and theoretical capabilities so it is really pushing them intellectually a bit more or trying to further their understanding and their ability to grapple with complex social phenomenon. (Charlotte, Social Sciences, Tutor)*

Furthermore, at Master's level, students are expected to dedicate time to intensive independent study and to achieve independence of thought. Master's study is not only about learning new and more in-depth contents, but also about learning new

intellectual skills, such as how to questions other people's views, how to frame and defend arguments, that can be applied in future. These expectations are exemplified in the following quotes,

*You do learn more [advanced knowledge] but what you learn is skills to help you get that information yourself. (Elizabeth, Humanities, Senior lecturer)*

*And try and make them [the students] understand that Master's level is not undergraduate and you are expected to do a certain amount of independent study and this is what we are encouraging. (Ann, STEM, Senior lecturer)*

*If we are taking someone from an undergraduate programme ... at the end of an undergraduate programme they should be quite good about this idea of building ideas into their work ... but we are pushing that as the major focus for the MSc. This idea of taking the ideas and topics and developing that with your own ideas. But in such a ... in a controlled way. (Robert, STEM, Senior lecturer)*

It can be synthesised from the ATS's accounts that they deemed independence as both a means and a goal for Master's study. In other words, the ATS in this study acknowledged that being independent does not equate with being left alone. This way of conceptualising students' independence, together with ATS's view of Master's study as a way of making students become intellectually more robust, may influence ATS's conceptualisation of pedagogical relationships which was discussed in section 5.3. For instance, in order to push students out of their comfort zone and to engage in intense intellectual debates, much closer connections (compared with relationships in undergraduate study) are needed to increase the dialogues between teachers and the students. However, any meaningful dialogue may require inputs from all parties involved in them. Indeed, in the ATS's view, students need to be prepared intellectually and emotionally *before* they started the Master's study.

#### 5.2.4. ATS's expectations of students' preparedness

In this thesis, preparedness is used as a multifaceted concept which refers to students' abilities, expectations, and motivations for doing Master's degrees. ATS expected students to be equipped with the necessary language abilities, as well as strong motivations when they enrolled for their study. ATS sometimes encountered difficulties with what they thought were issues of student motivation. For instance,

*I have difficulties if students appear and it appears that they don't want to learn. Which occasionally happens and I am not sure why they came in those circumstance. There is an extent to which ... there is an extent to which people sometimes want to do the course for the qualification. (Robert, STEM, Senior lecturer)*

Indeed, whether an MSc programme is more focused on deepening the knowledge that students gained during undergraduate study or serving as a bridge for students to change their academic interests, as mentioned by more than half of ATS, the intellectual debates at Master's level need to be more advanced and in-depth. Not surprisingly, if ATS want to maximise their students' learning, it is reasonable for them to expect that students have intrinsic interest in the subject and the ability to work at the required level in English. This is exemplified by Liam,

*There is a question of the preparedness of students you know ... you can't achieve the ideal if the students' motives for taking the course are more instrumental and don't quite match the intellectual purposes of the degree. That is a problem...Everybody who gets into the programme has to pass language qualifications but whether they are really adequate for doing advanced scholarly work in another language is sometimes not entirely clear. (Liam, Social Sciences, Professor)*

Liam's words, which were echoed by other ATS, showed that despite teachers' willingness to enter into equal intellectual debates with students, there are issues of students' preparedness which negatively influenced the pedagogical relationships (as I explained in section 5.4.). The following section explores and discusses the ideal features of pedagogical relationships that ATS wished to establish with their students.

### 5.3. An Equal Relationship Within a Hierarchy

This section reports the findings regarding ATS's understanding of the concept 'pedagogical relationships' as well as their conceptions of the features of ideal pedagogical relationships.

#### 5.3.1. Teaching and learning are inherent in relationships

As argued in Chapters 1 and 3, the two concepts - 'pedagogical relationships' and 'teacher-student relationships' should not be conflated, given that the former stresses the *pedagogical* value of relationships, whereas the latter focuses on relationship building between teachers and students. All ATS participants understood the term 'pedagogical relationships' as more than building positive relationships with students. Most of them did recognise the pedagogical value of these relationships. Some participants explicitly equated good pedagogical relationships and good teaching. For example:

*I have always believed that teaching is a ... interactive process and to get the most out of it, the student needs to engage, ask questions, let you know when they are not understanding what you are saying ... It is partly about having the space to ask questions and interact but it is also this business about one mind or a group of minds, getting to know another mind em ... it is hard work and it is part of what learning is about. (Liam, Social Sciences, Professor)*

*For me teaching is all about relationships... when I think of pedagogical relationships, I think of people being conscious and concerned of the kinds of dynamics and ways in which how they go about interacting and conducting themselves and exchanging ideas and knowledge, just an awareness of that. So just the emphasis on relationships and pedagogy is, I think, quite complementary. (Charlotte, Social Sciences, Tutor)*

*I think it means something like how you interact with your students, what your expectations are in terms of how you manage your classes, what you want students to get out of your classes, how you should try to run discussions. (William, Humanities, Senior lecturer)*

As Charlotte's quote exemplified, relationships and pedagogy are complementary. The next section elucidates the features of teacher-student relationships that can unleash the pedagogical potential of teacher-student relationships.

### 5.3.2. Achieving equality through exchanging ideas within a hierarchy

Based on the analysis of the data, the features of ideal pedagogical relationships conceptualised by ATS can be synthesised as the co-existence of equality and hierarchy. ATS wished to invite students to enter into equal intellectual conversations, while recognising that they were at a higher ground than their students in terms of the experience in the disciplines. The invitation for equal intellectual debates indicated that ATS in this study had the willingness to respect and listen to their students' ideas.

Moreover, ATS tended to mix the descriptions of ideal relationships with the relationships they would like to experience. One reason behind this could be the interwovenness of 'relationships' and 'pedagogy'. In turn, when ATS described their ideal relationships, they emphasised the pedagogical value of the relationships, whereas when they described the relationships that they would like to build with their students, their focus shifted slightly towards a personal aspect of the teacher-student relationships, which highlighted the ways of relationship building.

Equality and hierarchy are *prima facie* contradictory concepts. But it seems to be highly relevant and appropriate to use them together to summarise ATS's views on the ideal pedagogical relationships. Almost all participants highlighted that they wished their relationships with students were more equal at Master's level than at undergraduate level in relation to an equal status in intellectual debates. As exemplified by Kirsty and Rion, ATS expressed a sense of respect of students' ideas and opinions:

*There is more of an equal relationship than there is with undergraduates ... with the masters the discussion is much more on an equal terms. So I give them things to think about...An equal relationship so we can discuss ideas without them fearing...having this pressure that I am the doctor blah blah so their ideas countless. (Kirsty, STEM, Senior lecturer)*

*If I were to think how I would conceptualise that relationship again it is with mutual understanding, of increasing dialogues as equals ... I think this combination of interactive engagement in class between the equals combined with other extracurricular activities as social activities, I think can really create a relationship which could be optimal. (Rion, Social Sciences, Lecturer)*

Rion's accounts indicate the mutuality of pedagogical relationships. This is echoed with other ATS's views on ideal pedagogical relationships that these relationships created an educational space for both students and ATS to gain intellectual growth.

*The student would be able to take in information and process it and form their own opinions and be able to have informed discussion ... acceptance that they may have got it wrong but even be able to change the mind of the teacher. (Ann, STEMs, Senior lecturer)*

*Maybe fully collaborative. (Nicola, Humanities, Post-doctoral researcher)*

*The interactions with students. Sharing ideas, exchanging ideas. So it is not only teaching or ... it's really an exchange [their emphasis] because I think, especially with Master's students ... I think it is interesting to have an exchange. So we are learning also a lot from students. (Gabriel, Social Sciences, Senior lecturer)*

However, as well as longing for equal intellectual dialogues, ATS also recognised that a power differential between them and their Master's students exists, and the ideal equal relationships are built within a hierarchical framework. The sources of ATS's power can be from assessments, experiences, and expertise.

*I think the relationship is a mixture between something that is still hierarchical with a power relation. We have the power ... But at the same time it is an exchange in the sense that...students at the Master's level don't hesitate to nuance or criticise sometimes what we are saying ... For me it is really an opportunity for me to create a collective exchange. A group exchange with some students, among students, within the class, in the classroom. So something that is not necessarily so hierarchical but at the same time I am also well aware that we have this power. (Gabriel, Social Sciences, Senior lecturer)*

Most ATS recognised that because of their expertise in certain disciplinary areas, they still have a leading role in relationships. This hierarchy, in terms of knowledge and experience, provides further opportunity for students to learn.

*It is a way of presenting yourself where you are still leading the group and you are still the expert in the room but you are kind of facilitating a discussion among your students. (Elizabeth, Humanities, Senior lecturer)*

*You can create a relational kind of authority. (Charlotte, Social Sciences, Tutor)*

*I am intellectually higher in that I have more experience, but I am not intellectually higher in any other way ... I think. I don't know...Having a*

*hierarchical relationship is that there is a bit of in-built respect there which is ... useful in many ways in that ... its ... that makes it easier in the first instance if there is a little bit of respect there. (Robert, STEM, Senior lecturer)*

In summary, ATS viewed ideal pedagogical relationships as relationships in which there are equal intellectual dialogues between them and their students, while there is a hierarchy in terms of ATS's knowledge and experience. Notably, as Charlotte's and Robert's words exemplified, although the nature of pedagogical relationships is hierarchical, they recognised the mutual respect between ATS and students. Four out of 11 participants explicitly use a coaching analogy to describe the ideal pedagogical relationships at Master's level. Such coaching analogy, on the one hand, indicates a willingness to building personal relationships to facilitate students learning, and on the other hand shows the hierarchical aspect of the relationship. Moreover, as Neil's words show, that coaching analogy also indicates relationships featuring mutual trust:

*You have a particular relationship to your coach, where they have a certain authority over you but also a kind of commitment to you. So your coach works hard for you and you believe ... you have to have a relationship of trust with your coach. You have to do what they say because they are the experts and you are not. But you also have to ... it is a very genuine relationship in the sense that your successes are your coach's success. (Neil, Humanities, Senior lecturer)*

This analogy is discussed further in Chapter 7 where I propose another analogy (i.e., a music director and an orchestra) to support my discussion on the features of ideal pedagogical relationships at Master's level.

Furthermore, ATS expressed their willingness to know, understand, and relate to students. This willingness to relate implies that, just as how students felt (as discussed in Chapter 6), ATS wished the relationships with their students could be more personal than that which they have experienced. When ATS experienced positive relationships with students, they felt this to be very rewarding. For instance, during the interviews Robert (STEM, Senior lecturer), Kirsty (STEM, Senior lecturer), and Elizabeth (Humanities, Senior lecturer) all pointed with apparent pride at the note (on the wall of their offices) notifying them of their recognition and nomination as an excellent teacher.

Moreover, ATS were genuinely happy to see students' improvement. This is exemplified by Charlotte:

*Seeing as them [the students] as not just another face in the room ... but as like a person with fears and dreams and desires and things that are going on for them that are impacting upon who they are as a student. (Charlotte, Social Sciences, Tutor)*

This willingness to know and relate to their students, and the genuine happiness for students' growth indicates ATS wanted the relationships with their students to be personal. This willingness to know and understand students, according to Anderson et al. (2020) represent ATS's pedagogical caring in the sense that ATS care about students as people.

Positive relationships are not established in a vacuum (Griffith et al., 2015; Karpouza and Emvalotis, 2019). There are many factors that may influence the building and maintaining of these relationships. The following section explores shaping factors from students and institutions.

#### **5.4. Not What I Want: Factors beyond ATS's control**

In this section, I report the factors which are beyond ATS's control for building positive relationships with their students. Section 5.4.1. provides preliminary insight into the influence of students' preparedness on the building and maintaining positive relationships with the ATS. Section 5.4.2. discusses the influence of expansion of PGT sector on the relationship building.

##### *5.4.1. Students' preparedness for Master's study*

One important finding of this study is that it provides insight into the influence of students' preparedness for their study on building pedagogical relationships. As discussed in Chapter 3, neither conceptual papers nor existing empirical studies on pedagogical relationships in the higher education sector considered students' preparedness for their study as a factor, including their language abilities. This could be because most of those studies were conducted in a context in which the student body is homogeneous in nature. For example, the participants in Karpouza and Emvalotis' (2019) study were all local students in Greece. On the contrary, as can be seen from Chapter 2 and Chapter 6, in the UK context, there is a high degree of diversity in terms of Master's students' motivations, expectations, and abilities, including language abilities of doing their Master's studies. This study provides unique

insight into this diversity and its influence on relationship building between ATS and students.

In this section, I argue that ATS are showing a range of ways in which they think students can be unprepared. Such under-preparedness, according to ATS, serves as obstacles for building ideal pedagogical relationships. For instance,

*It is interesting that in describing the pedagogical relationship, what I think of naturally are like ... relationships you'd have with stronger students. Not relationships with students who have no motivation. (Neil, Humanities, Senior lecturer)*

Given the discussions in the previous section on the features of ideal pedagogical relationships, this comment from Neil is perhaps not surprising. Indeed, in order to achieve a relatively more equal relationship in terms of intellectual debates, both sides of a pedagogical relationship need to make effort. Although some participants enjoy teaching on Master's programmes and some positive relationships have been established, there are also disappointments associated with teaching at Master's level. The sources of those feelings were beyond ATS's control. However, it is important to stress that the participants in this study were not criticising or blaming the students, but they were expressing their disappointment in the situation. As is discussed in Section 5.5. (Teachers' input), in the face of some constraints, teacher participants still reported trying hard to build good relationships with all students.

#### 5.4.1.1. ATS's perception of students' Under-preparedness – students' competence and abilities

In general, when they were asked about the general feelings of teaching on Master's programmes, some ATS expressed their disappointment. They shared the view that many students were underprepared for their study. But ATS stressed that this is not the students' fault. All three programmes included in the study welcomed students who did their undergraduate in other disciplinary areas. As a result, the ATS reported that some students lacked the background disciplinary knowledge and the language ability required for engaging with the subject at the depth required for Master's study.

For instance, the excerpts from Neil and William exemplified the issue of students' lack of background knowledge of the subject they were learning:

*Sometimes people take ... particularly MSc degrees, as a way of moving into a subject where their undergraduate background isn't perhaps all that strong ... They will not necessarily come from the background in which you happen to be working. So you have often got very, very able students who are very engaged but who haven't quite got the grounding in the subject area that you are speaking to. (William, Humanities, Senior lecturer)*

*I am familiar with Master's programme where the students entering have stronger preparation in the subject and are relatively high achieving in their cohort. It feels to me in my subject there are a small number of our Master's students like that but most of them don't have any, or very little background in the subject. (Neil, Humanities, Senior lecturer)*

Having students who were not able to operate at the depth of Master's study, some ATS expressed the perceived negative impacts on the enjoyment of teaching. As Neil continued that:

*It is something that I talk a lot about with my colleagues and many ... most of them share this view that its considerably less enjoyable than teaching undergraduates. (Neil, Humanities, Senior lecturer)*

This was echoed by earlier career ATS, such as Nicola who said that:

*I think I prefer to teach fourth year undergraduate students, because to some extent, fourth year students are more independent and collaborative in relationships than lots of the Master's students because quite a few of Master's students are less experience in ... than some of the undergraduate students...I found it's easier in some case one to teach undergraduate students...they are more academically collaborative (Nicola, Humanities, Post-doctoral researcher).*

Furthermore, students' lack of background knowledge of the subject seemed to negatively affect the pedagogical approach that ATS would like to take. This is exemplified by Elizabeth that:

*You can't have a conversation with someone if you are constantly having to backtrack and explain what a concept is so that is why I think optimisation, the optimised student, the optimised conditions is one where you both have the sense of the tools that you have to work with. (Elizabeth, Humanities, Senior lecturer).*

Finally, some ATS raised the concern about international students who did not have English as a first language. The language barrier imposed challenges for ATS to build relationships with their students:

*Language is a challenge... It [teaching at Master's level] had to be very dynamic and adaptive and culturally sensitive, I would say. (Charlotte, Social Sciences, Tutor)*

It can be discerned from teachers' perceptions of students' preparedness that the current level of students' preparedness does not match with teachers' visions of an ideal pedagogical relationship. The influence of preparedness can be seen from the quality of the relationships at the dissertation stage. There is an agreement among participants that they were happier with the pedagogical relationships they built with their supervisees. The reason for this could be that the supervisor-supervisee relationships are closer. It is also because students are more competent in engaging in positive pedagogical relationships, given that the students have completed two terms of coursework. For instance,

*So at that stage [Master's dissertation] you can really safely expect a high level of background knowledge unless you happen to have got the student who no one else wanted. (Elizabeth, Humanities, Senior lecturer)*

#### 5.4.1.2. ATS's perceptions of students' motivation

More than half of ATS expressed disappointment and frustration when they encountered students who did not demonstrate motivation to learn at Master's level. This is well summarised by Neil:

*It doesn't really matter how good a student is at the subject. A lot of what matters is how much they care. (Neil, Humanities, Senior lecturer)*

This was echoed by Liam who expressed that:

*The student is the most active ingredient in learning ... any student who takes a passive approach to their learning, isn't going to get as much out of it. They need to sort of ... push, ask questions ... have something that they want to understand ... and teachers can't supply that. They can respond to it but they can't supply the students themselves with motivation, that has to come from them. (Liam, Social Sciences, Professor)*

Such lack of motivation is emotionally draining for some of the ATS. As Ann noted:

*There is so much good there but there is frustration as well. Some of the interactions with the students totally make you weak, and then sometimes you just want to scream at them...It does seem at Master's level, it is down to the*

*students em...ability and perspective as to whether you can even try and strive towards that which I would envisage would be the ideal. (Ann, STEM, Senior lecturer)*

Ann's accounts indicate a sense of helplessness when it comes to influencing student motivation. However, as noted earlier, ATS were not blaming students for their lack of preparedness. They recognised that there are factors which are beyond both ATS and students' control, such as the expansion of the PGT sector. Having looked at some of the constraining factors which ATS presented as within the student I now turn to look at the structural factors.

#### *5.4.2. Structural factors – expansion, class size and administrative workloads*

In this section structural factors are explored. The issues of enlarged class size, ATS's workloads, as well as aforementioned students' lack of preparedness for taking on intellectual conversations at the required depth, according to ATS's reflections, were attributed to the expansion and consumerisation of PGT sector for financial reasons. The majority of ATS demonstrated concerns regarding the negative impacts of the expansion on their pedagogical approaches and educational standards. This was exemplified by Liam and echoed by Elizabeth:

*I really don't think getting much over 30 for a postgraduate taught programme is a good idea ... the administration would disagree with me, they would say the more you can fit on a programme the better ... it makes more money. (Liam, Social Sciences, Professor)*

*I don't think my colleagues and I feel that at undergraduate level those standards have slipped. At Master's level it is a different story...This university is expanding the Master's programmes so massively that I do worry that there is a change in standards and that by having bigger and bigger Master's courses, particularly at that level, there is less ability to go into those ideas in more detail. (Elizabeth, Humanities, Senior lecturer)*

#### 5.4.2.1. Class size

As can be sensed from what Elizabeth said, it is evident in this study that ATS value small-size classes (1 – 15 students per class) when it comes to teaching at Master's level. From ATS's perspective, they wanted to build positive relationships with students, in which intense intellectual dialogues can happen. All participants explicitly highlighted the importance of having smaller classes at Master's level so that the ideal pedagogical relationships could be cultivated. They articulated a wide range of benefits for having small classes. For instance, Robert pointed out that small-size classes are important so the students feel they have access to their teachers:

*The thing I would choose to change currently and optimise, is class sizes. I think it is important that the class size is small enough that essentially the students feel that they have access to you easily, that they can interact with you and not ... not be in a queue of people perhaps. (Robert, STEM, Senior lecturer)*

Rion recognised that small-size classes/programmes are essential for them to get to know their students:

*Class size is a major factor ... programme size is a key factor. And if you have ten students you can really build a personal relationship with them. Because you know all of them, you know their situation, you know their backgrounds. (Rion, Social Sciences, Lecturer).*

Liam stressed the importance of the small-size classes in fulfilling ATS's belief of interactive teaching:

*I have always believed that teaching is an interactive process and to get the most out of it, the student needs to engage, ask questions, let you know when they are not understanding what you are saying ... and it is much easier to do that in a smaller, more flexible setting than it is in a huge lecture hall. (Liam, Social Sciences, Professor)*

What underlies the accounts of the benefits of small class-size was the reality that the cohort and class size they experienced was bigger than what they deemed as ideal.

This was summarised by Ann:

*We are not getting an increased staffing numbers that reflects the increase of students that we are in-taking ... within ... and our Master's programmes ... We are totally under resourced when it comes to the amount of teachers to student ratio. (Ann, STEM, Senior lecturer)*

The influence of the expansion not only manifests through increased class-sized but also can be felt through increased workloads of ATS.

#### 5.4.2.2. Administrative workloads and restraints

The majority of ATS participants complained about the workloads for administration. This is neatly summarised by Neil:

*I don't think academics are not busy, they are just busy with stuff that is not research or teaching. (Neil, Humanities, Senior lecturer)*

Neil's comment was echoed by Gabriel who noted that the university's regulation on assuring academic standards requires teachers to spend a lot of time on teaching related issues (e.g. various meetings and exam boards) at the cost of losing time for teachers spend time with students. For example,

*The paradox. We are spending a lot of time for teaching. But the actual time we are spending with students is not much ... I think one way would be to reduce these admin tasks. (Gabriel, Social Sciences, Senior lecturer)*

Furthermore, Liam argued that

*You really do have to give them the time and the space to just develop it on their own. You can't improve the staff/student relationship, teacher/student relationship and the caring aspects of it if people are so pressed for time they don't feel they can ... there needs to be a certain slack in the time so that people can let these things develop. (Liam, Social Sciences, Professor)*

The constraints have pedagogical influences. For example, for teachers on guaranteed hour basis. There are limited hours for interacting with individual students. According to Elizabeth (Humanities, Senior lecturer) and Robert (STEM, Senior lecturer), if they wanted to bring some change, it is not easy to get approval from the administration office. For example,

*That [learning in small reading groups] is not the kind of pedagogy we can do here because we are kind of restricted by [name of the administration office] and a lot of the sort of admin sort of prevents us from doing that style of learning. At least in an assessed way. (Elizabeth, Humanities, Senior lecturer)*

This kind of teaching experiences lead ATS such as Gabriel and Liam suggested that the management team should trust ATS more:

*They should trust a little bit more the teachers in the way they are organising courses. Begin to trust a little bit more to teachers that they can deal with that without having to fill in forms, reports, regulations. (Gabriel, Social Sciences, Senior lecturer)*

*I would encourage the university to back off a bit in terms of its constant management of the teacher student relationship, trust us to get on with it more, develop our own systems even if they are different from one part of the university to another. (Liam, Social Sciences, Professor)*

Drawing on the above discussion, it is clear that ATS were not entirely happy with their teaching experiences at Master's level. And the source of this unhappiness was partly from the consumerisation of education. As Neil pointed out,

*There is a lot of cynicism, obviously in me but I think in all my colleagues, towards MSc programmes where they just seem like kind of factory farm, not even factory farm ... it is more just like em ... just another customer, except one that you wish you didn't have. (Neil, Humanities, Senior lecturer)*

This was also an issue for student experience. As Ann summarised,

*Out of everything we have discussed that is where the breakdown is totally the worst. Because the students are paying an enormous amount of money and they come in with these expectations and it is not reflected in the quality of course that we are giving them because we don't have the teaching numbers to be able to give them the quality of course that they are paying for... It has to be about giving the student's value for money. (Ann, STEM, Senior lecturer)*

The sympathy and concern with students' negative experience can be seen explicitly in most teachers' interviews. This action of considering students' feeling is sign of pedagogical caring.

#### *5.4.3. Disciplinary features*

The analysis of the data shows that contrary to what was expected, there were no prominent disciplinary differences. Despite some of the ATS assuming there would be disciplinary differences, they gave very similar accounts. As I discussed thus far in this chapter, other factors which are associated with the features of Master's programmes, such as expansion of the sector and the expectation of students' independent learning, have bigger impacts than disciplinary features.

When asked to reflect on the particular features of their disciplines, most participants believe that some features may influence their ways of building pedagogical relationships. For example, participants from the social sciences programme believe that study on the programme is about interpretation of social phenomena, so in-depth dialogues and discussions are needed during study on the programme. Also, Charlotte (Social Sciences, Tutor) thought as a social scientist she was used to constantly reflecting on her social role as an educator. This would influence her pedagogy.

Similarly, in terms of the Humanities programme, although there may be certain historical facts which people are required to memorise, it is largely dependent on forming one's own arguments. For instance,

*It's a subject where you are introduced to problems and answers to those problems, and ways of being able to critique those problems. And I think that means that it does affect how you teach because I think it means that you don't present things as if they are the answers. (William, Humanities, Senior lecturers)*

These features once again explain why equal relationships are welcomed by ATS. Because to achieve pedagogical purposes, intense dialogues are required. However, surprisingly, some ATS from Humanities and Social Sciences demonstrated a perception of STEM programmes that they have more 'fixed' answers. For example,

*I am just going to pick on the sciences as an example where perhaps the master's is you get more advanced knowledge. So you learn more about a particular thing ... whereas in my subject, yes, you do learn more but what you learn is skills to help you get that information yourself. (Elizabeth, Humanities, Senior lecturer).*

This was not supported by how the STEM teachers explained their discipline. For instance, as Ann (STEM, Senior lecturer) noted in her programme, students do try to gain advanced knowledge of a certain concept, but students still need to be critical and hold debates on its application in future study. Thus, in terms of the format of study, STEM programmes may be different (e.g. lab works, group experiments). However, regarding intellectual properties, as Kirsty (STEM, Senior lecturer) said, no matter which subject it is, at Master's level the study is based on advanced research, which leaves many spaces for students and ATS to debate.

## 5.5. Theme Four - I'll Do My Best: Teachers' input

The previous sections have shown that ATS who participated in this study were not entirely happy with their teaching experiences at Master's level. They were not blaming the students, but they were identifying problems with the contexts where teaching and learning happened. Based on the interview data, a crucial source of ATS's disappointment was that their vision of an ideal type pedagogical relationship could not be fulfilled due to the constraints that were beyond their control. However, amid such context, ATS demonstrated great efforts to try to create optimal conditions for students' learning. Although none explicitly referred to her work, many of ATS's efforts are in line with Noddings' (2003) notion of caring. ATS's passions in teaching, their efforts in creating a safe environment, and their willingness of knowing their students as a person were in line with Anderson et al.'s (2020) notion of caring teachers who care about the subject, teaching, and students as a person.

### 5.5.1. Passion in teaching

All but one participants explicitly expressed that they love teaching and interacting with students. The reason why Nicola (Humanities, Post-doctoral researcher) did not mention this may be because she did not have many teaching duties. But she did mention that she would like to be an approachable teacher. Moreover, as the data presented above have shown, teachers think about teaching often and have a willingness and desire to relate to students. They do not just like teaching, but have a passion for it.

There are two other aspects that are closely related to their passion for teaching, which in turn may influence the pedagogical relationships - ATS's interests in the subject, and their intellectual input. These two aspects are also related to the value of Master's study. Indeed, three participants, who have been in a programme directors/designers role for a long time, highlighted the importance of courses being designed by people who are really interested in the subject. For example,

*I am not sure we should ever teach a Master's programme where the teaching is done by ... by people who aren't specialists in the topics ... I think at Master's level, we should never have a Master's programme ... we should never have a Master's programme where the teachers are not specialists in that area I think. I think we need to have enough strength and depth to teach a Master's programme which is something that we perhaps don't do. (Robert, STEM, Senior lecturer).*

*At Master's level it is good to have people running programmes who are in interested in that programme, who have a kind of intellectual reason behind it. It's always harder if you have some programme that you think is going to be taught, because there is a market for it, and there are a lot of people who can teach it but nobody particularly wants to teach it. (Liam, Social Sciences, Professor)*

It is important to note that what Liam said once again highlighted the influence of the marketisation of higher education. This is related to a slightly different point raised by Rion:

*I think students doing different degrees they feel like they don't have all the support that they were hoping for especially in being taught more actively, more extensively by people who are leaders in their field. People who are big names who are in their field. Because they are there, they are part of the university website but students never see them because they are so heavily involved in their research. (Rion, Social Sciences, Lecturer)*

In the views of the participants, the intellectual input from expert and motivated teaching staff is as important as students' intellectual input. Robert reflected that:

*People don't respect you when they think perhaps they are paying this money and they are not actually getting an appropriate level of intellectual skill from the teacher. (Robert, STEM, Senior lecturer)*

#### 5.5.2. Teachers creating a conducive learning environment

In a context where intellectual dialogues are supposed to be intense and in-depth but the students are not ready for this, the issue faced by the ATS was apparent. How can they get the best out of students and optimise students' learning experiences without compromising standards? The analysis of the data shows that one important way of achieving this is through the ATS's ability to create an environment within which students feel safe to make mistakes. For example,

*I would like to create an environment where people can talk to their fellow students or to me, or not, as they see fit... a good pedagogical relationship in terms of discussion, I always say to students, 'you are not under any obligation to come to the same view as any one of the great scholars ... and you are certainly not obliged to agree with me. The aim of the game is to get you to a view that you can defend, that you can articulate, that you can consider critically and that you can then apply.' (William, Humanities, Senior lecturer)*

#### 5.5.2.1. Openness and approachability

Similar views, as shown in the quote from William above, are prevalent among participants. ATS need to build an environment which does not intimidate students. This makes students feel safe to walk out of their comfort zones. One aspect related to this is ATS's openness to students' ideas and their own mistakes. And ATS need to communicate this openness to students. For example,

*The ability to say when you are wrong ... Making it clear that you are amenable to listen to views you don't necessarily hold ... Making sure that students know they can question you. (Elizabeth, Humanities, Senior lecturer)*

Furthermore, it is important for ATS to be approachable and communicate to students about the idea that they welcome students contacting them. ATS in this study demonstrate various strategies for doing this. For example, Kirsty (STEM, Senior lecturer) always keeps an 'open-door' policy that during certain time per week, students can come to see her, while William (Humanities, Senior lecturer) tried his very best to reply to every student's reasonable request through emails. What William said here also related to accessibility of teachers, namely, they need to be easy to reach.

#### 5.5.3. Prioritisation for addressing to students' needs

Despite the heavy workloads faced by ATS, they value dedicating more time to students. On one hand, the ATS's time spent on interacting with students is constrained by the overall time available to them, but on the other hand, it is down to the ATS to allocate time for different academic tasks. This is highlighted by Ann,

*If somebody cares then they ... respond to the student...prioritise that and addressing that need over prioritising some of the other needs. We have all got to juggle 101 things but it is all our own personal decision as to what we prioritise. It is the prioritisation and ... it's that personal prioritisation that each one of us does every day. (Ann, STEM, Senior lecturer)*

Teachers themselves enjoyed having more time with students. For example, when Robert was describing his practice of providing one-to-one consultation with students, he said,

*We can let the appointment run on. I always try if at all possible, not to have something after the allotted period, so if it is running long we can continue until we have run out of things to say. (Robert, STEM, Senior lecturer).*

Similarly, Charlotte as a more junior member of staff said that as a tutor on a guaranteed hour contract, she hoped the university could allocate more time for her to spend with her students. This was fulfilled during her supervision Master's dissertation.

*I supervised three masters students ... it is funny because in some ways you would think that getting fairly compensated for it would be at odds with having a fairly close relationship but it was one of the first times teaching that I felt I was fairly compensated for what I was doing ... I actually got paid for the hours that I put in, and that was like a huge relief. It was like 'oh god, I don't have to rush, I don't have to ...' and it was em ... so I developed really close relationships with them. (Charlotte, Social Sciences, Tutor)*

What Charlotte said here is echoed with other participants' ideas that time is a big factor in building pedagogical relationships in the sense that ATS and students may have more opportunities to get to know each other.

#### 5.5.4. Caring

Upon reflection of the research process, during interviews with ATS, I focused too much on eliciting ATS's articulation of the role of caring at Master's level by asking direct questions about caring. This was achieved successfully but I failed to realise the features of caring had already been told without the mentioning of the word care. Fortunately, when I was analysing the data, I identified this issue at an early stage and then tried to actively seek examples and counter-examples of caring offered by teachers. Moreover, I also actively compared and contrasted the elements of care which are demonstrated in ATS's articulation of their teaching with what the ATS explicitly said about caring. After rigorous and systematic analysis, the result shows that ATS think care is very important at Master's level. By analysing their accounts on their interactions with students, it is evident that they did care a lot. Rion's statement shows ATS's understanding of the importance of caring:

*I think caring is essential, because I think creating that positive environment where students feel that someone cares about them and they are not just customers in ... basically paying for certain service, I think can really improve their performance generally (Rion, Social Sciences, Lecturer)*

It is important to explore what behaviours or attitudes constitute care. More than half of the participants automatically associated the word 'care' with the word 'pastoral'. ATS demonstrated different focuses in term of caring. For some participants, caring is about offering help beyond academic issues, and for others it is about encouraging students. For instance:

*We all know that we cannot completely separate the academic work and their personal lives ... of course we need to take care, we need to have an aspect of caring but to what extent are we able to deal with some personal issues ... Sometimes I feel that I am not necessarily trained, I am not necessarily having the skills to do that...The difficulty of separating work time and personal time. For me caring is more about going beyond this strict academic guidance I was talking about. (Gabriel, Social Sciences, Senior lecturer)*

While Gabriel was putting particular limits on caring related to his experience, knowledge and understanding of his role, Elizabeth understood caring as confidence building.

*I think [care] in that particular context is confidence building. Me telling the student that they are good enough to be here ... and if they are worried about success here are some of the steps they can try and take to help themselves. So I think at masters level the duty of care, 90% of the time, is confidence building. (Elizabeth, Humanities, Senior lecturer)*

Notably, caring could take a more subtle form than what the participants explicitly said in the interviews. The participants indicated that they have constantly tried to understand the difficulties that students may face (i.e. showing concern and trying to understand students). They have tried to communicate their expectations and tried different ways to explain certain concepts. Moreover, some ATS found ways to embrace students' aspirations and they expressed the rewarding feeling of seeing students finally achieving intellectual outcomes. Teachers felt happy *for* students. This '*demonstrating concerns - explaining oneself - feeling happy for others*' process is in line with previous literature on caring (for example, see Noddings, 2013).

It can be discerned from interview data that ATS have constantly thought about students, tried different ways to improve their teaching, and have had willingness to facilitate students to achieve their goals. In other words, the care is embedded in their day-to-day practice without them knowing it. This shows that caring is a crucial and inherent element in the pedagogical process at Master's level. As Neil pointed out,

*If you think of old metaphors of universities in the English speaking world ... the alma mater ... the graduate uses the term alma mater to refer to the university, and it is Latin for other mother. It [a university] is the place you become an adult and that is a kind of mothering, parental relationship. And obviously the foundation of that is care. (Neil, Humanities, Senior lecturer)*

## **5.6. Summary**

I began this chapter by discussing ATS's perceptions of Master's studies. I went on to elucidate ATS's understanding of pedagogical relationships and the features of ideal relationships. Next, I discussed the factors that may influence the building and maintaining of positive relationships. More importantly, I tried to establish and demonstrate the connections among those themes. ATS's understanding of Master's study, together with structural pressures, may influence their commitment to Master's programmes, and more specifically their approaches to delivering course materials. ATS's inputs together with the factors that outside their control may influence the relationship they tried to build with students, which in turn, may have an impact of students' learning. In summary, this chapter tried to tell a rich story from the delivery side – ATS's perspective on pedagogical relationships.

The central remaining issue is whether students recognise ATS's efforts and understand the expectations from the ATS. Moreover, whether students know that ATS may face lots of constraints when designing and implementing Master's programmes. An excerpt of dialogue between Elizabeth (Humanities, Senior lecturer) and myself can be used to summarise these remaining questions.

*I: I just wonder how did you tell students the learning expectation from them? Whether the students know the difference between undergraduate and Master's study?*

*R: That is a really good question and I don't know the answer.*

In the chapter that follows, the answers to those questions will be revealed and discussed.

## **Chapter Six**

### **Students' Perspectives**

#### **6.1. Introduction**

In this chapter, I report the findings based on the analysis of interview data with the 19 MSc students who are described in Chapter 4. Three main themes have been identified: *(1) For and beyond jobs: Motivations, expectations, and preparedness for Master's study; (2) Equal relationships with a distance; and (3) Conditions for good relationships to grow: contextual and personal factors.*

The chapter opens with a discussion of students' motivations, expectations, and preparedness for doing Master's studies and their reflections on their learning experiences. This is the first theme to be reported, because it provides important context for the other remaining themes covered in this chapter. For instance, it can be inferred from interview data that students' motivations for pursuing their Master's degree influenced their preferences for certain ways of teaching, including the ways in which students and teachers relate to each other. For example, almost all student participants expressed the desire to deepen their understanding of a given subject. Thus, they hoped their teachers would be able to ask guided questions in an inspirational way to spark their thinking.

The second theme is about the nature of the ideal pedagogical relationship from the students' perspective – equal with a distance. On one hand, students recognised a hierarchy existed between them and their teachers in respect of knowledge and experience. On the other hand, students expressed a wish to be equal in terms of respect and recognition. Based on the data, it can be seen that students characterised the ideal pedagogical relationship as less formal and personal. With such pedagogical relationships students felt less intimidated and safe to share their ideas during the class. This 'equal with hierarchy' relationship almost implied a Socratic method of teaching through dialogue.

The chapter then moved on to discuss the factors that may influence the In other words, students acknowledged that there is a hierarchy regarding to the distribution of knowledge and experience. This difference in constructing the notion of equality to

a large extent provided an explanation of why most student participants highlighted the distance exists in the teacher-student relationships - the perceived social roles and the hierarchy of the distribution of knowledge and experience. As I shall return in Chapter Seven (Discussion), the sense of equality and hierarchy further complicated the assumption that PGT students as experts (Tobbell and O'Donnell, 2013) and the concept of 'mastersness' (Bamber et al., 2019; Knight, 1997)

Theme four is about caring. Based on the interview data, it seems that from students' point of view, some teachers made their teaching effective by being affective. The participants expressed the hope that the teachers would put themselves into students' shoes and provide substantial help for students' learning. Substantial help referred to individualised help and advice provided by teachers based on attending to the specific circumstances of a student. Such help is opposed to the formulaic help which consists of 'same old advice' (Gravett and Winston, 2022, p.368). Notably, the majority of participants differentiated *pedagogical care* from *pastoral care* and emphasised that they hoped teachers would care about their *learning* instead of playing an excessively pastoral role during their learning journey. The students thought it is unfair (i.e. beyond teachers' obligation) for teachers to provide pastoral care at Master's level, although they felt happy if their teachers did demonstrate caring about their lives outside academic settings. Indeed, it seems that the student participants implied an indirect caring from teachers, which was manifested in teachers' care of teaching. Thus, within this theme, I pay significant attention to explore in-depth on what make teachers stand out – by presenting in fine detail the teaching practices which are appreciated by the students.

## **6.2. For and beyond jobs: motivations, expectations, and preparedness for Master's study**

One important finding is that students' motivations for doing a one-year full-time Master's are diverse. The wide range of reasons for pursuing a Master's study can be identified both within an individual participant's account as well as among the whole data set. This diversity raised questions on whether these different motivations fit with the purposes of the MSc programmes held by the ATS. Bearing these diverse motivations in mind, this section then explores students' expectations of their Master's study. It seems that whether these expectations were fulfilled or not was highly related to students' satisfaction of their learning experiences. The data indicated that student

satisfaction and their experiences on MSc programmes was complex and multi-faceted. For instance, the students who were not satisfied with their study in general still held positive views on their tutors. This, to a large extent, implies that the constraining factors for the development of positive pedagogical relationships mainly lay at institutional level and stemmed from the features of Master's study (e.g. modularisation and only one year). Then, I move on to discuss students' preparedness for doing their Master's study.

#### *6.2.1. Competitive advantage in job market*

The most prevalent reason given by students for embarking on their Master's study was to increase their employability. A common theme across all three disciplines was the need to get a competitive advantage in the job market as exemplified by Quan that:

*In my subject area, if you only get an undergraduate degree, you almost don't have any advantage when you try to find a job. With a Master's degree, your advantage might increase a little bit. (Quan, STEM, East Asia)*

Despite the prevalence of this theme, it is important to note the diversity of students' motivations for pursuing Master's degrees (Morgan, 2014), as I reviewed in Chapter 2. Many of these motivations are interwoven with each other. For instance, a students' ultimate goal of increasing their employability could be 'indirectly' fulfilled through the achievement of their primary aim of improving their knowledge of a given subject. Following this line of thinking, it became clear why some participants did not feel they had learned enough subject-related knowledge from their Master's study for their future job, but they still chose to keep learning. For example:

*When I will finish this Master, I feel I wouldn't, if I start working, with this Master's in hand, I probably will have no idea of what to do. That's why I'm keeping studying, studying, and studying. (Elisa, Humanities, Continental Europe)*

### 6.2.2. Beyond finding a job

The reasons for doing a Master's study were not confined to increasing employability. A student may decide to do a Master's study because they really enjoy the learning process (intrinsically motivated) as exemplified by Katie. They may commence a Master's study in order to deepen the knowledge of a given area as, exemplified by Weiwei. They may also pursue Master's study to satisfy deficiencies, given that they had a sense of failure having a Bachelor's degree from a less well-known university, as exemplified by Shi. Notably, obtaining individual gain was not the whole story. As expressed by Mike from a STEM programme who wanted to contribute to the scientific community of his country, students might decide to do a Master's study with a sense of social responsibility. This sparked speculation that against the backdrop of the consumerisation of the UK higher education sector, perhaps education was still viewed by some students as public good. The following excerpts show the diverse reasons for doing a Master's study.

*Also because I really like education anyway...I like learning, I like being taught. So I thought it was a good way of spending another year of doing something I enjoy but also for it to be good for my career. (Katie, Humanities, UK)*

*Only till near the end of my undergraduate study, I had some interest in a particular topic and wanted to study hard. I wanted to be more specialised and broaden my horizon. (Weiwei, Social Sciences, East Asia)*

*To be honest, I studied very hard at senior high school. But performed badly during the College Entrance Exam. So, my university for undergraduate study was not good. So, part of the reasons for pursuing a Master's study was to compensate the sadness and disappointment for not attending a good university. (Shi, Social Sciences, East Asia).*

It is important to stress that although nearly half of the participants expressed a sense of satisfying deficiencies, this is by no means to suggest that they were studying merely for a degree certificate from a prestigious university. Among these participants, they not only felt sad about the reputation of their undergraduate universities, but also perceived that they did not experience the high standard of intellectual challenges from teachers that they would have gained from a prestigious university. I shall return to discuss this in detail in Chapter 7 (discussion), given that this finding has deep pedagogical implications. Indeed, on a micro-level, teachers who teach on Master's programmes need to recognise these students' needs (e.g. looking for intense challenge and insights). On a macro-level, it raised questions regarding academic

literature on 'students as consumers' (for example, see Touliston, 2017). It may not be appropriate to deem students of higher education as a homogeneous group. Indeed, it was a big decision for international students to come to the UK to do their Master's. Thus, compared with undergraduate students, although postgraduate students were paying more for their degrees, the motivations for their studies may be more autonomous. This, to a large extent, suggests that consumerism was not a synchrony of fee-paying service, and thus, scholars and policymakers should reconsider the remit of the concept of consumerisation of UK higher education.

In addition, the data suggests that the students' decision to come to the UK was influenced, not only by their internalised motivations, but also by their economic conditions. Indeed, the students deemed the short duration of a UK Master's programme as a driving force for them to come to the UK because of the relatively low living cost compared to two year Master's in other countries. Meanwhile, student participants raised concerns about the negative pedagogical consequences of the short duration of the course. For example, there was not enough time to build close(r) and personal relationships with their teachers.

The remaining question is to what extent students' motivations for doing a Master's degree is in line with teachers' notions of the purposes of an MSc programme reported in Chapter 5 (Section 5.2.). It is not difficult to discern that the teachers' focus of articulating Master's studies was on preparing for academic careers (e.g. doing a PhD) while the students' focus was on careers in general. This was perhaps because teacher participants had a deeper understanding of what was Master's study was for. It may also be because the teacher participants were from a research-intensive university. However, as noted in Section 5.2.2., teacher participants did acknowledge that not all the students want to be a professor, and when designing the courses, academic staff need to consider students' motivations and expectations.

### *6.2.3. The expectations for Master's study*

On reflection of the data, all student participants expected their Master's studies would be less like undergraduate study and more like PGR study in terms of class size, the depth of knowledge, and the style of learning and teaching. Notably, almost all student participants expressed the expectation of experiencing small-size classes and the

Oxford tutorial model. This implies that they held expectations for experiencing more intimate and interactive pedagogical relationships.

Based on the interview data, it was questionable to what extent, if any, these expectations had been fulfilled. The patterns across the data set indicated that students felt the knowledge they learnt was not in-depth enough (which was perhaps because of the short duration of the course), the class-size was too big, and there was a lack of intimacy regarding the pedagogical relationships. Moreover, it seems that there was not much 'mastersness' about their experiences. What Shi said exemplified this:

*It's just **one** year, how come what we learnt can reach a **Master's [emphasis in original]** level? (Shi, Social Sciences, East Asia)*

Shi was a conversion student who expressed that many concepts covered in her Master's study was relatively new to her. However, this lack of depth of study was also mentioned by those who studied in the same subject as their Bachelor's. For example:

*The study didn't really match with my expectation...a little bit pity...restrained by time, only one year. Didn't learn much. I come here to learn something in-depth or to think about what I've learnt before from new aspects, or something different from what I learnt in my UG study. But the courses didn't match with my expectation...I think Master's study should be more like PhD, exchange ideas with supervisors. (Xiaotong, Social Sciences, East Asia)*

This sense of the lack of depth calls for questions regarding teachers' and students' understandings of the concept of 'mastersness'. As discussed in Section 5.2.3., teachers' focus of the intellectual outcomes was on deepening analytical skills, independence, and students' generating their own ideas. Some teacher participants did mention 'a deeper reading of learning materials', but this did not necessarily match with students' understanding of the meaning of 'in-depth'. Thus, it may be helpful for teachers and students to explicitly communicate the expectations for Master's study at the beginning of the programmes.

Furthermore, regarding expectations for independent learning, more than half of student participants had a feeling of 'being left on their own', which was in line with Tobbell, O'Donnell and Zammit's (2010) observation that 'the practice of

independence is encouraged by an absence of information rather than an active facilitation of helpful practices' (p. 274). For instance:

*I chose to do a taught Master's because I wanted to be taught and I wasn't really taught as much as I would have liked to have been. For me as a Master's student, if I just reflect on my whole year, it was just a year of me spent alone in the library. This is just what I did. 90% of this year. I don't love being alone in the library, that is not why I came back [to uni]...but that is just I guess, part of what it is to be a **Master's [emphasis in original]** student. (Katie, Humanities, UK)*

*For most of time, I learnt on my own. I have had a better pedagogical relationship with myself and the searching engines in the library than the relationships with my teachers...(Jiawen, Social Sciences, East Asia)*

Moreover, while students such as Katie and Jiawen wanted more direct teaching, students such as Yi and Hugh highlighted the issue of class-size and anonymity. They had been looking for a more interactive and closer pedagogical relationships. The point made by Hugh also reflected the issue related to the expansion of UK PGT sector.

*Before I came here, I thought teacher-student relationships at Master's level would be closer. Everyone could have a personal tutor. But when I came here, I found out that it's not that close, because one teacher has to deal with too many students (Yi, Social Sciences, East Asia).*

*For a Master's programme, I was expecting a lot of face-to-face time with professor. And they know everyone's name by name. And they know what we are working on. That's what I expected, but I think the programme is way too big for it to be that intimate relationships with professors...I feel like they just took in too many students for the money and just don't know what to do with it right now. (Hugh, STEM, North America)*

What is implied in students' accounts were their wishes to have meaningful pedagogical relationships with their teachers, which were less anonymous. What is also implied in these accounts is their disappointment regarding the quality of the relationships with some of their teachers. The disappointment was well summarised by Katie:

*Honestly I don't really feel like I know any of them...when I reflect on this whole year it just feels like I spent no time at all being taught by lecturers. They were lovely people from the time I spent with them but I don't know them at all. (Katie, Humanities, UK)*

### **What had been achieved?**

Amid the discussions of those negative experiences, it is important to consider whether the Master's study had any value for the student participants. The answer to this is yes. Some transferable skills had been developed, such as time management skills. Moreover, their potential career paths had become clear. For instance:

*I did realise I like the academic stuff and wanted to do a PhD. (Peter, Humanities, North America)*

*After experiencing all those essay writings, I found that I am more used to expressing my own ideas now. So, I feel like I'm now able to take jobs which requires creativity. (Quan, STEM, East Asia)*

Quan was studying at a programme that was not often associated with creativity. Surprisingly he highlighted being more creative as an outcome of his study. This may be because of two main reasons. Firstly, the Master's study he experienced taught him how to develop his own ideas instead of memorising content from learning materials (which is what he was used to from his undergraduate study). Secondly, by engaging in various learning tasks (e.g. webpage and poster designing), he felt his creativity has been developed.

In addition, through one year Master's study, students obtain a sense of 'growing-up', a sense of development as a whole person. They also expressed that they had been exposed to new ideas from other people and started to view different issues from different perspectives. This is exemplified by Xiaotong who said that:

*The whole learning experience help me develop a lot. And my English improved. Regarding to whether the course contents can help me to achieve what I want to achieve...I think the coursework only broadened my horizon and insight. (Xiaotong, Social Sciences, East Asia)*

#### **6.2.4. Preparedness for Master's study**

##### **6.2.4.1. Background knowledge**

The three programmes which I chose to research during my study were open to students with, and without, background knowledge of the given subjects. About half of the participants in this study did not hold a Bachelor's degree in the same subject as their Master's. Because of this lack of grounding in disciplinary knowledge, some students felt afraid of taking part in group discussions and they wished their teachers

had acknowledged this. The following quote exemplifies the concerns raised by students regarding their lack of strong background knowledge.

*We lack of basic understanding of the content of the programme so it's very difficult to really have intense discussions. We know different aspects, but don't know the ideas behind them. I would be braver to raising questions if classmates are from the same background. I worried about whether other people really understand what I said if they didn't have a strong background knowledge themselves, or whether others may think what I said were too simple and superficial. (Lei, Social Sciences, East Asia)*

With this concern in mind, many student participants expressed appreciation if the reading materials selected by teachers were not too difficult to understand. The appreciation of easier learning materials was *prima facie* a consumer attitude because it seemed that the students hoped to pass the course with minimum efforts. However, a deeper reading should be given to this scenario. As Lei indicated above, students had a fear of their ideas being too superficial. This indicated students' had a willingness to engage in more intense discussions at Master's level. The easier materials were for complementing their knowledge deficiencies in a given topic, rather than for obtaining an easy pass for the course. This, again, indicates the contestation of 'students as consumers' discourse.

#### 6.2.4.2. Students' English proficiency

This was echoed in how the teachers' perceived students' English proficiency, and how the student participants highlighted the negative impacts of low English proficiency on their overall learning experiences of Master's study. Such a widely shared perception of the deficiencies in using English as a medium for study, to a large extent, casts doubt on the internalisation of PGT market. Indeed, despite the fact that these programmes all have IELTS conditions for entry, all non-native English-speaking participants (14 out of 19) highlighted that their command of the English language during their study was a huge challenge for them. They acknowledged the influence of their insufficient English skills on both in-class learning and (lack of) interaction with their teachers. Moreover, they noted that they would have enjoyed the courses more if their English was better. For example:

*For me, it's always been the language. It is very difficult. (Alana, STEM, West Asia)*

*Whether teachers convey their ideas to students effectively to some extent depends on our own English proficiency ... During the first semester, I should have interacted with teachers more, but I was afraid of to do so, because I was still at a stage of getting used to speak English (Yi, Social Sciences, East Asia)*

Furthermore, a participant who is a native English speaker raised the issue of his classmates' English proficiency and expressed his frustration.

*Some of my classmates' their English skill...I mean they are good on paper, they are brilliant people, but communication wise they had a lot of hard time communicating in English, which makes a project a lot harder than it used to be...My personal experience, it's always been like in a group...a couple of people who don't speak English, then one or two English speakers who did all the work. And just carry everyone else. There's a lot, **a lot [emphasis in original]** of complaints about this in my programme...If I have a good group, or not even a good group but a competent group with people I can hear all opinions properly, then I think the programme would be more successful. (Hugh, STEM, North America)*

The issues raised by the student participants provided evidence on the importance of English proficiency. The issues suggest that maybe the higher education institutions need to reconsider whether IELTS is sufficient as the sole tool for assessing students' ability in English usage. Indeed, although non-English speaking Master's students may get good grades for their course works through hard work, the lack of English proficiency has negatively influenced the building of positive pedagogical relationships between teachers and students, and between students and their peers. After all, interaction is the foundation of building and maintaining relationships (Karpouza and Emvalotis, 2019). If basic communications and interactions between different parties were hampered, it is unrealistic to expect that meaningful relationships can be built.

The other issue related to students' preparedness was whether they understood what they were expected to achieve at Master's level. Despite the speculations that PGT students were often deemed as mature 'expert' students, the data in this study indicated that most of the participants were not clear about the learning expectations at some point in their Master's study.

#### 6.2.4.3. 'Oh! So that's what you wanted me to learn!'

The heading of this section was taken from one of the interviews and vividly summarised part of all participants' feelings towards their Master's study. It seems

that students might be confused from the very beginning of their study. Their confusions encompass at least three levels. At programme-level, students may or may not hold a clear and secure understanding of their programme, including the content of the programme. At course-level, some students were confused about the contents covered in certain courses. Finally at assessment-level, the students may be confused about what they were expected to demonstrate in their essays. This finding further challenged the assumption that PGT students are 'experts'. They might be experts in the sense that they had already dealt with academic issues (e.g. preparation for exams) for four years. However, in the face of the aforementioned levels of preparedness and expected 'mastersness', even though they were experts in their previous studies, they felt they were novice learners in their Master's studies. This feeling was exemplified by Quan:

*We are all mature students and have already obtained a Bachelor's degree. In theory, we shouldn't feel **that [emphasis in original]** challenging in Master's study. However, after all it was the **first [emphasis in original]** time to do a Master's degree and the first time to write essays at Master's level. [Laughing] (Quan, STEM, East Asia)*

According to student participants, especially for conversion students, their programmes had thoughtfully provided courses on introducing the basic key concepts of their subjects. However, what was missing in some programmes was the introduction of the ways of how to do well in the subjects, especially when students' levels of preparedness were varied and they were not familiar with the disciplinary norms on writing good essays. For example, Katie, a UK-domiciled student who was doing an MSc in the same disciplinary area as her undergraduate, pointed out that,

*At the time I spoke to people when we had just kind of started, I think a lot of people weren't really told what was expected of them in terms of how to write an essay or what is wanted...For me that is something I don't even think about because I am so well versed in writing [subject name] essays. I know exactly what a [subject name] essay is meant to me. But we weren't taught that at all. (Katie, Humanities, UK)*

Implicit in Kaite's quote was that the students had willingness to do well through putting in great efforts to get a good grade. This was again a signal of contestation of 'students as consumers' discourse that students wanted to get good grades effortlessly.

Furthermore, some students felt confused on a programme level. A minority of participants noted that they did not really have a deep reading of the course descriptions when they chose the optional courses. This could be part of the reasons why students felt frustrated about the courses. For instance:

*I rushed to submit the application for Master's study. And I was struggling for passing the IELTS, so compared with my classmates, I didn't really have time to think about what courses to choose before I came here ... I chose the optional courses according to the titles solely, or at the very best, I tried to read through the description and to get to know what the courses are about **very briefly** [emphasis in original]. (Xiaotong, Social Sciences, East Asia)*

Although it was students' responsibility to read the programme and course descriptions, it might be helpful if programme directors and course organisers explained the purposes of the courses clearly in person. More importantly, it is up to teachers to communicate expectations explicitly to students to absorb at the beginning of the course.

### **6.3. Equal relationships with a distance**

All student participants deemed feeling equal as a key feature of ideal pedagogical relationships. The sense of equality in this study is a multifaceted concept. Student participants did not assume equality existed in every aspect of the teaching-learning dynamic. On one hand, students wanted and appreciated a sense of equality in terms of respect and recognition. On the other hand, students acknowledged that there was a hierarchy between them and their teachers with regard to knowledge and experience. This unique feature – equal with a hierarchy – implied a desire for the Socratic method of teaching and learning. Furthermore, although the students acknowledged their deficiencies in knowledge, they did hope teachers would treat their opinion as equally valid. Such hope may imply the importance of teachers' recognition of the emotional work students invested in making a contribution in class. In addition, students' desire for having relationships that are (more) personal implies that students conceptualised teacher-student relationships as a highly interpersonal relationships, rather than a 'GP consultation' type of professional relationship.

#### *6.3.1. Feeling equal with an inherent hierarchy*

The student participants in this study appreciated if the relationships with their teachers were equal, while acknowledging that their teachers had much more

knowledge and experience than the students in the given subject. Regarding their teachers' attitudes towards Master's students, almost all participants expressed that the teachers should not be 'lofty'. A Chinese idiom – *pinyijinren* - can be applied to summarise how students think the teachers should treat students. This is an idiom usually used to describe people who hold a high position, but who are amiable, approachable, and down-to-earth. For example:

*An ideal mode is teachers and students are relatively equal. Teachers would respect students. A relationship in which everyone is at ease and natural. (Yi, Social Sciences, East Asia)*

*The ideal teachers are those who are 'pinyijinren'. Some teachers gave you a feeling that they are very lofty. They made me think I don't have enough knowledge to communicate with them. But there are some teachers I really like. They still give you a sense of distance [in terms of knowledge and experience], but the atmosphere is that all students have a good relationship with the teachers. (Lei, Social Sciences, East Asia)*

It is slightly problematic when approaching the issue of teachers' respect to students' ideas and opinions on a topic. While students, such as Lei, felt a lack of confidence in communicating ideas with teachers, they had the need for their ideas to be valued by teachers. For example:

*You are a Master's student so you already have some ideas or what you want to do and the teacher has to respect that right. (Sally, Humanities, South America)*

Sally's idea of a Master's student seems to be closer to the ideal that the teaching staff had - that students would have relatively sufficient background knowledge and ideas that would allow an equal academic conversation. However, Sally's assumptions about what it is to be a Master's student, as indicated in the rest of the data, were not the case for all students. This could once again reflect the diverse motivations and expectations that the students brought into their Master's study. Similarly, students from other programmes also express the hope that their ideas and criticisms would be considered to be valid. For instance:

*I think you should definitely be very equal. I think, like, Master's students should be able to come to lecturers with kind of any issues and kind of go back and forth. They should kind of be considered as peers whose kind of criticism is valid. (Alice, STEM, UK)*

These students' contentions raised questions on teaching and learning practices at Master's level. For instance, whether a Master's student who is new to a discipline is going to have an equally valid perspective on a topic to someone who has been working in the field for 20 years. The answer to this question might be 'no', but a deeper interpretation of what the participants said is needed. They were not trying to argue that their ideas and opinions should be accepted by the teachers even though the ideas were poor. Instead, they were trying to highlight the importance for having a space in which opinions are all welcomed to be evaluated. What student participants said also emphasised the importance of teachers' recognition of the emotional work students can feel during a class. For example:

*It happened to me during the first semester here, with the teacher of [course name]. I tried to say what I was thinking but he didn't consider at all what I was saying. And I came back home with the feeling I was stupid. 'I will never talk again because I said something very stupid' and of course you never want to feel yourself stupid or make the other people think you are stupid. (Elisa, Humanities, Continental Europe)*

In turn, such environment in which students feel comfortable to share ideas could contribute to build equal relationships.

*I hope we would have a feeling that we are needed. We may share something that they didn't really know before...the feeling was very nice when teachers listened to our opinions attentively and carefully. (Lan, Social Sciences, East Asia)*

The sense of being needed stressed the reciprocal nature of pedagogical relationships, which was manifested in the fact that Master's students were willing to contribute to the building of an equal relationship. This was echoed by teachers' accounts that they would like to learn new perspectives from the students. Moreover, there was a shared responsibility regarding the need to build relationships with an equal nature. For instance:

*An equal relationship can only be established when the students are excellent. Because teachers are very knowledgeable. You need to make your teachers appreciate your academic ability first. But of course, every student has special ideas and previous experiences. I learnt a lot from them. Maybe some teachers are better than others in identifying students who has knowledge can help their [the teachers] understanding of something. Then, those teachers may deem teacher-student relationships more equal. (Xinyi, Social Sciences, East Asia)*

It is important to note that although the de facto hierarchy of knowledge and experience may sometimes make students feel intimidated, such hierarchy may be a positive element to facilitate learning. Students hoped the hierarchy would serve as a starting point for their learning. For example:

*Some teachers made me feel they are very arrogant. They wanted you to ask them questions, but not to challenge their ideas ... Some teachers may feel what we [students] said are all non-sense. I know what I said are all bullshit. But maybe, just maybe, there are something valuable for digging out from the bullshit. I hope teachers play a role to guide me to find out those valuable stuff. (Xinyi, Social Sciences, East Asia).*

As exemplified by what Xinyi said, the student wants the teacher to respect their ideas but at the same time acknowledge that their ideas are not robust. This largely indicates students' perception of the role of teachers at the Master's level, namely, to help students improve the robustness of their thinking. It implies a desire for the Socratic Method where the tutor talks the students through the implications of their thinking until the students reach their own sound conclusions.

### 6.3.2. Personal but with distance

Almost all student participants expressed that they wished their relationships with their teachers could be less anonymous and closer. This implies that students paid much attention to the interpersonal dimension of teacher-student relationships *vis-à-vis* a purely professional “GP consultation” type of relationship. A majority of the participants noted that teachers should be ‘friendly’. Within this majority, more than half used ‘friendship’ as an analogy for the ideal pedagogical relationship. The concepts of ‘friendship’ and ‘friendly’ in this study are slightly different from their daily meaning. Indeed, many students highlighted that the personal relationship was not without boundaries. They would not talk about *any* topics with their teachers as friends normally do. In other words, building friendly relationships with teachers was not an end in itself. Students hoped their learning would be facilitated *through* the relationships. Thus, the concept of friendship can be understood as a type of relationship which was featured by less formality, equal, trust, respect, and caring.

From students’ perspectives, relationships that were close and personal were manifested in different ways. They were surprised, and welcomed it, when teachers shared their personal stories and asked students’ advice on non-course related issues during classes (e.g. one participant mentioned a story about a lecturer’s relative encountering some health issues, and the lecturer asked students for advice). Other students felt happy and cared about when teachers called their names and remembered their personal details. For example:

*Here they remember your name, and they call you by your first name. And they know what you did during the last semester and they remember what you said during that class and all these kind of things. And this creates some kind of personal relationship. (Elisa, Humanities, Continental Europe)*

Indeed, the majority of students expressed their appreciation of their teachers’ small actions (e.g. knowing students’ names). This indicates that teachers need to increase their awareness of the importance of their teaching practice, since their practice may have big influence on students’ learning experiences.

*A teacher remembered my name and where I am from. He called my name during the class and asked about my views. The perception to the teacher has changed. I realised that actually the teachers care about all the students, rather than just finishing job. If I didn’t take this course, I would feel the teachers didn’t*

*care about me. I prefer communicating and seeking help from such teachers.  
(Lei, Social Sciences, East Asia)*

Similar to Lei, many students felt warmth when they found out their teachers did not treat them as another nameless face. It seems that when the teachers unexpectedly called the students' by their names, the students may perceive that there is a willingness on teacher's side that they wanted to know their students. The demonstration of such willingness, in turn, was an antecedent for building meaningful pedagogical relationships.

Furthermore, student participants expressed that they wished and appreciated if their teachers were friendly. For instance, Alice, who had gained her undergraduate degree from the same institution at which she was doing a Master's degree, reflected on her learning experiences and noted that one big difference of relationships with her teachers at undergraduate and postgraduate level is that the teachers seem to be more friendly:

*The biggest difference ... the staff are much friendlier and kind of you have better relationships with them at Master's level. (Alice, STEM, UK)*

There were a number of possible reasons behind this. At Master's level, on the teachers' side, teachers may deem Master's students as mature adults compared to their undergraduate counterparts. On the students' side, they may have a (greater) sense of achievement after their undergraduate study. It may also be because of the relationships they experienced prior to their Master's study. As mentioned by several non-UK students, the relationships with the teachers were more hierarchical or personal in their home countries than the ones in the UK. In comparison, they either appreciated or discarded the pedagogical relationships that existed in their Master's studies.

Furthermore, more than half of the participants (mainly from East Asia) used word 'friendship' to describe features of the ideal pedagogical relationship with teachers. This may partly be because in Eastern Asian culture, people tended to use a Chinese idiom to describe the role of teachers (at all level of education), namely, *yishiyiyou* - as a teacher and a friend. For example:

*In an ideal teacher-student relationship, students and teachers may get along with each other like friends. They would appreciate your ideas and exchange ideas with you. I think this is a very good format of relationships. (Jinming, Social Sciences, East Asia).*

As exemplified by the above quote, the students in this study were not using the word 'friendship' with its daily used meaning, such as sharing personal anecdotes with friends. This special kind of friendship has boundaries and needs to serve pedagogical purposes. For instance:

*It should be teacher-student relationship **plus [emphasis in original]** friendship. It's not either or. I shouldn't chat with teachers about food or fashion. Of course I can chat these topics with teachers only if they related to a topic under my study. So, friendships within teacher-student relationships have boundaries. I wouldn't chat everything with teachers. (Xiaotong, Social Sciences, East Asia)*

*It is just that this teacher must remain something far from you. I mean you can create some kind of bond, some kind of link between you and the teacher but there must be a distance, so that you don't ... for instance, you study a topic just because the teacher ... you study the topic because of yourself and your purposes in life, with your interest in the topic in any case. Having this affection with your teacher can help you find the topic even more interesting. This is definitely true. But as I said the teacher must remain kind of distant and kind of neutral and I don't think you should have ... share some kind of personal aspects of your life. (Elisa, Humanities, Continental Europe)*

Although Elisa stressed the importance of a distance between students and teachers, what is also implied in her account, and among other participants' accounts, was the important role of teachers for their Master's study. There might be an assumption that because Master's students were experts and adult learners, the pedagogical importance of relationships was diminished. This study has provided clear evidence that this is not the case. For instance:

*When I feel this kind of feeling [affection] for my teachers I am always more willing to study their subject. For instance, last semester there was this teacher of ... A super hard topic. But the teacher was so good, he has been so kind to me ... I studied the topic more for him than the topic itself. I mean the topic was super interesting of course but maybe it wouldn't have been that interesting if it wasn't for him. (Elisa, Humanities, Continental Europe).*

*Through her, through her experience and how she made us feel, now I am more interested in the topic. But I would say that is just ... we got really close, all the students with her. Which is not the same in other courses, to be honest. Other teachers are more ... they are supportive, they are really good but they are just*

*like more ... I don't know, more separate. You feel more comfortable with her. (Sally, Humanities, South America)*

Similar to Sally's and Elisa's views, the majority of participants appreciated inspiration from their teachers. This implies how positive relationships support student learning, namely, students would engage more deeply with the course materials if they felt safe and comfortable to take on academic challenges. Such in-depth engagement with the course materials was in line with the concept of 'mastersness' and the teachers' expectations of the learning outcomes. It is reasonable to argue that the pedagogical importance of relationships is the same (if not more) important at Master's level than at undergraduate and school level. Indeed, as Sally continued:

*A perfect relationship would be a relationship where the students feel comfortable in the class, not necessarily comfortable with the topic. Because I think that the topic needs to challenge you in a way... You are comfortable talking to the teacher... even if your question is a small question ... Everybody could say what you feel, what you like. It was really good. So all the students could actually participate in how the course is organised ... You feel that you are actually part of the experience. (Sally, Humanities, South America)*

### 6.3.3. Less formality

In general, student participants at Master's level welcome less formal relationships with teachers. One of the students raised the concern that students' perceived requirement for addressing teachers formally may counterbalance teachers' efforts toward building equal relationships. For example:

*Sometimes people get overly caught up in the sort of formality. And kind of academia wanna things to be formal...I guess it's not a good staff-student relationship to worry about how your wording...tidying introduction of the email so much that you fell you have to ask someone else's advice on it. Cos that's like you're putting way too much effort into that...it's wasted effort, I think. And you don't want a relationship where someone is putting in wasted effort. Cos that's never a good dynamic, I think. (Alice, STEM, UK)*

This widely reported sense of informality among student participants implies the mutuality of the relationships. Despite the inherent hierarchical nature of the teacher-student relationship, students hoped for equal emotional investment from both sides in building and maintaining pedagogical relationships. Furthermore, students expressed the willingness to know their teachers as people without confinement to social roles as students and teachers. They believe that this could be achieved by

participating in social events. Once again, this implies that most students conceptualised teacher-student relationships as highly interpersonal. For example:

*If the university did organise kind of like activities or lunches or something, with the students and the lecturers. Because obviously when you are in a tutorial or a lecture, the point is for you to be taught things and to learn, it is not really a time for you to be like building any form of relationship. So I think in order to build a relationship there is going to have to be time that is spent not in the classroom really. (Katie, Humanities, UK)*

At the first reading, Katie seemed to provide an interesting view that the classroom was not a place for building close(r) relationships. A deeper reading of what she said was that at first, teacher-student interactions did not equal teacher-student relationships. Relationships, to Katie, contained a personal aspect which went beyond professional social roles of teachers and students. The personal aspect was brought to the surface by non-academic events where teachers and students can communicate informally.

For close and personal relationships to grow, certain conditions are needed. The following section will explore the factors, both contextual and personal, that influence the building and maintaining positive teacher-student relationships.

#### **6.4. Conditions for Good Relationships to Grow: Contextual and personal factors**

This section reported the factors, recognised by the student participants, that may influence the building of the ideal pedagogical relationship. These factors can be sorted into two categories: (1) contextual factors which are beyond teachers' and students' control, and (2) personal factors that teachers can devote efforts to. Although, as mentioned in the previous section, students recognised the mutual responsibility for making the relationships equal, in this section students mainly discussed the factors that exist on the teachers' side and what the university can do. Implicit in this was the inherent hierarchy existing in teacher-student relationships. It seems that even with mature 'expert' learners at Master's level, teachers have the role and responsibility to set the pace for the development of relationships (Karpouza and Emvalotis, 2019). What is missing from the data was the widely assumed 'student-as-consumer' attitude. This is particularly surprising given the high tuition fee that the participants had to pay towards their education at Master's level.

#### 6.4.1. Contextual factor: The scale of the class and programme

'Small class size' was deemed by the majority of participants as the precondition for establishing good relationships. When asked about the courses they enjoyed the most, almost all participants started the description by saying that the course was held in a reading group type of setting, where students and the teacher sat around the table and exchanged opinions. Although most of the participants did not specify a number during discussion of the 'small' size, based on the analysis of their description of the teaching and learning activities that occurred in the small-size classes, it can be assumed that the small-size class articulated by the participants corresponds to the class-size classification devised by the Student Academic Experience Survey (Neves and Hewitt, 2020), namely, 1 – 15 students per class. In such environments, teachers get to know students better, which is, in turn, an important condition for building personal relationships. Indeed, in a small-sized class, teachers are more likely to have an opportunity to know students personally and to identify their learning needs. It also creates opportunities for students to interact with each other and with their teacher. Such opportunities create a sense of familiarity. This is exemplified by Sally who said that:

*It was a small course. We were five. We were all together and it felt really familiar, you know. And she was really interested in know what we think about each topic. (Sally, Humanities, South America)*

Notably, in response to the interview question on suggestions to the university for facilitating building meaningful pedagogical relationships, almost all students highlighted the importance of reducing the size of the classes and programmes, while many of them doubted the possibility for reducing the size at programme level. For example:

*Making classes smaller. That is all the university can do because you cannot force the teachers to teach in a specific way. Or you could not force the students to want to participate or anything. I would say that only try to make smaller groups, but I get that that is complicated in some programmes. But to me that makes a difference. To me that makes a huge difference. To be able to have a smaller discussion groups and stuff. (Sally, Humanities, South America)*

Moreover, what Sally said above reflected students' perceptions of their classmates' preparedness for Master's study. It seems that students recognised that with adult

learners, there were limited ways for teachers to make students engage with the course. Furthermore, reducing class-size would not only benefit the quality of in-class teaching and learning, but also, according to some participants, would benefit the one-on-one pedagogical relationships. Students perceived that there was a diminishment of time that teachers spent with each students when the programme, and class size, was too big. This has resulted in students' perception of teachers' 'busyness'. For instance:

*I know they are very busy, especially if 30 or 40 students want to see her/him after class. They don't have the time. I think for a good teacher-student relationships, it should start from the basis that the programmes not being so massive. (Hugh, STEM, North America)*

Such perceptions, together with perceived hierarchy in teacher-student relationships, may create students' perceptions of the unapproachability of their teachers. This may provide an explanation of why students sometimes did not seek help from their teachers proactively, despite the encouragement from the teachers and the 'open-door policy' promoted by the teachers, because, as mentioned by some of the participants, they did not want to waste their teachers' time.

#### *6.4.2. Contextual factor: Short duration and the institutionalisation of teacher-student relationships*

It can be sensed from the data that the fast-paced and modularised one year Master's programmes in the UK made it difficult for students and teachers build close(r) relationships. Indeed, with some of the participants' courses, there were different lecturers or tutors introducing the topics each week throughout a semester. As reflected by some of the student participants, they could not even remember their teachers' names, let alone build personal relationships with them. Moreover, echoing some of the teachers' accounts, students perceived that there might be a lack of willingness from both sides to build meaningful pedagogical relationships, due to the short duration of the taught components of their studies, which typically last only about eight months.

Despite the absence of a consumer attitude when participants described their own learning experiences, some students did feel that the teacher-student relationships were transactional at some points of their study. It seemed that the source of such

feeling was not from teachers' and students' attitudes to building pedagogical relationships, but mainly from the institutionalised way of how students and teachers were expected to interact with each other, which was characterised by a high level of formality. One participant's 'GP' analogy well summarised most students' feelings towards the institutionalised teacher-student relationships.

*I hope they can be accessed more easily. The arrange of the meeting should be more flexible. At the moment it feels like making appointment with my GP. I don't like such formal arrangement... My supervisor is kind, but always so busy, she gave me a big sense of distance. (Jiawen, Social Sciences, East Asia)*

The formality of teacher-student interactions and the formulaic way of communicating with students made students feel the relationships (if any) established with their teachers were not genuine, in the sense that the teachers were merely fulfilling their job in response to the institutional requirements. For instance:

*I may put it in this way: It feels like a transactional relationship. Maybe because the university asks teachers to have personal meetings with students. So teachers have to fairly allocate time for students' appointments. It feels like teachers' time was divided like cakes and sold to students. You pay the tuition fee, so I [teachers] have to take care of you. But that's all the time (cake) you can get. It's kind of ostensible. It feels like they were highlighting that they were taking care of you, so you shouldn't criticise them for not caring. (Xinyi, Social Sciences, East Asia)*

Xinyi's comments also implied that a poor interaction was worse than no interaction at all. Katie further demonstrated how frustrating it was when students encountered a teacher-student interaction with poor quality.

*I think it is kind of stupid really. It wastes everyone's time that at the start of term you have this one meeting with someone and they are just like 'ok, what subjects have you picked' and then you never see them again. It is just kind of weird formality where that person is suddenly meant to be the person that you go to if you have any concerns, but really you just spoke to them for five minutes, if you have a concern you are probably not going to go to that person, you don't really know them that well. (Katie, Humanities, UK)*

Although teacher participants reflected that most teachers would arrange meetings with their students and had an open-door policy, in reality it seemed that students were not feeling those meetings were as useful as they are designed to be. The ostensible meetings with teachers seemed have created a sense of distrust on the student's side. Indeed, students might gain a feeling that they were receiving care

from 'strangers' rather than a person they knew and trusted. This view, to some extent, explained why Master's students felt 'helplessness', while the institutions claimed to have designed various ways for helping students. It seemed that institutions had rightfully designed meetings for engaging students into the programmes, but this effort was counterbalanced by the workloads imposed on teachers. As a result, the measures for helping students were implemented and experienced poorly, due to the lack of available time for teachers that would allow them to devote time and energy to interacting with students.

Apart from these institutional constraints, students discussed factors that were closely related to their teachers: (1) teachers' approachability and (2) teachers' pedagogical caring.

#### *6.4.3. Personal factor: Approachability*

The word approachability used in this section contains two aspects of meaning. First, it refers to teachers' accessibility, meaning that students can make contact with teachers easily. This aspect of approachability was largely influenced by the institutional factors. However, implicit in more than half of the participants' accounts, approachability was not confined to institutional factors, but it can be facilitated by teachers' efforts to devote time to students. For instance:

*They come across as like a friendly person and if you do ask for help they are totally on board with that and willing to give you their time so you don't feel like by asking for help that you are harassing them or that they don't have time for you (Katie, Humanities, UK)*

Secondly, as indicated in Katie's words, in line with Sabir (2015) and Perrine (1998), approachability also means students' perceptions of their teachers as being friendly, easy to talk to, and warm. Furthermore, according to most student participants, being approachable is not only a desirable personal trait of teachers what was equally important was teachers' *ability and efforts* in building a learning environment within which students feel safe and unintimidated. This was exemplified by Mike who said that:

*First thing that teachers should ensure is that students feel free to ask anything about the lecture topic. Feel confident to talk to the lecturers if the students face any problem in the learning and understanding. Lecturers should make warmth for all of them to participant equally in the class. (Mike, STEM, South Asia)*

Notably, such welcoming environments, as implied by Mike, may be influenced by students' sense of fairness, including the opportunities for interacting with teachers during class. Despite many positive encounters, some non-English speaking students expressed disappointment when they felt that their teachers interacted with native English speaking students more frequently. As Mike continued that

*Honestly speaking, I have experienced some teachers they actually talked mostly with English speaking students. Obviously the English-speaking students feel more confident within their region, their country. And they way they feel in the class, we don't feel that way. It is important at international level learning - making yourself free and open to students from other countries and cultures, and make them feel easy to approach. Equal opportunity. (Mike, STEM, South Asia)*

Those negative experiences highlighted again the importance of English proficiency at Master's level and its implications on relationship building. It also has a practical implication for teachers on a one year full-time Master's programmes - increasing teachers' cultural awareness. When teachers demonstrated the cultural sensitivity, students might perceive them as caring teachers.

#### *6.4.4. Personal factor: pedagogical caring*

'Excellent teachers are those who care' – this is a salient finding constructed during the analysis. Along with other aspects (e.g. the large class-sizes) that the students were not satisfied with, the student participants seemed to have very positive things to say about (some of) their teachers. These positive things can be categorised as 'teachers' caring'. Teachers' caring in this study, informed by Anderson *et al.*'s (2020) categorisation, was manifested in three areas: (1) Teachers care about the subject (i.e. teachers' passion and enthusiasm on the topics that they teach); (2) teachers care about teaching and learning (i.e. preparation and delivery of teaching, which is based on knowing students' needs); and (3) teachers care about students (i.e. want the best for the students). These aspects were exemplified by Hugh who said that

*Well, the teachers who do stand out are the ones who care. I don't mind if you are a hard grader or don't do well in the classes. The fact is they are there to teach you information and make you successful other than promote their agenda. They genuinely care about the students, they genuinely want you to do well, they genuinely want to teach you something. It's like the teachers are passionate about students' learning... Those who can push you think outside the box instead of wanting you to do everything in their way are good*

*professors...The ones who want to have a dialogue with you...The ones who will take a lot of extra steps. (Hugh, STEM, North America)*

What Hugh said indicated that teachers' caring was not only exemplified by *direct* caring about students, but is also manifested in how teachers care about teaching. This, to a large extent, reflected students' perceptions of the vital role of teachers at Master's level as a person who would push and guide students through dialogues. Moreover, Hugh's notion of 'pushing' students was in stark contrast with the assumed consumer attitudes that students tried to avoid being challenged. Furthermore, students hoped the teachers would put themselves into students' shoes. This practice, in turn, was perceived by students as genuine care, because the students thought their teachers wanted them to get most out of their Master's studies as opposed to delivering teaching in a manner which was not based on knowing students' learning needs. This highlighted the importance for having close(r) relationships between teachers and students, given that such relationships may provide conditions for teachers and students to get to know each other. In turn, teachers may be able to provide more personalised help rather than formulaic advice to students.

It is reasonable to argue that students participating in this study conceptualised caring at Master's level as mainly *pedagogical* rather than *pastoral*. For example, as Sally said in the following quote, the students were looking for personalised help from teachers that the students can then use to develop their own learning instead of expecting teachers to solve all their problems. In other words, students implicitly demonstrated a tendency for becoming independent learners. However, this independence in students' learning would be achieved with their teachers' help and care rather than being left on their own, which may make them become 'isolated' learners.

*Giving you useful tools you know...I don't want you to write my essay. I just want you to tell me how I can do it better. Some teachers are funny. They are just telling you 'don't worry you are going to be fine'. That is nice but it is not useful. I mean you can call your parents, they will tell you the same. What I want from a teacher is that you tell me 'this is your problem, this is a way of how you can resolve it, use this, read this, try to do this' and I will go and do it and I will find my own answer. (Sally, Humanities, South America)*

Although the student participants almost unanimously emphasised the pedagogical care of their teachers, they felt happy if their teachers did demonstrate caring about their lives outside of the academic setting. This contradicted feeling further manifested in students' narratives that, on one hand, they thought it was unfair for teachers to take the role of providing pastoral care which was beyond the teachers' obligations but on the other hand, they thought it was awkward and less helpful for asking help from non-academic teaching staff who did not know the courses that the students were taking very well. The pedagogical and pastoral care nexus shed further light on the practices of student support at Master's level. For example:

*It could definitely be significantly better because the existing stuff is intimidating ... they need to set up a relationship with those members of staff that you can go to about that help ... because there is nothing done to do that. You have made people get on with the lecturers but the lecturers aren't really ... you shouldn't be going to the lecturers with those issues and they are not set up to deal with them. So ... you are kind of left feeling like you don't know the person you can go to deal with that stuff about which doesn't make you inclined to go seek out a stranger to kind of deal with it, I think. (Alice, STEM, UK)*

#### 6.4.4.1. Caring about the subjects

Most participants expressed that they identified good teachers as those who demonstrated passion and enthusiasm in the subjects that they taught. Teachers' passion was 'transmissible', in the sense that many participants reported that their teachers' passion had made them respond to the topic in the same passionate way. For instance:

*If they are really passionate about what they are talking about, they really care about what they are talking about, it kind of makes you care a bit more. Make you to think this information is more important. (Hugh, STEM, North America)*

Students also highlighted the inspirational role of teachers in their learning journey. This was exemplified by Elisa,

*He would let us talk a lot during the class. He's like a director of an orchestra. He's able to create discussions which are very valuable, very interesting. And he's always able to make us feel confident. (Elisa, Humanities, Continental Europe)*

I shall return to the orchestra conductor analogy in detail in Chapter 7, as this analogy is in line with my central argument regarding the feature of ideal pedagogical

relationships – equal with hierarchy. On one hand, a music director of an orchestra needs to respect each musician's individuality and talent, given that each musician is an expert for their specialised musical instruments. Elisa's wish to have more chance to talk indicated that she hoped the teachers may value students' views and give students a chances to exchange those views. However, on the other hand, a conductor is inherently at a higher position than other musicians in an orchestra given that she/he is the person who sets the pace for the entire music and who takes charge of pointing out musicians' mistakes. Moreover, an orchestra conductor also has the responsibility for inspiring fellow musicians with her/his expertise, knowledge and passion about music during rehearsals and performances.

Conversely, it was demotivating when a teacher demonstrated 'carelessness' about what they taught. For example:

*The person who organised the course, didn't really seem to care about it. Like it wasn't their area of interest and they didn't care how students did in it ... it was like 'I only lecture because it is part of my job' as opposed to 'I enjoy it and want people to learn'. (Alice, STEM, UK)*

It remains unclear why some teachers left negative impressions to the students. It might be due to their teaching techniques (e.g. asking relatively close-ended questions which did not spark deep intellectual conversations) or it may be because the teachers lack of particular interest in the topic they taught. Alice's words to some extent echoed what Neil expressed in last chapter, that some teachers might have lost faith in the value of Master's programmes and the person who was running the course might not be someone who has interest in the topic. No matter what the reasons behind the students' negative impression, the findings highlighted that students did experience some of their courses negatively. This calls for some reviews and reflections on the provision of Master's programmes. Furthermore, what Alice said also implied that teachers need not only have passion in what they teach, but also need to demonstrate passion in the way of how they teach it (i.e. their teaching) and to care about students' learning.

#### 6.4.4.2. Caring about teaching and learning

The student participants suggested that teachers' care about teaching (and learning) was manifested in a wide range of practices that are based on understanding

students' diverse backgrounds and learning needs. What underpinned this understanding was teachers' attention to the hierarchy (in terms of content knowledge) that existed in the pedagogical relationships. In turn, teachers were expected by students, to put effort into providing and presenting course materials in a way that would benefit students with diverse backgrounds. For instance:

*Good professors should delivery the lecture in such a way that is understandable to all levels of students, they must understand one thing at first, the audience are not as knowledgeable as them. Not as experienced as them. So, we are at beginning level. Some professors actually don't care about that. And talk about really technical stuff. Sometimes, I feel like, I'm lost. (Mike, STEM, South Asia)*

It is important to note that the students' expressed needs, which seemly implied a preference for learning materials with a low-level of difficulty, was not in contrast with the concept of 'mastersness'. The expressed needs must be read and interpreted in combination with the students' willingness to take on the intellectual challenges at Master's level. Indeed, it is because students wanted to participate in deep intellectual debates, but they hoped to understand the basics first. Furthermore, it seemed that most Master's students in this study thought their teachers should play a pivotal role in helping them absorb knowledge. This was exemplified by Xiaotong who said that

*I don't care whether you are the leader scholar in this area or not, my concern is whether you can facilitate my understanding of the topic. The real amazing teachers are those who can explain the complicated and profound concepts in the simplest way. They need to consider the feeling of the recipients of their lectures. (Xiaotong, Social Sciences, East Asia)*

What Xiaotong said implied students' willingness for engaging in complicated concepts at Master's level, which suggested that the universities need to recognise the important role of academics as teachers and to provide substantial support for teaching. Moreover, when student participants described their learning experiences, they tended to highlight their feelings and emotions, which reflects that teaching and learning were not only an intellectual undertaking, but they are also embedded in emotions (Palmer, 1998).

Indeed, other manifestations of teachers' care about teaching and learning include teachers' genuine concern about how the courses were run and students' feelings of taking the courses. For example:

*She really worried about the students being comfortable with ... how the course is organised...Nobody ask me that other than her... I mean other teachers asked you know. 'Is everything going right with the course?' But she is really concerned about it...I mean in the media it is always like 'yes, we are an international community, like people from all over the world'. It is true. But the international students sometimes they are lost. They are completely lost. They don't know where to go for ask for real help, like real help. (Sally, Humanities, South America)*

Sally's words indicated that one way of making teachers' concerns sound genuine was to ask students' individualised questions relating to the course and to pay attention to students' feelings. This implied that at Master's level, teachers' pedagogical concerns need to go beyond delivering course material efficiently, but also to consider the emotional bounds that exist between them and the students. In other words, they may achieve effective teaching by being affective. Furthermore, Sally and many other students pointed out the sense of feeling 'lost' as international students. This suggested that students appreciated teachers who would show empathy on students' learning. The demonstration of empathy seemed to be particularly important at Master's level, given that the student body was more hegemonic than their undergraduate counterparts were. In addition, the 'real' help mentioned by Sally can be interpreted as help that was personalised, which is based on teachers' understanding of students' situations through students' eyes.

#### 6.4.4.3. Caring about students

In this aspect of caring, student participants conceptualised it as teachers' willingness to knowing students as people who have a life beyond the immediate classroom teaching-learning environment. This conception of caring reflected that Master's studies were a vital part of students' life, and hence they appreciated if their teachers demonstrated efforts to know them personally, and to recognise how much the students valued their experiences of Master's studies. For instance,

*I can feel that she really cares about me and asked me related questions on my interest. And she asked my future plans. You can feel she's trying her very best to help you and she's really helpful. She cares about my life. (Yi, Social Sciences, East Asia)*

'Trying their best for helping students' and 'want the best for students' were two recurrent expressions used by student participants. Such expressions exemplified a

widely held notion among student participants – the importance of teachers’ ‘attuned responsiveness’ (Dall’Alba, 2009, p.68). This attuned nature reflected Noddings’ (2012) argument that teachers need to respond to students’ expressed needs rather than their assumed needs. In other words, teachers’ helping actions need to be based on the teachers’ ability to put themselves into students’ shoes. For instance, students expressed appreciation when they felt that their teachers were trying to feel and understand the situation that the students were in. It is reasonable to argue that the focus on the students’ expressed needs could be the basis for providing non-formulaic, individualised help which was described by students as helpful. Indeed, the difference between expressed needs and assumed needs, to a large extent, explained why students described good teachers as those who really knew what students want and who made extra efforts to get to know and understand students’ different backgrounds and needs. For example, Elisa described two teachers who executed helping actions with opposite natures.

*If some student asked him something he would have given the same answer to all of them, rather than considering their different backgrounds and conditions and understanding of the topics and stuff and make some sort of personal answers... He [another teacher] understand that when you have problems and stuff, he feels the problems in a way, he feels that you need that kind of help. He tries to understand you. (Elisa, Humanities, Continental Europe)*

It seems that students would perceive a course, and the teacher who taught on it, as more inclusive when the teacher showed effort in getting to know students. For example:

*She is not leaving anyone behind...She is always like [knowing students are] not coming from the same background and she really tries to make all the students understand the basic points of everything. I think really good...she is concerned about everything (Sally, Humanities, South America).*

Students’ encounters with caring teachers, which were exemplified by Elisa and Sally, affirmed that meaningful pedagogical relationships did improve students’ learning experiences. Such meaningful pedagogical relationships were close(r) and personal.

## Chapter Seven

### Discussion

#### 7.1. Introduction

This study aimed to (1) explore Academic Teaching Staff's (ATS) and students' views on the features of ideal pedagogical relationships at Master's level in the UK, and (2) to explore the factors that influence the development of positive pedagogical relationships. The findings from ATS's and students' perspectives were presented in Chapters 5 and 6 respectively. In this chapter, I further interpret these findings and discuss them in relation to previous literature and the research aims; meanwhile practical implications are provided and discussed. This chapter also addresses the three research questions:

- (1) What are the key features of ideal pedagogical relationships conceptualised by ATS and students in one-year full-time Master's programmes in a research-intensive university?
- (2) How are pedagogical relationships experienced by ATS and these students in a marketised learning context?
- (3) What factors influence the way in which these pedagogical relationships are built and experienced?

The second and the third research questions are discussed first, because they provide the context in which ideal pedagogical relationships were built and experienced. In Section 7.2., I elucidate the influence of marketisation and massification of higher education in the UK. The student participants in this study demonstrated what I have called a *beneficiary-victim dyad* in the context of the commercialisation of PGT sector. For instance, the students described relatively low entry requirement for doing Master's degree in the UK as a motivational factor. However, most student participants indicated regret for being under-prepared for study at this level. This regret is particularly salient among international students regarding their English proficiency. Due to this deficiency in terms of both background knowledge and language ability, there was a sense of regret among student participants that they were not able to engage in intellectual conversations at a higher level and therefore what they could learn from their Master's study was constrained.

In Section 7.2. I show that the marketised and expanded UK PGT sector appeared to have changed students' perceptions of the nature of pedagogical relationships they experienced. Analysis of my data shows that some of students' accounts of the actual pedagogical relationships they experienced implied a notion of 'formulaic customer care', meaning that they perceived ATS as demonstrating care towards students merely as an act of fulfilling their duties. This 'formulaic customer care' or 'GP consultation' type of care was in contrast with ATS's accounts of their pedagogical practice, which showed that ATS genuinely care about the subjects they taught, the teaching activities they engaged in, and their students. The main reasons for this misalignment between what teachers tried to achieve and what students experienced were those structural factors beyond students' and ATS's control. Those factors, to a large extent, tainted both ATS's and students' experiences.

In Section 7.3. I explore the factors that influence the building of pedagogical relationships. More profoundly, this section explains how and why these factors can shape the relationships between ATS and students. My analysis suggested that the marketised and commercialised PGT sector fostered what Buber (1944) termed as *I-It* relationships, in which ATS and students were objectified as nameless faces, rather than optimistic *I-Thou* relationships which were featured by mutuality and warmth.

In Section 7.4. I return to addressing the first research question, namely, the features of the ideal pedagogical relationships. Based on the analysis of data, my research suggested that first and foremost an ideal pedagogical relationship needs to be *pedagogical*. In this section, I explain this apparently eccentric assertion in detail. This section also provides a discussion on one of the main findings of this study, which are presented in Chapters 5 and 6: *Feeling equal within a hierarchy*.

In addition, most previous research focused mainly on student experience. My study has looked on both students and ATS, and I would argue that more studies need to be done with ATS. Indeed, as scholars such as Lynch (2010) asserted the new managerialism which is associated with neoliberalism has called on ATS to do the caring work, such as replying to students' emails in their 'free time'. This study found that the workloads expected from management have imposed great pressure on ATS.

## **7.2. The Changing Nature of Pedagogical Relationships – The contested and complex notion of ‘students-as-customers’**

In this section, I discussed how ATS and students perceived pedagogical relationships against the backdrop of marketisation and massification of UK higher education and the expansion of PGT sector in the UK (Tight, 2019). Arguably, the current context fosters the development of an *I-It* type of relationship between ATS and students, which are opposed to the *I-Thou* relationship - a concept construed by Buber (1944) which laid the foundation for the development of relational pedagogy and caring (Gilligan, 1982; Noddings, 2013; Mayeroff, 1979).

### *7.2.1. An overview*

This study showed how complex the PGT students’ experiences are. Earlier studies (e.g., Naidoo and Jamison, 2005) speculated that the nature of pedagogical relationships has changed: this study provides unique insights into the ‘how’ and ‘what’ of these changes. In contrast with previous studies, such as Molesworth, Nixon and Scullion (2009), which suggested a linear model of the influence of consumerisation: *consumerisation > overly demanding students > lowered education standards*, my study suggests that, at least at PGT level, it is an oversimplification to label students and ATS as ‘customers’ and ‘service-providers’ respectively. These discourses do not reflect the richness and complex nature of pedagogical relationships ATS and students experienced. The notion of consumerisation was experienced and expressed by students in much more subtle and complex ways than most previous studies suggested. For instance, in line with Tomlinson’s (2017) study, although students were aware of consumerism, they tended to resist the construction of themselves as ‘student customers’, while both ATS and students sensed the relationship between them has been commercialised to some extent. Xinyi’s account of her feeling that ATS’s time has been divided and shared among students like cakes, exemplified this commercialisation of pedagogical relationships.

Furthermore, this study sheds light on the reasons why ATS and students perceived the relationships as a commercial one in some respects. The expanded sector which manifested in enlarged class size, increased student-staff ratio, and increased administrative work for ATS has counterbalanced ATS’s efforts in caring for students. ATS in this study recounted their willingness to care for students, while students expressed their experience of, and gratitude for, caring from ATS. This suggests that

the commercialisation of pedagogical relationships was largely due to structural factors rather than personal factors, such as ATS or students lacking willingness to relate. For instance, the institutional requirements for ATS to care for students were accompanied by an increased student-staff ratio, which made it very difficult for ATS to give their full attention to each student. This in turn, resulted in students' perceptions that some ATS's care was not genuine, but was formulaic, and only fulfilling their job requirements. It seems that due to structural factors, the time and energy devoted by ATS for caring for students was not felt by the students.

Before proceeding to the next section, it is necessary to highlight some key concepts related to the consumerisation of pedagogical relationships. As outlined in Chapter 2, the higher education sector in the UK is characterised by marketisation which means that the sector has been placed on a market basis, and that the supply and demand of education (as a product or a service) is based on a price mechanism (Brown, 2011). Closely associated with the notion of marketisation is consumerisation, which refers to a phenomenon in which consumers get the quality of a product/service which is matched to the 'correct' price (Jabbar et al., 2018), in other words, the consumers would receive value for money. The idea of consumerisation and 'students-as-customers' discourse was reinforced following the publication of Dearing Report (1997) and Browne Report (2010) and the subsequent amendments of government policies on tuition fees for undergraduate study in England and Wales, as the latest cap on undergraduate tuitions fees is at £9,250 (OfS, 2020). The possible consequences of adopting market-driven and customer-oriented ideologies in government policies and among senior management teams of higher education institutions have been widely discussed. Naidoo and Jamieson (2005, p.271) anticipated that:

*Education is likely to be reconceptualised as a commercial transaction, the lecturer as the 'commodity producer' and the student as the 'consumer'. In this way, previously integrated relationships between academics and students are likely to become disaggregated with each party invested with distinct, if not opposing, interests.*

On ATS's side, Naidoo and Jamieson (2005, p.275) further explained that:

*The constant threat of student litigation and complaints, together with requirement to comply with extensive external monitoring procedures may encourage them to opt for 'safe teaching' which is locked into a transmission*

*mode where pre-specified content can be passed on to the student and assessed in a conventional form.*

Echoing Naidoo and Jamieson's (2005) anticipation, Molesworth, Nixon and Scullion (2009) noted that student-consumers would seek maximum outcomes (e.g. high grades) with minimal efforts. Although whether students in higher education are consumers or customers is still in debate, Guilbault (2018) called for the end of the debate and asserted that: "one area where the debate needs to stop is whether students are customers. That ship has sailed, what needs to be determined is how to steer it" (p.297). I have no intention to engage in the debate on whether students *ought to* be deemed as customers by the policymakers, university staff, or themselves. This study is primarily concerned with students' experiences in this commercialised learning context. The findings highlight that the 'student-as-customers' phenomenon were experienced by students and ATS in far more complicated ways than those scholars speculated. This study suggests that if the commercial forces are strong in the current higher education sector, this has been resisted by both teachers and students.

Two caveats need to be added here before proceeding to the rest of the chapter. Firstly, ATS and student participants were not paired. This means that when I discuss the discrepancy of ATS's and students' accounts on certain issues, I am referring to their reflections on the pedagogical relationships they experienced in general, rather than their comments on each other. For instance, some student participants mentioned that ATS's reactions to their contributions to the in-class debates made them feel that their ideas were undervalued. This does not indicate that the ATS participants *in this study* did not care about students' feelings, because the students were reflecting on their learning experiences in general, not the relationships built with any particular ATS participant.

Secondly, previous studies on the marketisation and consumerisation of UK higher education have been conducted almost exclusively in the context of undergraduate study. The proliferation of research in undergraduate settings was a consequence of introducing tuition fees in England and Wales (Walker-Gleaves, 2019), whereas PGT sector in the UK has long been deemed by policy makers as a marketised sector (For example, see *Jarratt Report*, 1985). Perhaps this long-standing marketisation had become the *de facto* nature of PGT sector for many years, and consequently there is

a dearth of empirical studies of this sector within the UK context. Thus, caution needs to be taken when comparing the findings of this thesis with the findings of previous studies.

### *7.2.2. Contested notion of 'students-as-customers'*

On the one hand, echoing scholars such as Naidoo and Jamison's (2005), ATS and students in this study perceived that at some point during their teaching and learning journey, the relationships they experienced were transactional in nature. However, it seems that this perceived transactional nature did not result directly in what scholars such as Nixon, Scullion and Hearn's (2018) speculated - that in a marketised context students would try to eschew academic challenges while ATS dedicated their attentions to boosting customer satisfaction, which in turn would result in a drop in academic standards. My study showed that students' perception of consumerism is, to a large extent, 'notional'. This is echoed by the findings of Tomlinson's (2017) that the consumerism did not entirely inform students' behaviours and attitudes to higher education. This was further affirmed by a more recent study by Garside (2020, p.216) reported that the notion "that students, in constructing themselves as consumers, have lost sight of themselves as learners" did not hold true in the context of her study (i.e. two post-92 universities in the UK). She went on to explain that "Students constructed themselves both as engaged learners and consumers depending on the context of the conversation." (ibid.).

My study added at least two aspects to her analysis. First, this dynamic way of constructing 'students-as-customers' identity can be extended to PGT sector in a pre-92 research-intensive university. As demonstrated in Chapter 5, ATS showed their frustrations that students came to study with inadequate competence. ATS participants, such as Neil, used the phrase 'factory farm' to describe MSc programmes and went on to assert that students are 'just like another customer, except one that you wish you didn't have'. Meanwhile, ATS did not act (at least they did not demonstrate this during the interviews) as if education is now a product for sale, in contrast to the findings of Carasso and Brown (2013). On the student side, students in my study were asking for more contact time with ATS and indicated the wish to receive high quality teaching. Such demands had been interpreted by scholars such as Bunce et al. (2017) and Koris and Nokelainen (2015) as customer demands, because these demands indicated customer rights similar to when consumers were

purchasing a product or service. However, perhaps because their studies were based on quantitative data, the assertion of 'students-as-customers' seemed to be based solely on their interpretation of students' answers to the questionnaires, which may not be able to capture the 'notional' feature of consumerism. Moreover, it is important to note that, as elucidated in Chapter 6, students in this study did show their willingness to engage in in-depth course work. In other words, their 'customer demands' were for engaging in intellectual challenges, rather than purchasing an education.

Caution needs to be exercised when interpreting this finding regarding the notional feature of consumerism, because the student participants in this study are not necessarily representative. It could be that academically strong students were more willing to share their ideas about studying at Master's level. Consequently, they may be less likely to deem education as a product. Future research should consider using mixed-method design to further elucidate students' diverse perceptions and experiences of consumerism.

The second aspects of extending Garside's (2020) study lied in the exploration of how structural factors caused the relationships to be perceived as transactional. This will be explained in detail in the following section.

### *7.2.3. Institutionalised pedagogical relationships were perceived as transactional and superficial*

This study provides original insights on ATS's and students' complex perceptions of the nature of teacher-student relationships they experienced. The study found that students and ATS did not *conceptualise* pedagogical relationships as a commercial one, meaning that they did not have a universal and static commercial attitude to the pedagogical relationships they experienced. But when the condition is 'right', students would *perceive* the pedagogical relationships they experienced as transactional, even though ATS followed institutional guidance to care for students. In other words, it can be inferred that the barriers lie in the structural factors that are beyond the control of students and ATS.

The word 'transactional' as used in this thesis could also be mean superficial, as shown by students who perceived ATS's caring as formulaic and just 'fulfilling the job'.

This phenomenon could be a derivative of the consumerisation of higher education. It is fair to argue that this sense of 'being left uncared for' was not what those government reports, such as *Browne Report*, hailed, in the sense that the students should be at the centre of the higher education system (as informed customers). It was also not the intention of policy documents (such as mission and value statements for universities) at the institutional level, which claimed that students should be cared for and cherished (Walker-Gleaves, 2016; 2019). As can be seen in the two findings chapters, what went wrong was the lack of supporting mechanisms to enable teachers to care for students. This was aggravated by the expansion of PGT sector, perceived by many ATS and students as for financial reasons, which led to problematic student-staff ratios and ATS's increased workloads. Williams' (2016) discussion on the 'contractualisation' of student experience can be used to provide further explain for this. According to Williams (2016), the relationships between students and ATS was primarily built on trust which lies in an unwritten social contract between them. However, the relationships between students and ATS were more and more *formalised* through the use of university charters in Williams' (2016) case, and in many other studies (for example, see Walker-Gleaves, 2019). As she went on explaining that this formalisation had led to "a 'contractualisation' of student experience ... an excessive focus on procedures can lead to the learning needs of individual students being overlooked" (ibid, p.76). Barnett (2011) seemingly held a contrasting view to this, in which he supported the notion of marketisation in the sense that students and ATS's expectations can be better communicated. For example, in a private correspondence with Barnett (2020), he pointed out that in a course handbook he would try to state clearly what students and ATS can expect from each other. A further scrutinisation showed that Williams (2016) and Barnett (2011; 2020) were supporting the same thing, namely, the institution should trust ATS more and leave the task of negotiating expectations to students and ATS. The longing for trust was also expressed by many ATS in the current study.

It seems that when the discourses such as caring for students and building positive pedagogical relationships were extensively highlighted at institutional level, but without giving ATS enough time and resources, then no matter how genuine ATS were in terms of wanting to build positive relationships with the students, such relationships had already been encapsulated in a transactional context. Furthermore, in considering the tuition fees the students paid for their Master's study, it is not

surprising that students perceived the relationships with their teachers as transactional in nature. It is necessary to restate Xinyi's cake metaphor here since it well summarised students' perceptions of the relationships they experienced:

*It feels like a transactional relationship. Maybe because the university asks teachers to have personal meetings with students. So teachers have to fairly allocate time for students' appointments. It feels like teachers' time was divided like cakes and sold to students. You pay the tuition fee, so I [teachers] have to take care of you. But that's all the time (cake) you can get. It's kind of superficial. It feels like they were highlighting that they were taking care of you, so you shouldn't criticise them for not caring.*

Notably, students in this study did experience ATS who tried to maximise the cake that students can get – those who would 'go the extra mile' to care for students, such as having an academic consultation meeting with students, which was extended from the allocated time slot. However, given that the current environment (e.g. large student-staff ratio) this did not necessarily cultivate the growing of a caring relationship. It is questionable how far those extra miles can go. Based on my data, the extra time and effort is essential. Thus the university structures need to make it possible for ATS to do this within their core work. However, I acknowledge that it seems that this 'extra mile' is effective specifically because it is 'seen' by the students as the ATS doing extra work. So if it were just incorporated into the job requirement then it would no longer be seen as going the extra mile. It would be, in turn, no longer interpreted as a symbol of 'caring'. In other words, it's not the extra time that matters, it is the students thinking that staff are going above and beyond their duty regardless of what they do in that time (Macleod, Barnes and Huttly, 2019).

### **7.3. Embracing the Complexity – The importance of positive pedagogical relationships and a context fostered *I-it relationships***

It is crucial to locate the discussion of pedagogical relationships in the light of potential learning outcomes of PGT study, because it was clear from both ATS's and students' account that they conceptualised teacher-student relationships as a kind of relationship which must serve educational purposes. Undeniably, the features of positive pedagogical relationships are important. Such features, as has been shown in this study, as well as in the previous literature, include ATS's approachability and accessibility, ATS and students' respect for each other, trust, closeness, authenticity and genuine, openness, fairness, and care (Anderson et al. 2020; Cotten and Wilson, 2006; Gravett, Naomi, and Winstone, 2022; Hagenauer, Muehlbacher and Ivanova, 2002; Hagenauer and Volet, 2014b; Karpouza and Emvalotis, 2019; McPherson, et al. 2017; Phillippo, Brown and Blosser, 2018; Rossiter, 1999). However, it can be argued that these features are not unique to *educational* relationships. They should exist in any positive relationships in a broader context beyond educational settings. What matters most is whether the current PGT sector (and the broader higher education context) presents an environment which promotes these positive features. This study has shown that the current context imposes more barriers than facilitators for the building of positive pedagogical relationships. This will be explored in more detail in this section.

This study found that positive pedagogical relationship did make a difference in terms of students' learning experiences at Master's level. Unlike previous studies (for example, see Hamre et al., 2013; Pianta, 2001) conducted in school settings, which were based on large-scale quantitative data, this study did not seek to establish a correlation between positive relationships and increased students' learning outcomes and engagement. However, the evidence presented in Chapter 6 indicated that positive relationships made students happier. The sense of happiness had positive effects on students' attainment at university level (Edwards and Richards, 2002). More importantly, the achievement of this happiness through positive pedagogical relationships was not at the cost of dropping educational standards in the sense of satisfying customer needs. As Noddings (2001, p.42) asserted, education should be both satisfying and satisfactory, which means that "Achievement without positive affect is morally and aesthetically empty. Positive affect without achievement is a delusion". In other words, students' academic achievement/outcomes (e.g.

'mastersness') and the affective nature of education can and should co-exist, and this co-existence ensured by experiencing positive pedagogical relationships.

This study supported Rossiter's (1999) contention that the achievement of educational outcomes was facilitated by caring relationships between ATS and students. This study explored this contention further and found that for PGT study, it was ATS's *pedagogical* caring (which contains three aspects: caring about the subject, caring about teaching, and care for students as a person) rather than *pastoral* caring that students valued the most, although to some extent the third aspect of pedagogical caring (i.e. caring for students as a person) overlaps with pastoral caring. In other words, caring needs to stem from ATS's willingness to support students' *learning*.

### *7.3.1. The structural factors that fostered I-It relationships*

In the literature review, I introduced the notion of *I-It* relationship which was construed and criticised by Buber (1944). It is a concept which primarily describes humans' relationships with objects, such as trees and bread. Buber (1944) extended this primary meaning to the objectification of relationships among human beings. This aspect of the concept was examined and well explained by Morgan and Guilherme (2014, p.5) as follows:

In the *I-It* relation human beings *fail* to establish a dialogue. That is, in the *I-It* relation one being confronts another and does not recognise the *Other* as an equal, because the *Other* is objectified. Therefore, in the *I-It* relation an individual being treats things, *including other people*, as objects to be used and experienced, that is, they become means to ends and have no value in themselves.

It was not surprising that Buber construed the concept in 1920s, for it was a turbulent period in Europe. It might be an exaggeration to make comparisons between the current higher education context and the two World Wars which fed into the growing of *I-It* relationships, but as I elucidated in Chapter 2 and early in this chapter, the concept of *I-It* is still with great relevance to the pedagogical relationships experienced by ATS and students nowadays. Indeed, the explanation presented by Morgan and Guilherme (2014) above, to a large extent, resonates with the contention that education now is a product/service for sale (Carasso and Brown, 2013) in the sense

that instead of learning *through* positive pedagogical relationships, students are now focusing on getting their degrees with the help of their 'personal trainers' (i.e. ATS). Although I argued earlier in this chapter that the participants in this study did not exemplify customer behaviour, the structural factors such as large student-staff ratio and ATS's workloads made the development of positive relationships between students and ATS very challenging. Thus, the pedagogical relationships experienced and recounted by the participants was not always positive in nature.

It was clear from the data that both ATS and students wished the relationships between them could be less formal and more personal (but not without boundaries) compared to what they experienced. This was well summarised by Lei who said that what students wanted was '*pedagogical relationships with a sense of warmth*'. This sense of warmth is apparently in contrast with the stone-cold *I-It* relations. To generate this warmth, an *I-Thou* relation needs to be built between ATS and students, in which "a mutual attitude of recognition" is required (Morgan and Guilherme, 2014, p.93). In the *I-Thou* realm, educators authentically embraced *the other* (i.e., the students) and this invited educators to know their students' needs, which was a crucial element in Noddings' (2003) notion of caring. However, the current context experienced by the participants, within which there were too many students *per* ATS as a result of the expansion of PGT sector, did not really create the conditions for ATS's to devote enough time to care for students. The evidence for the negative impact of such expansion was pervasive in Chapter 5 in which several issues raised by ATS were reported, such as appealing for the institution to trust ATS more in terms of teaching practices so as to reduce ATS's duty for filling in reports for external auditing and to allocate more time and resources for ATS to spend with students. ATS's workloads can be exemplified by a conversation between Gabriel (Social Sciences, Senior lecturer) and myself which is worth reiterating here. After I mentioned to him that his students perceived him as a caring teacher when they received his instant reply to their midnight email, Gabriel said:

*It's funny because I would not have necessarily included an email ... or replying to an email after midnight as caring. For me this is more related to the craziness of our work. The difficulty of separating work time and personal time.*

According to Lynch (2006; 2010), the dismantling of the boundary between work time and personal time is one of the negative impacts of neoliberalism. This thesis did not

have the opportunity to further examine ATS's feelings of working at a research-intensive university and the possible emotional burn-out (For example, Ann, a senior lecturer in STEM, expressed that sometimes she wanted to scream at students). Thus, it is important and urgent for future research to take ATS's wellbeing into account.

In addition, in an *I-Thou* or caring relationship, educators need to listen to students' expressed needs (Noddings, 2013) and to demonstrate an attuned responsiveness (Dall'Alba, 2009, p.68) to students' needs. However, these scholars, including Buber (1944) and Noddings (2001; 2005; 2013), underestimated the difficulty of considering students' needs. Indeed, the issue of students' needs is complicated in PGT student–teacher relationships because of Master's students' diverse academic competence at the beginning of their studies. As I highlighted earlier, most previous literature relating to pedagogical relationships was written in the context of schools and undergraduate studies. The starting point (their academic competence) for each student might more or less the same (e.g. most of first-year students may not be familiar with the academic discourse that is required for undergraduate study). This is in stark contrast with the situation in PGT setting, in which students have diverse competence, as demonstrated among the student participants in this study. For example, some of them had spent 4 years previously in the same subject area as their Master's degree in the same institution, whereas others had little or no previous knowledge of the content that was covered in their Master's programmes, together with the fact that they never wrote an academic essay in the English language before their Master's studies. Therefore, it would be dangerous to mechanically follow Noddings' (2013), and other scholars' recommendations to respond to students' expressed needs, given that this may lead to a scenario in which ATS provide whatever student's want. This would arguably result in a drop of educational standards which was not what either students or ATS participants wanted. In recognition of this complexity, in the rest of this section, I will briefly recap the diversity amongst students and attempt to discuss some practical implications in the light of the importance of communicating expectations.

### *7.3.2. The diversity amongst PGT students and its influence on pedagogical relationships*

Whilst previous literature has suggested that the diversity on PGT is in terms of students' demographic background and modes of study (Knight, 1997; QAA, 2020), in this study all student participants were on a one year full-time, on campus, specialist study programme. However, that is not to say that the student participants were a homogenous group, in fact there was significant diversity amongst the students in terms of their motivation to study, the extent to which they were prepared for study at this level, and what they expected from their Master's experience.

This study found that students were both beneficiaries and victims of the marketisation of higher education in the UK. After analysing the data, it can be induced from what student participants said, that they were beneficiaries in that they were able to receive their Master's degrees in the shortest period of time with minimum entrance requirements compared to doing Master's degrees in other countries. For example, in the US the duration of Master's degrees is two years. And in the US, during the application stage, the result of The Graduate Record Examinations (GRE) was part of the entrance requirements. On the other hand, students were victims in the sense that it can be clearly discerned from the interview data that students' willingness to engage in deeper intellectual debates during class was hampered by their under-preparedness. For international students, this was especially salient, because the expansion of the PGT sector for financial reasons has resulted in higher education institutions admitting high numbers of students who don't have English as their first language, and they were really struggling to engage in the classroom discussions. The *beneficiary-victim* dyad resonated with Garside's (2020) finding, as reported earlier, that students identified themselves as both customers (who benefit from short study period) and active learners (who wish to engaging in learning at higher level).

#### 7.3.2.1. Students' motivations for doing Master's study: foundation for conceptualising pedagogical relationships

*Students come here to learn.* Students decided to do a Master's degree for various reasons, ranging from increasing their employability, hoping to get promotion, getting advanced skills (for work or for doing research), learning something new, enjoying being taught, fulfilling their social responsibility to their countries. However, based on a deep reading and analysis of the data, a central theme underlying all these motivations was identified. The evidence presented in this study is clear that students were aiming to achieve these goals *through learning*. This provided a fundamental explanation of students' conceptualisation of pedagogical relationships, namely, a

relationship that will let *learning* happen. This also foreshadowed the boundaries of pedagogical relationships between students and ATS. For instance, despite students hoping that ATS can be friendly, and even be their friends, building ‘friendships’ with ATS was not an end in itself. Based on my analysis, the friendship between the ATS and students must serve the purposes of facilitating students’ learning, for example, by creating an unthreatening environment for students to communicate their ideas with ATS and with their peers.

It may sound eccentric and repetitive that one of the profound findings of this study was that pedagogical relationships need to be *pedagogical*. However, this eccentricity, the emphasis on the word *pedagogical*, fills the gap in the previous literature. Most previous empirical studies on pedagogical relationships were focusing on the *relationship* building. For instance, Cotten and Wilson (2006) highlighted how to build positive teacher-student relationships, including having high frequency interactions/meetings and increased teachers’ accessibility and approachability by encouraging students to seek help from them. Karpouza and Emvalotis’ (2019) study suggested a model showing the dynamic nature of the pedagogical relationship, which tried to explain how the teacher-student relationships were built, maintained, and ended. The existing empirical studies highlighted the way in which relationships were built, to some extent, at the expense of losing the insight of the fundamental reason for building pedagogical relationships – namely, let learning happen (Heidegger, 1968).

One implication needs to be highlighted. When ATS try to engage students in positive pedagogical relationships, the guiding principle should be to facilitate students’ learning, rather than satisfying students’ demands in the face of the ever-growing ‘customer’ rights. Furthermore, the findings of this study call for ATS to devote the time and resources to the ‘right’ type of caring towards students. It seems that the ATS in this study were inclined to understand the concept of ‘care’ as *pastoral* care. However, it was clear from what student participants said that the nature of the care they wished to receive was *pedagogical*. Moreover, previous studies, such as the one conducted by Nixon and Scullion (2022), suggest that there have been increasing demands from senior management in higher education institutions on ATS to provide pastoral care. As indicated in the evidence provided by this study (See Chapter 6), the institutions should also devote the resources effectively to improve students’

learning experiences. This study suggests that the improvement of caring should be done by improving the condition of teaching and learning, instead of urging ATS to devote time and energy to providing pastoral care. Although providing pastoral care is undeniably important, this should mainly be the duty of university support services, rather than ATS.

#### 7.3.2.2. Diverse levels of preparedness and diverse expectations of students' Master's experience – importance of communication

Both staff and students reported that many students came to do their Master's study underprepared. This was similar to O'Donnell et al.'s (2009) finding that postgraduates need to be understood as a group of students with different levels of ability regarding academic practices, and differing levels of competence in academic skills. The skills highlighted in O'Donnell et al. (2009) referred to general skills for academic study at universities, such as how to find e-journals. None of their participants expressed any concern in terms of engaging with learning materials at a higher level. The findings of the current study are in contrast with the latter point. The student participants expressed their unpreparedness in regard to general skills (e.g. academic writing skills) *as well as* in regard to engaging with learning materials at a higher level. The different results between these two studies are possibly because of the different characteristics of the participants. For instance, in O'Donnell et al.'s (2009) study, the participants consisted of both PGT students and PGR students, whereas in this study the students are exclusively one-year full-time Master's students and many of them were taking Master's degrees with conversion purpose, i.e. changing their career pathways to another disciplinary area. In other words, they had minimal (if any) background knowledge of their subjects prior to their Master's study.

The most salient 'underpreparedness' agreed among students and ATS in this study was that many students' English language levels were not sufficient for their studies. There was a wide range of suggested detrimental impacts of this language deficiency. Many students were not able to engage with the learning material at a deep level nor could they communicate their ideas thoroughly. The lack of English usage ability also hampered the peer relationships, as student participant Hugh expressed, he did not enjoy his experience of a group project as many non-native English speakers relied on their teammates too much. It was also an obstacle for building close(r) relationships with their teachers, because verbal communication was a crucial

element for interaction which is in turn the basis for building relationships (Karpouza and Emvalotis, 2019).

Furthermore, as mentioned earlier, the language deficiency was a manifestation of the *beneficiary-victim dyad* of students' experiences in a commercialised and expanded PGT context. For instance, on the one hand, many students noted that the relatively low entry requirement for being admitted to Master's degrees in the UK was a motivational factor for them to come to the UK. On the other hand, when they were reflecting on their learning experiences, they indicated the willingness to fully express and exchange their ideas with ATS and with their peers, which in reality was not fulfilled due to their constraints in expressing themselves in English.

A nuanced discussion of the validity of The International English Language Testing System (IELTS) is beyond the scope of this thesis. But previous studies suggested that IELTS test has a relatively weak predictive power for students' academic performance (Dooley and Oliver, 2002). Taking writing tasks in IELTS as an example, it requires students to express their ideas in relatively informal way, rather than assessing students' ability in academic writing. For instance, there was no requirement for citations or using literature to support their arguments. Similarly, it is questionable to what extent the students can apply what they practiced in order to pass their speaking test, for example describing a movie, to a Master's class in which, for example, they were required to engage in in-depth discussions of the epistemological position of critical realism.

Any suggestion made on admission policy needs to be tentative, given that improving the quality of students at admission stage is complicated. Based on the finding of this study, the current admissions practice is leading to students who cannot engage fully and at the required level. However, to increase the entry requirement sharply or to make the pre-session courses, the benefits of which are evident (Evans et al., 2018), compulsory and free is not realistic, given universities' reliance on PGT fee income. Nevertheless, this study suggests that higher education institutions do need to reconsider the entry requirement for Master's studies, given the detrimental impact of students' deficiency in language usage on building positive pedagogical relationships.

*Expectations and genuine communications*

Undeniably student 'free riders' who do not care about learning and studying do exist. However, it seems to be an oversimplification to assume that all students are customers as if they do not care learning at all. This study suggests that students (at Master's level) not only cared about the 'product/service' they received, but also are keen to actively engage in their learning. They held various expectations about their learning experiences. In line with Humphrey and McCarthy's (1999) study, Master's students expected something different from UG study, particularly in terms of class-size. The student participants expected small-size classes with no more than 15 students per class and even an 'Oxford tutorial model' with frequent one-on-one tutorials with ATS. This, however, was opposed to what they actually experienced which was evidenced by what students said about the lack of contact hours with ATS.

Moreover, due to the lack of English proficiency and background knowledge in their subjects, students also expressed that they wished the difficulty level of the reading materials could be lowered. Some of them said the most helpful reading would be those which were *easy but thoughtful*. This demand on the reading materials they received, on the one hand, showed their eagerness to understand and to engage in the course. On the other hand, it indeed carries with it a risk of dropping the educational standards. As Neil said students may not necessarily be in the best position to know what the best for them is (at Master's level). This dissonance between students' and ATS's understanding of students' needs reflected Buber's (1944) contention that pedagogical relationships were always asymmetrical in nature, in the sense that the educator knew the content that they were going to teach, but students were not always clear about what they were going to learn.

Some scholars' ideas can be used as guidelines regarding what ATS can do to meet students' needs but not at the expense of lowering standards, namely, open and genuine communications. Noddings' (2013) notion of meeting students' expressed needs must be given a deeper reading. Indeed, she highlighted that when those needs could not be satisfied, the goal of the educator was to maintain the caring relationship (ibid.). One way of maintaining the relationship was to explain to the cared-for, why their needs cannot be met. Similarly, Brookfield (2006, p.14) stressed that

*We must never confuse responsiveness with capitulation to majority wishes or always doing what students say they want. Instead, we must understand*

*responsiveness as fully addressing learners' concerns and questions, even if this means justifying why we can't do what they say they want us to do.*

As Brookfield (2006) explained earlier in his article, educators have to use their power to push students' out of their comfort zone and help students gain intellectual development in long-term. But if the educators want to make students walk out of their comfort zone, educators must create a safe and equal (in terms of respect and recognition) atmosphere first.

#### **7.4. The Ideal Pedagogical Relationships – equality within a hierarchy**

I have discussed in Section 7.3.2.1. that first and foremost, an ideal pedagogical relationship needs to be *pedagogical*, for this is the defining feature of this relationship. This pedagogical nature must be the guiding principle when ATS try to build positive relationships with their students, because students acknowledged that for achieving their goals (ranging from doing a PhD or just getting a degree) they have to learn.

When I tried to draw out the features of positive pedagogical relationships based on the analysis of my data, I was surprised that the features can be summarised in a succinct, almost an equation like, phrase – feeling equal (regarding respect and recognition) with an inherent hierarchy (in terms of knowledge and experience). The most relevant previous studies on these features were conducted by Hagenauer, Muehlbacher and Ivanova (2022), Tormey (2021), and Anderson et al. (2020).

##### *7.4.1. Equal and personal*

Underlying this simplicity (i.e. feeling equal within a hierarchy) was great complexity. Within the concepts of equality and hierarchy, there were many nuances. Feeling equal was deemed by students as optimistic in terms of receiving recognition and respect from ATS, whereas hierarchy or power distance existed in the knowledge and experiences domain. There has been a relatively nuanced discussion on the features such as approachability and caring in previous chapters and sections; this section will highlight a specific aspect of equality, namely, personal but with boundaries.

Both ATS and students wanted the relationships with staff at Master's level to be more personal - personal as an opposed to formulaic (Gravett, Naomi and Winstone, 2022;

Gravett, Taylor and Farichild, 2021). Students felt happy when ATS recalled their names or remembered them personally, but as some students highlighted they did not need ATS to be their friends. What students really wanted was, when encountering academic difficulty, individualised advice from ATS. This, again, reflected the importance of the pedagogical nature of teacher-student relationships. This nature also defined the boundaries of the friendships existed between ATS and students, in the sense that the professional sphere and the personal sphere of the relationships need to co-exist.

The next section will elucidate the way in which the pedagogical nature of the relationship was enacted and experienced. As will be explained, the ideal pedagogical relationships created a space in which students felt able to express their ideas.

#### *7.4.2. Learning through relationships featured equality within a hierarchy*

This study suggests that to build positive pedagogical relationships, ATS need to strike a balance between equality and hierarchy, meaning that, as discussed in Chapter 6, ATS on the one hand need to respect students and recognised students' emotional investment into the course work. On the other hand, they need to acknowledge the important role they play in students learning journey, because students recognised the hierarchy existed between them and the ATS in terms of knowledge and experience, and they expressed a willingness to learn from ATS. Studies conducted by Bovill (2020) and Karpoulza and Emvalotis (2019) have suggested that the hierarchy in teacher-student relationships can be flattened to make the learning process more student-centred. This implies that these scholars deem hierarchy as a mainly negative element for learning.

However, this study suggests this may be an oversimplification and I argue that rather than flattening the hierarchy, a balance needs to be struck between equality and hierarchy. Applying the terms used in Haenauer, Muehlbacher and Ivanova's (2022) and Hagenauer, Glaser-Zikuda and Volet's (2016) two-dimensional framework of the quality of teacher-student relationships, ATS needs to strike a balance between the interpersonal (e.g. closeness) and professional (e.g. power relations) aspects of the relationships. Indeed, as suggested by the data, at Master's level the role of teachers (i.e. ATS) was not weakened by the assumption that students at this level were 'expert students' (Tobbell and O'Donnell, 2013), which was in line with Leenknecht et al.'s

(2020) finding. As exemplified by Xinyi, the students acknowledge the greater expertise of the ATS in the field of study, and would like to take ATS's expertise as a springboard to develop their own ideas. Furthermore, if ATS behaved in an over friendly way and blurred the pedagogical aspect of the teacher-student relationship, a scenario depicted by Brookfield (2006) would occur: the students may not feel they learn anything substantial. This was reinforced by the fact that the student participants deemed caring ATS as those who cared about the subject and teaching.

Furthermore, it is worth noting that the notion of equality held by ATS seemed to focus largely on engaging students in equal intellectual conversations rather than on recognising students' feelings during the class. Consequently, as I reported in Chapter 6, some students felt that during class discussions, their opinions were undermined by the ATS. As mentioned above, the pursuit of equal intellectual conversations was hampered by students' under-preparedness, for which students felt sorry. In other words, there were subtle differences between students' and ATS's expectations regarding equality. The consequence of the lack of the awareness of these differences arguably may be aggravated by ATS who did not pay extensive attention to students' feelings of being recognised. Indeed, although some ATS in this study mentioned that they have encouraged students express their thoughts, by reassuring students that "There is no stupid questions or answers", such encouragement alone seemed not enough. According to the student participants, it seemed that it was teachers' *reactions* to students' ideas that mattered the most. For instance, as reflected by some students (see quotes from Xinyi in Chapter 6), sometimes ATS discarded students' ideas without an explanation, or ATS rejected the students' ideas without letting learning happen (e.g. helping students to further develop their ideas). As a consequence, some of the students experienced being 'shut down' by the ATS and this was a barrier to their learning.

#### 7.4.3. A metaphor

Before concluding this chapter and indeed this thesis, I would like to briefly discuss some metaphors. Regarding the feature of ideal pedagogical relationships, *equal within a hierarchy*, nearly half of the teacher participants used a coaching metaphor (Hunaiti, 2021; McEwan, 2007) which highlights that the teachers have a certain authority over the students while they also have a commitment to the students. One student participant used an orchestra metaphor in describing the relationships with

their teachers. I chose to adopt this orchestra metaphor to demonstrate the ideal relationships. My reasons for preferring orchestra metaphor to the coaching metaphor can be briefly stated as follows. First, all sports are highly outcome-driven. The primary goal for a coach and their team is to win the match. In this regard, the metaphor to some extent reinforces the outcome/performativity orientation of education, which has received considerable criticisms, particularly that such orientation ignores the complexity of learning process (Deem, 1998; Olssen and Peters, 2007; Robertson and Dale, 2013). Secondly, the coaching metaphor mainly focuses on the relationships between the coach and the players. The relationship with the subject is missing, whereas in the orchestra metaphor there are three parties involved - the conductor, instrument players, and the music. This is more in line with the pedagogical relationships within education – the relationships among the teachers, students, and the subjects (Friesen and Osguthorpe, 2017). Thirdly, although a coach could often be seen shouting and waving their arms at the edge of a pitch, their influence (e.g. providing inspiration) over the players is minimal *during* a match. The result of a match largely depends on players themselves and the opposing team. In contrast, in an orchestra, the music director and the players are always in connection either during a rehearsal or a performance. Relating this to teachers in educational settings, teachers have an on-going inspirational role over students' learning. Indeed, the essence of teaching is to let learning happen (Palmer, 1998). I reiterate the metaphor as follows:

A music director on the one hand needs to respect the expertise, talent, and individuality of the musicians in an orchestra. On the other hand, a conductor is the person who sets the pace for a musical work and who oversees and corrects musicians' mistakes. In other words, a music director inherently possesses a higher position than other musicians in an orchestra.

I recognise that, like all metaphors, this one is not able to capture the entire complexity of teaching and learning processes. But it serves my purpose of demonstrating the ideal feature of pedagogical relationships at Master's level – equality within a hierarchy.

## **7.5. Summary**

The study showed that the nature of the relationships was indeed perceived by ATS and students as being shaped due to the marketisation and expansion of PGT sector. This study suggested that it was the structural factors made the development of optimistic relationships challenging. This chapter highlighted that the teacher-student relationships need to be pedagogical in nature, for this was the defining feature that made this relationship unique. Some possible implications for practices were discussed in this chapter. In the next chapter, thoughts on future research will be discussed and final concluding remarks will be given.

## **Chapter Eight**

### **Conclusion**

#### **8.1. Introduction**

This study aimed to explore the nature of pedagogical relationships at Master's level. It commenced with an analysis of the development and structure of the UK PGT sector and a discussion of the purposes of universities (Chapter 2). Then the thesis engaged with existing literature, both theoretical and empirical, on pedagogical relationships. The literature reviewed helped me refine the research questions, informed my research design, and facilitated the interpretation of the research findings (Chapter 3). I provided the rationale and detailed accounts of the research design with the highlight of the trustworthiness of the study in Chapter 4. Findings were presented in Chapter 5 (ATS's perspective) and Chapter 6 (Students' perspective). In Chapter 7, these findings were discussed intensively in relation to previous literature and implications for practice were provided. In this chapter, I briefly summarise the findings of this study, give suggestions for future research, and provide final concluding remarks.

#### **8.2. Contribution to Knowledge and Understanding of Pedagogical Relationships**

Overall, I have achieved what I set out to achieve, namely, to understand the complex nature of pedagogical relationships that ATS and students experienced, and to understand how they conceptualised ideal pedagogical relationships for Master's study. In this section, I summarise the key findings of this study.

##### *8.2.1. Pedagogical relationships need to be pedagogical*

As I mentioned in Chapters 1, 3, and 7, there was a gap between theoretical and empirical literature on pedagogical relationships. The former emphasised the pedagogical value of the relationships between students and their teachers, whereas the latter focuses on relationship building. Based on the findings of this study, it is evident that both ATS and students conceptualised pedagogical relationships as a type of relationship through which students' learning can be facilitated. Indeed, although students and ATS both expressed their preference for a personal and less distanced relationship (some students labelled this as 'friendship') which featured

equality, respect, genuine, trust, and caring, building such relationship was not an end in itself, meaning that students acknowledged that this type of 'friendship' has boundaries, and they wished to learn *through* the relationships. One crucial implication of this finding is that it calls for ATS and their management team to reflect on their pedagogical practices. As I have argued in the previous chapters, the practice of building positive relationships with students should always be guided by the pedagogical value of the relationships. In turn, the activities designed for engaging Master's students with their programmes should be pedagogical in nature. Indeed, this study, to a large extent, provides insights into Master's students' need for the teacher-student relationship to be pedagogical. By reflecting on this finding, ATS and staff in student support and management team may be able to ensure their efforts are directed appropriately.

### *8.2.2. Equality within a hierarchy*

Heidegger (1968, p.15) pointed out that the difficulty of teaching is 'to let learn'. In the face of the expected intellectual outcomes (reported in Chapter 5) and let students to learn, ATS need to create a safe environment in which students do not feel intimidated. In other words, an environment where students can walk out of their comfort zone without feeling uncomfortable. This study suggests that such environment is experienced by having pedagogical relationships which are featured equality within a hierarchy.

On the one hand, students wanted their relationships with ATS to be equal, in terms of respect and recognition. This fits into the interpersonal sphere (Hagenauer, Glaser-Zikuda, and Volet, 2016) of pedagogical relationships. On the other hand, they recognised the hierarchy in terms of knowledge and experience, which belongs to the professional sphere (*ibid.*) of pedagogical relationships. The study has elucidated (in Chapters 5, 6, and 7) how equality and hierarchy, two contrasting concepts, can exist in harmony and work together to facilitate students' learning at Master's level. I concluded that the two elements of equality and hierarchy have created a unique space for learning at Master's level happen. Only when both elements were presented, would students feel safe and welcomed (because of the equality) when they embraced the intellectual challenges imposed by their teachers (in terms of the hierarchy). In other words, the 'mastersness' achieved through the pedagogical relationships. Furthermore, a 'sense of equality' and 'inherent hierarchy' were

connected by the ATS's pedagogical care. The notion of pedagogical care (i.e. care about the subject, care about teaching, and care about students) provides an explanation of why a teacher could be seen by students as being stern and approachable at the same time. As long as ATS's strictness stemmed from their willingness for students to get the best out of Master's study, students would perceive them as caring teachers.

### *8.2.3. The structural factors and I-It relationships*

This study has shown that the marketisation and massification of PGT sector has made it difficult to establish the ideal pedagogical relationships perceived by ATS and students. The class-size was too big and the contact hours between ATS and students were scarce. The structural factors fostered *I-It* type of relationships. The findings presented in Chapter 6 have indicated that students' interpretation of some of the ATS's pedagogical practices were tainted by these structural factors. As a consequence, although ATS tried to build positive relationships with their students, students felt the caring received from ATS was superficial. Furthermore, regarding the speculation on the influence of marketisation of higher education on pedagogical relationships (Naidoo and Jamieson, 2005), this study has suggested that neither the ATS nor the students statically deemed the nature of Master's study as commercial. Both ATS and students demonstrated a wide range of attitudes on the marketisation and consumerisation of higher education.

### *8.2.4. Students' preparedness for Master's study*

Previous studies on pedagogical relationships did not take students' preparedness for their studies into consideration. One reason could be that most of existing studies were conducted in a context where the student body was homogenous. For example, students' capacity of using English for their study was not mentioned in previous literature. In contrast, as I explained in Chapters 2, 5, and 6, the student body was highly diverse in relation to their motivations, expectations, and their English ability in the PGT sector in the UK. Thus, apart from contributing to literature on the factors that influence the building of positive pedagogical relationships, this study also contributes to the literature on students' experiences of studying at Master's level in the UK.

### 8.3. Reflections

Reflexivity is perhaps one of the most important elements of doing social science research (Bechhoffer and Paterson, 2000). It is also crucial for practitioners to engage in the professional community of social sciences in general, and in the field of education in particular, as Macleod et al. (2023, p.11) commented, the professions in education “commonly involve a career-long commitment to evidence-based practice and reflexivity.” Thus, before concluding this thesis, a moment of reflection is necessary. The reflections on my research focus on three main aspects:

- (1) reflections on existing literature on student experience. This includes discussions on the contribution of the current study to the broad literature on student experience;
- (2) embracing students’ needs for support with pedagogical caring; and
- (3) recapping the strength of the current design, including my ability to conduct interviews in two languages. Future research opportunities and designs will be presented and evaluated throughout this section.

#### *8.3.1. Student experience and needs for support*

At the point of entering their studies, Master’s students bring with them diverse aspirations and expectations. As shown in the literature review (for example, see Morgan and Direito, 2016), students decided to do a Master’s degree because they wanted to improve their employment prospects, to develop a broader range of skills and knowledge, to progress to a higher level of academic qualification, and/or to prove that they were capable of postgraduate study. Some of the students decided to ‘transition’ into Master’s study, because they were not ready for perceived ‘bigger’ transitions, namely, entering full-time employment (Bowman, 2005). Some students, such as the UK domiciled participant in my study, Katie, who really enjoyed ‘being taught’ (i.e. attending lectures) and thus decided to do a Master’s degree to continue studies. With these diverse expectations, students faced numerous challenges. Some of the challenges, particularly those facing students whose first language is not English, stemmed from poor writing skills. This finding is in line with previous studies, such as the one conducted by Macleod, Barnes and Huttly (2019), which discussed the issues related to Master’s students’ unpreparedness from a programme directors’ point of view. Thus, my study has deepened the understanding of student unpreparedness for Master’s study through providing insights from the students’

perspectives. It is important to stress that this study highlighted that UK-domiciled students, despite the fact that they studied at the same institution where they completed their undergraduate studies, also face challenges. UK home students in my study expressed a feeling of anxiety at the start of the programme. This reflects their willingness to do well and uncertainty about how to do well at Master's level. My participants' account of their experience of Master's study is another strong piece of evidence showing that transition into Master's study is not a straightforward process and students need support to transition in, through, and out of Master's study.

In Section 2.4., an in-depth review of literature on student experience was provided, in which three main interwoven concepts were discussed - student transition, independent learning, and student experience. That section has provided strong arguments that none of these three concepts (or indeed any concept in social sciences) is a simple construct. Consequently, any improvement to be made regarding these dimensions of students' lives requires collaborative efforts from ATS, non-academic staff, and the wider university community. In the same vein, no single piece of research can fully explore these concepts. Future research aiming to further explore these concepts needs involve collaboration among researchers at different institutions (research or teaching-focused universities). Research which applies different types of data would also be helpful. For instance, large-scale quantitative studies would provide a broad picture of student experience and the challenges they face, while small-scale qualitative studies would add nuance (Pring, 2000) to the findings and thus provide a knowledge base for practitioners to reflect on.

Notably, this study was conducted in a research-intensive university. At more teaching-focused universities, ATS and students may face different types of issues and, in turn, these issues may influence the nature and way of building pedagogical relationships between ATS and students. For example, Bird (2017), in her qualitative study with ten international students and 12 ATS, noted that one common concern of ATS was international students' lack of understanding of plagiarism. This concern was not mentioned by the participants in the study. Therefore, future large-scale studies may benefit from adopting a comparative design and could look into the nature of pedagogical relationships at different types of institutions with further consideration of different students domiciled status and the distance between their previous academic culture and the one in which they pursue a Master's degree.

Upon further reflection on the literature on student experience and the review of my own study, my belief and confidence in the findings of this thesis is strengthened. It may therefore be possible to develop a scale to measure the quality of teacher-student relationships based on the findings of this study. A scale designed by Pianta (2001) has been adopted widely in school settings, however there is no specific scale for evaluating teaching-student relationships in the higher education context. Moreover, the prospect scale has the potential to be incorporated into existing surveys, such as Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (PTES) to gain further insights into taught Master's students' learning experience and provide unwavering support to improve the experience of their study.

### *8.3.2. Providing supports through the lens of pedagogical caring*

It is important to reiterate that this study shows that both ATS and student participants conceptualise caring as a complex construct beyond pastoral caring. Caring is not only manifested as ATS providing one-to-one student support but is exemplified in various ways. This is in line with Anderson et al.'s (2020) study that caring by ATS is perceived by students as the ATS caring about the subjects (e.g. through showing passion for the subject they teach), caring about teaching and learning (e.g. through choosing reading materials that students perceived as helpful in facilitating understanding of the key concepts), and caring about students as people, not just nameless faces.

More specifically, Motta and Bennett's (2018) notion of care as recognition is worth being highlighted. It relates to "acknowledgement of life experiences, competencies and insights each student brings to the learning environment and the value placed on these by teaching staff" (Seary and Willans, 2020, p.16). One theme that cut across almost all student participants is that they wanted their ideas to be valued by ATS. This is a particularly salient point in light of the literature reviewed in Section 2.4., and given that Master's students brought diverse prior experiences and knowledge with them into their studies with an expectation to improve their career prospects. Thus, ATS's attention and respect for students' ideas, especially those derived from students' prior experiences, is a crucial link in bridging the gap between student's current knowledge and their expected outcomes. Therefore, supporting students

through pedagogical care which manifested in respect for students' ideas, has great potential to improve the student learning experience.

There is increasing studies in exploring the concept of caring in higher education, such as those conducted by Anderson et al. (2020), Dall'Alba (2009), Motta and Bennett (2018). This could be another area of study for future research, with a particular focus on Master's programmes (full-time and part-time) in the UK. Such marketised context, as shown in this thesis, creates challenges for caring relationships to be established as opposed to customer care.

### *8.3.3. Future research opportunities and designs*

The design of the current study evidences coherence between research purposes, questions, design, and findings which are interconnected by a subtle realist ontological viewpoint and a constructivist epistemological position. The trustworthiness of the findings has been further supported by my ability to conduct and analyse interviews in two languages. Research literature has long suggested that interviews conducted in the participants' first language would put participants at ease, thus allowing more nuanced views, as well as more diverse expressions and examples relating to the topic, to be generated (Resch and Enzenhofer, 2018; Welch and Piekkari, 2006). Such diverse expressions and in-depth conversations would in turn increase the trustworthiness of the study (Shenton, 2004).

Given the interpersonal nature of the topic – relationship building between ATS and students, it presents challenges for pairing ATS and students in exploring and comparing ATS and students' perceptions of pedagogical relationships. Future studies could benefit from such research design with particular consideration of the anonymity of research participants.

Furthermore, on further reflection of the literature on Master's student experience, peer supports are crucial. In turn, the exploration of peer relationships will be meaningful in any further exploration of relational pedagogy. Returning to the orchestra metaphor, a conductor is not able to master every musical instrument, but the musicians in each section can. Therefore, students at any educational level would benefit from positive relationships with their peers. And in turn, they would have a better connection with the learning content.

#### **8.4. Directions for Future Research**

There are many improvements that could be made to this study. The limitations were outlined and discussed in Chapter 4. These limitations can serve as a stepping stone for future research.

Under the possible influence of social desirability bias (Grimm, 2010; Nederhof, 1985), it might be the case that the ATS participants in this study were exclusively those who have paid attention to building positive relationships with their students. In other words, the views of ATS, who potentially refused, or struggled, to build positive relationships, were not included in this study. Thus, future research may benefit from adopting more anonymous methods for data collection, such as online open-ended questionnaires, to gain insights into those ATS's views on the matter of pedagogical relationships.

Moreover, future studies should consider the views of university senior management on the issue of pedagogical relationships, given that this study has provided clear evidence that both ATS and students think it is not each other's fault for the inability to create ideal pedagogical relationships.

Furthermore, relationships between ATS and students are not the only pedagogical relationships that exist in Master's students' learning journey. Future research needs to explore students' peer relationships, as well as the relationships between students with non-teaching academic staff. In addition, Temple et al. (2016) highlighted that staff in areas such as accommodation services and information services largely took the notion of 'students-as-customers' for granted. It is possible that the staff in such areas implicitly violate students' rights and blame students for holding unrealistic customer demands, while pretending to have fulfilled their duties to care about students when they have not. It is reasonable to argue that if these non-academic supporting staff, to whom students frequently seek help, do not show any sign of caring, ATS's efforts for building positive relationships would be in vain. Therefore, students' relationships with non-academic supporting staff are worth of further exploration.

#### **8.5. Concluding Remarks**

Since Medieval times, universities have served various purposes, ranging from training professionals in areas such as law, medicine, and theology, cultivating human minds, to generating new knowledge (i.e. advancing research). These purposes have been the subject of debates for many years, and will be for many years to come. This study shows that any attempt to specify the purposes of universities is an oversimplification. Indeed, the findings of this study demonstrates that students come to university with overlapping but still diverse purposes. It would be interesting to reflect on whether the debates on the functions of universities are necessary. Indeed, any university is a platform, and it is the people (i.e. students and academics) who are involved with it who decide its purposes. Students and academics with different aspirations would decide what to take away from their experiences at universities.

As for the students, even at Master's level, they are not experts. The fulfilment of students' purposes requires help from their teachers. This, as shown in this study, is largely done through their relationships with the teachers. I hope teachers, students, and other educational practitioners can find something worthwhile to take from this thesis, given than this thesis aims to contribute to the understanding of this under-researched but important topic. Indeed, pedagogical relationships, for better or for worse, are at the heart of teaching and learning.

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## Appendix A. Information sheet

### PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

<b>Research Project Title</b>
<b>A multiple case study of pedagogical relationships in different disciplinary areas in a research-intensive university</b>
<b>Research Investigator</b>
<b>Xiaomeng Tian</b>

#### **Introduction**

My name is Xiaomeng Tian, I am a PhD student at Moray House School of Education. I am working on my PhD project on pedagogical relationships at Master's level. I would like to give you information and invite you to take part in my study. If you have any question or feel uncertain about the project, please feel free to contact me and I will take time to explain.

#### **Purpose of Study**

This study aims to explore the nature of pedagogical relationships in 1-year full-time Master's programmes in one research-intensive university. More specifically, the study aims to gain insights on how students and their teachers conceptualise pedagogical relationships at Master's level, including the exploration of the features of pedagogical relationships in PGT programmes. Furthermore, the factors that may influence the building and maintaining of pedagogical relationships will be explored.

#### **Participant Selection and Research Procedures**

You are being invited to take part in this research because I feel that your experience as a student on [programme name] programme, which has number of course organisers with diverse backgrounds, can contribute to the knowledge and understanding of pedagogical relationships. I am doing my research with three different programmes in different disciplines (Humanities, Social Sciences, and STEM). I have selected your programme because it meets the study's inclusion criteria: size, disciplinary area, full-time, taught stage followed by research component.

I hope to interview around 8 students and 4 staff members from each of the three programmes. I hope all of us, as students and practitioners, can gain some insight on

good teaching practices by engaging in this research project. In particular, by reflecting on the features of pedagogical relationships we experienced. This study is anonymous and neither you nor the programmes on which you are studying will be identified.

If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to participate in one interview. It will last approximately an hour. The interview will be audio recorded and transcribed verbatim.

### **Voluntary Participation and Anonymity**

The decision to participate in this study is entirely up to you. You have the right not to answer any single question, as well as to withdraw completely from the interview at any point during the process without any repercussion. In addition, you have the right to request that the interviewer not use any of your interview material. This study is anonymous.

### **Use of the Information Beyond this Project**

The anonymised data files that generated in this study will be stored in Edinburgh University's DataStore for the writing of academic papers and further research. According to University of Edinburgh Data Management Guidance, the data can be retained for a minimum of 3 years.

### **Right to Ask Questions and Report Concerns**

You have the right to ask questions about this research study and to have those questions answered by me before, during, or after the research. If you want to participate in the study, or have any further questions about the study, at any time feel free to contact me through email: [s1522461@sms.ed.ac.uk](mailto:s1522461@sms.ed.ac.uk)

## Appendix B. Consent form

### PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

<b>Research Project Title</b>
<b>A multiple case study of pedagogical relationships in different disciplinary areas in a research-intensive university</b>
<b>Research Investigator</b>
<b>Xiaomeng (Bill) Tian</b>

Please read and complete this form carefully. If you are willing to participate in this study, circle the appropriate responses and sign and date the declaration at the end. If you do not understand anything and would like more information, please feel free to ask me.

- I have had the research satisfactorily explained to me in verbal and/or written form by the researcher. **YES / NO**
- I understand that the research at this stage will involve *one interview which will be audiotaped and transcribed verbatim (time involved: about 1 hour)*. **YES / NO**
- I understand that I may withdraw from this study at any time without having to give an explanation. **YES / NO**
- I understand that all information about me will be treated in strict confidence and that I will not be named in any written work arising from this study. **YES / NO**
- I understand that the excerpts of the transcriptions of the interviews may be used for academic purposes only, and they may be included in journal articles and/or conference papers. **YES / NO**
- I understand that any audiotape material of me will be used solely for research purposes and will be destroyed on completion of your research. **YES / NO**
- I understand that you will be discussing the progress of your research with others (e.g. supervisors) at the University of Edinburgh. **YES / NO**

**I freely give my consent to participate in this research study.**

**Participant:**

_____	_____	_____
Name of Participant (Print)	Signature	Date

**Researcher:**

_____	_____	_____
Name of Researcher (Print)	Signature	Date

**Contact Details:** Xiaomeng (Bill) Tian      Email: [s1522461@sms.ed.ac.uk](mailto:s1522461@sms.ed.ac.uk)

## **Appendix C. Introductory letter for ATS**

Dear Sir/Madam,

I'm Xiaomeng Tian (Bill), a PhD Education student supervised by Dr. Gale Macleod and Dr. Neil Lent. My supervisors have already spoken with you about the possibility of conducting research in your programme. I'm grateful that you are open to considering this request. And I'm happy to have a chance to provide more details about my study, and in particular, to address the questions listed in your previous email.

### **Research aims**

My study aims to explore the nature of pedagogical relationships in the context of three MSc programmes in different disciplinary areas (i.e. Humanities; Social Science; and STEM) in one research-intensive university against the background of marketisation of UK higher education. More specifically, the study aims to gain insights on how students and their teachers conceptualise pedagogical relationships at Master's level, including the exploration of the features of pedagogical relationships in PGT programmes. Furthermore, the factors that may influence the building and maintaining of pedagogical relationships will be explored.

### **Research procedures**

This study includes two parts: (1) Informal classroom observations/fieldnotes; and (2) In-depth one-to-one interviews with students and staff.

### **Fieldnotes/observations**

The purposes of observations are to know more about the course, the kinds of learning activities that take place, and ethos and culture of the class. In addition, I hope to begin to build rapport with students during these observation sessions. So, when I invite them to participate in interviews, they would already know who I am and the purpose of my research. I would like to take fieldnotes of my reflections on conversations and/or actions during the lectures and seminars/tutorials. These fieldnotes may later be used to inform the kinds of questions that I ask during one-to-one interviews with students

and teachers. They may also be used to facilitate the analysis of the interview data, as I will be somewhat familiar with the context which is being described.

Ideally, I would like to attend 5 lectures and 5 seminars/tutorials for these informal observations and making fieldnotes. I think it might be a good idea for my participation to start from week 4, thereby give the class opportunities to meet together and gel as a group without the presence of an observer. In other words, in this way I would not be interfering with the development of class ethos.

For the weeks that I am present in the class, I would plan to do all the readings associated with these weeks, so I can participate in any seminar discussions. My supervisors have suggested that this will help me to fit into the class and get a feeling as a member of the group. The students may come to see me as their classmate rather than/ as well as, an observer, and therefore, any chilling effect can be mitigated.

It is important to emphasise that this study in general and the observations in particular won't involve any sorts of evaluations (e.g. evaluations on coursework or on the quality of pedagogical relationships in a specific programme). This will be stressed and reassured to the students and tutors when I introduce this project to them in person.

### **Secure consents from potential participants and anonymity**

I'll be happy to introduce myself, discuss the purpose of my study with students in person and answer any questions. It is important to stress that the fieldnotes *per se* are not part of the data set. They are general descriptions of classroom settings, atmospheres, and more importantly, my reflections on the settings. I may take notes of some interesting incidents, but again, these descriptions may later be used to develop the interview schedules, rather than being analysed themselves. Furthermore, this study is anonymous. In fieldnotes, neither participants nor the programmes on which they are teaching/studying will be named. The conversations among students during observation sessions won't be digital recorded or recorded verbatim. Course related contents and/or any information that may lead to the identification of the participants (and the programme) will be deleted.

Because I'm not going to collect any data from individual students through the observations and fieldnotes, in discussion with my supervisors, I think the best way to gain consent from students and the lecturer for this first stage of the project is to seek verbal opt-out consents rather than asking for written opt in consent. Thus, it might be better for you to introduce the possible observation activities to the students first without my presence because the students might feel more comfortable saying they want to opt out to you rather than to me. I'm very happy to discuss with you whether a verbal opt-out consent for taking fieldnotes would be sufficient, and I am also in the process of applying for ethical approval from the Moray House committee and it may be that they can offer some advice on this.

I would provide information sheets for students to cover my period of acclimatisation to the course and my desire to take fieldnotes. And at the later stage of my research, I'll provide information sheet and written consent forms for participating in interviews.

Thank you very much for your time and consideration.

Yours Sincerely,

Xiaomeng (Bill) Tian

## **Appendix D. Interview guide with students**

### **Interview Guide (Students)**

#### **Section 1: Opening question: Students' background information**

1. Thank you for participating in this study. Can you talk a little bit about what you did before you came to Master's study/Can you tell me about your background before you started your Master's study?

#### **Section 2: Motivation to pursue a Master's degree**

1. Can you tell me about why you decided to do a Master's degree?  
2. Why did you decide to take this particular programme?/ what appealed to you about this programme? What other options (programmes, jobs, universities) did you consider? What do you think was the main thing that made up your mind to come here?  
3. Can you tell me about what you expected to get from this programme? For example, gain particular skills? What do you plan to do once you've finished your Master's? (and in what ways do you hope the masters will prepare you for that?)

#### **Section 3: Students' experiences of learning at Master's level**

1. Can you tell me about the teaching and learning activities in your programme?  
- Which courses are you taking at the moment? And which will you take next semester?  
- What considerations did you have when you make the decision? [Course organiser's reputation (research publication vs. teaching); The way that the course organiser builds relationships with students on induction day]  
- Follow up questions in terms of students' perceptions' of teachers' research duty.

2. What are the best bits of study on the programme so far? What do you enjoy the most of your Master's study?

3. What are the tutors like in your programme?

4. Thinking in particular about your relationships with teaching staff, the relationships are similar to or different from the relationships that you had in your undergraduate study?

-if the answer is yes: In what ways they are similar?

-if the answer is no: Why?

- More probing questions if the answer is no: Is it because your expectation of the relationships changed?  
- Or are there any other factors?

#### **Section 4: Students' conceptualisation of pedagogical relationships**

1. In an ideal world, what would be the perfect teacher-student relationship for you at the level that you are studying at the moment?
2. Do you think the relationships you just described are different at Master's' level compared with studies at other levels (e.g. school, UG, PGR)? / Do you think the ideal kind of relationships are different at different academic level?
3. Thinking about the relationships you have so far with the tutors on different courses, whether they are match up with the ideal type of teacher-student relationships?
  - if yes: How does it match up?
  - if no: Are there any factors constraint the development of relationships?

#### **Section 5: The (contextual) factors that influence teacher-student relationship**

1. To what extent do you think the relationships between teachers and students may be influenced by university structure?
  - For example, in terms of (1) class size and (2) teachers' approachability
2. What university can do to enhance the teacher-student relationships you have?

Additional question:

If you were a tutor at your programme here, what kind of tutor you would like to become?/What kind of relationships you would like to build with your students?

## **Appendix E. Interview guide with ATS**

### **Interview Guide (ATS)**

#### **Section 1: Demographic information**

1. Thank you for allowing me to sit in on your programme/seminar. And thank you for participating in this interview. First of all, could you tell me about yourself? How long have you been working at the UoE?
2. What teaching do you do? (Probing questions: Do you teach on both UG and PGT programmes? Any research supervision duties?)
3. Can you tell me about the programmes on which you're teaching? What's the teaching activities involved in these programmes? For the PGT programme (that I was sitting in), how long have you been on this programme?

#### **Section 2: Understanding of teaching/Motivations of university teaching<sup>2</sup>**

1. Why did you choose university teaching over other sorts?
2. Why did you choose the UoE? (It's research opportunities?)
3. In your view, what is the best thing about teaching?
4. Could you describe to me an "ideal" academic – What they do, who they are, etc.?

#### **Section 3: Teachers' preliminary understanding of PR**

1. As you know, my research topic is on exploring the nature of pedagogical relationships at Master's' level, and I have done a lot of readings on it. But I'm interested in what it means to you. So, when you hear/use the term (pedagogical relationship), what do you mean by pedagogical relationships? (What pedagogical relationships mean to you?)

#### **Section 4: Teachers' conceptualisation of PR in different disciplinary areas**

1. What do you think about the position of PR on students learning?
2. From a teacher's point of view, what are the features of an ideal PR?
3. As a teacher of this programme, how do the PRs that you try to build with your students fit with your view of an ideal PR?  
--- How do these features demonstrate in your teaching and in your academic work?
4. Are there any features of the discipline in which you teach affect the kind of relationships you are trying to achieve with you students?  
(Alternative question: What is your understanding of the influences of a certain disciplinary area on the nature of relationships between students and teachers?)

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<sup>2</sup> Adopted from other research

### **Section 5: PGT vs. UG**

1. As for the features of PR you just described, do you think you are trying to build the same kind of relationships with students on UG and PGT programmes?

If no – do you think the nature/features should be the same? Why?

### **Section 6: Caring<sup>3</sup>**

After doing some reading on PR, I notice that one element of PR, which was mentioned by previous study frequently, is caring. So,

1. How do you understand caring within academic work?
2. What factors do you think can be used to identify a caring teacher?
3. As a teacher, do you consider caring to be an intrinsic part of your teaching? How do caring demonstrate in your teaching?
4. From your point of view, do you think the students will say you are a caring teacher?
5. Could you share with me what you consider to be the best feedback from students that you've had about your teaching. And the worst?

### **Section 7: Influences of students' demographic features**

1. Do you find you have different kinds of relationships with different kinds of students? For example, in terms of relatively more matured students, students who have their professional career, and students from different countries?
2. How do you think about their (students') expectations of PR?

### **Section 8: The contextual factors (Teaching/researching duties)**

1. From your point of view, are there any influences from university structure on the relationships between teachers and students?  
- For example, (1) workloads for teaching and doing research; (2) pressure for publication; (3) your own career path; (4) class size.
2. What university can do to enhance the teacher-student relationships you have? Are there any signs of change already?

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<sup>3</sup> Adopted from other research