

The Influence of Student Identities on Progression to, through and beyond Higher Education

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### **Abstract**

Increasing opportunities for higher education in the Middle East has meant that many women who would not traditionally have attended post-secondary education are now encouraged to access higher education. This change has come with many potential problems as the traditional role of women in a conservative society is redefined. It is a change which is embraced by some and challenged by others and it presents potential problems for higher education institutions. This thesis is a case-based life history study examining the experiences of young female students from different economic and socio-cultural backgrounds in one higher education institution in a Middle Eastern country. The aims of the study are to research and document the factors that shape the identities of female students, to develop a clearer understanding of how those identities influence their experience of higher education and to suggest evidence-based ways of enhancing those experiences. A sample of ten students took part in a series of detailed interviews, recounting their past and present learning experiences and their future aspirations. Their life stories were used to build their life histories and to describe their evolving student identities, including the dominant factors informing their experiences and opportunities. Bourdieu's concept of capital was used to analyse the data and to examine the three main factors that emerged in the development of their identities: how the students define their roles and identities within their family; how (and who) they recognize as individuals of influence; and how they identify individual and collective moments of realization. The findings are discussed in the context of the past, present and future to determine how their student identities are shaped and how the students are able to shape them. This generates a better understanding of their experiences and opportunities as they progress to, through and beyond higher education. The results of the research will be used to inform policy and practice at this specific institution and so potentially contribute to the enhancement of the higher education experiences of women in the region.

## Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction.....	6
1.1. Context of Study .....	11
1.2. Positionality .....	17
Chapter 2: Literature Review.....	20
2.1. Growth of Higher Education in the Gulf Region.....	20
2.2. Family Influences on Academic Success and Identity.....	23
2.3. Islam and Female Education.....	27
2.4. Identity.....	30
2.5. Student Identity.....	33
2.6. Theoretical Framework.....	38
2.6.1. Field .....	39
2.6.2. Capital.....	40
Economic capital.....	41
Social capital.....	42
Cultural capital.....	42
2.6.3. Habitus.....	44
Gendered habitus .....	45
2.7. Using Bourdieu in the Middle East.....	46
Chapter 3: Methodology .....	48
3.1. Theoretical Framework in the Research Design.....	49
3.2. Life-History Research.....	51
3.3. Implications of Life History Research.....	54
3.3.1. Weaknesses.....	55
3.3.2. Strengths .....	56

3.3. Method.....	56
3.3.1. Recruitment and selection.....	56
3.3.2. Interviews.....	59
3.3.3. Use of language.....	61
3.4. Participants.....	63
3.4.1. Sabeen.....	63
3.4.2. Noura .....	64
3.4.3. Aisha .....	66
3.4.4. Nadia.....	67
3.4.5. Anfal .....	68
3.4.6. Reem.....	70
3.4.7. Haya.....	71
3.4.8. Sara .....	72
3.4.9. Fatemah.....	73
3.4.10. Afrar.....	75
3.5. Data Analysis.....	76
3.6. Ethical Issues .....	79
Chapter 4: Findings.....	81
4.1. Theme1: Parental Expectations.....	81
4.1.1. Aspirations .....	82
4.1.2. Cultural expectations .....	87
4.1.3. Traditional and conservative.....	91
4.1.4. The influence of parental expectations .....	94
4.2. Theme 2: The Influence of a Key Person.....	98
4.2.1. The mother.....	100
4.2.2. The father.....	104

4.2.3. The “other” .....	107
4.2.4. Influences of a key person .....	108
4.3. Theme 3: Epiphany – A Moment or Moments of Realisation. ....	116
4.3.1. Singular pivotal moment.....	118
4.3.2. Cumulative pivotal moments .....	126
4.3.3. Negative pivotal moment(s).....	132
Chapter 5: Discussion of Results .....	135
5.1. Past, Present and Future.....	136
5.2. Key Themes .....	139
5.3. Key Influencers.....	141
5.4. Single-gender Environment .....	151
5.5. Progression to, through and beyond Higher Education .....	154
Chapter 6: Conclusion .....	162
6.1. Summary of Research.....	162
6.2. Contribution of Findings.....	167
6.3. Future Research .....	171
6.4. Recommendations for Practice .....	173
References.....	180
Appendices .....	192
Appendix 1: Ethical Approval .....	192
Appendix 2: Letter of Invitation to Participate .....	193
Appendix 3: Selection Questionnaire .....	194
Appendix 4: Interview Schedule.....	195
Appendix 5: Example of Coding .....	196

## Chapter 1: Introduction

Human resource development in Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Kuwait, is a focus of much research (Bilboe, 2011; Burden-Leahy, 2009; Harry, 2007; Mellahi, 2000; Metcalfe, 2011; Onsam, 2011; Wilkins, 2010). Reports by the United Nations (UN) and the World Economic Forum highlight that the “empowerment of Arab Gulf women is a significant aspect of the region’s future competitive development” (Metcalfe, 2011a, p.132). For example, in the last two decades, government agencies in Kuwait have introduced numerous initiatives and programmes to meet the rapidly expanding needs of the local population. Burdened by the welfare tendency of the Kuwaiti government and an expatriate population that dominates the private sector job market, a government policy of market nationalization was introduced, referred to as “Gulfization” of the countries in the region, (Metcalfe, 2011, p.127). This has resulted in a rapid growth in academic and vocational higher education (Bilboe, 2011; Mellahi, 2000) as Gulf countries strive to meet the need to educate its younger generations for employability within the private sector. These programmes were targeted at the rapidly expanding population and, although the socio-cultural experiences of male and females have been significantly different, the programmes included a pro-active policy of female education to, through and beyond higher education.

The government push for education generates potential tensions for female students. The government and social parameters remain regarding socially acceptable employment and careers. These limitations may be external or internal and may influence aspects of student life and behaviour, including but not limited to student agency; social norms, expectations and traditions,

including gender and definitions of power and authority; quality of learning and assessment; teacher behaviour; and institutional mission and values. This also includes some important issues regarding the extent to which females are genuinely being encouraged to actively participate in society and realise their own potential or “future possible selves” (Leondari, 2007, p.18) through higher education, and whether they (female students) are truly engaged and committed to the education process (Tinto, 1988). In order to address these issues, it is necessary to look at the experiences and student identities of current female students. The aim of this thesis is to give voice to current female students in order to answer two research questions: (1) what factors do participants report as having influenced their identity as a student of higher education, and (2) how do participants feel their student identity influences their progress to, through and beyond higher education.

Female participation in higher education in the Gulf states is higher than in other Arab states. Kuwait University, for example, has a female population of approximately 80% (Metcalf, 2011b, p.124) and women are actively encouraged through educational and social initiatives including financial incentives, to attend higher education. For many, they are the first young adults in their families to attend college or university and are substantially better educated than either parents or siblings (Geenburg & Sagiv-Reiss, 2013; Weiner-Levy, 2006). The implications of this new “complex reality” (Greenberg and Sagiv-Reiss, 2013, p.152) can be challenging for women, families and society as traditional expectations and boundaries change and mobility, voice and aspirations grow (Sellar and Gale, 2011). According to Sellar and Gale, mobility is defined as “cultivating networks” (Sellar and Gale, 2011, p.121) while voice is defined as the ability to “narrate experiences” (p.126). These reflect a focus on the individual aspirations that

influence their progression to, through and beyond higher education and encouraged women to find their voice through their educational experiences.

Women in the Arab Muslim context are “subject to a number of coded or unwritten social mores in a patriarchal male-dominated society” (Elamin & Omair, 2010, p.746). These social prejudices regarding female employment and ‘suitable careers’ for women and the relatively late entry of females into the labour market in the region, mean that opportunities can be limited, and job satisfaction can be low (Afiouni, 2013; Metle, 2001). This negatively impacts female occupational attainment, especially in certain career fields which are still considered ‘male’ (Elamin & Omair, 2010; Metle, 2001) or careers in which social contact is required. However, as stated by Metcalfe, women are gradually expanding into “previously limited professional areas” and developing leadership roles (Metcalfe, 2011b, p. 124). Younger, educated males were less likely to hold traditional values and expectations regarding female education and employment, and age was an additional factor determining gender prejudices (Elamin and Omair, 2010). However, experience shows that this is not always the case and older, uneducated males can be strong advocates of female education for various reasons including a desire for improved social status and a respect for education as a tool for economic empowerment and growth. Economic empowerment of women can lead to the well-being of families and households. Traditionally, an educated mother will educate her children and thus improve the family’s opportunities and economic stability. Increasing women’s political participation can also lead to the creation of better services, jobs, and rights for women.



The need to determine a new 21<sup>st</sup> century Arab identity that will not abandon its traditions is a challenge. The same is true for the role of women in Arab societies, influenced by interpretations of Islam, and pulled between varying discourses from Islamic scholars, hard-line traditionalists and feminists. Starting in Egypt, from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, female education and the social and economic development of women was encouraged. By the 1960s, this had spread to other Arab countries but with unequal degrees of success and encouragement. Despite having one of the highest literacy rates for an Arab country, Kuwaiti women were negatively impacted by existing traditions and culture (Metle in Sidani, 2005, p.501). Social divisions were strictly enforced, including female seclusion. A woman in a “male-space (i.e. public space)” was deemed to be “provocative and offensive” (Syed, 2010, p.151). In traditional families, this division remains. Female modesty remains a strong force in Islamic society and a female seen to be immodest (the definition of which can vary according to interpretation) can be subjected to judgement and social retribution. Her actions, or the interpretation of her actions, impacts her family’s social position, and, as a consequence, many families exert strict control over all females.

In a postcolonial world, “women’s attainment has become symbolic of their nations’ progress” (McClintock, 1997 in Kurshid, 2015, p.100). Education leads to employment which leads to extended economic benefits which leads to an enhanced ability to make decisions at home (McClintock, 1997 in Kurshid, 2015, p.100). Kurshid states that in a global context, education is seen as “a universal tool to empower Muslim women” and equip them with the tools to transform their “oppressive” cultures (Kurshid, 2015, p.99). In her study, education is synonymous with being a “good Muslim” (p.99).

For her, education is seen in a binary context: the West is seen as progressive, modern and secular while Muslim societies are backward, traditional and religious. Islam is seen as unmodern, oppressive and “a challenge” that restricts women’s access to schools, jobs and political participation (Kurshid, 2015, p.100- 101). The Western stereotypical view of the Middle East is that of female subjugation and male dominance in all aspects of life and society, but there is an inherent danger in the West’s preference to see countries like Saudi Arabia, as a “caricature, its realities...unfamiliar, and to many, simply unbelievable” (Ahmed, 2008, p.394). The government actively promotes the need to educate the expanding younger female generation (the demographic majority) and increasingly in all aspects of society, including education, employment, and politics, women are becoming more visibly empowered. Moreover, women have been gaining their opportunities with “the encouragement and often unabashed support of their male...counterparts” (Ahmed, 2008, p.343). However, the duality of their social roles and identities prevails and the parameters remain fluid and controversial. None are more conscious of this than the young women. For women, theirs is a “multi-layered, complex, cloistered world” in which “their goals and dreams and their places in the workforce are achieved only through the manipulation and influence of husbands, fathers or brothers or sons. Without their influence, they can never express themselves” (Ahmed, 2008, p.64). This “subversive manipulation” (Ahmed, 2008, p.64) requires intelligence, determination and strength. This combination of duality and strength was what I wanted to explore through my research study and the most effective way was to let the future generation of women use their voices and “lived experiences” (Kurshid, 2015, p.116) to tell their own stories and articulate their own aspirations.

### 1.1. Context of Study

I first started teaching in the Foundation Department in 2010 and became the Head of the Department in 2011. I remained there for six years. One of the primary values espoused by the institution in its vision and mission statement is the empowerment of women. Many of the students are strong independent women who have a tangible sense of their abilities and their possibilities yet, at the same time, their actions and decisions are determined by the closest male relative. Single-gender discursive environments, referred to as “e-hijab” offer a safe zone in which women can discuss identity in “freedom from the [proverbial] male gaze” (Bunt in Piela, 2013, p.395). This institution prides itself in being a place that allows some of the students to display a certain side of their personality that would probably not emerge in a conservative society or in a co-ed institution. The exclusivity of women creates an environment that develops leadership and initiative without constraint, and this create a great potential for students to develop their leadership skills and their self-confidence. The challenge is how to balance the empowerment of women within the college environment with the social reality of their real world, and all it entails, within a conservative society. Society encourages the education of women while the reality is a tangible sense of nervousness at the implications of allowing women full equality in the labour market and society. This has direct implications for institutions that educate and empower women for the workforce.

Prior to working at this college, I had already been in this Middle Eastern country for over 10 years, having first gone there in 1996. During my time in there, I taught in a private international school, a corporate training institution and the public university, so the country and culture were

familiar to me. A single-gender higher educational environment, provides the opportunity for female student identity to be explored and developed further. I was fully aware that the stereotypical western view of young Muslim women in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries was simplified, inaccurate and often insulting. I was also increasingly aware of the frustration felt by many women at being misrepresented by outsiders who spoke *for* them instead of *to* them. I wanted their voice to be heard. For this reason, a life history research method seemed the most appropriate.

Life history research puts the human experiences into perspective. It gives voice to the participant allowing the researcher “access to social reality, signifying the worlds through which people have moved” (Freeman, 2004, p.69). It allows them to tell their stories and these personal stories can be incredibly powerful and can impact policy (Watts, 2008). Narratives are important to understand individual stories and experiences. It is too easy to focus on statistics and not stories. Stories may be rich in details, but if they are going to impact policy then they have to be contextualized within the immediate and larger environment. This is what distinguishes life histories from life stories. In this study, the life stories, as told by each participant, need to be analysed within the micro context of family and education, and within the macro context, including the socio-cultural and religious context of conservative Islamic countries. This process takes the life story and transforms it into a life history.

Each participant has her own unique story to narrate with a depth of experiences and emotions, all of which make the tapestry of her life story. They may not be aware of their growth and the development of their story and identity in relation to the wider context (Squire et al, 2008) but

they all narrated a similar trajectory, each evolving through different experiences and influencing factors, both positive and negative. It is this process of narration that gives the individual control over the construction of her identity (Watts, 2015). However, each life story is not entirely unique because of the structures it is founded on and which rise through the layers of individual history and experience to shape the story being told (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). The life history approach, with the capacity to see the individual's world from micro and macro perspectives, requires the present character of the individual to be considered within the circumstances of her past (Goodson, 1995; Järvinen, 2004), thereby, connecting individual lives and stories to the “understanding of larger human and social phenomena” (Hatch & Wisniewski, 1995, p.113).

When transitioning into higher education many students have to redefine their identity and roles in society and their immediate family as they transition from the traditional structure of the school system to the relative freedom of higher education. Using the life history approach, students can articulate their lives and how they progressed to higher education. This research attempts to develop a better understanding of these tensions and how individual students negotiate them to improve the learning experience and outcomes of female students. Creating policies and practices that ease this transition and help students “maximize the opportunities of the present” (Stevenson & Clegg, 2010, p.242) would be beneficial to all the students and the wider community. Therefore, the aim of the research is to research and document the student identities of a sample of current students in a particular HE institution to develop a clearer understanding of how the range of issues constituting students' identities influence progression to, through and beyond higher education, including in the context of national policy changes.

Although this research focuses on a small sample of students (ten), the findings can inform current practice and provide a basis for future improvements. Each participant's life story is unique, but the common themes across the sample group provide enough data to help from decisions for future practice and policy. Internally, the research can help identify strategies that can be implemented to improve the engagement of the students; consequentially, it will help to (1) improve their higher education experience and maximise their potential, and (2) promote their progression through HE, thereby improving the retention and graduate rates for the institution.

The majority of students at the college are recipients of government scholarships. Students can apply for a government scholarship for higher education, and provided their GPA remains at 3.0 or higher, the scholarship will cover their fees. Any student that falls below 3.0 for three consecutive semesters will have their scholarship suspended until their grade improves. Those who receive a scholarship, also receive a monthly stipend, equivalent to approximately 300 GBP. However, government funding applies to students who are citizens only and non-citizens must pay privately. For many, the fees for higher education are unaffordable. As a result, many students either select a non-accredited institution or are sent "home" to study, even if they have little or no experience of living there. Four of the participants in this study were non-citizens. The college also provides a small number of college scholarships for students who would have to withdraw for financial reasons. These are awarded at the discretion of the college Chairman and are for non-citizens students and citizens who lose their scholarship. No participants in this study were receiving college scholarships.

During the research, participants were asked to reflect on their educational experiences in relation to past, present and future. As the interviews progressed, participants discussed many factors that influenced their educational choices as well as life choices and future aspirations. The level to which each individual could consciously reflect on their experiences differed – some interviews were more descriptive in nature than others, but all were able to narrate experiences and emotions that affected their progression to, through and beyond higher education. Bourdieu's sociology of education and his concepts of field, capital and habitus are used as the theoretical framework (Bourdieu, 1993, 1997, 2000; Husu, 2013; Navarro, 2006). Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital, which articulates with other forms of capital, encompasses numerous aspects including social background and educational experiences. It generates individual and classed habituses that influence a student's interpretation of her own identity and a sense of legitimacy in educational institutions (Reay, et.al., 2005) and so mediates her choices, opportunities, and experiences.

Prior to the research and based on the literature reviewed, several key educational factors were anticipated as likely to arise, including mobility, aspiration and voice (Sellar & Gale, 2011), possible future selves (Leondari, 2007; Stevenson & Clegg, 2010) and the concept of "belongingness" (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Levett-Jones & Lathlean, 2008), engagement and persistence (Anderson, 2010), transition to college (Hoffman, et al., 2008), and retention (Tinto, 2012). However, during the primary analysis stage, three factors were identified as emergent themes. These three themes were: (i) parental expectations; (ii) a key person; and (iii) a moment, or moments, of realization (or epiphany). These three themes emerged in the participants' narrations of their life stories as significant experiences that impacted their life (and education)

choices. These issues were analysed in terms of the cultural capital on the individual participants and comparisons were made between student experiences of these issues to identify the significance of cultural capital in the negotiation of those issues. Cultural capital is “more than the possession of obvious academic resources such as formal qualification; it includes the “accumulated benefits of the individual’s social background (for example, the type of school attended), accents, confidence and the possession and knowledge of cultural objects such as books and the ‘high culture’ of the arts”. This “sense of power and confidence” in relation to schooling is a “key component of cultural capital” (Reay, 1999, p.163); it results in a “tendency to behave in ways that are expected of ‘people like us’.” (Reay, D. 2004, p.433)). During the narration, these themes were naturally located in the past, present and/or future and a secondary analysis focused on the timeframe of these themes. Some were located exclusively in one specific time frame while others spanned two or more timeframes.

The participants have progressed to higher education and the aim of this study is to give them a voice to identify what they experienced and how these experiences influenced their student identities in order to show how their developing student identities impact their progression in higher education. By learning *from* their experiences and not *of* their experiences (op. cit., p.3), it is possible to understand the diversity of student experience from the perspective of the students themselves. The life-history approach “links agency and structure” in two sources of the data – one addressing agency of the students and the other the social structures within which they moved (Watts, 2015, p.235). This reflects an engagement with equity of access to higher education and facilitates a better understanding of what factors and capital are required to enhance the learning environment for future students. Where capital is lacking, support networks



and policies can be implemented to enhance their experiences and provide support where it is lacking. Intervention strategies can be developed and implemented for those at risk of dropping out, thus creating a more equitable learning experience for students.

## 1.2. Positionality

When starting this research, I was very clear that it was not going to be a deficit study. I had no intention to show the participants as oppressed, or as girls that needed saving. On the contrary, the impetus of my study was the force of personality of the young students I encountered daily at the college. I met students who were determined to improve themselves and seize the opportunities that were emerging. The motivation for this research was to learn from these students. I wanted to explore how their student identities were shaped – specifically what factors influenced their identities - and how these evolving identities influence their education and future. The purpose of the research was to use the findings from this research and apply them to future practices and policies in order to support the student identities of future students and, ultimately, improve the educational experiences for future students.

The best way for me to accomplish this was to hear their voices as they narrated their life stories. It is through their life stories, or histories, that I was able to see how the students saw their student identities emerging and developing through their experiences and relationships. Their student identities were the significant factor to determine their progression through higher education. By looking at the relationship between student identities and progression in higher

education, it is possible to contribute to future practices and policies that support and develop student identities in similar educational environments.

As I have stated, my aim was not to present another study on female Muslim students in which religion and cultural traditions are the focus. The study was a group of female students who happened to be in this particular Middle Eastern country, and any references to religion or cultural traditions are to provide context of the social environment and are not part of the research. The participants are all women because the study was conducted at a female-only institution and, as a result, gender is a factor in this study. However, it was not a determining factor in the early stages of the research. I did not select a female-only environment; on the contrary, I chose the environment in which I was lived and worked. I could have based my study on a group of male or mixed students in any other country in the world, but the context was determined by my location and by the fact that after many years working closely with students, I really wanted to give voice to their stories. As a faculty member in the college, I was in a position of power and my positionality is acknowledged further in Chapter 3 (Methodology). Although I was an outsider, I was also considered an insider because of my familiarity with the culture and student population. This enabled me to have substantial conversations with many students who may not have spoken so freely with someone who was completely outside their culture or someone who was within their culture.

The aim of the research was not to impose or suggest any changes for the participants. I wanted to hear their voices and learn from them. I wanted to explore how their identities were shaped

and, subsequently, shape their educational journey. The purpose was not to judge or impose external values on the lives and identities of these students, but to record their perceptions of student identity and , if indicated by the research, to suggest changes to policy and practice to contribute to the development and improvement of future educational environments.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### 2.1. Growth of Higher Education in the Gulf Region

The globalization of higher education has led to a rapid expansion of higher education in the Gulf regions, specifically countries belonging to the GCC. Globalisation and its impact on the “peripheral developing countries” (that is, all countries not considered Western industrialized countries) are examined by Burden-Leahy who focuses on the specific context of the UAE as she analyses the significance of low levels of labour market participation in a “very high income, early development state nation with high economic growth levels” (Burden-Leahy, 2009, p.525).

Over the last two decades, there has been a rapid growth in the number of overseas universities opening campuses in the GCC states. The local demand for internationally accredited higher education by the burgeoning populations has been matched by the enthusiasm of international universities for opening overseas branches in the high income, wealthy oil economies. Wilkins analyses several factors including student experiences at international branch campuses of foreign universities in the context of the UAE (Wilkins, 2010). Madichie and Kolo (2013) focuses on the challenges experienced in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in implementing internationalization initiatives by foreign universities in successfully operating in the region. Culturally and academically, there are many challenges, and the higher education hub concept is an “unproven model” (Wilkins, 2010, p.397). Student experiences, quality, and institutional strategies (Al-Atiqi & Alharbi, 2009; Wilkins, 2010) vary considerably. Institutions are finding it increasingly difficult to differentiate themselves in the education market (Wilkins, 2010, p.394) and as enrolments fall, less prestigious institutions are having to improve programmes to improve the employability of their graduates.

The growth in higher education was to create a skilled local labour force while increasing employment opportunities for citizens. However, a negative perception of the private sector remains in most Gulf countries. Students reported that they are discouraged from vocational skills because of lower wages and social and cultural values, “pride and social acceptance are related to the type of work they do and the sector they work in” (Mellahi, 2000, p.339). The negative social perception is discussed by Al-Waqfi and Forstenlechner (2012) with regard to private sector work. In their study on the UAE, research shows that citizens overwhelmingly prefer public sector jobs because of their security, salaries and benefits and social status. In fact, 98% of the Emirate population is employed in the public sector. This tendency is repeated through the Gulf region and the Middle East. A report published in the Kuwait Times, stated that 4.7% of Kuwaitis were unemployed and of those “58%...are unwilling to work in private sector jobs, preferring to wait until a public sector job becomes available” (Kuwait Times, 2016). This is evidence that, despite the government stipends and benefits offered to its citizens to accept private sector jobs, encouraging graduates to enter the private sector is proving extremely problematic.

As an attempt to improve the negative attitudes to private sector employment and encourage citizens to enter the private sector, the UAE and Kuwait have emphasized initiatives and developments that focus on training and vocational education in the GCC region (Bilboe, 2011; Harry, 2007; Mellahi, 2000). Kuwait’s need for trained, skilled technicians to meet the demands of the growing labour market increased steadily since the 1960s (Alqatani & Almutairi, 2013; Bilboe 2011). Mellahi’s research focuses on vocational education in Saudi Arabia, specifically

the key factors that impact human resource development. Vocational education was seen as the “magic cure” for the lack of skilled labour force to meet economic demands and to reduce unemployment while improving the attitudes towards traditional “blue-collar work” (Mellahi, 2000, p.329). As with other Gulf countries, vocational education was considered the “cornerstone” of national human resource development strategies (Mellahi, 2000, p.330). Vocational education is regarded as “essential for progress and substantial development” (Alqatani & Almutairi, 2013, p.10). However, despite government initiatives and incentives, vocational education remains a stigmatized choice for many who view it as a secondary choice.

Furthermore, with regard to female employment opportunities, social constraints remain a limiting factor. The Labour Law in one GCC country states several restrictions (articles 22 and 23) on female employment including: “It is prohibited to employ women at night - from 10:00 pm to 7:00 am and it is prohibited to employ women in hazardous jobs or those that are harmful to their health. It is also prohibited to let them engage in jobs that defy the morality code and exploit their womanhood. They should not work in institutions which provide services exclusive for men” (Arabtimesonline, 2015). Final approval for female-appropriate employment rests with “the minister of social affairs and labor after consulting the Consultative Committee for Labor Affairs and the concerned organization” (Arabtimesonline, 2015). Such restrictions, common in conservative Islamic societies, limit the opportunities for female graduates and reduce their choices of higher education courses. This can result in poor employment opportunities and career progression.

## 2.2. Family Influences on Academic Success and Identity

As a result of the increasing population and the desire for English-language higher education, many families have turned to private schools to educate their children (Al Shehab, 2010). These private schools traditionally catered to the foreign population and follow different systems including Arabic, American, British, Canadian, Indian, Pakistani, French and others. Parents still prefer the public school more than the private as “an extension of the welfare state model” (Al Shehab, 2010, p.181) with many believing that education is a “public responsibility to be shouldered by the government” but socioeconomic factors indicate that there is a correlation between areas with higher socio-economic status and private school enrolment (Al Shehab, 2010, p.184). The government mandates that all citizens and Muslim children in private schools take Arabic and Islamic studies, and all children take Social Studies, but the remainder of the curricula is determined by the school’s system. International private schools provide educational services that are not available in public schools, including remedial programmes, arts, crafts, music, enrichment programmes and sports programmes. For some families, socio economic factors limit the choice between public and private while for others, religious and cultural taboos mean the reality of choice is irrelevant (for the families and the schools). According to Al Shehab (2010), despite generous government funding, the academic performance of public schools will continue to decline, a trend that he attributes almost exclusively to the increased enrolment of private schools and decline of parental involvement in the public-school system.

Family involvement has long been discussed in literature as an important factor in improving student commitment and decreasing the drop-out rate (Hill, et. al., 2018; Kiyama & Harper, 2018; Oswald, 2018; Reay, 1996, 1999; Yamamoto & Holloway, 2010). A study by Alqatani &

Almutairi (2013) discussed parental influences as a factor for attrition but did not identify the educational or socio-economic level of the family members and, therefore, did not address the level of social capital. Alkandari's research on the major private higher education institutions in one GCC country concluded that the financial burden placed on students was attributed specifically to the cost of textbooks (Alkandari, 2014).

Baydoun (2015), Fulton and Turner (2008), Ijaz and Abbas (2010), Metheny and McWhirter (2013), Tarar (2012) discuss the role of family and parental participation on the academic achievement of students in different countries around the world. Fulton and Turner's US-based research on parenting styles and their impact on academic motivational beliefs discusses whether three factors (parental warmth, parental supervision and parental autonomy granting) predict "students' perceptions of control and, in turn, whether perceptions of control predict academic grades" (Fulton & Turner, 2008, p.530). They conclude that parenting practices are a "significant predictor of college students' perceptions of control and the perceptions of control are related to college GPA". Furthermore, student belief systems are formed through "earlier parenting" and these belief systems impact outcomes in college (Fulton & Turner, 2008, p.530). A secondary issue of their study, relevant to this study, investigated "whether the predicted relations were moderated by student gender" (Fulton & Turner, 2008, p.523.). It concluded that supervision "operated differently for males and females" (Fulton & Turner, 2008, p.530).

The importance of family "warmth, supervision and autonomy granting," (Fulton & Turner, 2008, p.521) needs to be considered in the context of this study. Ijaz and Abbas (2010) focus on the differing perceptions of the education of daughters in the first- and second-generation of



Mirpuri-British-Pakistanis in the West Midlands. They explore the juxtaposition of parents valuing education and success while being concerned about the effect(s) of “Westernisation”, or “the best of both worlds: receive Western education and yet maintain their conventional religio-cultural values” (Ijaz and Abbas, 2010, p.315-316). As opposed to the study by Fulton and Turner, the parents did not differentiate between their sons and daughters, stressing that “Islam does not discriminate on the basis of gender” (Ijaz and Abbas, 2010, p.317) but the reasons for an education did vary. A daughter’s education was considered a “safety net” (p., a means of independence and confidence in society.... a means by which they could function effectively and independently, probably as a response to their experiences of their first-generation parents. Parents who advocated professional careers for their daughters contextualised them in a gendered work environment... teachers and doctors for “our sisters” (Ijaz and Abbas, 2010, p.317-318). Ijaz and Abbas’s study strongly refutes any notion that South Asian Muslim parents do not value education for young women and although their study was UK-based, their findings and concerns (co-ed schools, corruption by Western values) can be applied to the context of this study.

Adding to this perspective, Tarar (2012) looks specifically at the mother-daughter relationship in Pakistan Muslim culture. In a patriarchal society like Pakistan, social constraints are framed by the belief that women are property, therefore the closeness of mother-daughter relationship is “disrupted by man-made systems” (Tarar, 2012, p.70) and one that must relent to the societal expectations. However, “woman to woman understanding and dealing of family and social relationships” forms a support system, the “basic-matrix” of which is the mother-daughter relationship (Tarar, 2012, p.70). This relationship and understanding is key in the formation of identity (public and private) for a young Muslim female. From an early age, the differing

parental roles and expectations are assumed, as evidenced by in the interviews conducted by in which several participants talk about the relationship with their father and/or grandfather in the context of approval or disapproval of actions, the mother is not mentioned. Actions (public) are determined by the patriarchal figure while emotions (private), “a mutually empowering psychological unit in various contexts” (Tarar, 2012, p.74) are determined by the mother figure.

Patriarchy, “the defining force in establishing a gender hierarchy within the family” (Greoblacher, 2012, p.14). reinforces the male dominance over female relatives. The family unit operates on a similar power structure but at a macro-level wherein the “male-centric environment” operates and dominates parallel to a (subservient) female support system and hierarchy, “Intra-household relations are defined as complementary, in which female members are taught to respect and defer to male members while males are urged to take responsibility for their female kin” (Greoblacher, 2012, p.14). Although restricted by societal norms and expectations, a woman’s cultural capital (including personal histories and educational experiences) contributes to her “self-assurance...[and] sense of efficacy” (Reay, 1999, p.166)and is a key factor in the role and effectiveness (as a motivator and support system) of the mother. It is important to note at this point that the parental academic capital may be limited but this does not necessarily negatively impact the perceived and espoused value of education in a family; in fact, it can be a motivating factor for parents and children (Modood, 2006, p.248).

Reay (1999) and Baydoun (2015) both discuss the linguistic capital of parents as an influential factor in educational access and success. Similarly to Fulton and Turner (2008), research has shown parental involvement has a positive impact on academic achievement. Parental

participation in schools is vital “to address the continuing decline in middle school students’ academics” (Baydoun, 2015, p.23). Parental support is not the only key influence in a student’s progression through education; teacher support is also crucial as discussed by Cuconato, du Bois\_Reymond and Lunabba (2015) in their article on the role of teachers in a student’s transition. Their research on teacher identity typology differentiated between three specific professional identities of teachers, as defined by themselves. The third identity was the teacher as someone for whom “the well-being of students prevails over systemic and economic motives” (Cuconato, du Bois\_Reymond and Lunabba, 2015, p.325). This was particularly relevant for the transitional phase for students and a factor in preventing attrition and academic failure.

### 2.3. Islam and Female Education

The United Nations Development Program (UNDP) confirms gender equality is indivisible from the UNDP human development goal of improving people’s lives and in the choices and opportunities available to them. The UNDP considers gender equality to be a pre-requisite for inclusive, democratic, violence-free and sustainable development (UNDP, 2011). Higher education plays a major role in democratization and social justice within any society (Halai, 2011; Herrera, 2006; Noureen, 2015).

Cooray and Potrafke’s (2011) comparative study looks at gender equality as a tool for economic development and democracy with references to religion and aspects of culture. Women’s attainment, according to Kurshid (2015), has become symbolic of their nation’s progress. The traditional Western stereotype of Arab Muslim females is one of oppression and submission - a bleak existence entirely dependent on and subject to the whims of a primitive, uneducated male

relative. Kurshid (2015) refers to the modern versus traditional binary, where Muslim societies are “backward, traditional, religious” and the West is “progressive, modern, secular” (Kurshid, 2015, p.101). Metcalfe points out that Islam has “afforded women’s rights...it is tradition and cultural practice in Arab Gulf States that have impacted women’s economic and social advance” (Metcalfe, 2011b, p.124). The distinguishing point is the difference between Islam and the *interpretation* of Islam. Sidani refers to Arab societies as being “in a state of confusion” (Sidani, 2005, p.498) as they seek a new identity encompassing shifting power structures, changing societal expectations, and developing male-female relations (Sidani, 2005).

According to research conducted by Cooray and Potrafke (2011), the primary influence on gender inequality in education is culture and religion. Their research concluded that autocratic regimes do not discriminate against girls in denying educational opportunities” and democracies do not discriminate by gender when “providing educational opportunities”. They further concluded that discrimination against girls is “especially pronounced” in Muslim dominated countries. (Cooray & Potrafke, 2011, p.268). This is supported by Noureen’s research (2015) on female empowerment through education. Her research focuses on the context of the school environment and how it negatively or positively impacts a girl’s self-esteem, participation, and retention. Gender-related discrimination manifested in the provision of facilities and opportunities is further examined as Noureen’s gender identity case study researches the how higher education effects women’s lives and empowers them in a patriarchal society such as Pakistan. The gender identity study refers to the South Asian region where investment in the education of the female child is considered a “waste of resources’ (Noureen, 2015, p.9). Early marriage and the dowry system have increased the financial burden of families and education is

beyond the financial means of many families. Additionally, societies in which the woman goes to live with the husband's family on marriage, discourage female education due to the perceived loss of financial capital. (Noureen, 2015; Tarar, 2012)

The rapid growth of higher education in Saudi Arabia, in terms of gender segregation, national identity and regional leadership, is examined by Onsman (2011). According to Onsman, as higher education expands rapidly, there is mounting concern over the need to retain cultural traditions and identity while promoting academic development (Onsman, 2011). In the context of this study, the push to align national standards with international standards, while meeting societal needs, includes segregation. In keeping with the gender-segregated society, all education establishments are segregated for teaching, with the exception of private international schools. School campuses are separate but higher education is mostly conducted on shared campuses with segregated social facilities and classes. Halai's (2011) study on segregated single-sex schools (Pakistan) determines that the lower self-efficacy (of teachers) and gendered expectations of pupils in school that originate from the broader socio-cultural context constrain girls' freedom to learn even when access is equal to that of boys. However, in the context of single-sex institutions of higher education, females experience an environment that offers them a protective space, socially and educationally, in which to express themselves freely and without gender-based prejudices. For many, the difficulties arise in the transition to the workplace and wider society where social norms and expectations reappear to collide with a developed sense of self-efficacy and independence. Many have expressed a need to conform and abandon their sense of independence to avoid conflict and to be seen as a role-model as someone who can experience the new while retaining the traditional (Weiner-Levy, 2006).

#### 2.4. Identity

Ijaz and Abbas (2010), discussed earlier in this chapter, refer to the formation of the identity for young British Muslim women in a society that tries to balance the Western influences of the social world the young women will be expected to participate in with the traditional social and familial values of their first- or second-generation parents. Many of the parents in her study rely on the Imams from local mosques to guide them; thus, relying on the *interpretation* of the Quran for their knowledge of “village values” (Ijaz and Abbas, 2010, p.323). For Muslim women, living in conservative Islamic countries, including Pakistan, the dilemma is less overt but still present, mostly due to social media and the media in general. In the Gulf countries, the preference for international education adds another dimension to the complex issue of identity. Social movements that focus on gender, ethnicity, sexuality, are no less controversial in homogenous societies even if the conversations are less public as discussed by Husu (2013) who connects the social position, resources, and cultural competence behind the practices of identity movements.

Dress is, for many, a visible representation of identity, a physical representation of their voice (Haw, 2009; Roche, Roche and Al Saidi, 2012; Ruby, 2006; Zine, 2006). For some young women, the dress and headscarf are the outward expression of obedience and “honour”; for other young women, they represent imposed values and “backwardness”. The “Who am I?” question (Kuhn and McPartland, 1958, in Hutnik and Street, 2010) is “particularly pertinent during adolescence” as young women question their assumptions and early identifications in a new context, in the case of this study – college. Some experience an “unexamined” identity, some

define their identity in comparison with peers while a third group are “confused” (Hutnik and Street, 2010, p.34) and feel marginalized. Although their study refers specifically to ethnic identity, the process of identification can be applied to education and student identity.

Higher education is the time of exploration and self-discovery; a time for freedom and independence (albeit in relative terms). As with the girls in Hutnik and Street’s (2010) study, the participants in this study come from family units in which decisions are made with parental authority and not by autonomous choice-making of the individual. As a result, the concept of *voice* is particularly relevant to identity studies on young Muslim women (Abu-Lughod, 1998; Al-Sharmani, 2014; Archer, 2002; Brown, 2006; Greenberg and Sagiv-Reiss, 2013; Haw, 2009; Kassam, 2007; Keddie, 2009; Keddie, 2014; Noreen, 2015; Piela, 2013; Ruby, 2006; Weiner-Levy, 2006). In Islamic societies, like Kuwait, there is an emphasis on group identity (Muslim and Kuwaiti). Young women are “the public face of their community” (Keddie, 2014, p.355) with the responsibility of “guarding their family honour”. Social pressure to protect this value (of family honour) are strong. Higher education, specifically Western education, can provide a context that supports self-determination or agency, conceptualized as “having presence (rather than absence) where they are the author of their own multiple meanings and desires” (Keddie, 2014, p.357) while remaining sensitive to the context of religion, gender and culture that frame, and constrain, their lives.

This complex development of identification is echoed by Brown (2006) who states that “social markers, such as gender, religion and identity are contingent relationships with multiple determinations” (Brown, 2006, p.417). One important outcome of the development of identity, is

the need to separate culture from religion, “authentic and legitimate Islam” from “culturally tainted or corrupted expressions of Islam” (Brown, 2006, p.420). In situations that may be culturally oppressive for females, they can develop “Islamic-based platform for resistance”, as interpreted by female scholars. This, however, is less prevalent in Middle Eastern cultures where religion is still fixed and determined by male religious scholars. As part of her study, Brown refers to the Islamic conceptualization of “complementarity”. Women have the rights to work and education, but as “a woman is half a family” she also has the choice to not work. Therefore, as opposed to western ideals of “sameness” and gender equality, gender difference is “valorised within the context of a gendered division of labour in the family and the community” (Brown, 2006, p.427).

This concept of choice is further developed into the concept of a good woman, as defined internally and externally. The “shifting senses of self” (Haw, 2009, p.376) for young Muslim women comes at a time of rising “widespread individualism concerned with identity and self-actualization”. Young women are increasingly exposed to a westernized sense of emancipation and empowerment while they remain in a society “inherently patriarchal in their embracing of conservatism and tradition” (Keddie, 2009, p.266), it is worth noting that “the most successful have been those who have located their political action in the context of Islam and its teachings” (Keddie, 2009, p.267); in other words, those who remain a good Muslim. This is discussed further by Kurshid (2015) in her research on *parhay likhay* (educated) women in Pakistan. Education as a process to change who were considered “wiser, modern and good Muslims” (Kurshid, 2015, p.113) because of their ability to balance being “agents of change who could also sustain certain gendered norms that kept families and communities together” (Kurshid,



2015, p.113). Again, the emphasis is on forming an identity that works within institutions of family and community “to gain respectability and access to specific forms of power” (Kurshid, 2015, p.113) without misusing the freedoms and trust, and ultimately not defying community norms or challenging existing structures. Gender equality, in such contexts, comes from such women being “active agents” not “victims” (Kurshid, 2015, p.119) waiting for a Western rescue. For Kurshid, education is a process of change, creating educated women who struggle within, not against, the existing institutions.

## 2.5. Student Identity

Student identity is a term widely found in current literature and across many disciplines. In educational literature, it is widely discussed around the significance of class, gender, race and sexuality (Smyth & Hattam, 2004, p.97) and is as rich in volume as it is in complexity. In an educational context, Wexler’s (1992) term “becoming somebody” is an appropriate way of looking at the formation of the self, and identity because the development of an identity is a process. This is echoed by Smyth and Hattam’s concept of identity, which they define as a “production” which is “never complete and always in process” and not “one true, stable, unchanging self that can be discovered” (Smyth & Hattam, 2004, p.192). This sense of process and fluidity is important as we consider how the individual sense of identity is influenced by (and influencing) the social structure around it.

According to Smyth and Hattam, there is an interplay between the ongoing effort to establish a “social identity” and a “construction of the self” (Tait, 1993, in Smyth and Hattam, 2004, p.67) and the “becoming somebody” is “a desire for recognition...always process of under

circumstances not of their own choosing under circumstances not of their own choosing”. In other words, as young individuals navigate an entry into adulthood and work, they are also trying to “establish, confirm and in many cases endure a socio-cultural identity” (Tait, 1993, in Smyth and Hattam, 2004, p.67). The process includes instability and uncertainty and also danger as each individual attempts to determine their own identity while also being subject to social norms and expectations. This “individual-society relation” (Wexler, 1992, p.6) is where tensions arise – tensions between structure and agency and where the “identity is negotiated” (Whitebrook, 2001, p.5-7).

The aim of this research was to give voice to the participants as they articulate how a sense of student identity developed and influenced their progression in higher education. In order to do this, it was important that each participant could tell their own story because the stories the participants tell “lie in the matrix of categories of race, ethnicity, class, and gender: and they are all interdependent.” (Fathi, 2018. p.63). Whitebrook (2001) develops this with his concept of identity as

“a matter of the stories persons tell others about themselves, plus the stories others tell about those persons and/or other stories in which those are “included” - so “what the self shows the world” or “what of the self is shown to the world “ together with “what of the self is recognized by the world” (Whitebrook, 2001, p.4).

In the context of education, the literature focusing on immigrant families highlights the intersectional tensions they experienced and continue to experience (Adel-Salam, et.al., 2019;

Al-deen & Windle, 2017; Aboulhassan & Brumley, 2019; Chapman, 2016; Fathi, 2018; Keddie, 2014; Mahbub, 2015; Scandone, 2018; Shwayli & Barnes, 2018; Tamim, 2013). However, regardless of geographical locations, educational aspirations are relatively “similar for female students across countries and cultures” (Smyth and Hattam, 2004, p.97).

Rind (2015) focuses on female gender identities and gender roles which affect learning. This is not specific to any geographical location, as gendered practices worldwide control or limit female access to education and employment (Rind, 2015, p.4). Rind’s focus on structure is in contrast to Hajar’s focus on individual agency in learning, which she sees as a “a vehicle for self-explanatory and social alteration” (Hajar, 2018, p.417). While Hajar’s research focused on one participant, there are similarities with the multiple participants in this study, whose sense of identity is developed through their own agency in education while negotiating with the external structures of family and society. Therefore, although her study is a different context to this research study, the employment of individual agency by several participants are evident.

Female students can be further disadvantaged through gendered capital and social practices that limit their choices. The “micro-narratives around educational aspiration... are shaped in relation to the macro-processes that promote women’s education whilst also controlling their access to specific job markets” (Fathi, 2018, p.61). This is supported by Mahbub (2015) who refers to “the deep mismatch” which exists “between women’s education and their economic (and social) autonomy” (Mahbub, 2015, p.872). Therefore, some women may have aspirations for graduating but do not aspire to future careers after marriage. For them, the capital accrued through higher

education will be transferred to their married life and not future careers. Thus, their student identity, defined within the field of education, is in contrast with their identity within family/society and its predetermined gendered roles.

The context of the research is education and higher education, and so, as the participants were constructing their student identities, different identities emerged through their stories as they locate themselves in separate yet overlapping fields – higher education, home, family and society (amongst many). As stated above, the concept of identity refers to how individuals see themselves and others, and how others see them. Their identity is fluid and changes according to the fields in which they are situated and their roles within each field. In telling their stories, common factors emerged between different participants.

The factors were defined, directly or indirectly, by the students themselves as they told their life stories. Parental expectations, relationships and epiphanies emerged as the influential factors in the process of constructing their identity. These factors were influential in constructing their identity, as located in the immediate field of education and the wider fields of family and society. It is through this process that we come to a sense of “who we are and who we are not” (Fathi, 2018, p.63). Furthermore, by examining the factors and listening to the stories of the participants, Wexler’s concept of “becoming somebody” (Wexler, 1992) seems to be particularly relevant. The participants are in the process of creating a life for themselves in the immediate field of education but, ultimately in the wider fields of family and society.

Tensions between the social structure and the individual agency are evident in the life histories of the participants. These are discussed in detail in chapters 4 and 5. Their identity is shaped by structure, but it is also shaped by their own sense of agency with regard to how, or if, they can form their own perception of self (Rind, 2015, p.3). Their life stories narrated experiences and relationships that reproduced structure, or as in a few cases, attempted to redefine the structure to their individual or familial socio-economic advantage. We can identify the agency at play in their multiple roles which are defined and re-defined by the structure around them. For some, the constraints imposed by the structure will determine their identity while others will use their agency to negotiate their power relations within their immediate social structures.

Their life stories show how these tensions are in play as they describe their identities within their current socio-cultural and economic environment while considering their future aspirations and opportunities. Again, the fluidity of the process of creating identity is dominant as each individual understands his or her relationship to the world, how the relationship is constructed across time and space, and how the person understands possibilities for the future (Norton, in Hajar, 2000, p.). Their sense of identity is further developed with the participants' aspirations. Their aspirations reflect their habitus and are "what people like us do" (Scandone, 2018, p.520). Definitions of 'us' are determined by the participants and the sense of us as an identity is formed through the influential factors that have brought them to their current situation within higher education. Their student identity, as defined in this study, is one identity in their multi-faceted 'self'. Their identity in the field of education, at this point in their lives, has been constructed through the key factors analysed in the data during their past and present experiences, relationships and aspirations.

## 2.6. Theoretical Framework

Bourdieu's theory of education focuses on power in society and how social order, and inequalities, are maintained across generations. Bourdieu used the concepts of field, capital and habitus to describe this phenomena. By following certain rules and expectations, hierarchies are entrenched, and social differences are legitimized (Bourdieu, 1984, p.101). It describes how and why we behave as we do, how we live our lives and what we accumulate and achieve in these lives. With regards to this study, Bourdieu's framework allows us to understand how the participants live their lives and create their identities within their current socio-economic conditions.

Bourdieu was concerned with the reproduction of the power imbalance and the way that people's own dispositions to feel "at home" contribute to that. When an individual internalizes a "sense of one's place" (Bourdieu, 1986, p.141), they become complicit in the reproduction of inequality. They accept their limitations, imposed by family and society, and they do not challenge the norms or exceed assumptions. The external (structure) dominates the internal (agency). Power is constantly re-legitimised through an interplay of agency and structure, as people's behaviour (practice) tends to reproduce their relative social advantages and disadvantages. He argued that practice was generated from an individual's habitus and capital positioned within different fields:

$$\text{practice} = [(\text{habitus}) (\text{capital})] + \text{field}$$

### 2.6.1. Field

In Bourdieu's theory, 'fields' are the various social and institutional arenas in which people express and reproduce their dispositions, and where they compete for the distribution of different kinds of capital (Gaventa, 2003). Fields are internally defined by the predominant form of capital within them and each has its own logic. For example, the field of education is internally defined by cultural capital. A field is a network, structure or set of relationships which may be intellectual, religious, educational or cultural (Navarro 2006). Fields can sometimes overlap, and the rules that apply for one field may differ from and possibly conflict with the rules of another field. As a result, people often experience power differently depending which field they are in at a given moment (Gaventa, 2003).

In this research study, the field is higher education at a specific college of higher education. The field is specific because it is a small female-only college, and so there is a different set of rules to the co-ed colleges and universities. The college was not chosen because of this, but because it was where I worked and where I had the best access to students. This has an impact on the value of the capital defining the field of higher education, and consequently, the uses to which it can be put in the wider context. Bourdieu (1984) accounts for the tensions and contradictions that arise when people encounter and are challenged by different contexts (or fields). His theory can be used to explain how people can "resist power and domination in one [field] and exhibit complicity in another" (Moncrieffe 2006, p.37).

Fields help explain the differential power, for example, that women experience in public or private, as Moncrieffe shows in her interview with a Ugandan woman MP who has public

authority, in the field of politics, but is submissive to her husband when at home, in the home field (Moncrieffe, 2006, p.37). Thus exemplifying, different rules for different fields. This has been widely observed by feminist activists and researchers, and illustrates that women and men are socialised to behave differently in public, private, and intimate arenas of power, and is particularly relevant in this geographical context. It is further supported by several of the participants who refer to activities that they do in private but would never be seen to be doing in public (discussed in more detail in chapters 4 and 5).

The specific field of this college enables the realization of different practices. By being female-only, it has its own set of rules and hierarchies that allow the students to express themselves more freely and speak out undeterred by male voices or opinions. This is empowering for many but does not necessarily transfer to the fields of society and the workplace. Once in the workplace, the majority of students will be expected to revert to their traditional roles and be more complicit in the patriarchal society. Some may be able to transfer some of their new power across fields, but this requires higher levels of cultural capital and it is difficult to determine how far they will succeed in challenging social norms and gendered roles.

### 2.6.2. Capital

A second concept introduced by Bourdieu is that of ‘capital’, which he extends beyond the notion of material assets to refer to all forms of “valued resources” (Navarro, 2006, p.16). Each field is determined by the levels of capital that dominate and within each field, different forms of capital are dominant. Throughout life, individuals try to maximize their gains and accumulate



resources under different forms of capital (economic, social, and cultural). These forms of capital may be equally important and can be accumulated and transferred from one arena to another (Navarro, 2006, p.17). The majority of capital tends towards the inter-generational maintenance of the same position in the field. The field of education is defined by the levels of cultural capital at each individual's disposal. Higher education traditionally requires higher levels of cultural capital and so a person's position within the field of education (including access to higher education) is generally determined by their access to cultural capital.

This thesis refers to three main forms of capital - economic, social and cultural. Academic capital is usually referred to within cultural capital but, for the purpose of this thesis, it is referred to separately as it is a major factor in how students see themselves and shape their identity. Additionally, institutional capital is discussed separately within the framework as it plays a significant role in the educational experiences of students and how they progress and succeed. Both are discussed in more detail in this section.

### Economic capital

Economic capital refers to the financial resources available to an individual, primarily money and property. Capital is transferable and transactional. It can, therefore, be used in securing advantage. This capital is relatively easy to quantify. The participants have varying levels of economic capital. Higher economic capital allows families to invest in and increase cultural capital, through education, travel and life experiences. As a result, it also provides greater freedom to make choices (including educational and marital) that would be denied to others.

### Social capital

Social capital concerns the value of social networks consisting of mutual acquaintances and recognition. Social capital is also convertible, in certain conditions, into economic capital. It can also be institutionalized, for example, social rankings for families. In this context, families' social rankings are based on tribal affiliations (evident by their family name) that is prevalent in all aspects of society. These families maintain a certain status in society. Their social status benefits them in many ways and adds to their levels of capital, for example social capital and the use of *wasta*<sup>1</sup>. However, it does not always equate with economic capital as some families have higher levels of social capital than economic capital. Non-citizens will usually have lower levels of social capital in the wider society but higher levels within their immediate community.

### Cultural capital

Cultural capital refers primarily to cultural goods and meaningful resources at an individual's disposal. It is the form of capital that defined the field of education. It is:

“more than the possession of obvious academic resources such as formal qualification; it includes the “accumulated benefits of the individual's social background (e.g. type of school attended), accents, confidence and the possession and knowledge of cultural objects such as books and the ‘high culture’ of the arts”. Such capital has “significance of the individual's interpretation of her identity and of her sense of legitimacy in educational institutions” (Watts, 2015).

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<sup>1</sup> Social connections that are used as leverage.

Cultural capital – and the means by which it is created or transferred from other forms of capital – plays a central role in societal power relations, as this “provides the means for a non-economic form of domination and hierarchy, as classes distinguish themselves through taste” (Gaventa, 2003, p.6). These ideas are elaborated at length in Bourdieu’s classic study of French society, *Distinction* (1984), in which he shows how the ‘social order is progressively inscribed in people’s minds’ through ‘cultural products’ including systems of education, language, judgements, values, methods of classification and activities of everyday life (Bourdieu, 1986, p.471). These all lead to an unconscious acceptance of social differences and hierarchies, to “a sense of one’s place” and to behaviours of self-exclusion (Bourdieu, 1986, p.141). However, cultural capital is not fixed. For Bourdieu, capital is the “transmutation” (Bourdieu, 1993) of the interests of dominant groups in society.

This is relevant for this study as cultural capital includes “a confidence in relation to schooling as cultural capital generates certainty, self-assurance, and the ability to reject opposing views” (Reay, 1999, p.166). It is a “disguised” form of economic capital (Bourdieu, 1984) that can be invested in for a better return. For example, parents will pay for higher education for their children with the hope that it will lead to better career opportunities and improved economic status.

Two forms of cultural capital are significant in this study. These are:

- Academic capital: this refers to the educational experiences of the participants. It is not restricted to this, but also includes the generational transfer of education and status of the academic institutions attended. Furthermore, the value of a higher education degree (or diploma) will vary depending on who possesses it, and this is also included in academic

capital. A degree or diploma for a female graduate will not have the same value in the employment market as it would for a male graduate. Due to the restrictions on employment (as defined by the government, society and family), women will be less likely to convert this form of cultural capital into economic capital.

- Institutional capital: as mentioned in academic capital, it is concerned with the existing hierarchy of universities and colleges which can be a determining factor in the successful progression for students. Viewed through a Bourdieu's lens, the hierarchical structure of higher education produces and reproduces the levels of capital, as the different levels of institutional capital each participant's disposal will influence their future social, economic and cultural capital. Students' access to and choice of higher education is determined by their access to cultural, economic and social capital and is thereby reproduced.

### 2.6.3. Habitus

Bourdieu's third concept is habitus. The term habitus explains

“an individual's way of being or disposition that is not fixed but shaped and/or learned through the interactions and participation in practices that are typical for a particular group, class or community” (Shwayli & Barnes, 2018, p.95).

Habitus refers to socialised norms or tendencies that guide behaviour and thinking. It is a person's habits, skills and disposition that are acquired by being part of a group or culture. It shapes the mind because it influences our expectations and limitations. Consequently, it shapes

our actions in the world. It is the external internalized and the internal externalized. It is not a fixed state, but a dynamic process that usually leads to a person reproducing her position in the field. It is “structured by the past and structuring of the present” (Moncrieffe, 2006, p.37).

Having a “sense of one’s place” (Bourdieu, 1985, in Reay 1999, p.167), as referred to at the beginning of this chapter, means that an individual has internalized the parameters of their position within the field and acts accordingly, usually by not challenging the assumptions. It is, therefore, complicit in the reproduction of inequality. Much of this is non-reflective because it is not thought about but internalized. Therefore, the internalized (aspirations and intentions) are externalized through an individual’s actions and habitus is employed in a way that does not challenge the rules. However, habitus “is not fixed or permanent, and can be changed under unexpected situations or over a long historical period” (Navarro, 2006, p.16). If an individual student chooses to challenge, and is able to exceed her expectations, then change is possible.

Habitus is Bourdieu’s attempt to mediate the tension between the external (structure) and the internal (agency). It is not a synonym for decision-making but the catalyst. It is usually employed in the non-reflective state - the rules of the field are unchallenged and accepted non-consciously; however, as discussed in chapter 5, it can also be employed reflectively.

### Gendered habitus

As stated in the introduction, this study was not intended to be an outsider’s view of the life of a poor Muslim girl. On the contrary, this study is one that gives voice to the real-life experiences

and emotions as told by the individuals themselves. The collective history (past and present) of an individual and the “whole collective history of family and class that the individual is a member of” constitute habitus (Reay, 2004, p.434). The participants relate their life stories in the context of their own society and culture, and in doing so, they illustrate habitus and gendered habitus.

The primary focus of the interviews was the story of each participant, as they defined their experiences in the context of being young women and students. Their stories also provided information on the socio-economic role of young women within the field of society, and the educational opportunities afforded to women by society and family. Central to this was the student identity of the participants, as articulated by them through their ‘lived experiences’ (Kurshid, 2105, p.107). By identifying themes (factors) that influenced each individual student, the analysis process also generated an understanding of how participants negotiated their gendered and class-based identities and developed their sense of student identity. Reay (2004) cautions us on the “increasing tendency” of habitus being “sprayed throughout academic texts like ‘intellectual hairspray’” (Hey, 2003), bestowing gravitas without doing any theoretical work” (Reay, 2004, p.432). However, it is a vital element in the theoretical toolkit for this research study as it directly relates to the life histories of each participant and their sense of student identity as they experience higher education and prepare for the future in society with varying degree of conscious reflection.

## 2.7. Using Bourdieu in the Middle East

Pierre Bourdieu’s work was primarily concerned with the transfer of power in society and how social order is maintained through the generations. The main body of his work was produced in

the latter quarter of the twentieth century and focused on Western society. This creates the question: is Bourdieu's theory of education relevant for modern day countries in the Middle East?

Education is a field that, traditionally, ensures a rigid power distribution and the permanence of social inequalities. The massification of higher education and increased education for females in the Middle East is a move towards progress and economic development. However, it is undeniable that distinctions still exist in higher education. This applies to the differing status and institutional capital of universities. Higher education in the Gulf countries has moved towards more socio-economic parity but, in reality, hierarchy is still strong and certain select universities are considered elite. The public university and the most prestigious private universities draw the most privileged students economically and academically. The next tier of universities includes several private universities and colleges, while the third tier consists colleges that offer two-year diplomas. This college, a vocational college offering two-year Diplomas, is the only college to offer Diplomas in Design, and so its ranking is often considered higher than that of other colleges. Academically, however, it is not on an equal status with the more prestigious universities, and female graduates of this college do not enter the employment market with the same success as those from the more prestigious universities. This illustrates that, despite the intentions of increased access and equality in higher education, the inequalities remain, and the field is still reproducing, and the education system is ensuring "a rigid power distribution and the permanence of social inequalities" (Navarro, 2006, p.15). This suggests that Bourdieu's work is relevant to the Middle East.

### Chapter 3: Methodology

This thesis aims to answer two research questions: what factors do participants report as having influenced their student identity in HE, and how do they feel their student identity influences their progress to, through and in higher education? The study looks at the different learning experiences and how these experiences impact their academic progress and sense of student identity. This research study started from a basic desire to know why female students were here at the college and how they got here. How difficult, or easy, was the journey to higher education? Had the educational journey changed them, and, if so, then how? What did they expect now they were here? Where did they see themselves going in their immediate future?

All the participants had come to higher education, and remained, by choice, although in some cases not to the institution of choice. This progression to higher education would not have been possible without support from family members. The level and nature of support they received was also intriguing. Were there overt assumptions of how their higher education would benefit them or their family? Were these assumptions agreeable? How much was their voice considered in these life choices? To address these questions, students need be able to articulate their lives and how they progressed to higher education. Weber (1978, in Navarro, 2006) asks the question: “Do individuals act in response to external causes like culture or social structures or do they act for their own identifiable reasons?”, so for this study I will be using a theoretical framework based on Bourdieu’s theory of field, capital and habitus.



### 3.1. Theoretical Framework in the Research Design

Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital refers to the values, skills and knowledge that people acquire; social capital refers to the network of relationships at their disposal, and economic capital refers to their material goods. Capital can be transferred from one to another and its value can decrease and increase. Investing in one form of capital (for example cultural capital through education) can be an investment that transfers to another. For example, higher education leads to better career prospects which in turn lead to increased economic and social capital. Capital is determined by the field (or context) and so it changes as the field changes. For example, females in a female-only college will have different levels of capital than they will in their position in the field of the wider workplace. Their positioning in the field is also determined by their habitus, which is determined by the wider expectations and limitations imposed by the structure of society (or field). This internalized habitus functions as "a kind of transforming machine that leads us to reproduce the social conditions of our own production but in a relatively unpredictable way" (Bourdieu, 1993, p.87). Habitus is also an "open system of dispositions that is constantly subjected to experiences, and therefore constantly affected by them in a way that either reinforces or modifies its structures" (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p.133)

By using Bourdieu's framework, it was possible to illustrate how higher education provides opportunities for individuals to change and transform. Increased capital allows individuals to improve their status and reposition themselves, even if it is measured in small changes within inflexible environments (or fields). Furthermore, in the initial selection stage, by comparing levels of capital, it was possible to ensure a variety of data was collected; thereby ensuring the study was one of diversity and not typicality.

The capital at each individual's disposal was initially considered in the selection process to ensure a diverse and not typical sample selection. During the primary data collection stage, the concepts of capital and habitus were used to generate the data. Specific levels of capital were identified and analysed to determine if and how they impacted the students' opportunities. Students require a certain level of capital to access higher education. As they progress through higher education, they need different types of capital, and that capital is expected to adapt and grow. Additionally, as expected in a conservative Islamic society, all students live at home and many have restricted travel (less cultural capital), therefore their social and cultural experiences are determined by their families (Crozier & Reay, 2011, p.146-147). Therefore, the college represents a place in which there is scope (albeit limited) for social and cultural experiences that may be denied outside.

The extent to which each participant was able to use these experiences to increase their reflection on the opportunities for their future life is likely to vary according to their agency and employment of habitus. The habitus of each individual was analysed because educational progression is often dependent on the habitus of the individual. The changing nature of habitus, influenced by learning experiences, was discussed in detail as evidence of the development of the student identity. Education, specifically higher education is considered one field in which a person can reposition themselves through capital accumulation.

### 3.2. Life-History Research

The aim of the study is to give voice to the participants as they answer the questions of what factors they identify as having influenced their student identity and how they feel their student identity influences their progress. In order to answer the questions above, it was necessary to identify the significant experiences of each individual and then collectively across the group. The individual life stories allowed me to construct individual life histories that were then analysed to identify shared themes (or experiences). The wider literature suggested several themes that might be present in such a study, however, the setting for this study is unique with few studies that explore the lived experiences of female students in this region. Consequently, it would not be wise to make assumptions about possible themes that might emerge. Hence, a methodology that gives voice to the participants and allows them to reflect on their own educational trajectory seems to be the most suitable.

As the process of analysing the data across the sets progressed, several themes started to emerge as significant. Through a comparative analysis, three themes were identified across the data sets. These were: the parental expectations; a key person of influence, and a moment (or moments) of realisation, also referred to as “epiphanies” (Denzin, 1989). The terminology was not determined initially, and this evolved over the analysis process when data became clearer and experiences were analysed through the theoretical lens of Bourdieu.

Life history research puts human experiences into perspective. It gives voice to the participant allowing the researcher “access to social reality, signifying the worlds through which people

have moved” (Freeman, 2004, p.69). Life history research allows the researcher to consider the choices young people have by locating the stories people tell of their lives within their wider context. Student experiences in higher education need to be located in the wider context of their educational structures and socio-cultural contexts. Despite the “highly quantitative patterns of past work”, there is a need for research which “employs ethnographic procedure to explore how students understand the temporal quality of their college careers” (Tinto, 1988, p.450). College careers are a stage in the growth of an individual; a time when identities are forming free from the rigid structure of school. It can be a time of confusion and self-doubt. Students are agents taking control of their own lives. They (and we) learn *from* their experiences and not *of* (Kurshid, 2015, p.3). The life history approach enables us to understand from the perspective of students, from their “lived experiences” (Kurshid, 2015, p.3) - the breadth of student experience and not typicality; it “links agency and structure” in two sources of the data – one addressing agency of the students and the other the social structures within which they moved (Kurshid, 2015, p.3). The students in this study have progressed to higher education (otherwise they wouldn’t be participating) so the focus is on how they “negotiated the barriers” they encountered.

Narratives are important to understand individual stories and experiences; however, this is also where narratives can be limiting. Personal narratives are not always able to distinguish between the individual choice and the expected norm, between social conformity and individuality. Was something (an action or decision) truly a choice or is it chosen due to subconscious expectations and assumptions? Taking this into consideration, the analysis has to be clearly contextualized. After all, it is the context that distinguishes life histories from life stories. Each participant has her own unique story to narrate with a depth of experiences and emotions, all of which make the

tapestry of her life story. They may not be aware of their growth and the development of their story and identity in relation to the wider context, their “big and small stories” (Squire et al, 2008) but they all narrated a similar trajectory, each evolving through different experiences and influencing factors, both positive and negative. It is this process of narration that gives the individual some control over the construction of her identity (Watts, 2009). However, each life story is not entirely unique because of the “deep structures it is founded on and which rise through the layers of individual history and experience to shape the story being told (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). The life history approach, with the capacity to see the individual’s world from micro and macro perspectives requires the present character of the individual to be considered within the circumstances of her past (Goodson, 1995; Järvinen, 2004), thereby, connecting individual lives and stories to the “understanding of larger human and social phenomena” (Hatch & Wisniewski, 1995, p.113). Framing the smaller stories by the bigger stories enables the research to illuminate the experiences of each individual and while each unique story is part of the overall big story, it maintains its individuality and its richness of details.

This research aims to develop a better understanding of how female students redefine their identity and roles in society and their immediate family as they transition to, from and beyond the traditional structure of the school system to the relative freedom of higher education. It focuses on how individual students negotiate the (possible) conflicts that arise as they redefine their identities with an emphasis on the forms and levels of capital that facilitate or hinder their progression. Identifying and analysing the levels of capital and influential factors that impact their progression can help to improve the learning experiences and outcomes of female students at the college.

As stated in the introduction, the aim of the study was to give voice to the participants and document the key learning experiences of current and former students to develop a clearer understanding of how these issues impact their sense of student identity and influence progression to, through and beyond higher education. Consequential aims included (1) improving their higher education experience and maximizing their potential, and (2) helping to promote their progression through HE, thereby improving the retention and graduate rates for the institution. This will impact policy creation and implementation at an institutional level and across all academic departments and the Department of Student Affairs. The focus on identifying the key learning experiences for students was to identify salient factors that influenced their progression to, through and beyond high education. Then, the study examines how these factors influence their education experience and how they see themselves as students. By doing this, it is possible to discuss if, and how, higher education works as a vehicle for change for these students. The factors would be identified by students and may or may not be addressed in statistics or current research. A life history approach was used to enable the student perception of themselves to be contextualized in the wider educational and socio-economic frame.

### 3.3. Implications of Life History Research

The nature of life history research focuses on the lived experiences of individuals. The role of the participant is central – it is their story told by themselves within the wider social and political contexts of the research. Each individual constructs their own identity as they describe the life they are living and the context in which they live it with the relevant social structures and hierarchies. Within an educational context, life history researchers:

“allow those telling their stories to establish their own identities; and this can be used to restate the central role that people play in educational processes and educational systems.” (Goodson & Sikes, 2001).

The epistemological integrity of life history research requires the data to be fair, accurate and valid (Watts, 2009). However, there is an inevitable bias involved when people tell their own stories and relate their own experiences. Not all information shared can be taken a face-value and as a researcher we can anticipate inaccurate, embellished, conflicting accounts. Can we take their opinion to be fact? Is it enough that someone has an experience that evokes certain feeling and opinions sufficient? Does the sole opinion of one make it less real? Personal emotions can dictate an experience but that is, after all, what makes the stories rich.

### 3.3.1. Weaknesses

Life history research depends on an individual’s narration of their experiences and emotions. It is, therefore, biased in its nature. For the researcher, the rich data has to be analysed as methodically and accurately as possible. For some of my colleagues, the nature of the methodology raised an eyebrow or two. Those with more quantitative research backgrounds questioned its validity and integrity as a research methodology. The data was “too fluid...too abstract”, I was told by one economist, but it is the richness of the data that makes this methodology so interesting. It moves beyond the quantitative and allows the participant to generate data that might not be present in the initial stages of planning a research study.

### 3.3.2. Strengths

The most obvious strength of doing a life history research is that the participants are telling their stories in their words (Cole and Knowles, 2001). My primary focus throughout has been for them to be able to use their voice and to be heard. This is not to assume that they are not heard in their lives but, as evident in their interviews, they may not always be listened to. Several of the participants are not heard within the patriarchal structure of their families and as shown in this thesis, their reactions vary from rebellion to acquiescence, depending on their agency. For sure, some of the participants have a more vocal voice and greater agency because of their families but this may not always translate into the wider context. The methodology used in this research allows them to express their opinions and relate their experiences, which then evolves into their ability to discuss their aspirations and identity.

### 3.3. Method

The research study had two phases: (1) recruitment process and selection of participants, and (2) the interviews of selected participants. Participants were limited to ten to enable sufficient time for interviews and typing of transcripts.

#### 3.3.1. Recruitment and selection

Phase 1 was the selection process of participants. The aim of the study was to reflect the diversity of students and not typicality and, my intention was to interview a sample of students from diverse backgrounds and to draw on their depth and range of experiences. A recruitment email, with some basic questions, was prepared with the intention of identifying a general level of cultural capital at the disposal of each interested individual (see Appendix 2 & 3). The focus



of the questionnaire was to identify a representative selection of students from a range of socio-economic backgrounds who might be willing to be interviewed. Social and economic capital were not immediately identifiable from the questionnaire but could be inferred from the individual's answers. Bourdieu's concept of capital was used to inform the research design at the selection stage to ensure a diverse socio-economic group. Although economic and social capital usually correlate with higher levels of education and access to higher education, I was more interested in the cultural capital available to each student. My initial interest was in how and why some students from lower socio-economic status progress through higher education and, therefore, my focus was on the cultural capital. Selection questions (Appendix 3, questions 5, 6, 7 and 8) focused on the education levels and occupations of parents and siblings. The final question asked about future aspirations.

The sample selection was limited to ten participants and selection was based on more and less cultural capital, as identified from their responses to the recruitment email and questionnaire. From the thirty-seven students that responded, five were ruled out because they did not provide complete information about their parents work or education. From the remaining thirty-two, I looked for examples of students who had obvious high levels of cultural capital (as suggested by the education levels of family members) or low levels (again based on the education levels and jobs of family members). I also selected students whose parents had different levels of education, particularly if the mothers had higher levels of education (and, therefore, cultural capital). Finally, using question 10 (aspirations), I looked for students whose aspirations seemed to go against the cultural levels of their family, specifically high aspirations with relatively low cultural capital at their disposal.

The questionnaire and recruitment email were distributed to all students in the Diploma courses at the college. For ethical reasons (discussed in the Ethics sub-section), students who were currently enrolled on courses in the Foundation Department were not included; students who had completed their Foundation courses and were due to start their diplomas were included. Due to the slow response, paper copies were also distributed to students by several faculty from other departments in the college. I asked the other heads of department if their faculty would be willing to assist. The faculty that volunteered were given copies of the recruitment letter and questionnaires to distribute to students at the end of class. The majority of responses came from the paper distribution method. Very few were completed online. Of those who did respond by email, only one responded to an invitation to meet. This was not anticipated especially in an age where young people are glued to their devices and conduct most of their communication digitally. However, it may also reflect a wariness of college emails that could be intercepted and could identify the sender. This issue is discussed further in section 3.3.2.

The recruitment email distributed with the questionnaire explained the purpose of the study (see Appendix 2) and emphasised the voluntary nature of the study. Completed questionnaires were returned to me directly via email, via a response box in the entrance to the faculty office, or, in two cases, by the volunteer participants in person. The selection process was limited by the responses from the initial volunteers. No students were directly approached or requested to participate; however, two students did not respond to my follow-up email inviting them to meet with me and so additional participants were later recruited by ‘snowballing’ – asking existing participants to identify students who were then invited to participate.

### 3.3.2. Interviews

The aim of the interviews was to encourage each participant to use her voice (Keddie, 2009, 2014; Piela, 2013; Tarar, 2012) and articulate her experiences and emotions in as much detail as possible. The interview process took place over several weeks prior to the summer vacation. This time frame was chosen as students had completed exams and were more inclined to meet and talk. Earlier attempts to interview students had been unsuccessful due to their workload and college obligations. One student did turn up for an interview but told me she had to be interviewed there and then and could only spare ten minutes. She was not selected as her time was restricted. The interview procedure was repeated for all ten participants; the purpose of the interview was explained (and students were given a copy of the Participant Information Sheet for their own records); the students were then asked to review and consent to the principles and procedures (as required by Liverpool University's ethical guidelines) and the interview was digitally recorded. All interviews were conducted in a classroom on campus and lasted approximately one hour. The longest was one hour fifty-five minutes; the shortest interview was 20 minutes as the participant's father arrived to collect her and she was obliged to leave.

The interviews were semi-structured. They followed the same schedule and were based on ten questions that were intended to open the conversation and focus on the topic of learning experiences (Appendix 4). The interviews were semi-structured to ensure that the key issues were addressed by all participants, thereby enhancing the validity of the research, while giving the flexibility to address individual issues in depth and detail. As the interviews progressed, each individual focused on issues that were more important to their learning experiences and,

ultimately to the development of their own student identity. Participants were asked to provide basic information on their family – family composition, location of family home, education of all family members (including level, institutions and courses), and high school results. The purpose of the initial questions was two-fold: (1) to provide basic socio-economic and educational information, and (2) to help the participant relax. By asking simple conversational questions, the participants were able to overcome any initial nerves they may have had on entering the room.

Participants were then asked to describe their early educational experiences progressing from early education to their current higher education. Additional, follow-up questions were asked with the purpose of encouraging the participant to elaborate on something she mentioned by offering examples. Although questions were used as prompts, they were not intended, nor used, to ‘guide’ the conversation but rather to focus on specific experiences and responses. Students were encouraged to tell their own stories from their perspective and these stories were then contextualized within higher education.

Having provided their life stories, they were then invited to begin narrating their life histories by considering their opportunities and restrictions in the local context. The majority of interviews progressed smoothly. With the possible exception of one participant who was nervous and more reticent in her interview, they were able to articulate their experiences and emotional responses very competently showing a high level of narrative capital (Watts, 2008). Participants were open and willing to share their lived experiences; each interview transcript being “an independent conversation focusing on participants’ particular understanding of women’s education and of their relationships with family and community” (Kurshid, 2015, p.107). Most of them were also

able to reflect in some detail on their experiences; several of them showing a remarkable maturity and awareness of their identity within the macro (society) and micro (college) context of the study.

Interviews were transcribed in full in individual narratives. The transcription was a time-consuming task, but it was necessary to record the rich data provided by each participant. Each participant volunteered to be interviewed and gave up their time to participate in this study, so it was important that each detail was recorded in an appropriately accurate manner. Repetition, deviations and hesitations were included to show when a participant paused to reflect or wished to emphasize or correct a point. All students had been informed of their right to refuse use of their data and, on completion of the transcripts, a copy was prepared for each student to review (as agreed previously). Prior to the interview, all students had given their permission for the use of their stories. Given the possibility that students were wary of trusting email (as mentioned earlier in this chapter) I informed them that the transcripts were available and invited them to request copies. These could have been sent in paper or email form. In the event, none asked for a copy. I did not go back to them to ask why as this could have seemed intrusive.

### 3.3.3. Use of language

As an overseas campus of an international college, the language of instruction is English. Official College policy dictates that all courses are taught in English. Most of the instructors are non-Arabic speakers. Those who do speak Arabic are instructed to not use Arabic in the classroom or during tutorials. Student Support staff were also required to speak only English, but this has changed gradually over the past four years and the department is now bilingual.

Administrative staff speak both English and Arabic. Because it is an English-medium college, all prospective students take an in-house entrance exam that tests their abilities in English. Students test into one of four possible placements – direct entry to the undergraduate departments, or one of three levels of English in the Foundation Department (Beginner, Intermediate, or Advanced). The Foundation course can take from one semester to three depending on the starting level. Students can retake a level as often as needed to graduate but the government will only pay for three semesters of Foundation English and so repeating is at their own cost. Those who fail to attain the basic score are not admitted to the college. The curriculum and main course books are supplied by the Australian college (with some minor alterations and localized supplements). Whether testing into their diploma courses directly or on completing the Foundation English Courses, the level of English of students is good and they have sufficient English skills to study and graduate in English. All interviews for this study were conducted solely in English. Having worked in the college for five years (at the time of the interviews), I was confident that language would not be an obstacle to the research.

Some interviews were longer than others and provided more detail. This may reflect the language ability, but it also reflects their differing personalities. Some participants liked to talk and enjoyed the opportunity to share their experiences while others were, by nature, more reticent, and less confident in their abilities to share experiences and emotions. Sara and Haya were particularly shy and although their transcripts were significantly shorter with fewer details, this did not make their interviews (and data) any less significant.

The full-length interviews, and student biographies, were transcribed in narrative style and so reflect the idiosyncrasies of each individual's speech and command of the English language. I did not correct any grammatical or contextual mistakes in writing the narratives. This applies to all quotes that are used in this thesis. My intention was to transcribe their voice as accurately as possible to reflect what they said and how they said it. Inaccuracies, contractions, hesitations, and other anomalies are included, and intentionally not corrected, to reflect their own character and use of language. It may seem awkward at times, but I chose to do this because I think it adds to the reality of each voice and increases the richness of the data.

### 3.4. Participants

Ten participants took part in this study. Each individual's interview was transcribed as accurately as possible, including any inaccuracies and hesitations. The quotes in their biographical summaries reflect their use of language and have not been corrected.

#### 3.4.1. Sabeen

I am nineteen years old. I was born here but my parents are not from here. I have two brothers – one a year older than me and the other is a year younger. I am studying Interior Design and I have just completed my second semester. My GPA was 4.00 but it is now 3.96. I went to a private school for non-nationals until Year 10. I loved my school. However, I had to move to a nearby school because the fees were too high. The new school was not a good experience. I was able to return to the first school for Year 12. I graduated with a high school grade of 97%. My brother is twenty and studying petrochemical engineering at a university overseas. He is the

smart one in the house. My younger brother is eighteen and is not interested in studying. My mother graduated in English literature from a university in her home country and taught in before coming here. She came here after marrying my father and stayed at home while we were young. She is a teacher and now the Principal of a nursery. My father came here at age sixteen or eighteen after finishing school. My grandfather owned a mechanical shop here and my father now owns it. In the future, I want to do a bachelor's in Architecture, but there is no place here for me to do this, so I don't really know yet. I wanted to be a surgeon, a cardiologist or neurosurgeon but the public university does not accept non-citizens easily. In the future, children will come and if my husband is making enough money then I want to stay at home. I feel the child misses out when the mum is working. I don't drive because my parents worry about me being alone. We don't travel much. Six years ago, we went to my parents' country as a family and stayed for a month. We don't have any family here, but my mother's relatives live all over the world, England, Canada, Germany and America.

#### 3.4.2. Noura

I am eighteen years old. I am a citizen. I am the oldest of four. I have three brothers, who are seventeen, thirteen and eleven years old. They are all in school. My father is a fireman. He finished high school, but he didn't go to college. My mother attended the public university and studied accounting, but she didn't graduate. I don't know why. She works at the Ministry of Justice. Now, she looks after us. She cleans because we don't have a maid. When I was eleven, my parents separated, and my mother moved to my grandmother's house. We stayed there for two years until my parents got back together, and we returned home. Elementary school was fine, but I didn't like middle school. I have good memories and bad memories. I think I had a lot



of problems then. After school, I went to a private university, but I couldn't apply as my high school grade was 70% and that was too low. I knew I wanted to study in English not Arabic so I'm here studying a major I don't want to, Business Management, because it's the only one I could with my low grade. It's not my dream. My dream is to be a pilot. I need my dad's permission. "You are a girl", he said. "Our traditions don't allow that." I was angry with him. I'm still angry with him but I haven't given up on my dream. I have searched online and there is a school in Florida. It costs \$15,000 to study there. I'm going to run away because my father will not let me go. My mum agreed. My mum and dad have lots of loans for the bank. I think I'm going to be much happier if I stay away from my father. Yes, I am going to be much happier if I achieve my goal. This is my plan. My brothers are allowed to do what they want. He lets them choose. I'm not allowed to drive but I have a driver. I'm not allowed to go out and meet friends. We travel quite a lot. I've been to Thailand, Dubai, Lebanon, Syria. Oman, Bahrain and Saudi Arabia on family holidays. In 2012, I traveled with my uncle. He is my mother's brother. He is thirty-one years old, unmarried and an engineer. I am very close to him. I was supposed to travel to Turkey with him this summer, but I failed maths and had to take summer school instead. I was very angry, but I learned not to fail. I am studying Business Management. This college is much easier than high school. I need a 4.00 GPA. I can do it, but it will be hard. My GPA is good now, 3.93, and I didn't expect that because I was not good in high school. The subjects are easier here, and the teachers are good. Everything is good here. I had a lot of problems at home and a lot of pressure. I am more relaxed to be myself because it is all girls, and it is more comfortable. Here girls can take their freedom.

### 3.4.3. Aisha

I am a twenty-three year old national. We live in a house with my grandmother and my aunt who is divorced. We just moved this year because my grandfather died, and my father feels responsible for his mother and sister. I am the middle child of three and have two brothers. My older brother is twenty -five and my younger brother is sixteen. My older brother is a customs officer at the border. He didn't go to university. We have a family chalet there, so he lives in it because of his work. He's not married. My younger brother doesn't like to study either and spends most of his time online. I went to school in four different schools. I was naughty at school and my mother moved me when I got into trouble. I missed my friends. The girls in my high school were quiet and didn't want to cause any trouble. My grades improved because it was so boring. After school, I started at a private university but transferred to this college after one semester because I was offered a scholarship. I am studying Business Management and have been here for three years. I completed my diploma this semester, but my GPA is 2.97 so I am repeating a course in the summer to improve my GPA. I will go back to the private university next semester and complete my bachelor's in Management. After that, if it's easy, and not too hard, I will continue with my Masters. I was not a good student in school, and I nearly lost my scholarship here because my GPA was too low. They gave me three warnings and that made me realise that it wasn't that hard. I should have done this before. I think this college really changed me. After graduation, maybe I will work, maybe I will continue. I am not too sure. My age now is twenty three, and if I want to graduate, I will be twenty five or twenty six...it's too much. For a Masters, I will be thirty. Yes, that's too much, so I am not too sure. My mother graduated from university and she works in Foreign Affairs. She encouraged me to take my education seriously. She told me, "You can be better than the other girls." I still remember these words like yesterday.

My father is an accountant. He graduated from university and works in a company. I drive, and I have freedom but not as much as my brothers. I cannot go with my friends, but I can go out with my cousins. This summer we will travel to Europe. We went there last year and really liked it.

#### 3.4.4. Nadia

I am a non-citizen but born here. I am twenty years old and I live in the city. I am the youngest of five children. I have three older sisters. They are thirty-one, twenty-six and twenty-four. My brother is twenty-eight. My father came here when he was seven years old. He went to school but not college. He is a goldsmith and has his own business. It was his father's. My brother works in my father's business too. My mother is a housewife. She finished high school in her home country and then married my father and came here. My oldest sister graduated from high school in 2001 and married in 2007. She doesn't work. My second sister married two years ago. She graduated with a degree in Banking and Finance in 2012 from a college in my parents' home country. She returned here and got married. She doesn't work. My third sister is a chartered accountant. She studied here for two years and then went to my parents' country to complete her studies. She is married and lives there now. I studied in a private school for nationals of a specific country. My sisters and all my relatives studied there. The teachers are mostly from there and the teaching is in English. I liked school and I studied hard because it difficult. On graduating, I got average marks, not too high and not too low. I applied for a private university, but I was too late, and the admission had closed, so I went to my parents' country for six months and gave private tuition to family members. When I returned, I applied to this college. I am studying Business Management and have just completed my first year. It was easy. My GPA is 3.97. After graduating I plan to continue at a private university here and complete my bachelor's.

Then, I will do my Masters. I want to complete education and then I will go for a job. After I finish my studies, I want to work because I want experience of the real world and then get married. I don't want to work after I marry. It is our tradition that after marriage, you focus on your husband and in-laws. Most of what we will do depends on our husband, but we have to stand up for ourselves. My mother teaches us that sometimes you have to compromise, and you cannot always stand up for yourself because after marriage it is a big thing to stand up for yourself. I like studying at a women-only college. I am excited to come to college. I am not here to make friends or gossip with friends or sit the cafeteria. I am here to study, to learn something new each day. I am learning to drive because my father has to drive me to college and it is a long way, but he never complains.

#### 3.4.5. Anfal

I am twenty years old. I am the middle child of five and the only daughter. I am a citizen. My mother is a chemical scientist and graduated from the public university. She works at the Ministry of [name removed]. My father graduated from university and then joined the military. He worked as a translator and travelled around the world. Now he is a VIP escort at the international airport. My oldest brother is twenty-three and he is a coastguard. He didn't go to college; in fact, he dropped out of high school and joined the police. My second brother is twenty-two and he is in college in the USA. He's studying Business. He's been there for two years. My third brother is sixteen and still in school. He's in a religious school and he wants to study religion in higher education. My fourth brother is fourteen and in school. He wants to be a professional footballer, but this changes every week. I kind of liked school but it was hard. I loved English. My parents are traditional Arabs...they put their religion first and then the usual

Arabian traditions next, like segregation. The other day, my father told me I had to stop going to the theatre because I'm too "close to other genders." I was disturbed by his words because it's not why I go to the theatre. I don't go to sit next to another gender. He's worried. He's the typical Arab and believes in traditions. This country believes in tradition more than religion sometimes. There is a huge difference between religion and tradition. I can still go to the theatre, but I have to take one of my brothers with me. He's worried what people will think if they see me. Family name is important to him, but he does go overboard. I respect his beliefs, but we need to open our minds a little bit. I talk to them. I argue with them. They tell me tradition comes first but we need to advance, we need to open up our arms and our minds to other stuff, to accept and understand others. I don't have problems with other religions or sexualities. I'm kind of open minded about these things. Now, I tend not to tell him sometimes, just so he won't get mad or upset. I won't say I have a secret life, but I do some things that my parents don't know about.

I was lonesome in school and had a hard time communicating. I used to be shy but that changed when I got to college. I am studying Interior Design and have just completed my third semester. It's going great. I don't struggle with the subjects. I have a few friends but mostly I focus on my work. I chose this college because I wanted to study in English and do something with art, but my GPA was too low for the universities. My parents wanted me to sign up for something more important than design. They wanted me to be an engineer or an architect. I have a GPA of 3.9 and will continue my studies after I graduate next year. I'm hoping to go abroad, maybe the UK. Of course, I will have to take my mother along and I'm ok with that.

### 3.4.6. Reem

I am twenty-three years old. I am a citizen, and I am the youngest child of fourteen. The three oldest are my stepsiblings. I don't know them very well. I have two brothers and nine sisters; I am the tenth daughter, and I am the only one living at home. My father is eighty and my mother is ten years younger. My father went to college, but this was before real universities. He is a businessman and has a lot of businesses in the city and overseas. My mother did not go to university and has never worked. My father was married when he saw my mother at her high school. He wanted to marry her, so he divorced his wife and married my mother when she was eighteen. My mother doesn't believe in studying. She believes in the husband's life. She always calls me down to meet women, "Come, come, they want to see you. Wear a nice dress." Every weekend, we have a gathering at our house. Everyone comes to our home to eat lunch. My mother is very busy, but she doesn't cook. We have two or three chefs. My oldest sister is forty. She went to university but couldn't decide what to study, so she dropped out. She works. My second sister graduated from university and works as a volunteer with handicapped children. My third sister is thirty-five. She graduated from university and works in the university library. My fourth sister is thirty-two and has been working since graduating from university. My fifth sister did not go to university or even high school. She married our cousin when she was fourteen. My sixth sister went to university but is lazy and doesn't work. My last two sisters are both teachers. I went to the public university to study Engineering and Petroleum, but I was only there for a year and a half. I didn't like it. I got married to another student when I was there. I loved him but we divorced. He wasn't responsible. When I divorced, I felt sad. I couldn't continue with my studies. After a while, my father told me about this college. I am studying Interior Design and I have just completed my first year. I didn't want anything serious. I want something interesting. I

love it. I love the course and the teacher. My GPA is 3.78. I work hard, and I don't have time for my family. I like to study. I don't drive because I'm afraid, but I have a driver. I stay home a lot. After graduating, I want to do my bachelor's and then open my own design business. There are design colleges in the Middle East, but my family will not let me study there because their way of life it's too different. Before university, I went to three different schools. We had three homes because my father likes moving. We have a house in Lebanon. He likes his work too much. He wakes up, goes to work, comes back at one o'clock to sleep then back out again. He comes homes ten o'clock. In the summer, we will go to New York. I have been there before. My father has business there. I have travelled a lot, including Switzerland, Interlaken, Egypt, Zurich, London, Washington.

#### 3.4.7. Haya

I am nineteen years old. We are four sisters and two brothers, and I am the oldest. I am a citizen. My father is a policeman. He didn't go to university. My mother is a secretary. She graduated from the public university. My two brothers are fourteen and twelve and attend school. My sisters are seventeen, sixteen and fourteen. The youngest is a twin with my youngest brother. My oldest sister goes to school. She wants to be a dentist. My other two sisters go to school. I am studying Interior Design. I have been at the college for two years. My GPA is 2.53. My parents wanted me to come to college. I want to be an Interior Designer because I love colours. I love to design spaces and homes. I want to be a designer but not just with a diploma. I want to continue with bachelor's, but there are no colleges here, so I will work to collect my money and I will go out to study. We have travelled to other Gulf countries but not outside the Gulf area. I will study overseas, maybe in Australia. My father laughs and says, "If you want to go then you go with

your husband.” After marrying, I hope to work because if we want to live, we must work. I see my dad and mother work to have money. They want to have a good life for us. I was scared to come to this college because I was worried about my English, but when I started studying, I felt good. I feel that I am strong. I can do it. I’m learning a lot. My English is good because my mother brought a teacher for me when I was eleven. My brothers and sisters do not have a tutor because I am the first one. Everything is for the first one.

#### 3.4.8. Sara

I am a nineteen year old non-citizen. I am the youngest of six children. I have one brother and four sisters. My parents were born overseas and came to this country before 1991. My mother is a housewife. She has never worked. She started higher education in her home country but didn’t finish. I don’t know what she studied as she never talks about it. My father studied Mechanical Engineering at university, but he didn’t complete his studies. He married my mum, and they came over here. He’s retired now. I was born here. All my brothers and sisters were born here. My brother is thirty-three and he went to university overseas to study Mechanical Engineering. He is married and here. He works in a company. My oldest sister is thirty-six. She went to college in overseas, but I don’t remember what she studied. She dropped out when she got married. She married and now they live in a Gulf country. She doesn’t work. My next sister is thirty-two. She went to a university here. She studied English. She worked and then got married. Her husband is from my family but is a European citizen. She has lived in Europe for five years. I haven’t visited here because I need a passport and visa. She doesn’t work. My third sister is thirty-one. She studied here at college for a few years and then went overseas to study. She studied something medical. She lives overseas near my other sister. She is married to a man from



there. She works in a private hospital. My last sister is twenty-five. She graduated from a university here in IT. She worked for a while and then got married to a non-citizen. She is now a housewife. School was ok. I liked some grades, but I don't like to study. When I came to this college I had to study English. I wanted to go to my parents' country to study design, but my brother said I should go here. I was scared because it's all in English. I am studying Graphic Design and I have been at the college for two years. I like it too much. It's good for me. My GPA is 3.8. After college, I hope to complete my study at another university, maybe in Australia, but it's difficult because I don't have a passport. My parents want me to stay here. Maybe I will stay and work in a company. Maybe in five years, I could go to another country like my sisters. My dream is to open a design company. I want to be an international businesswoman. I think it's possible if I work hard. I have my goal. I will get married in a few years. I hope to finish my studies first.

#### 3.4.9. Fatemah

I am a non-citizen but born here. I grew up here. I am thirty-three years. I am the oldest of four. I have two sisters and one brother. My father went to university in his home country. He was an Arabic teacher in a private school for students from his country. Now he teaches there. My mother did not go to university. She does not work. My parents moved back to their home country three years ago. My two sisters are married and live there. My oldest sister is twenty-eight. She went there when she was twenty and got married. She graduated in chemistry from the public university here because she was very clever. Every year the university takes 5% non-citizens, and they took her. She's now a translator because her English is excellent, and she didn't find work in her major. My other sister is twenty-four. She is married, of course. We have

to marry. She went home and got married there. She graduated from university in Business. She does not work. My brother is nineteen. He is, studying Law at the same university. I have been married for ten years. My husband is from our home country. He is an architect. I went to school here, but then went there, so my high school and college was there. My family stayed there for one year and then I stayed there with my grandparents. The change of school was very difficult because the level of education here was very low, so I felt I was very low to the other girls there. I was a bit depressed. I studied hard and I decided to stay and go to college there because the level was higher. I went to university and studied Graphic Design for four years, but I didn't graduate. I dropped out in the last semester because I got married. I was sad and depressed because I wanted to complete my last semester, but I accepted it...I don't know why. Marriage was my family's decision; it was a traditional marriage, so I stayed at home. We came back here for two years, but then I returned to graduate. My husband wanted me to graduate. I graduated and returned here. I worked in a travel agency for five years and taught drawing in a private elementary school part-time. I opened my own photography studio. I have five staff and its very busy. I have responsibilities and it can be difficult when I have problems because I am not a citizen. I have a partner to help with residencies and official paperwork. I decided I wanted to return to my major because I like Art and I like teaching, so I came to to this college last semester. It's the only one that has this major in Graphic Design. I have a 4.0 GPA. I want to do my bachelor's and PhD and then, I want to be a lecturer in college. I like this major and I'm always reading online and researching because I cannot trust my lecturer. Anything she tells me, I research. Some teachers are amazing, and I study hard for them. I study every day at home. Most of my time is for studying because I don't have a child. I am older, and so I am not comfortable with the other students, but it is only two years and only a diploma, so I will stay. I

am motivated. It's not like before. Now my aim is to do Master and PhD. Yes, I know what I want.

#### 3.4.10. Afrar

I am twenty-two years old and a citizen. I am the youngest of three. I have one stepbrother and one sister. I live with my parents, my sister, and her husband. My mother is a housekeeper. She graduated in Business from the public university but never worked. She got married in the last year of university and stays at home. It was not her choice, but she was happy to stay at home. Now she really regrets it because my father's salary is not enough. My father went to the public college to study Business. He worked for the national airline and then worked in two government departments for twenty years. Now he is retired. He likes to go camping at his farm, so we don't see him much. My brother is from my father's side. He is forty-one. He has been in the military since he left high school. My mother is my father's second wife. His first wife is still alive but not with my father. My sister is thirty-one and she is my best friend. She went to the same public college as my father and studied Business, and now works where he did at the Government Housing Department. She has worked there for ten years but our father did not get her the job. She got it herself. She has been married for two years and they live with us. They have their own apartment in the house because rent is so expensive. Her husband has two houses, but they rent those out. I went to school and graduated at nineteen because I had a problem with my back and had to repeat my second year. I still take medicine and I go to a hospital overseas every six months for injections. I also do *hijama* (cupping) every three months. I take cortisone because I have psoriasis. I enjoyed school. I was good at school and my grades were good. My uncle is a minister in the Department for [removed] and he doesn't like *wasta*. He doesn't even use it for

his daughter. I had to go to college to prove myself for him, for my mum and for myself. When I came to college, I learned how to study. This college taught me how to study. I am studying Business Management and I am just completing my final semester. My GPA is 2.62 and I hope to graduate with 3.0, so I can go to a private university. I can go with less but then I have to pay. In my free time, I like to sing traditional Arabic songs with my family. I like to go to the beach and walk. I can drive, and I have my own car, so I can go where I want. This summer, I will travel to Ohio, USA with my mother. She needs surgery. After that, I will complete my studies. I am excited about graduation but also sad because I love college. The teachers are wonderful. During the last course, I had a really difficult situation in my home. My parents were going to divorce, and I have the problem with my back. My father would not give me money to travel to hospital to take my injections. I was absent for ten days and missed two exams, but one teacher really helped me. I am excited because if I finish my diploma, I can finish my degree, then I will have my own business. I want to have my own business making clothes. I want to marry but after I start my own business. I'm not studying all that time to keep myself at home. No way.

### 3.5. Data Analysis

The theoretical framework for this study was Bourdieu's sociology of education. Using Bourdieusian concepts of capital, the purpose was to analyse the different levels of capital at each individual's disposal to determine how they impact an individual's identity as a student as they progress to, through and beyond higher education. This would include all forms of capital, but with a focus on cultural capital. Cultural capital in the field of education manifests itself in "confidence, information about available educational provisions, assertiveness and a sense of entitlement" (Reay, 1999, p.162). The differentials of cultural capital, and linguistic capital,

impact the individual to articulate their own life stories, or voice, thereby reflecting Bourdieu's distinction between being 'heard' and being 'listened to' (Bourdieu, 1993, in Reay, 1999, p.162).

Prior to collecting the data, possible themes were identified. These themes were selected, based on the literature and on a pre-conceived assumption that they would be significant - the assumption being based on the literature. These themes included the concepts of student identity, student agency, engagement and future selves. Other themes that were anticipated, based on the literature, were the role of religion and culture in the context of the study; the socio-economic role of young women in this context; and the educational opportunities afforded to women by society and family. Central to this was the student identity of the participants, as articulated by them through their "lived experiences" (Kurshid, 2105, p.107). Although possible themes had been highlighted, this was only intended as preparation for the study and they were not pre-determined; the data would determine the themes and issues. The life history approach used in this study yielded a rich dataset from which several salient emergent issues evolved.

In stage one, complete and detailed transcripts were analysed for issues arising from the literature or those arising from the interviews. Experiences and possible themes were highlighted in the transcripts. Additionally, evidence of capital was listed for each participant; levels of capital were also evaluated and listed (Appendix 5).

In stage two, key issues were isolated from each participant and then cross-referenced with the dataset and plotted onto a spreadsheet for comparison, looking for similarities and differences

across interviews. This spreadsheet was created by hand (not on computer) on a large paper. The visual and tangible aspect of a working-poster-size board was important for me to be able to feel the data and visualize the emerging patterns as they were added and the whole picture emerged. This would have been more challenging for me on a computer screen. From the emergent issues plotted and coded onto the spreadsheet, three key issues emerged. These three key issues were identified as the themes that would be analysed in detail in stage three.

Once the key themes were identified, the third stage analysed the common themes to generate an understanding of how participants negotiated their gendered and class-based identities and developed their sense of student identity. The primary focus of the interviews was the experiences that each participant gave voice to as they defined their experiences in the context of being young women in society. For this to be possible, it was important that the key issues to be analysed were those that emerged from their data as sufficiently significant to have shaped their identities. Identifying the key issues was not straight forward. Each individual expressed different responses to key moments, or “epiphanies” (Denzin, 1989) and emphasized different influential experiences. It required a process of coding that necessitated the disassembling of the data to identify, categorise and then compare issues. Each transcript was broken into small sections based on the topic being discussed. These were then analysed further, across the data set, to develop links between the categories and subcategories and to determine the level, significance, and impact of the capital at their disposal. As a result, this meant that certain pre-conceived themes and/or assumptions had to be modified.

As a life history research study, the data led the research and, consequently, in order to be fair and true to the data, it was necessary to be flexible to some degree while remaining within the parameters of the initial research study. The qualitative nature of the research methodology makes the element of subjectivity unavoidable. To ensure the trustworthiness of the data and data analysis, records of each stage were kept. Each time new data was generated it was highlighted in the transcripts or spreadsheet. It became more of an iterative process than a linear one. The research questions remained the same, but the path to it changed slightly.

### 3.6. Ethical Issues

As per the requirements of the University of Liverpool, the research study was governed by a set of ethical principles and procedures. Protocols concerning all aspects of the study were followed. Such protocols included the voluntary nature of participation, and anonymity and confidentiality of the participants which was provided with the use of pseudonyms. All data was anonymized before publication and information that could identify an individual was removed or changed to protect their identity. However, for the number of students who were non-citizens, this could not be guaranteed. Due to their under-representation in the institution, full anonymity was not possible. Pseudonyms and the omission of any names that may directly identify them helped to retain their anonymity. This was explained to them before the interviews proceeded and they all agreed to participate. During one interview, a student asked for some comments she was about to make to not be included. These comments did not impact the study and were a case of getting some personal feelings “off her chest”. Participants were also requested to not use the names of faculty at the college. Participants were required to sign consent forms which ensured their privacy but also safe-guarded the researcher in case of future disputes. Participants were given an

official letter, provided by the University of Liverpool, detailing the process for withdrawing from the study (pre, mid or post interview) or for filing a complaint. This included the contact information for the researcher's supervisor. Students from the Department of Foundation Studies and past students of mine were not invited to participate to avoid any issues arising over "power differentials" (Kurshid, 2015, p.117).



## Chapter 4: Findings

During the process of analysing the individual data as detailed in the Methodology chapter, a pattern of recurring factors emerged. This pattern consisted of differing factors that influenced the student identity of participants and, consequently, influenced their progression to and through higher education. Some of these were specific to each participant's narrative, while three were present across the majority of the individual narratives. These three key themes were identified as key for all participants in the formation of their student identity. There were not the only issues that helped individuals create their identity, but I identified them as the key issues for the purpose of this study. The three themes were identified as (1) parental expectations, (2) the presence and influence of a key person in the participants' lives, and (3) a moment (or moments) of realisation that influenced the choices of each individual. The themes are interconnected and identified as the key issues that impacted their student identity and progression to and through higher education.

### 4.1. Theme1: Parental Expectations

In the context of the patriarchal societies, there are traditional roles and behaviours that govern gender. Obeying parents, not questioning the judgement of adults and not dishonouring the family name are three of the many complex concepts that were required. Breaking any of these is essentially *ayeb* (shame or shameful). "Women in particular had to be careful not to do anything *ayeb* because any behaviour less than modest or courteous could draw shame not only upon

themselves but upon their whole family” (Salbi & Becklund, 2005, p.41). Women are the public face of honour and, as such, they are expected to be obedient and respectful of their parents’ expectations (Greenbuärg & Sagiv-Reiss, 2013; Groeblacher, 2012; Keddie, 2011; Weiner-Levy, 2006). The characteristics of obedience are controversial, and the controversy increases considerably when such terms are used to define another culture by those outside the culture (Abu-Lughood, 1998, 2005; Al-Sharmani, 2014; Archer, 2002; Haw, 2009; Noureen, 2015; Piela, 2015; Ruby, 2006).

#### 4.1.1. Aspirations

The theme of parental expectations can first be viewed through the aspirations of the participants. Sabeen<sup>2</sup> seems to be the perfect example of a “good daughter.” Close to both parents, she speaks warmly of the protective, supportive environment of their home, the value of education and the aspirations of her parents for their children (male and female) to be successful professionals in life, preferably doctors and engineers. She sees herself as a role model for other students, and sometimes teachers, even offering to explain lessons to peers who were unable to understand the teacher. Her conversation and behaviour model the ‘good’ daughter - dutiful, mature, and polite, with exceptionally high academic abilities and exemplary conduct. Her dream, and that of her parents, was for her to become a cardiologist – a specific goal and something which she felt she needed to clarify in the interview with stating that the dream to be a doctor was “not even a joke”. Her statement suggests a need to assure the interviewer that she was serious in her intentions. This could be attributed to her awareness of her limited social

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<sup>2</sup> As mentioned in the Methodology chapter, pseudonyms are used to ensure anonymity for the participants.

capital, as a child of non-citizen parents, as well as an acute awareness of her current academic status (i.e. studying in a vocational college for a diploma, as opposed to a university for a degree). This creates a need to clarify and emphasise her abilities and aspirations to the interviewer, i.e. *despite* her goal, and her high level of academic capital, she *chose* to study for a diploma in design at a vocational college. As a non-citizen, Sabeen was aware that studying medicine would be challenging if not impossible here. Entrance to the Medical School at the public university (the sole option for medicine) is virtually impossible for non-citizens without “a big recommendation from someone or something”. Her family has limited social connections (and no *wasta*) and so this is not possible. A possible option would be to study at home – a country she has never lived in and has little desire to move to, so again her family’s limited social connections make this an unrealistic choice. Therefore, her family’s lack of social capital prevented her pursuing her higher education goal. However, her parents’ emphasis on education remains strong, and her decision to abandon her goal of being a doctor made her parents sad – a term she repeated several times. Explaining her choice, she adds that she gave her parents many reasons but was not completely honest and did not tell her parents the actual reason for her choice:

“I made up my reasons to stay here...I am not ready to take on the world because my brother is suffering right now [being away from home]. I have always been dependent on my parents for everything and I am very attached to them. I was just starting to get along with them...When we are young, when we are teenagers, we don’t think of our parent as our friends...but all the rest [unspecified] are temporary and my parents are not going to be here forever”.

Thus, she makes her choice for her parents. She is disappointing them and dashing their hopes and aspirations for her, yet she is also protecting them from the truth in order to be a ‘good’ daughter and remain at home until marriage. It also reflects a fear of being cut off from her family, a fear of homesickness but also a fear of being exposed to a new and unfamiliar world (Greenberg & Sagiv-Reiss, 2013, p.146). She chooses the safety of home and the protection of her parents. Some may consider this a non-reflective instance of habitus, in that she reproduces the inequalities of the field by not exceeding social boundaries. However, in this instance, her habitus is employed reflectively but, instead of there being a conscious decision to exceed boundaries, there is a reversal from the assumption to exceed. Despite having sufficient levels of academic capital to exceed social boundaries, she chooses a lesser status; thereby devaluing the capital at her disposal.

Nadia, like Sabeen, is non-citizen and, therefore, lacking a high level of social capital. Her father is a goldsmith, and his family have a relatively low social status. She is one of five children including four girls. All four girls attended higher education. The brother did not attend higher education and entered the family business as a goldsmith (as did their father with his grandfather). Two of the three sisters have not worked since marrying despite having graduated from university. Nadia expresses a desire to work while admitting that her husband will ultimately decide, something that she learned from her mother who taught her:

“Whatever my husband will decide. You have to follow, no problem. It is a big thing after marriage if you stand up for yourself, but...”

Nadia does not complete her sentence, and the use of *but* indicates an indecision or uncertainty over the lack of control over her own future. This would not be unusual for a young girl contemplating marriage and its impact on her career and future; however, her expression of doubt indicates a strength of character that may prove to be unrealistic. She is a strong young woman who does not want to depend on her parents:

“No one knows what will happen in the future...I think education is very important for every human being...to be independent, to have a status in life. I think it give you.... you feel independent, you are not dependent on others. If you think you have an education, you are independent. After I complete my study, I am trying to be independent. I don't want to depend on others even my father, even my father. I want to do something for myself. I have to aim to fulfil my own desire by my own money”.

Her repetition of the word *independent* indicates a strength of character and determination. For her, education is the chance to be “independent”. Her aspirations may be at odds with what her parents want for her future, and the very real possibility of being in a marriage that will not allow her to assert her independence. As her family has not yet started the marriage process, her future husband is an unknown entity and therefore Nadia is in the conflicting position of aspiring to a future of emotional and financial independence while unsure of her future role and limitations. She can only hope that she gets a husband and in-laws who will support her. As discussed by Tarar (2012), the social constructions of a daughter are framed in patriarchal systems and traditions yet “equally deeply ingrained are women’s ways of understanding their social world and ways of coping with its difficulties” (Tarar, 2012, p.70). An arranged marriage is inevitable, and this alone will determine her future.

When it comes to aspirations, Noura is a very different example. Her family is one of the five founding tribes and this affords them a relatively, high level of social capital; however, they are heavily in debt and have a low level of cultural capital. Her family's academic capital is also low – her parents did not graduate from higher education and because her grades from school were so low, she could not enrol in her college of choice. The importance of retaining *face* in these circumstances is even greater and pressure is often immense on the younger generation to protect the family name while crippled by their economic status. This situation is not uncommon as the materialism and social pressure to keep up is frequently beyond the reach of less educated families, regardless of their historical importance and social status. To an outsider, the pressure seems unbearable. Noura has a traditional, uneducated father who strictly controls her actions and future choices, including her current choice of study, “I didn't choose management. I'm studying the major that I don't want to... I'm pushed”. Although *pushed* refers in part to her lower academic capital, it also refers to her father's refusal to allow her to follow her dream which is to be a pilot:

“I need my dad's permission. He's the one stopping me you know. You are a girl...our traditions don't let that...he cares what people say”.

She copes with her disappointment by dreaming of running away. Her anger towards her father and his traditional views are evident but she is not prepared to give up on her dream just yet. There is an element of planning in her dream, and, according to her, she is not alone in her dreaming. Her mother is aware of it, “Yes, my mum agreed. My mum support me with this, about my future”. Her desire to rise above familial and social expectations remains strong.

This shows a reflective employment of habitus and a strong sense of agency. Despite her father's control over her life decisions, he leaves her home alone with her younger brothers while he and his wife travels suggesting either (a) a trust in her actions, (b) an assumption that she will not disobey, or (c) a naivety or lack of foresight into the possibilities of what could happen or what she might dare to do. The assumption of her obeying reflects an ingrained belief that she will acquiesce to his demands. This could be interpreted as realistic, in that she knows that her options are limited and that social rules apply.

Noura describes the significant debt her family are living in and the dream of running away could be to escape the economic pressures of being in debt in a country where materialism is the public face of social status. The family's economic capital is very low, indicating a difficult and unhappy home life:

“My mum and dad they have a lot of loans, you know, from the bank...lots. I think they don't like it here. They want to migrate”.

The reference to her family migrating seems unrealistic and more an expression of desperation. For her personally, running away to fulfil her aspirations, would have serious implications for her and her family.

#### 4.1.2. Cultural expectations

Several of the participants come from families that are immediately recognizable as having high levels of social and cultural capital. Unlike Noura, these families also have high levels of

economic capital. Anfal comes from a family with a very high level of social and cultural capital. She has a traditional but educated father who seems to be conflicted in his treatment of her and his perception of her potential and aspirations. Describing her parents as “traditional Arabs”, she immediately identifies them as the opposite of “open-minded” Arabs (like herself):

“You know, my parents are kind of those traditional Arabs. They put their religion first and then the usual Arabian traditions next, like segregation or other stuff, so I do respect them but at some point, we need to open our minds a little bit. They tell me tradition comes first but at the same time, like, traditions are important, but we need to advance, we need to open our arms and open up our minds to other stuff, to accept and understand others”.

Anfal speaks fondly of her father and, while not critical of him on a personal level, her admission that they argue over her decisions and activities shows the conflict present in her life and the contrast between her sense of identity and her father’s sense of her identity:

“Like one time, my dad told me I’ve gotta stop going to the theatre and I asked him why and he told me that ‘You’re too close to other genders’ and I’m like, is that a problem? That’s not the goal. I don’t go there just to sit next to a different gender. I think he was just worried. He was just being that usual parent and, like I said, he’s that typical Arab that believes in usual traditions”.

He lets her go to the theatre now “as long as I take my brothers along”. This shows some compromise and Anfal tries to express her appreciation, but her frustration is evident:



“I know my dad is worried, but I do have this idea in my head that he’s just believing in our usual traditions that a girl shouldn’t go anywhere without a guy or a brother or a husband and so on. He does go along in telling me that other people shouldn’t see you doing these things and I tell him ‘Dad, I don’t really care what people say’ but, you know, he’s just worried and he does praise up or family name a lot. Family name is important especially to him that he has to keep it straight in a way that is doesn’t...well we all believe that, that we shouldn’t disgrace our family name that’s something that’s very important to us, but it does do go a little bit overboard with how, like, for example, I can’t marry someone just because he’s in a different family which I find kind of racist which I totally stand against so when I do talk to my dad about that he does get disturbed, he knows I’m right but he says ‘this is what we’re used to’. He knows but he finds it hard to accept it”.

Her need to hide her activities and rebellion from her father is, in her words, to protect him. She justifies her choices as a desire to “protect” him (her words) from her actions, or the knowledge of her actions. She also shows her ability to make decisions in her choice of subject and college. She states that her parents’ desire is for her to study something more important than design and not at a diploma level. Her parents wanted her to be an engineer or architect, both considered more appropriate professions for someone from their social status. Her insistence on studying design reflects a strong personality but also one that pulls her into conflict with her parents, in particular her father, and may contribute to his steadfast refusal to allow her to attend and present at exhibitions - all seen to be inappropriate behaviour for his daughter within their social and cultural position.

In contrast, Aisha is subject to stricter rules regarding her freedom and independence than her brothers, but there is an apparent balance in her family life with no element of conflict or overt control. Her parents are supportive yet there is a more relaxed approach to the rules imposed and the implementation of their rules. For example, Aisha recalls her mother removing her from a school after bad behaviour (which she did not want to elaborate on). However, the experience is retold lightly, almost humorously, and with no sense of fear or punishment having been present. This could be indicative of a more reflective mature personality in Aisha or an acceptance of the cultural and social restraints.

Another participant who comes from a family with high social, economic and cultural capital is Reem. The youngest of fourteen, she is the only child still living at home. After a short marriage, in which her young student husband moved into the family home and was financially supported by her father, she divorced him and remained in the marital apartment in the family home. The divorce, initiated by her and, according to her, supported by both families, implies a high level of social status that was at least equal to, if not above that of her now ex-husband. Additionally, both the families' responses, as reported by Reem, reflect negatively on the husband. He was seen to be at fault. Reem's expectations of marriage were evidently overestimated and, although she laughs as she recounts married life, "he only sleep...I love you. What I take from this?" her words indicate a young woman with goals and expectations of married life.

Not content with an under-achieving yet loving husband, she divorces him with what seems to be an almost casual abandon and then drops out of university. Her decision to drop out of university

may seem a sign of defeat, yet she had already stated that she did not want to attend university to study Petroleum Engineering (a prestigious, high entry level course) but did so at her family's encouragement. Describing herself as "a child" then, she reflects an awareness of her previous innocence and lack of self-determination. Freed from her marriage and a degree (and future career) she never desired, she decides to do something she likes, so she enrolls in design school. What would be a disaster for some (divorce and university drop-out) is a liberating experience for her that allows her to follow her own dreams and aspirations.

Evidently, she has the familial support, enabled by her family's high levels of economic capital, to make these life-changing choices. Her family support is crucial; without it, none of this would have been possible and instead of being judged or condemned, she is encouraged by her father. Her mother, a woman who is dedicated to her husband and their life together, encourages her to dress up and present herself to the women who visit, evidently in the hope of a new suitor, which she does with good humour but with little enthusiasm. Her ability to laugh at her experiences is indicative of a strong determined female with the economic, social and cultural capital to sustain her and protect her position in society. Allowed to live independently in her apartment she is nevertheless protected within the wider family environment.

#### 4.1.3. Traditional and conservative

Two participants (Haya and Sara) are from traditional conservative families. Both girls referred to themselves as "good girls" during the interviews. Haya, a citizen, is the oldest child of six while Sara, a non-citizen, is the youngest of six. Both were quiet, shy girls with a weaker level of English than the other participants.

Haya is from a traditional, bedouin family with a relatively low socio-economic status. The only participant fully covered, she is the weakest linguistically and the least talkative. Giggly and naïve, her conversation indicates she is the most socially protected of all the participants with little experience of life and society outside her immediate family. Driven to and collected from college daily by her father, her freedom is extremely limited. When her father calls for her (on her cell), she immediately responds, as is expected. He tells her he is waiting for her in the car park and she does not question or delay, simply stopping what she is doing and leaving swiftly and politely. Her role of obedient daughter is one within the strict social and familial restraints placed on her by her family.

The cultural and economic capital of her family is low and consequently her choices are limited. The eldest child of six, she is considered the “role model” by her parents for the other children, repeating their mantra of “everything for the first one.” Her education is an investment for the family; as a return, she is expected to tutor her siblings and guide them academically. Seemingly accepting of her social position within the family, it is a role she is happy to fulfil. This role gives her status with the strict confines of siblings and parents and she prides herself on being a “good Muslim girl” (Abu-Lughod, 2009; Brown, 2006; Findlow, 2013; NCAFP, 2011; Piela, 2015). Higher education is encouraged for her by her parents but within limited scope. She was encouraged by her parents to do a diploma and confidently discusses further study, even mentioning the possibility of going overseas, “I will work then collect my money then I will go out and study...maybe in Australia”.

Despite his encouragement, her father does not seem to take further study seriously, referring to it being up to her future husband, “If you want to go then you go with your husband [*laughter*]”. Like Nadia, the reality of her aspirations being fulfilled is wholly dependent on an unknown entity (her future husband). Based on her family status and the endogamous culture, her future husband will come from an equally conservative family; however, we cannot assume that this would prevent her from fulfilling her aspirations. One could assume however, although unsubstantiated, that her father’s laughter at the subject of further study overseas, is, at best, to appease and at worst, to dismiss her ideas, perhaps those of a naïve child. Alternatively, he may simply be expressing the accepted fact that the decision will not ultimately be his or indeed his daughter’s. Her immaturity and passivity to her future as expressed in her language is indicative of her sheltered and child-like personality. To be bolder would be considered inappropriate and certainly not the expected behaviour of a daughter. She constantly refers to herself as “strong”, stating quite boldly, “I can do it”, but she is not specific as to *what* she can do. This would seem to be self-assuring rather than an indication of her independence and future aspirations.

Sara is the only child of six still living at home; all siblings having moved out after marriage. She has more freedom than Haya, driving herself to and from college every day and being allowed to go out, albeit at specific times and to certain places and always accompanied by her mother or a female relative. Like Haya, she had limited life experiences to talk about in the interview which would indicate a lower level of cultural capital. Her aspirations for the future were vague, which could be due to indecision or apathy. There is an air of disappointment. She states that she wanted to study in Lebanon. She had no specific subject in mind, “to study anything” but had no doubt as to the location. However, she was not allowed to go, presumably because of her parents,

a decision she said made her sad. Her brother chose her college for her, but when asked why he chose this college, she is unsure as to whether it was because she wanted to study design or because it was female-only. His reason was not shared with her although she admits that she had told him previously that she would like to study drawing.

She is the only sibling who did not attend a university which could be due to lower academic capital, specifically lower high school grades. She was unable, or unwilling, to give any further explanation. Her brother and several of her sisters studied overseas so it would seem unusual that she would not be allowed to do the same. However, as the youngest in the family and the only remaining child at home, it could be attributed to a more protective attitude towards her, “we try to protect each other”, or a need for her to remain at home, thereby not abandoning her parents in their old age. This echoes Sabeen in her sense of family duty and the role of a good daughter. This however is supposition and cannot be determined by the data; what can be determined, is her complete powerlessness on the choices that influence her identity and her future. Of all participants, Sara is the least empowered with the lowest cultural capital at her disposal. It is evident from the data that the stricter (more traditional) the rules, the less it takes to break them.

#### 4.1.4. The influence of parental expectations

Based on the data generated by the interviews, it would be a relatively easy task to divide the participants into those who fulfil parental expectations and those who don't. A simple comparison would be Sabeen as an example of a daughter who fulfils parental expectation and Noura as an example of a daughter who doesn't. However, this would be far too superficial and would ignore the subtle yet complex nuances of their identities which are far more fluid and

change depending on the field in which they situate themselves at any given time and the internal/external forces that impact them at any given time.

Nadia fulfils the notion of a good daughter and yet she desires independence, “financial, personal and communicative” - attributes that could be defined as undesirable in a family that encourages compromise and obedience to one’s husband. Her strong character, and bold expression of ideas and opinions, are in conflict with her family’s concept of a good wife being obedient and compromising. Her mother reflects this dilemma in their conversations but, as the older generation, it can be assumed that she has accepted her role in the family and society (Abu-Lughod, 2009; Brown, 2006; Findlow, 2013; Keddie, 2011; Kurshid, 2015; Piela, 2015; Tarar, 2012). Nadia may be a good daughter but the attributes and characteristic traits that make her a good daughter are also helping to develop an identity that will create conflict in the future, a future determined by external forces. Her limits and boundaries will be determined by external forces – family and tradition. This is the opposite to Sabeen, whose limits and boundaries, though impacted by external forces (her lack of higher education options), are largely imposed by her on herself.

Anfal is an example of an individual creating two identities to adapt and survive within socially and culturally defined norms. Her “other life” emerged from her desire to hide her activities from her traditional father to protect him from the truth. Her actions would be considered in some circumstances to be protective, and the act of a good daughter - she knows her father would be upset and disapproving, so why worry him? However, she is aware that, in her culture, her actions would not be considered as compassionate, with many seeing her actions as those of a

daughter who is going against her father's wishes and one who could bring shame to the family name.

Unlike Noura who is adamantly rebellious to her father, Anfal defends her actions,

“It's not like I hate my parents or anything...it does go up and down, so I just try my best to please them...they're my parents”.

She justifies her secretive life as protecting him from becoming upset or mad. However, the latter use of *mad* suggests a desire to protect herself from being the object of his anger or disappointment, so her reasons are not entirely altruistic and may be more self-motivated than those of a purely good daughter protecting her father.

Aisha, a student who initially seems rebellious, does not express any rebellious tone in her interview. A fact that could be attributed to the apparently few expectations placed on her and the soft hand of her parents regarding her education. There is no mention of her parents becoming involved in her education except to reprimand her when she underachieves and move her to another school when she consistently misbehaves. Both actions were done in a supportive, non-threatening way and although she resisted at the time, she finds humour in it now, “I was very naughty [*giggling*]”. Similarly, her brother is moved to a “special school”, not due to any specific learning need (at least not one that has been diagnosed) but due to behavioural issues. Again, the soft touch of her parents is unthreatening and not confrontational.

Similarly, Reem, a young, divorced university-drop-out, can, apparently, do no wrong in her family. The youngest of fourteen children affords her the privileged position of being the baby in



a large family. After a failed marriage, she returns to her family home, content to spend her time at home in her own apartment with little desire to go out. In reality, she never left her home. Her young husband moved to her family home and was supported financially by her father. Her father and not her husband remained the primary patriarchal figure in her life.

Afrar is a participant that seemingly falls under the definition of a good daughter. She speaks positively of her relationship with her mother and sister. Unlike other participants, her family unit is small consisting of only two children (unusually small) with only one sibling other than a distant stepbrother. Her married sister lives in their home on one floor and, with her father spending most of his time away at their farm; her home life is female dominant. She speaks fondly of her family life at home (minus father), describing it as “so nice”. Activities she undertakes, like walking on the public beaches and singing, could be considered inappropriate for a young unmarried woman. However, they are done discreetly, for example, her singing is in never done in public, and with full knowledge of her mother. This shows her sensitivity to the social norms and reflects a desire to abide by the expectations of behaviour (Brown, 2006; Findlow, 2013). When she talks of her father, however, there is an element of rebellion or frustration. She describes him becoming “aggressive” at times when he does not get what he wants and refers to a time when her parents were divorcing, and he refused to pay for her required medical treatment.

While this narrative, being subjective in nature, does not determine his character, it does indicate her strained relationship with her father and how his decisions affect her directly. As a result of her father’s volatility, the women in the family gain strength from their close relationship. This

bond perpetuates and develops the identity of good daughter as deviating from good would ruin the group and destroy the closeness of their relationship. Furthermore, possibly as a result of her relationship with her father, she strongly declares that she will continue to work after marriage regardless of her husband's opinion, "I'm not studying all that time to keep myself at home. No way." As with Nadia, whether this expression of strength and determination will be realized in her future will be determined by her future marriage, but her determination is indicative of a strength of purpose and a strong sense of identity.

#### 4.2. Theme 2: The Influence of a Key Person

There is an abundance of research focusing on the impact parental involvement has on a student's progress and success in education (Baydoun, 2015; Fulton & Turner, 2008; Ijaz & Abbas, 2010; Metheny & McWhirter, 2013; Reay, 1996,1999; Tarar, 2012; Yamamoto & Holloway, 2010). This chapter looks specifically at how the levels of capital at each student's disposal vary through the different types of relationships, and how this impacts their life choices, specifically their progress to higher education and the aspirations for the future.

Without exception, each participant referred to at least one person in their lives who was a key motivator in their progression to and through higher education. Some participants were very aware of the role this person played in their past and present experiences and choices, while others mentioned a person without recognizing or articulating their importance in their past choices. Nevertheless, each participant clearly identified one person, directly or indirectly, during their interview. For the majority of participants, this was a parental relationship, and, in

most cases, it was one specific parent that guided the participant with regards to her choice of higher education and future. This guiding relationship was not without friction, as discussed in more detail in this chapter. The following table shows the key individuals in each participant's life identified in their interviews:

Student	Mother	Father	Other
Sabeen	✓	barely at home (work)	
Noura	barely mentioned	difficult relationship	✓ (uncle)
Aisha	✓	✓	
Nadia	✓	barely at home (work)	
Anfal	barely mentioned	✓	
Reem	✓	✓	
Haya	barely mentioned	✓	
Sara	barely mentioned	mentioned briefly	✓ (brother)
Fatemah		✓	✓ (husband)
Afrar	✓	barely at home (retired)	

The relationship with the key person was predominantly positive, with the exception of two participants, one of whom is passively fighting against the restrictive “traditional” expectations of both parents, while another is more aggressively resisting the pressures of a domineering father. These are discussed in detail later in this chapter.

#### 4.2.1. The mother

Half of the students (Sabeen, Aisha, Nadia, Reem and Afrar) identified their mothers as the predominant motivational force for their decision to enter higher education. All five participants describe their mothers as supportive and encouraging but their motivations vary. Sabeen refers to her mother directly as the main person in the house, making all the decisions concerning the children and their education. Unlike her father, her mother was from an educated family and graduated from university in her home country. Although she did not work while her children were small, she returned to work after they started school and worked as a teacher before becoming a nursery-school principal. She describes her mother as an avid reader for whom “books were kicked out of her life on marriage”, something which her mother regrets deeply.

Despite her husband feeling that books are a “waste of money”, both she and her daughter buy books regularly, determined to read as much as possible. Sabeen frequently expresses the desire to “be the best” and “to try as much as I can”. Her one failure in life was an embarrassment due to her mother’s reaction and her subsequent anger made her daughter more determined to succeed. Her parents wish for her was to be a surgeon, but as there were no medical schools for non-citizens, she decided to enter college and study for a diploma in design. Her desire is to stay close to her mother and be her friend, something she feels her mother wants, “My mum always wanted to be my friend”. This resulted in her choosing to study only a diploma (her mother’s words) at this college. She has never told her parents why she chose not to go to medical school, preferring to let them think she is not ready to leave home, “I don’t want to be independent because it’s so lonely...you miss home”.

Afrar has a very close relationship with her mother and sister, with her father being an almost peripheral figure in their home-life, preferring to spend extended weekends in his farmhouse out of town while the women of the house remain in their home. Both mothers are dominant in their families and homes but have made choices and sacrifices for their husbands. For Afrar, her mother has little choice when it comes to her father's wishes, but in relenting, she gains her power within the family and maintains a calm and stable home environment. His absence allows her to enjoy the family life with her two daughters and one son-in-law (who live with them).

As with Sabeen, Afrar's mother went to university (their fathers did not) but did not work after graduating in accordance with her husband's wishes. This is something she regrets now especially due to the rising living costs. As with Sabeen, their mothers regret their previous choices made, according to the students, to please their husbands. Both families have low economic capital at their disposal, but Afrar has more social and cultural capital due to her being a citizen. For Afrar, her mother's regret is predominantly economic based while for Sabeen's mother, it is less economic and more academic and self-fulfilling. This regret manifests itself in their daughters' desires to prove themselves, especially to their mothers. On failing a test in high school, Sabeen remembers:

“She gave me a lecture as she was angry. I didn't want my mother to know. I knew she would be, not angry, but she would have an opinion about it. My mother has never hit me so I wasn't afraid of that....so I think I was afraid to accept I failed and I didn't want to talk about it but my mum found out and she talked to me...she was shouting. She was mad”.

Despite stating that she had “never, ever” experienced “pressure” from her “very supportive” parents growing up, this experience shows some fear of having failed and of having her mother find out. This indicates at least a sub-conscious feeling of pressure and a sense of responsibility to do well. Afrar is similarly pushed by her mother to succeed:

“My mum...she keep motivating me....you will finish high school, you will get to college. Doesn't matter if you have a weak GDP, you will go to college, you will prove yourself”.

For Afrar, there is additional pressure to prove herself and not succumb to (or rely on) the culture of *wasta* that pervades society:

“Do you know [name withheld]? He's the Minister for [name of ministry removed]. He's my uncle. So, he don't like *wasta*, so I have to prove myself for him...he don't even have *wasta* for his daughter. Yes I have to prove myself”.

Afrar has the potential to access social capital through her mother but, as her mother wants her to “prove herself” and not use her *wasta*, it is not available to her and, therefore, not a realistic choice. Both students are, therefore, enacting their mother's wishes to succeed and carrying the burden of pressure.

Aisha is close to both parents but does not discuss them in detail. Neither of them appears to place any pressure on her and her lifestyle is relatively relaxed and unrestrictive. During a short period of rebellion in high school, it was her mother who disciplined her, moving her to another school, and encouraging her to improve her behaviour. With the exception of this incident, direct parental involvement in her education does not seem present.

Nadia and Reem describe their mothers as traditional- a term which has both negative and positive connotations as evident from their detailed descriptions. With regards to the traditional mothers, there is evidence of some friction between mothers and daughter, especially when it comes to marriage. Nadia's mother wants all her children (three girls, one boy) to be educated "to face the world because if you are educated, you can face anything." Despite, or because of, neither parent being educated past high school, education is valued highly within their family as a source of independence and strength. This is the dilemma for Nadia. Encouraged to be independent and strong, "I have the aim to fulfil my own desire by my own money", she is also encouraged to compromise and be a good wife on marriage. While she may not believe that as a woman, "spiritual uplift can be gained through servitude to her husband" (Tarar, 2012, p.70), she does believe that her future is inextricably tied to her future husband. At this point, she is unsure how marriage will work for her and her uncertainty seems to derive from her mother, who encourages her to be strong yet also to compromise when it comes to her future husband and his wishes for her.

Reem has a similarly traditional mother-daughter role although the difference for her (Reem) is that she has been married and is now divorced. Her mother is a woman who is dedicated to her husband and has little interest in careers or education. Her sole interest now is to find a new husband for her daughter, one presumably with better prospects. Afrar is an academically strong student who was accepted into a prestigious degree programme, yet she is encouraged to dress prettily and meet the mothers of prospective husbands. This is something that the daughter finds amusing. Her reaction is not easily interpreted and could be indicative of an acceptance of the

inevitable, a tendency to dismiss her mother's actions as irrelevant and amusing, or the ability to find the whole marriage proposal process amusing. She doesn't offer any additional information to clarify her reaction.

With students Sabeen, Nadia and Afrar, the fathers' absence gives the mothers independence within the family. When they (the fathers) are displeased, the punishment is swift, and they withdraw their support be it financial or emotional. Afrar, a student with chronic health problems, needs monthly medical treatment only available overseas but when her mother threatened divorce, her father refused to pay for her medical treatment. Her mother eventually agreed to return to him, and her treatment resumed. The delicate balance of power is evident as women assert their strength within the confines of their home life and relationships yet are at the mercy of the patriarchal figure for economic survival.

#### 4.2.2. The father

Of the ten participants, five describe their father as a positive, encouraging figure in their lives. Two of these (Aisha and Reem) identify both parents as being equally influential in their lives and education. This shows a shared emotional responsibility between husband and wife in which both parents are present and engaged with their children. This is a more balanced family dynamic than other families in which the male head is present but engaged at a distance.

Aisha offers less information regarding her parents but describes them as supportive and encouraging. Her relaxed description of them suggests an informal non-intrusive relationship. This is similar for Reem who describes her parent with more amusement but with a maturity that



is reflected by her own experiences (married, divorced, university drop-out, mature college student). Encouraged by her father to attend the public university to study Petroleum Engineering (a prestigious course especially for a woman) but acknowledging “What did I know, I was a child”, she is encouraged to return to higher education after two years, again by her father. This time, however, she is encouraged to enrol on a course of her own choice. Her father is a role model who works hard and encourages education for his large family (fourteen children) despite (or because of) not being educated himself to degree level as he is older than the public university. Both students refer to their fathers as role models saying they learn from observing them in action, for example the long working hours (Reem’s father) and promotion (Aisha’s father).

Fatemah has a similarly close relationship with her father although as she has been married ten years, this relationship is now replaced with the relationship with her husband. It was her father, a teacher, who encouraged her to work hard at school and sent her to his home country to study with family. He then encouraged her to remain there and attend higher education (university) as the quality of education was vastly better in their opinion based on her experience of high school. However, she did not graduate university, dropping out one semester short due to getting married. When asked about her choice to marry in her senior year of university, she replied simply, “I was sad and depressed, but I accept it. I don’t know why.” Her statement suggests it was not her choice, but she does not elaborate and does not explain her father’s reaction to her choice to drop out; it was her husband and not her father who, two years later, convinces her to return to university to graduate.

Anfal and Haya have slightly more complicated relationships with their fathers. Haya is from a very conservative family. She is close to her father and speaks of him gently, rarely referring to her mother other than as someone who agrees with her father. Her role, as the oldest child and daughter, is to mentor and tutor her younger siblings. Her father emphasizes the importance of education and, although uneducated beyond high school, she sees him a role model because of his commitment to work:

“If you want to life, we must work. I believe this myself because...I see my dad and my mother work...to have money. They want to have a good life for us.”.

She has her father’s support for her education but, he is less committed to further education after she graduates. When she discusses her desire to study overseas, his response is gentle amusement, referring to that decision as being for her future husband and, pointedly, not her.

Anfal has the most complicated relationship with her father. She considers herself open-minded but her parents, especially her father, as traditional Arabs. She explains her definition of them as being traditional Arabs as people who “put their religion first and then the usual Arab traditions” although she then goes on to question why people, like her parents, put tradition before religion which seems to contradict her earlier statement. Her father is a man preoccupied with protecting the family name and, as a result, she often finds herself in direct conflict with him. A strong-minded young woman, her lifestyle is one that constantly brings conflict into their relationship. Her father is unhappy with her going out alone to exhibitions and, as a compromise, allows her to go but only with one of her brothers. This compromise is not sufficient for her and, instead she adopts a sort of ‘other’ life. While it is evident that her relationship is complicated, she does

admit to trying her best to please her parents. Although potentially serious in their consequences, her actions are those of a young women/teenager trying to determine her boundaries and identity. Mindful and proud of the importance of her name and family reputation, it is doubtful that she would consciously rebel to the extent that it would impact her family.

#### 4.2.3. The “other”

Three of the participants identified an “other”, and not a parent, as a person of influence and motivation. Noura is the most noticeable in this category. Her relationship with her maternal uncle is a source of encouragement and support. On closer examination, her uncle provides support through the opportunity to have fun and possible escape from her restricted life. She does not refer to him as encouraging her academically and he seems to fulfil a male role that allows her to be herself and to have experiences that would not be permitted by her controlling father, for example travel overseas, including extreme sports. Regarding her relationship with her father, Noura is vocal in her dislike of him. In her opinion, he is the reason she cannot follow her aspirations, to be a pilot, and is the source of her frustration and unhappiness. Her combative relationship with her father is not tempered by a strong relationship with her mother, on the contrary she is dismissive of her mother who seems to have a limited presence in her life, almost a non-existent role in her daughter’s life. “My mother? She does nothing.”

Sara identified her brother as being a central figure in her life, as opposed to her mother or father. While close to her parents, her older brother has assumed the decision-making role for her (the youngest child), making the decisions on her higher education plans. Despite wanting to study overseas, he decided that she should remain here for here to study and even chose her college.

Brothers assuming the decision-making role for younger (and sometimes older) sisters, is not unusual in this culture, especially in families of many children and when fathers are elderly or deceased. In many cases, such situations can be more restrictive for the young women. However, in this case, with the exception of her not being allowed to travel overseas to study, there does not seem to be conflict between Sara and her brother. In fact, despite preventing her from travelling abroad, he encouraged her to attend higher education and “allowed” her to choose her course of study. Fatemah, while describing her father as a key figure in her early education, now depends on her husband for support and advice. She is discussed in more detail in the next section.

#### 4.2.4. Influences of a key person

During the process of examining the role of a key person in each participant’s life, the participants fell into four groups - those who are motivated by their mother, those motivated by their father, those motivated by both parents equally, and those motivated by another family member. For those who are motivated by another family member, it was worth examining their relationship with both parents to see why they were not considered a source of support. For all four groups, the types, levels and access to capital varied according to the person of influence and their position with the immediate field of family and the wider field of society.

Three of the participants specifically identified their mother as the main driving force behind their progression in education (Sabeen, Nadia and Afrar). Sabeen and Nadia come from similar backgrounds, but they have different levels of cultural and economic capital on their maternal side. Sabeen’s mother is a graduate from university and a school principal, so her economic

capital is certainly higher than that of Nadia's mother who married at seventeen and has never worked. Both mothers encourage education but Sabeen's mother has more cultural capital to offer and it is her desire to see her children educated as an engineer (son) and doctor (daughter). Within the field of education, her position is higher as she has more capital to transfer to her children. Nadia's mother also wants her daughters educated but is more cognizant of their need to compromise and adapt on marriage. The words and actions of Nadia's mother, less educated than Sabeen's, shows how "deeply ingrained...women's ways of understanding their social world" amidst patriarchal standards and traditions are (Tarar 2012, p.70). Here her practice, is generated from the habitus and capital situated within the fields of family and society.

The fathers of Sabeen and Nadia have limited education, and low levels of economic capital. They learned their trade from their own fathers who started their businesses. As a result of the split days that all businesses operate (8a.m -1p.m. and 4p.m – 8p.m.), both fathers work long hours and are rarely home. When they are at home, they are not actively engaged with the mundane day-to-day bringing up of the children, a task left to the wives and mothers. They are, to a large degree, pampered by their wives and daughters and, although both students describe their fathers as loving and supportive, they are not predominant at home. Their predominant role is breadwinner. They provide the economic capital which is similar in level. Their income would not be particularly high, but they want to invest their economic capital in their daughters for future gain – economic, social and cultural.

There is no question as to their daughter's fondness for their fathers, but their relationship is based on a caring protective nature (daughters to their fathers and vice versa) than a guiding hand

and influence. Within the family field, the mother is dominant. Sabeen's father is to be more of an active presence in her life, encouraging her to be a doctor, and expressing his disappointment at her decision. Nadia's father is reduced to the role of drive and seems to offer little advice directly to his daughter. Both girls are independent minded and academically strong, but both girls have a somewhat ambivalent attitude to their mothers – Sabeen gently criticizing her mother for working instead of being at home and Nadia questioning her mother's advice to compromise after marriage while encouraging her to be strong and prove herself. Neither seems completely at ease with their mothers' choices in life, adding a different dimension to their mothers' role as motivator. In passively disagreeing with their mothers' choices, they have a source of motivation to reflectively employ their habitus against their respective maternal role-models. Sabeen, wanting to stay at home and Nadia, questioning her marriage and loss of independence.

Afrar has an equally close relationship with her mother. Like Sabeen and Nadia, her father is rarely present, but instead of work he chooses to remove himself from the family home, preferring to stay at his farm outside of town. "Aggressive" and demanding, her mother "doesn't care" that he prefers to be absent although, as further stated by the student, the truth is that "she has no choice." The small family unit of mother, two daughters and a son-in-law remain at home, enjoying a close female relationship while "spoiling" the only male in the house. Without the presence of the controlling patriarch, the home is comfortable and relaxed. The married daughter living in the same home after marriage is not unusual in this culture, and as mentioned by Afrar, it ensures that a male is present in the home, thereby allowing the head of the family (her father) to be absent.

Although he is absent, her father is the dominant presence in the house, providing the social and economic capital. Afrar, her mother and, presumably, her sister and her husband are financially dependent on him and he controls them through economic capital. This is emphasized by Afrar during the interview, when she twice refers to her mother's regrets for not working (and increasing her economic capital). Their economic (and thereby social) status is solely reliant on the patriarch of the family, as evident when her mother tries to obtain a divorce. The father, and patriarch, withholds money for Afrar's medical treatment and, next thing, the divorce is off. Additionally, Afrar needs to improve her GPA to 3.0 in order to regain her scholarship and continue studying which means that her father is not prepared to pay for her further higher education. Her future choices are controlled by her father's use of capital and her position is under his control in several overlapping fields – family, society and education. In addition to the economic capital controlled by her father, there is another source of capital that Afrar has no access to, and that is the social capital of her mother's *wasta*. Afrar sees her father's control as negative, but her mother's as positive which can be seen to be influenced by the different relationships she has with each parent. One is done to restrict and control her, while the other is done for her benefit.

Another student who is controlled and restricted by the economic and social capital of her father is Noura. Unlike the more passive Afrar, Noura has a combative relationship with her father. This is exacerbated by the apparent ineffectual presence of her mother who offers little guidance. Her family's social capital is not converted to economic capital. It may be transferrable in some areas, specifically access to loans, but it is not transferred to economic status. Their position in the field of Kuwait society is precarious (and not unique to theirs) – their family name gives

them a relatively high level of social capital, which gives them social status, but it is not matched by their economic capital; therefore, they are living beyond their means by maintain a lifestyle appropriate for a founding family, including travel, while being unable to finance it. Noura is in a similar situation to Afrar in that two sources of capital are unavailable to her. Her family's economic capital is not transferable (albeit for different reasons) and her father's social capital is used to control her and limit her future because of her gender. As the only daughter, her father's control is even more noticeable in relation to her brothers' relative freedom. Noura's frustration and isolation is mitigated only by her relationship with her uncle, again a male figure, but one who is not subjected to the same controls or expectations. However, her uncle is a source of entertainment and not, at least not according to the interview, a motivator for education. Noura's motivations, therefore, is more internal. She employs habitus reflectively to break from the structure that stifles her. She wants to escape and the negative relationship with her parents is the source of her motivation.

Though not as combative as the father-daughter relationship of Noura, Anfal has a complicated relationship with her father. Anfal refers to both parents as being similar in opinion and behavior, but it is her father that she refers to mostly in her conversation. Again, like other participants, her mother appears as a supportive figure (to her father) and rarely described in her own terms. Educated and supportive of her education, they are disappointed at her choice of subject. Her father encourages her to work hard yet, like Noura's father, he tries to restrict her freedom of movement and participation: "I have the freedom that I want...mostly, but usually I have to take my brothers along". Even when it comes to future study and the need to study overseas to fulfil his desire for her to be an architect, it is contingent on her taking her mother with her. Her



brother, studying in the USA has no such restrictions. Like Noura, her father's social capital and family status influence his relationship with his daughter. Their family position must be protected and maintained even though it leads to conflict. Her relationship with her father can be described as amicable but tense - an apparent clash of the modern open-minded young female with the educated yet traditional Arab father.

Of the three participants (Anfal, Haya and Fatemah) who viewed their father as the main source of motivation for them to progress to higher education, all of them barely mention their mother during the interview. Almost without exception, references to their mothers, refer to her as traditional. Her presence within the home seems barely worthy of notice, hovering somewhere between a maid and housekeeper – a role that seems to be unremarkable and taken for granted, (Ijaz & Abbas, 2010; Tarar, 2012). Anfal and Haya talk almost entirely about their father; any reference to their mothers is as an echo of their fathers' wishes and demands. Mother mirrors father with no exception.

Haya has traditional relationship with her father. Her family is also one of the more traditional families and her father's position in the fields of family and society influence his opinions and his attitude to his daughters. Unlike Noura's father, he is supportive and caring but still the patriarch. Despite wanting to go to Australia to study further, her father reminds her that her future husband will decide. Her mother has higher levels of cultural capital (mostly academic) but is barely mentioned by Haya, and so her capital is devalued. It is her father who make the decisions, but by reminding her of her future marriage, he is also reminding her that he will be transferring her choices from him (and his capital) to her future husband. Her husband will

presumably have different levels of capital, depending on his age and family status, and so, like many of the other participants, Haya's access to capital (and her opportunities and choices) will be determined by the dominant male in her life. Her employment of habitus is non-reflective at this point, but habitus is not fixed and may change in the future once married, depending on her relationship with her husband (and her redefined position in her new family field).

Sara has a similarly traditional relationship with her father, but instead of waiting for a future husband to make the decisions for her future studies, her brother has already assumed that role in her life. Like Haya, she aspires to study in Australia, but this seems unrealistic for three reasons –she has no passport, her parents cannot afford to send her, and her first choice to study overseas was denied. Haya can still aspire to study overseas, but because of her limited capital (in all forms) and the role of her brother, Sara's aspirations are dreams. That does not mean that she accepts her position. Again, as with Haya, habitus is not fixed, and Sara aspires to have her own design business. Thus, limitations on further study do not stop her. She is able to employ her agency to challenge her socio-economic constraints and use habitus reflectively to envision a new position in the wider field of employment and society.

Two students, students Aisha and Reem, have equally close relationships with both parents, with neither being the predominant parent although their roles are distinct. Both students are citizens and from affluent families. While Aisha's parents are both educated to university level, Reem's parents are not but are older and cultured – with frequent travel, homes overseas and an affluent lifestyle. Her father, a successful businessman, is evidently close to his youngest child and daughter and gently pushes her back into higher education after her divorce and subsequent

withdrawal from university. Both students have a relaxed easy-going relationship with their parents.

Unlike Afrar and Noura, whose families restrict their access to capital, Reem's family share their high levels of capital with their daughter, including financially supporting her husband during their marriage, providing an apartment for her to live in post-divorce, providing a driver for use at her convenience, introducing her to prospective new mothers-in-law, and travelling to Europe and the USA. Reem's father is the patriarch and the main source of economic, social and cultural capital, but her mother is also a source of cultural and social capital, despite her relative lack of education. It is with the support of both parents that enables Reem to make two significant decisions - to divorce and drop out of university. In contrast to most of the other participants, Reem makes the decision to reposition herself in the fields of education, family and society by not fulfilling her opportunities and assumptions. Her reflective employment of habitus is, therefore, used in the same way but with a different result. Her choices should position her lower, but this is allayed by the high levels of capital that her family have and that are made available to her. Thus, she is able to maintain her position in the wider field of society and probably family, if not in the field of education.

Fatemah is the exception in this group because she identifies two males in her family as the course of her motivation – her father and her husband. Her mother is briefly described as a motivating force during her earlier childhood – forcing her children to study at home and restricting their play and activities; however, she is mentioned only briefly and there is no reference to her education or experiences. Fatemah even refers to herself explicitly as following

her father and not her mother – working hard, studying and establishing a business. She has a strong bond with her father, who values education. He encouraged her to enter higher education in his home country because of the perceived better quality of education. In discussing her earlier education, at university in Iran, she describes how she married in her final year of university and then stopped one semester short of her graduation, she states “I was sad, and I was depressed, but I accept it. I don’t know why.” The use of the word “accept” signifies the powerlessness of her situation. However, it seems unlikely that either her husband or father discouraged her from completing her higher education. In fact, it was her husband who encouraged her to return to university two years later to complete her degree, so her choice to withdraw from university could have been self-imposed and not imposed upon her by tradition. Her relationship with her husband is mutually supportive; she discusses everything academic with her husband. Her cultural capital is high, but unlike other participants, she is responsible for building capital whereas the other participants are younger and rely on the capital of their families.

#### 4.3. Theme 3: Epiphany – A Moment or Moments of Realisation.

As part of the interview structure for this study, participants were asked to discuss their aspirations for the future and reflect, if possible, on their past aspirations that led them to their current place in higher education. I was impressed with the level of conscious reflection expressed voluntarily by the participants. During the interviews, most of the participants were able to identify and articulate specific experiences and emotions that affirmed the importance of education for them. Several of the participants were able to recall a key moment or experience in their education (recent or past) that was an essential part of their learning experience and their evolving identity as a student.

These key moments are referred to as “epiphanies” (Denzin, 1989) and referred to as ‘pivotal moments’ in this thesis. For some of these students, the moment was a singular epiphany in which they realised the significance of their learning experience. Although not necessarily life-changing, they were experiences and resulting emotions that, on reflection, led to the formation and/or development of their student identities. Some of these were experienced during high school, some were in the preparation stage of higher education (when a student was selecting or enrolling at higher education), and some were during higher education. However, not all pivotal moments were singular events or realisations. For many of the participants, the pivotal moment in their learning experience and development of their student identity was not a single eureka moment but rather a steady accumulation of “epiphanies”. “Habituation is, after all, cumulative rather than epiphanous” (Bourdieu, 1984; Denzin, 1989). Furthermore, not all epiphanies were positive. For some participants, a moment of realisation came from the negative responses of key people of influence - responses that affected them directly and altered their opportunities for the future.

For the purpose of this study, this chapter divides participants into (1) those who can recall a specific pivotal moment; (2) those whose pivotal moment is not specific but cumulative; and (3) those who have a negative pivotal moment, either singular or cumulative. Several students do not fit neatly into one sub-group. This is mostly due to other important factors that impact this categorisation. For example, one factor that emerges is a students’ exposure to and experience of varied cultural and educational environments. Three students have experienced more than one culture and educational system. One student (Fatimah) experienced school overseas, while the

other two (Sabeen and Nadia) experienced different cultures within private schools for nationals of a specific country.

Experiencing different cultures and educational systems can add to an individual's level of cultural capital and may impact a student's learning identity. Educational experiences, specific to each system, will cumulatively influence their overall learning experience (positively and negatively) and develop their student identity beyond the parameters of those students who experience only one system throughout their educational life. One way in which these experiences manifest themselves in this study is through a more critical discussion of education and teaching quality by the participants themselves. All three were confident in voicing their opinions and able to offer examples to support their opinions. An increased level of cultural capital enhances their sense of agency which enables them to challenge the power structure of the classroom and institution.

#### 4.3.1. Singular pivotal moment

Five of the ten participants were able to identify a pivotal moment in their higher education experience that changed their student identity. These were Noura, Aisha, Anfal, Reem and Afrar. Reem is a slightly different case as she left a prestigious university and later started a college diploma course. The four students with low GPAs started the diploma with a low level of interest in education, but now have a new perspective on the future. All five have gone from failure and lack of motivation/engagement to increased agency and engagement in their education. This change in attitude brings a change in their goals and aspirations and reflects their evolving student identity.

During their early education, only Reem, graduated with a high GPA. The reasons for the poor academic achievement of the four students varied from chronic sickness (Afrar) to poor behaviour in school (Noura and Aisha) to lack of motivation and disinterest in school (Anfal). Reem, progressed to the public university to study a prestigious degree in Petroleum Engineering while three of the other four (Noura, Aisha and Anfal) failed to get into their colleges/universities of choice due to their low high school GPA. This becomes an important factor as they progress through college and reflect on their past and future choices.

Noura, Anfal and Reem are studying courses that they, or their parents, would not have chosen and at a level (diploma) that their parents most certainly do not approve of. For Anfal and Reem, their parents have referred to their current choice of study as only a diploma and not serious, encouraging them to study something more important than design. Their parents show an awareness of the different levels of institutional capital and the varying levels of cultural capital associated with different courses. The two girls have high levels of academic capital, even if Anfal's was more potential than realised at this point. Their parents are well-educated professionals, and therefore have high levels of cultural capital at their disposal. They also have high levels of social and economic capital. Their reactions make it clear that they expected their daughters to use this capital and to aspire to higher education at a higher level than diploma courses at this college. This is the habitus they are acting within – the assumption that they will go to university and graduate with a degree in a serious subject. The generational transfer of capital is evident here, but it is not being fully exploited by the two daughters. They are consciously choosing to do what is not expected and what is not desired.

This is further illustrated by the reference to the design course as being fun and “not serious study”.

“They are very supportive in education, kind of pushy [laughing] especially getting accepted here. That was another subject when I did. They wanted me to sign up in something more important than Interior Design...so when I did accept [Interior Design] there were some ups and downs between us.” (Anfal)

This could be referred to as academic snobbery but it is a further indication of the parents’ sensitivity to the different levels of social and economic capital that are attached to different courses:

“It’s because of our social level in this country...if you don’t have a stable or strong job, you can’t really live....it’s expensive...and keeps getting more expensive by the day.”  
(Anfal)

Anfal and Reem come from families that have a higher socio-economic position in the field of society. Therefore, the higher education choices (institution and course) are valued according to their positions – daughters who are able to go to university should, and they should study serious subjects (for example, architecture or engineering and petroleum). The assumption being, if you have the means and opportunity, then you should take it. Additionally, the parental investment of capital in their daughters’ education comes with the expectation of increasing future capital. This is in opposition to the stereotypical and poorly informed view in the west that Muslim cultures do not value female education, considering it a waste of resources with little return; the often-



argued opinion of why educate a daughter if her husband's family will benefit. (Ijaz & Abbas, 2010, p.321; Tarar, 2012, p.69).

Parental disappointment is mentioned by all three students, but this does not always translate to their own disappointment. With the exception of Noura, the students seem content with their choice of study. Anfal's choice was made because she "wanted to do something with Art so it would be easier". Similarly, another student of Interior Design, Reem, chose to leave a prestigious university degree course to study for a diploma in design. Why?

"Because I don't want a serious study because I feel bored...I don't want. I want something interesting. I love it. I like the course too much."

Like Anfal, her parents are vocal advocates for higher education and supportive of their daughter's choice, but she is fully cognisant that she is choosing something that is considered beneath her potential. Again, like Anfal, there is an air of mischievous enjoyment in this fact and, although good humoured, the significance of this should not be underestimated. Their apparent happiness in their choices in education and life is only possible because of their parents' acceptance and support. For students of Interior Design, there is a reality of limited further study and employment in the design field. This may change in the near future as colleges and fields of study expand, but it sums up the current parental anxiety for the social and economic worth of higher education qualifications in design. However, Anfal remains confident in her choice and her confidence results in higher self-esteem and a stronger sense of her student identity. For both students, their choices of course could reflect the realization of their employment opportunities after graduation are likely to be limited. As female graduates in the field of a patriarchal society,

their choices will be restricted. Therefore, why not study something that is enjoyable (and which you can't use or study further) instead of something that is difficult or boring and that you can't use? Despite the opportunities offered at higher education and the wishes of parents, the students may be making a choice based on their internalized sense of reality and future opportunities.

For Noura, her tangible (and often expressed) disappointment is because of the choice of subject – a subject which she herself does not want to be studying. Despite aspiring to be a pilot, and visiting the aviation college, she was unable to enter it because of her low academic capital. Her father's disapproval was also a major factor:

“I need my dad's permission. He's the one stop me, you know... You are a girl, our traditions don't let that...because he cares about what people say.”

Noura admits to still being angry at her father but, significantly, has not given up on her dream. Academically bright, but emotionally troubled, she rebelled against the strict structure of early education, expressing disappointment with all aspects of it – the teachers, the buildings, the courses, even the extra-curricular activities and excursions. As a result of her early education, her academic capital is low, and this impacts her choice for higher education, and adds to her disappointment and frustration. Although higher education gives her an environment in which she can improve her academic potential, it is her personal relationship with her uncle that was the indirect catalyst for her improved academic performance.

Failing meant repeating exams during the summer and that meant she was not allowed to travel with him on an overseas trip. She was angry but, as a direct consequence, “I learned not to fail. I have to focus more. I have to do everything on time...yes, I wasn't very good at high school.”

This is a moment of realization for Noura. She is able to judge her actions against the consequences and make a mature decision to change and improve. The previous habitus might be to fail, but she uses her developing agency to change and improve her position in the field of higher education. Her motivation might not be grounded in the field, but its impact will carry over and positively affect her position and academic capital. On the question of the college now and her current studies, she responds positively, “Everything is good here.” Her response shows a mature reflection on her past behaviour and a pivotal moment in the formation of her student identity.

Like Noura, Aisha was also academically able in school but underachieved. However, unlike Noura, Aisha comes from a cohesive and supportive family with high levels of social, economic and cultural capital. Although her early educational experiences were mostly positive, they were dominated by an unruly and mischievous behaviour which got her into frequent trouble. In an attempt to remove Aisha from the bad influences of her friends, her mother moved her to a different yet equally affluent high school. Unhappy and now isolated from her friends, Aisha underachieved and graduated with a low GPA. Despite her low GPA, she was accepted to her college of choice for her subject of choice. Despite having limited academic capital, she limits her choice of college to one that is possible, providing an example of habitus at work. After one semester she was transferred to this college. It was here that she realised the importance of study and her abilities. After a series of academic warnings about her failing grades which would have resulted in the loss of her scholarship and would require her to self-pay, she realized she had reached

“my last chance in the semester to get it...so I did it...and after I realized that it wasn't that hard, you know...I didn't do that much and I *get* it.” (her emphasis)

The possibility of a loss of economic capital (her scholarship) provided the momentum for the moment of realization. Although she was aware of her low academical capital, that was not a strong enough incentive to improve; economic capital was. During the interview, Aisha expressed regret that she had taken until now to realise that she was a very capable student, crediting her teachers with this pivotal moment of self-realisation:

“I felt that I was stupid. I should have done this before, you know, so I can get very high and didn't have to repeat but because I enter and I do the same like in...[high school], you know, being with my friend, not entering the classes, not doing all the quizzes, the homeworks...”

As with Noura, the realisation, or epiphany, was almost a sudden moment in which clarity strikes. Like Noura, Aisha's habitus to this point was one of expected failure. The moment of realization was enough to make her reflect and consciously change her actions and reposition herself in the education field from failure to success.

Afrar's experiences of early education were mostly positive. Her achievements were disappointing due to an apparent lack of interest but also due to her poor health which resulted in her being treated overseas and then repeating her second year of school. On entering higher education, her confidence in her abilities developed and she was able to reflect on the reasons why her academic standards improved:

“When I get to the college, I really learn how to study. So, if the time take me back to high school, maybe I will get 90% because really Box Hill teach me how I should study.”

Like Noura, Afrar’s academic performance (and capital) was negatively affected by the turmoil in her home. Noura’s family problems impacted her in earlier, during school; Afrar’s problems were more recent and during higher education. The emotional cost of their fathers’ actions and control in the family field, impacted them in the education and social fields. Their confidence and agency were affected, and they experienced a loss of capital. Their habitus would also be affected as they struggled to maintain a sense of agency in a difficult environment. Like Aisha previously, she credited the teachers with helping her realise her potential through their methodologies and emotional support, and her academic capital grows.

Anfal, like Noura, has a more complicated relationship with her parents which impacted her growth as an individual and student. Shy and lonesome as a child, Anfal’s early educational experiences were not described in detail other than being mostly positive; few details were offered. However, like Afrar and Noura, it is in the field of higher education where she develops her confidence and communicative abilities, going so far as to say that she changed. Her reason for this change is clear to her – a desire to stand out so her work could be seen and discussed. Conscious of the fact that her father wanted her to be an architect and study “something more important than design”, she is determined to prove herself to her family, especially her father. In studying design, she is reflectively using her habitus and not ceding to her father’s expectations.

#### 4.3.2. Cumulative pivotal moments

Sabeen, Nadia, Haya and Fatemah were four participants whose pivotal experience was cumulative and started at an early age. During the interviews, these four participants were able to reflect (to a varying degree) on their earlier education and relate instances and experiences that motivated them to study and aspire to achieve a higher education. Some of these epiphanies were specific moments and/or experiences while others were more subtle. Their awareness of specific moments and experiences show a sensitivity to the cultural and academic capital at their families' disposal, although this is predominantly subconscious.

Haya described her early education as positive but offered only limited details. Her early education exposed her to drawing and art and this was her inspiration for higher education in the field of design. Her early education determined her choices and although she was not as able as the other participants to apply self-reflection, her early education created the environment for future study. As the eldest child, her mother (a graduate of higher education) employed an English tutor for her for six years from the age of eleven. In return, she is expected to help her younger siblings with their schooling especially in English which shows an astute parental effort to improve their levels of capital as their economic investment in her education repays itself for her siblings (currently) and her family status (in the future). Her father, less educated than her mother, supports his daughter in higher education but with limits – a diploma. Again, as with Anfal and Reem, there is a sense of design being considered as less of a subject than other more traditional subjects, at least by her parents, but this does not concern Haya, “I feel good and I can feel that I am strong. I can do it.” Despite the limitations placed on her education and future by her father, Haya's sense of agency is not diminished. The small but cumulative moments of

realisation, however, are not all positive and these are discussed in more detail in the last section of this chapter.

Unlike Haya, Sabeen was very detailed in her reflections of early education. She was able to describe the quality of the education and how it impacted her student identity. Sabeen is a confident, self-assured student who displays little (if any) doubt of her abilities. From an early age, she could recall positive memories of being rewarded and praised for her excellence and commitment. She recalls her kindergarten teacher giving her a story book when she graduated Upper-KG for Grade 1. She further recounts how she still has the memory of her mother returning to the school for an unspecified reason only to come home and proudly tell her that her KG photograph, taken some eight years previously, was still on the wall. Her pride is evident, “That made me feel really good.”

In many ways, Sabeen sees herself as different to other students due to her perceived high levels of academic capital, specifically commitment and ability. This was reinforced during the one year (G11) that she spent in another school system, during which time she acted as a self-appointed “teacher” guiding the students and explaining the lessons to them.

“Teaching is not an easy job. You can have all the knowledge of the world but if you don’t know how to transfer it, if you don’t know how to speak it out properly, you cannot convey the message. The teachers, they knew everything, but they could not teach.”

While she graciously does not question the knowledge of her teachers, she does state that she found their teaching ability shocking to the point where she “wanted to ask them to stop and let

me explain it to the students”. Her confidence in her abilities was further reinforced by her simple statement of, “I knew what I was doing.” She takes pride in describing how she studied alone (with no tutor) for her IGCSEs while attending Grade 11 and preparing for AS levels. Her one experience of failure, failing her Social Studies exam in school, resulted in feelings of shock and disappointment especially disappointment for her mother. Determined never to repeat the same mistake, she has consistently retained a 4.0 average, which is exceptionally good. Her level of confidence and agency are high; however, she refers to her older brother as the smart one in the house. This may be based on facts but is also reflective of the gendered value of capital within the fields of her family and her society at large. It also suggests a more reflective use of habitus, in that she questions her expectations and future choices. This was discussed in detail in chapter five in the context of her decision not to study to be a doctor and to enrol at the college.

Like Sabeen, Nadia remembers her early education as positive although challenging. Coming from similar backgrounds, it is not much of a surprise that they share similar experiences and motivations. Like Sabeen, Nadia can clearly recall her one failure in exams (and an instance of a single epiphany):

“Actually, in my whole life, I failed only one time...and it was a big shock for me and after that I never failed because I study. I never failed in any other subjects”.

For Nadia and Sabeen, failure did not entrench any sense of unworthiness; rather, it acted as a motivational tool leading them to an epiphany (Denzin, 1989) and enabling them to act reflexively.



However, despite the similarities and an equally impressive GPA, Nadia lacks the public face of confidence and relaxed self-assurance of Sabeen. Less assured in her habitus and her way of being in the world, she expresses less certainty in her future, especially her future life after marriage, but her belief in the importance of education, reinforced by her mother, is unwavering. Although she struggles at times to express her thoughts, “I don’t know how to explain this”, it is evident that education is the means for independence, financially, personally, and communicatively Nadia has no doubts as to its value and absolute worth for her future life:

“I want to do something for myself. I have the aim to fulfil my own desire by my own money. I think education is very important for every human being...to be independent, to have status in life. If you are educated, you can face anything.”

Nadia recognizes that she learned the value of education from her mother and while at high school, where she had her single impactful experience of failure. Her motivation seems to have only grown as she has progressed to and through higher education. She is critical of the students who do not study, especially the ones who look to her to do the work in group projects:

“They let all the work on me and if they are working, they are giving me useless answer...I mean the answer is not related to the questions. If you want to work with me so you can, you should *think* and then you should give me the answer.”

Despite her obvious frustrations at fellow students, much of which is due to a sense of exclusion because she is a non-citizen, her sense of student identity is strong.

“Excited because I am here to study. I am not here to make friends or I am not here to gossip with friends or to sit in the cafeteria or something like that, so I am here to study, to learn something new each day. I am sure, each day, I learn something new.”

As with Afrar and Aisha, she attributes the quality of her learning to the curricula, teachers and institutional teaching methodologies which she sees as relevant and appropriate for preparing her for her future professional or personal life. By identifying the relevance of her learning experience, Nadia is empowered by and empowering her student identity.

Fatemah’s early education, specifically moving from school here to a high school overseas, was a pivotal moment in an early life that emphasized education. As with Sabeen, the experience of a different educational system was the catalyst for Fatemah. Used to being the top student, she saw the value of her academic capital decrease in the new field of education in another country where academic standards were higher. Frustrated and determined, she refused to give up and studied hard.

“Actually, it was very difficult for me. At the beginning, because the level of the education in here was very low that when I was there, I felt myself very low the other girls in the high school. That’s why I wanted to be *their* level. I was so studying. That’s why I didn’t agree to come back. I said, ‘I want the *high* education. I don’t want the low level.’”

The experience of changing school systems and re-evaluating her academic capital, encouraged her to remain to progress to higher education and study for with the aim of restoring the value of

her capital. She could have chosen to return to the field of local education and, presumably return to the position she held before, but her decision to stay overseas shows her strength and determination to succeed in her new field. She does not allow her current habitus to restrain her and reflectively exceeds the assumptions (of being lower academically than her peers). This conscious use of habitus returns several times after this – once when she returns to university to graduate after a two year absence and when she faces difficulties with a lecturer at the college.

Her commitment to study and her dissatisfaction with the level of early education in school is later expressed in the interview when she discusses her frustrations at what she perceives as the inadequate quality teaching she is receiving from some of the lecturers at her current institution. Fatemah has a strong student identity. She is not afraid to question teachers and takes some pleasure in their discomfort:

“I’m very straight. I’m complaining to their face. [laughing]. I’m not shy. I know they hate me but because I’m sharp. One of the lecturers she told me when I have the class with you, I’m scared and I’m reading before you come...that much [still laughing] because she’s scared of my questions.”

She is a motivated student who researches her subject. This is evident when she says “I like this major. Yes, the major, I like it all the time”, but also because of her distrust of some teachers:

“But I need more information and I cannot trust my lecturer, you know. Anything they tell me, again I am searching, googling and then I accept it. It’s very bad not trusting them.”<sup>3</sup>

On all three occasions, her progression falters, and she faces doubts and challenges, but she pushes on reflectively and achieves her goal, thus increasing her capital and repositioning herself academically, socially and economically.

#### 4.3.3. Negative pivotal moment(s)

Every participant was able to narrate their past experiences to some degree and to show they recognized the value of their education for their future choices and lives. Some were able to do so fluently and in detail while others were more reserved and less able to specifically pin-point or express an experience. The tendency is to think of a pivotal moment as a positive experience and response that alters one’s perspective or direction in life. However, pivotal moments can be more subtle responses to another’s decision that negatively impacts one’s life. For example, Noura was discussed earlier in the chapter in the context of experiencing a pivotal moment in college when she realized that her opportunities to travel and spend time with her uncle (one of her only sources of happiness) would only be possible if she passed her courses. That was her epiphany.

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<sup>3</sup> Fatemah’s concerns were being addressed by her department at the time of the participation in this study. I was not part of that process and the information provided in the interview and shared in this thesis remains confidential. It is discussed here with the purpose of reflecting her student identity and her sense of cultural capital.

However, we can also look at her in the context of a negative epiphany – the realization that her father will not support her aspiration to be a pilot. This illustrates the gendered value of capital, in which her access to her family’s capital is valued lower than her brothers who are allowed to do anything. Consequently, the devalued capital contributes to the habitus as she reflectively aspires (and plots) to escape the social field that restricts her and make her own opportunities as a pilot, thereby repositioning herself in another field.

Similarly, Sara and Haya both experience negative epiphanies during higher education. Despite wanting to go overseas to study, Sara’s brother made the choice for her to come to this college and remain in the country. Her parents and brother ignore her objections, showing her status and lack of voice within the family field. As with Noura, the capital at her family’s disposal is devalued for her because of her gender. She comes to the college and this is a pivotal moment because of her realization, in the form of acceptance, that this is her life choice (albeit imposed on her). Furthermore, and on a happier note, the initial negative epiphany evolves into a more positive experience as Sara’s goes from an initial reaction of “I feel sad”, to the present “I like it too much”. However, Sara experiences another negative epiphany as she realises that her aspirations to study in Australia will not come to fruition because she has no passport (and insufficient social capital to change this) and low economic capital. Again, as before, she accepts this realization, accepting her limitations in this field (of post-graduate study); thus, employing her habitus non-reflectively.

Haya’s experience of a negative epiphany is when her father laughs at her aspirations to study in Australia. In spite of supporting her decision to go to college, his laughter at her aspirations to

study further overseas can be seen as dismissive and demeaning. Unlike Anfal's father who listens to her protests for more freedom (and struggles with finding the balance between social expectations and his desire to support his daughter), Haya's father finds her aspirations amusing. As with Sara and Noura, her hopes are dismissed by her father without consideration. His reaction devalues her within the family field, and, like Sara, her habitus remain non-reflective.

### Chapter 5: Discussion of Results

This research study is a life history research, reflecting the individuals' learning experiences as lived by them. The data was fluid and the analysis process focused on making the best use of the rich data that was generated. The first research question focuses on the key factors that they identified as influential on the formation of their student identities. These were narrated in the terms of experiences. It was these experiences that combine to construct their own sense of identity, specifically student identity. The term "learning experiences" is used in the broader sense of the language and not used to refer to formal academic experiences. There is a distinction here between life experiences and college experiences although there is also some overlap.

As a researcher, I was interested in first examining the factors (or experiences) that students identified as influential in the development of their student identities to examine how their sense of student identity impacts their progress through higher education. Some of these experiences related directly to their academic life while others were related to life experiences in general. Gender and social norms are also reflected in the family values that impact the students' choices for study. Those norms were nuanced, and other factors influenced their choices. Identity is in a constant state of flux. It is formed and reformed in the tensions between agency (the individual) and structure (social norms and expectations). It is a dynamic, complex, and an ongoing process (Tatum, 2000 in Shwayli & Barnes, 2018, p.95) which involves past and present experiences, not exclusively formal learning experiences.

### 5.1. Past, Present and Future

All participants were interviewed during their higher education career; two (Aisha and Afrar) were at the end and had just completed their final semester, two (Noura and Fatemah) were just starting and had completed one or two semesters; the others six were mid-way. The way in which students engage with their education and environment (academic and beyond) impacts their learning (Anderson, 2010; Bloomer & Hodkinson, 2000; Evans, 2002; Stevenson & Clegg, 2010; Tinto, 1988). College is a time of transition and transformation. It is a transition from the structured environment of school to the relative freedom of higher education. (Hoffman, et al., 2008). It may be a transition from “adolescence to adulthood for traditional-age students or from one life direction to another for older students” (Pratt & Matsuba, 2018, p.25)., but for all it is a time of reflection and “reconsideration of one’s role and responsibilities in the world” (Pratt & Matsuba, 2018, p.25). This process of transformation reflects the temporal construction of their student identities – past, present, future.

#### Past

For the purpose of the study, the category of ‘past’ refers to all experiences prior to higher education. Participants were asked to relate their early experiences of learning, be they in a formal setting, such as school, or informal setting, such as home. Some participants, like Sabeen and Sara), were able to reflect on very early experiences, some when they were as young as three or four years old; for others, like Nourah, Aisha and Nadia, their earliest memorable experiences were from when they were around ten or eleven years old; others (Reem and Haya) narrated a more general experience of school lacking specific details. For most participants, their past learning experiences were generally positive. Their confidence is high, and they display a higher



level of agency than the other students. This could be interpreted as *either* the result of their earlier experiences *or* the cause.

For others, their earlier education was not positive due to experiences or past behaviour, but they are now able to reflect maturely and view it in a more positive light. A couple of students (Sara and Fatemah) expressed dissatisfaction with their earlier education and criticized the quality of their early education, specifically the teachers. For most of the students, time has enabled them to reflect and see past experiences as learning experiences – either good or bad. Some experiences were detailed, others not, and while the detailed narration of early experiences was extremely useful for the generation of data, the more generalized narrations became no less valuable in that their generality was indicative of the experiences. By not recounting detailed experiences, participants were indicating negative or non-influential experiences which are equally valuable to this study. In the life history methodology, what is *not* said can be as equally significant as what *is* said.

### Present

During the interviews, the participants were asked to reflect on their current experiences of higher education. For the majority of participants (seven in number), this college was their first and only experience of higher education. Their experiences were mostly positive and reflected the transition from school to higher education, from structure to (relative) independence. Three participants had experiences of other institutions of higher education; two previously studied at universities (one at the public university and the other at a private university); the other one

studied overseas. Only one of the three had graduated, albeit after an extended break of several years. Both students who previously studied dropped out before graduating – one for academic reasons (low GPA) and the other due to personal reasons (a divorce). Their experiences of higher education and specifically this college were more reflective and more critical of the overall standard of teaching and learning. College, and higher education, is a time of transition. Students come to high education from the structured environment of school, which serves not to challenge but to reproduce the field in which they are located. College offers the opportunity to help individuals articulate themselves within their field and to accumulate cultural capital to reposition themselves in the field for the future. Therefore, the present mediates the past and future. This is considered in more detail in the following sub-sections.

### Future

When discussing the future, the participants were, in most cases, less specific about their influencing factors. Some participants were less confident in their future opportunities and hesitant to express aspirations. This would not be unusual for students in the early phases of higher education when they still see higher education as an extension of their schooling. They express aspirations and for some, like Nourah and Sara, their aspirations show a certain level of confidence and determination but also reflect a certain naivety. Conversely, Sabeen, a student with high levels of agency and academic ability, is unsure and hesitant about her future reflecting an awareness and sensitivity of the conflict between her current role (and identity) as an educated high-achieving female and her future role and identity of wife and mother.

For some, like Nadia and Haya, the future is less certain and will depend on their marriages and future husbands. For Haya, her father makes it clear that her future aspirations will depend solely on the wishes of her husband-to-be, “If you want to go, then you go with your husband.” For Nadia, the future is clear, “It depends on husband or in-laws. Whatever my husband will decide.” Aisha and Afrar, the two participants who were about to graduate, were experiencing similar emotions regarding their future – a mix of nervousness, uncertainty and hope. Neither had a well-defined goal and neither had made a final decision on whether to pursue further higher education or work. As with the other students, this could suggest that they see higher education as an extension of their schooling, in that the final decision on their future had been delayed. Both expressed their wishes and desires for future careers but neither had made any concrete decisions to facilitate their determined future path. In many ways, their aspirations were more wishful thinking than absolute. Afrar, a student with aspirations to be a businesswoman with her own design company, states: “I’m not studying all that time to keep myself at home, No way.” She is resolute and yet her final comment is: “I hope that God will give me a good husband.”

## 5.2. Key Themes

The first research question for this thesis asked specifically what factors students report as having influenced their student identities. The three dominant themes that emerged through the initial data analysis were parental expectations, a key person of influence and a key moment (or moments) of realization. These themes (discussed in detail in chapter 4) were identified as the significant factors that influence the construction of their student identities. Most participants were not fully aware of the significance of these factors as they emerged through their narration of their life stories. Additionally, as they narrated their life stories and talked about their

experiences, they were also describing their emerging identities within different fields – social, educational, and familial. This reflects their changing identities and their subconscious awareness of habitus within the fields.

The identity of each participant is multi-faceted. Depending on the specific field, they have a different role to perform. Publicly, they are young women in society, students, and members of their immediate communities. Privately they are daughters, sisters, aunts and, in some cases wives. In each of these fields, they constantly make choices, consciously or sub-consciously, that determine their role (Archer, 2002; Abu-Lughod, 2013; Brown, 2006; Findlow, 2013; Haw, 2009; Piela, 2013). Some are self-limiting; others are self-affirming. Some are acts of rebellion; others are acts of devotion. Some are public; others are private. Some are externally determined; others are independently determined. Being able to describe their choices, as they did in their interviews, reflects an ability to identify the construction of their identities within the family unit and society.

Each participant's role as daughter is an example of their complex multi-identities. Their behaviour is modified by the social structure. For example, Afrar likes to sing but only does so at home and in front of close family; she is limiting her actions to the private field of home, where she has more freedom, and not the public field of society, which has different rules and expectations for her behaviour. Anfal, likes to go to exhibitions and conferences, but does not tell her father because he would not approve of her going without a chaperone. Within the social field she is breaking the rules by going to places she should not be unaccompanied; in the home

field, she is also challenging the rules, but she appears obedient to her father. In these situations, habitus reinforces the rules and recreates the field. Habitus can be employed reflectively when an individual person challenges the rules of the field and aspires to do something that is not expected. In this chapter, I will look more closely at the key influencers in each participant's life story and how habitus is employed by each participant in relation to the key influencers. I will then look at the single-gender environment of the college, as this is the specific field of higher education in which these participants' identities are developed. In discussing these factors, I will examine how the student identities impact their progress to, through and beyond higher education.

### 5.3. Key Influencers

As discussed in chapter 4, all of the participants were able to describe a key person that influenced them in their choices and learning experiences. Identifying a key person, reflects an awareness of familial and social roles of support. The presence of key influencers is a major factor in academic success (Baydoun, 2015; Hill, et.al., 2018; Kiyama & Harper, 2018; Oswald, 2018; Reay, 1996; Yamamoto & Holloway, 2010). It also indicates a development of the sense of identity within social, collegiate and familial contexts and an awareness of a person access to (or exclusion from) group membership. While identifying a key person that motivates and support them, each participant was relating some of their agency to this support network headed by a key influencer. The supporting figure increased, or decreased, their level of agency and awareness of aspirations and opportunities.

These key relationships for the participants were mostly positive and, the positive support has direct consequences on their identity as students and their academic achievement (Tarar, 2012). Half the students (five) barely mention their mothers even when they are identified as the main influence which may reflect the traditional gendered role of women in the society (Groeblicher, 2012). The socio-economic status of the families was not a factor in this, as it was common across the range of students. Almost all the mothers were referred to in the context of homemakers and caregivers; even those who advocated education and independence (Nadia's mother, for example), advocated tradition and adherence to social norms on marriage.

The only mother who stood out from this was Nourah's mother who supported her daughter's aspirations and encouraged her to leave but was still only referred to fleetingly during the interview. This would reflect traditional social norms in which women are not discussed openly in public and never with members outside the family (Ijaz & Abbas, 2010). Two students, Nadia and Reem refer to their mothers as traditional. As with the mothers discussed above, both women were described in a supporting role to their husbands, who were clearly the patriarchal heads of the family and both were vocal in encouraging their daughter to wed. The position of women within the field of these families is traditional and although their daughters were willing and able to discuss themselves and their roles in family and society, by not discussing their mothers in detail, they were displaying habitus in the non-reflective state. There is a generational difference in how the student talk about themselves and identify as young Muslim women and how they see and describe their mothers (Ijaz & Abbas, 2010; Tarar, 2012).

Anfal is has a more complex relationship with her father. Her family has a high socio-economic status and a high level of cultural capital; her parents are both university-educated and have prestigious jobs in the civil service. Her father is conflicted between his desire to protect his family name (thereby reproducing social structures) and a desire to support his daughter's aspirations and happiness (thereby challenging the assumptions and rules). His sensitivity to social norms - especially regarding the public role of females and what they are seen to be doing in public – reflects a sensitivity to their level of social and cultural capital within the local culture. This is an example of how supervision of children differs according to gender norms (Fulton & Turner, 2008). Anfal is sensitive to the fact that this attitude of her father reinforces and reproduces the rules of patriarchy that keep her in her gendered (and, in her opinion, inferior) position.

Sabeen, Aisha and Afrar are the only participants who discuss their mothers in detail. Their mothers are the central presence in their homes, mostly due to their fathers' absence, be it through choice or work. Sabeen and Aisha discuss their mothers in detail but, like the students above, their maternal role is always non-challenging and supportive. The role of the mother is traditional and supportive, reflecting the basic-matrix of the mother-daughter relationship (Tarar, 2012). Daughters are encouraged to excel in education but to remain within the structural limitations. There is no suggestion of anything other than conformity and acceptance. Afrar, like Nourah, has a negative relationship with her father. However, while Afrar is close to her mother, Nourah is distant from hers, preferring the support of an uncle. Her choice of male mentor is similarly shown by Sara, who refers to her brother as her key person, not a parent. It is her brother who chose her college, and he is evidently the one making the decisions for her. This

enforces the social hierarchy as, in the apparent absence of a father's influence (in this case through age), a brother assumes the role of protector and patriarch.

The patriarchal structure of family and society is dominant in the families of the participants. As the “defining force” (Greoblacher, 2012, p.14) within the family unit, it exerts a structural influence creating tensions between with their sense of agency. Nourah's father's control manifests itself in his adamant refusal to allow Nourah to even consider her future aspirations to be a pilot. This action consciously seeks to reproduce the social structures that exist and that limit his daughter's freedoms. However, despite her father's steadfastness, Noura is undefeated and she is determined to break from her family and become a pilot. She has planned her future out – the place, the cost of training, even the company. Her attitude reflects a high level of agency; for her, habitus is employed reflectively, as she rejects the assumption and voices her intention to exceed her limitations. Her father's control could be the negative force that drives her to exercise her agency and challenge her position. Alternatively, her mother's powerlessness and loss of capital (economic and cultural) on marriage could be the source of her rebellion (Modood, 2006). Instead of accepting the inevitable, she is resolved to challenge the field. However, as stated previously, the influence of a gendered society on the field cannot be minimised and however desperately Nourah wants this, it does not make it any more real or feasible (Fulton & Turner, 2008). Exceptions may occur, but patriarchy is still dominant, and exceptions are rare (Greoblacher, 2012, p.14), particularly for individuals with lower levels of capital.



Unlike Noura who has low regard for her father's feelings, Anfal is mindful of her father's dilemma and conceals her other life in order to save him any pain or public embarrassment. Like Noura, she employs habitus reflectively but, unlike Noura, she publicly appears to maintain the social norms and habitus advocated by her family; unlike other students (for example, Sara and Haya), her agency is at a level that gives her the confidence to have this "other life". Fatemah is a student with a similarly high level of agency, but hers is encouraged through her relationship with her husband and the reality of the wider context – she already knows that higher education provides opportunities as she has experienced the reality of a future after graduation. In fact, she is the only participant who has this knowledge and experience, and this is evident in her sense of agency.

The mothers, described by each individual student, seem to fulfil the traditional maternal role. Nourah's mother is the possible exception as she encourages her to rise and flee. She may be encouraging her daughter through love for her and a desire for her to break free or she may be doing so through her own unhappiness and frustrations; she may also be appeasing and not taking her aspirations seriously (as with Sara's father who laughs at hers). Regardless of her reasons, she is a probable source of agency and motivation for Nourah – either as an active and positive support network or a passive motivator for her daughter to exceed and thereby avoid a similar fate. For Nadia, her parents, uneducated and low income, are a powerful and vocal source of encouragement for education. Whether this is *despite* or *because of* their own lack of education is undetermined (Modood, 2006). Nadia's parents are not the only ones who encourage their children to value education, especially when they do not have an education themselves. Mothers are particularly vocal in the value of education for their daughters, even the

mothers who also stress the importance of marriage. In some traditional cultures, daughters with higher education qualifications have improved marriage prospects (Baydoun, 2015; Fulton & Turner, 2008; Ijaz & Abbas, 2010; Tarar, 2012) and this could be the case for several of the participants

For all the students, their fathers' socio-economic role within the field of family illustrates how the patriarchal society asserts itself to impose control and restrictions and maintain the social structure (Groeblicher, 2012). For Anfal and Nourah, we have the comparison of a father who wants his daughter to follow her aspirations (Anfal) and a father who is determined to prevent his daughter from following hers (Nourah). In Nourah's case, reimpose may be a better description as the sense of having realistic aspirations, encouraged by an environment that is all-female and empowering, is crushed by the reality of the real world and the existing patriarchal control. This doesn't mean her agency is necessarily diminished. By progressing through higher education, her cultural capital will increase, and this may reposition her within her immediate context. She may not get to be a pilot, but she may still exceed the assumptions and limitations imposed on her by family and society.

For two students, the patriarchal nature of their families exerts a strong influence over their formation of an identity. Nourah and Afrar have few choices in life. Their families have relatively good social status but varying economic capital. For Nourah, her family's economic capital is particularly low. Afrar's family has a higher level of economic capital which is used as a tool of control by the patriarch. Both girls have higher academic capital on their maternal side

then the paternal side, yet both are controlled by the male head of the household. The daughters are expected to listen, and their choices are limited.

Sara and Haya are also from conservative families. Their family structures are similar to those of Nourah and Anfal (conservative and patriarchal) but are more supportive. Their fathers encourage them in education but also expect them to be obedient daughters helping with siblings and then, later, obedient wives who will do as their future husbands wish. Unlike Afrar and Sara, the mothers of Nourah and Haya work. In the past, this would have been unlikely in conservative families, and as evident by the mothers of several participants who have not worked since marriage) but it is becoming more common. This can indicate a higher level of cultural capital (she wants to and is allowed to work) but it is more likely that she needs to work due to their limited economic capital. This is further supported by the fact that, despite having wives that work, the fathers of Nourah, Haya and Afrar do not value the future education or aspirations of their daughters.

Contrary to the expectation of gender inequality discussed by Cooray & Potrafke (2011), Haya's father does not differentiate between the education of his sons and daughters as overtly as Nourah's father, but by laughing at her aspirations, he is no less dismissive than Nourah's father. Both Nourah and Haya have fathers who, while different in their early opinion of education for daughters, have no wish to see their daughters reposition themselves in the field. They (the fathers) assert their patriarchal authority to control their choices and ensure they do not challenge the structure. Nourah's mother started higher education but dropped out after marriage, at her husband's insistence. Due to their debts, she works but in a job that does not pay enough to

improve their economic capital. Haya's mother works as a secretary, a job considered suitable according to government policy (Arab Times, 2015). Afrar's mother, educated is not allowed to work (by her husband) She is unhappy but unable to leave due to her husband's financial control. Her father, largely absent, remains the patriarch, controlling all from a distance. For Afrar, Nourah and Haya, the patriarchal hierarchy asserts itself and rules are reproduced. Daughters remain at home with limited options while the patriarch retains all financial control, and so in this case, economic power is used to maintain the structure and traditional roles.

Nadia's family see education as the tool for their children's independence and improved social status. Her mother is her strongest advocate for higher education, yet also encourages her to accept her future as determined by her yet-to-be-chosen husband. Higher education is valued and encouraged but only within the field of their socially accepted norms (Kurshid, 2015). Ultimately, Nadia is acutely aware that the young women in her family are expected to conform, and this is something she is aware of even as she works towards her goal of graduating and starting a career. Her desire to be financially independent which would allow her to "face anything" would seem to be in conflict with her familial expectations. Conformity is expected. Even so, within conformity, the field can change. With improved cultural capital (gained through higher education, for example), Nadia can re-position herself. This could come in the form of marriage as her own education will probably improve her marriage prospects thereby moving her to a higher socio-economic status and improved capital. However, this is not guaranteed.

Sabeen's maternal academic capital is higher than paternal capital but her family structure is different to the students above. Her mother has a professional career and her role in the family is more equal. This is due, in large part, to the fact that her father works long hours and she barely sees him. Her mother has stepped into the role due to her father's absence and her position within the family shows her economic and cultural capital. From the four students whose mothers have higher academic capital than their fathers, Afrar and Nourah have mothers that are subservient to their husbands and remain in unhappy marriages for economic reasons. Both daughters have aspirations to leave and become independent professional women. It is therefore possible to argue that they have an increased strength of agency because of their mothers' unfulfilled potential. In fact, their reflective habitus, indicated by the desire to break free or rebel and so challenge the reproduction of inequalities in the social field, could be because of the limitations imposed on their mothers by their fathers who represent and reinforce the patriarchal society. This is not a phenomenon exclusive to this immediate context. Women all over the world face similar challenges as they strive to reflective employ habitus to redefine themselves (within the family and society) and reposition themselves culturally and economically.

While Nourah and Afrar employ their agency to challenge their position in their field, Nadia and Sabeen seem to do the opposite. Both girls have similar early experiences, and both are academically strong with a strong sense of purpose and agency. However, both appear to have limited futures, albeit for different reasons. Sabeen has high academic ability but, instead of choosing a university and a career commensurate with her parents' expectations, she chooses a diploma in design. Generally, habitus is assumed to be employed reflectively when exceeding boundaries and limitations but, in Sabeen's case, it is unclear whether she is making a reflective

choice to not do something that she could or if she is conforming (non-reflectively) to the social assumption not to exceed social limitations. A reflective decision (or action) would show that a choice to not do something is as reflective as choosing to exceed boundaries, or is she actually restricted by her position in the field and limited cultural capital and accepting the inevitable?

In contrast, Reem's is from a family that has high levels of social, economic and cultural capital. Her life is more privileged than the other participants. Her experiences (in higher education and marriage) illustrate how her agency has grown. She chose to make the changes even though both (dropping out of a prestigious course and getting a divorce) would seem to be against social expectations. These choices would not have been possible without a high level of agency and the support of her family. It is possible to look at her agency through a different lens. Because of her family's social status, she has the freedom to change her mind and change her aspirations, without the need to be responsible and independent. Her brief marriage may have adhered to social norms, but she decides to divorce her husband and remain at home. Here, the structure is accepted and unchallenged as it offers her the support she desires, or which comforts her. She shows no desire to change her position in the field; thus, her agency is displayed in her accepting and choosing her position. However, the fact that she now wants to be a businesswoman shows that her agency is continuing to increase while at college and while her choices may not adhere to social expectations, they are indicative of a high level of agency.

#### 5.4. Single-gender Environment

Research shows how cultural capital can have significant influence on student perceptions of themselves as students and on their learning experiences (Reay, et. al., 2005). A female-only college is a unique site in which to investigate these issues in order to gain a greater insight into female experiences of their education and the development of identity.

This college has two factors that immediately differentiate it from the other colleges – the courses offered and its female exclusivity. While the majority of its students are citizens, its admissions process does not differentiate between citizens and non-citizens. All applicants are treated equally, which is not the case for many of the higher education institutions. Public universities and colleges have strict admissions policies that exclude almost all but the very well-connected non-citizens and several private colleges are too expensive for non-citizens. As a result of its unique status, it attracts students from all socio-economic groups in society. Some apply because of the courses, some because the fees are more affordable than the more prestigious universities, some because their domestic situation will not allow them to attend co-educational campuses (Afrar) and others because, having failed entry to a university, a diploma is a first step to a degree (Aisha). Academic, social, economic and cultural concerns determine their access to higher education (Reay, 1999; Baydoun, 2015).

The students in this study are daughters at home and independent women in college. If the patriarchy defines their role as daughters, their agency within a single-gender environment redefines it while in higher education. For many students, college is the only place and time that they are able to increase their agency and put it to use (Brown, 2006; Keddie, 2014, Wexler,

1992). The structure of their home lives and society dictates their behaviour and restricts their future opportunities but higher education provides them with the platform to increase their cultural capital and agency. It is perhaps the only field in which they can show one facet of their identity and where they can openly reflect on their experiences and choices for the future. It is their protective space which is free from gender-based prejudices (Halai, 2011).

For some students, higher education has offered an opportunity for students to develop their agency for probably one of the only times in their young lives. In Sara's case, her brother chose her college. Her agency was limited within her family when she came to college and will not increase significantly over the timeframe until graduation. In fact, during her interview, her father called her, and she immediately excuse herself and left explaining that she could not expect her father to wait for her. This simple act of obedience could be interpreted as indicative of her low level of agency in challenging the norms and an acceptance of the social structure. Although, I do not want to dismiss her actions simply as a lack of agency as they could also be indicative of her reflective choice to use her agency compliantly. As Reem and Sabeen use their agency to make choices against expected norms, Sara uses her agency to accept social norms. In contrast yet similarly, Anfal and Aisha have higher levels of agency in their lives, mostly grown over time by having choices (and voices) within their families, though still within well-defined social parameters. They push the parameters but know when to withhold and obey their patriarchal figures and social expectations.



As a female only college, there is an opportunity to create an environment in which young females can explore their individuality and agency and develop their student identity. The college offers a support network, whether peer-based, teacher-based, or a combination of both and one that is female-oriented. With the support of peers, faculty and staff, many find themselves able to develop a form of independence that is denied to them outside the college campus (Abu-Lughod, 1998; Halai, 2011; Rind 2015). They are encouraged to think for themselves, make decisions and assume responsibility for those decisions. Some grasp this opportunity while others need time to develop it gradually.

Some individuals, like Sabeen, Fatemah and Rawan come to the college with a high level of agency that has developed through their early experiences. This research shows that these students maintain their level of agency at a relatively constant level through higher education. Others who come with low levels of agency, like Aisha and Aseel, are able to increase it through their experiences while at higher education. By increasing their agency, they become more aware of the increasing opportunities for their future and are more able to reflect on their choices and raise their aspirations, from having a college selected for them to, perhaps, studying abroad (as in the case of Sara). Thus, their concept of identity is developing (Smyth and Hattam, 2004) and impacting their progression in higher education and beyond.

Female students, empowered in the college environment, graduate into a patriarchal society and an employment market that restrict their choices and remove their newly acquired independence. This last example, however, shows that there is an inevitable tension between what policy states

for the younger generation of women (better access, more opportunities) and what society and familial expectations will permit. (Brown, 2006). For many of the students, despite being encouraged to attend higher education, the reality will not match the aspiring aspirations nurtured and grown in college. Anfal's relationship with her father reflects the duality of identity for some young women in conservative cultures. Publicly, unchallenging; privately, challenging (Abu-Lughod, 1998; Keddie, 2014). While society continues to consider some careers as male-only (Elamin & Omair, 2010; Metle, 2003) and the Labor Law continues to state that women are not to be employed in jobs that "defy the morality code and exploit their womanhood" (Arab Times, 2015), then future opportunities will be restricted.

#### 5.5. Progression to, through and beyond Higher Education

In this research, the awareness of a pivotal moment (or moments) of realisation reflects an ability (conscious or subconscious) to identify and articulate specific experiences and emotions that affirm the importance of higher education for them and their future lives. In doing this, it reaffirms awareness (again, not necessarily conscious) of how each individual sees themselves and the construction of each individual student identity (Brown, 2006; Weiner-Levy, 2006) as they move from school to higher education and prepare for their futures and how this perception influences their progression. Higher education offers an opportunity for individuals to use their agency over structure. This opportunity is not always taken as structural influences, including gendered habitus, remain dominant. Furthermore, social expectation and realities of the female roles in the workplace limit the opportunities for many graduates.

As with many institutions of higher education, this college represents a microcosm of society with the same rules and social inequalities. In a patriarchal society, the absence of males at the college allows greater freedoms for its student population. Several of the participants stated that they preferred the female-only environment as it was more “relaxed” and somewhere they could feel “free”. This is echoed by the college President who sees it as one of the college’s main strengths. In providing a safe and supportive learning environment, free from patriarchy, the students can explore their experiences and build their cultural capital. The support system provided by faculty is an important factor as students transition and learn to adapt to the college environment from the more formal structure of school and society (Cuconato, et al., 2015). Here, they can see the opportunities offered to them and this enables them to reflect on their habitus and consider their future roles and identities.

In the moment, or moments, of realization, the individual students are consciously or subconsciously aware of their identity and position in their field. This moment of awareness can manifest itself in different ways, from a sudden realization or a slow dawning of realization. Higher education can be a time when they realise their opportunities and position in the field and reflect on their future lives. This is reflected in the slow process of habitus which can change slowly over time. As they progress through higher education, students are moving in the field and acquiring capital while building their identity or identities. Depending on the individual, this results in different states of reflectiveness and actions.

The school environment is extremely structured, and for many students, entering higher education is their first experience of relative freedom. Many of these transitions create

opportunities for individuals to accumulate cultural capital. Some also provide opportunities to accumulate social and economic capital and an opportunity to reposition oneself in the field. For some of the participants, higher education provides them with the environment to employ a reflective approach to their habitus. They can reflect on their experiences to this date and use this to reflect on their future lives. Anfal, Reem, Aisha, Afrar, Nadia and Nourah are all students who have taken the opportunity offered by higher education to reflect on their learning experiences and consider their futures. They have aspirations for the future that have changed or developed during their time at college through the reflective process.

Sabeen, for example, displays a reflective approach to her habitus and despite her opportunities, she chooses to remain here with her family and to not fulfill her potential. This choice, made consciously, determines that the rules will be reproduced and her position in this particular field will remain unchanged. She is accepting the “normal” route for a daughter and, like Reem, she has consciously turned her back on opportunity. Her role is now determined by her social norms of her field. This may be a case of internalizing the external and accepting the position she has, or it may be a reflection of her preference for her position. It is not for me to presume to judge what is the “best” choice for either of them. If we examine her choice from another perspective, we can see there is a generational parallel between her and the mothers of Nourah, Sara and, to a lesser degree, Afrar. Nourah and Sara’s mothers started higher education but did not complete, thereby not fulfilling their educational potential and opting instead to remain at home in the role of wife and mother. This choice is reflected in Sabeen, in her choosing for a *lesser* degree (thereby reducing her academic capital) and declaring that she would prefer to stay at home once married. She is reproducing the rules with the probability of staying in the same place in her

field. As discussed before, it is unclear if this is a reflective or non-reflective instance of her habitus, as discussed by von Rosenberg (2016).

If we compare Sabeen and Nourah, we can see they illustrate how two different actions (or end results) can be reached through the same process. Both girls employed a conscious, reflective approach to habitus – with one reproducing the norms and rules, while the other is determined to challenge the norms and reposition herself. Employing a reflective approach does not guarantee a change of rules or norms. The process does not determine the end result. Similarly, Reem’s reflective decision to resume to role of daughter and not wife, seems to be a non-reflective approach but, in my opinion, it is a conscious employment of habitus to reproduce and retain the structure that she finds comforting. Sabeen and Nourah seem to be opposites - one planning to exceed social assumptions, the other planning to remain within the assumed social limitations, but are they actually the same? Are they both making choices against the “expectations”? There are different interpretations possible here and, in my opinion, it is neither possible to state one as more accurate than the other.

Among all the participants, Nadia is the most clearly conflicted by her possible future life, or “future self” (Leondari, 2007). Conscious of her family expectations, she is aware of her limited agency and her future possibilities. Her adolescent habitus is in conflict with her adult habitus (von Rosenberg, 2016, p.1488). Nadia is not the only student in this dilemma, but she is the one who is able to articulate it the most clearly. She is reflective in wanting to be independent in her future life, and also in her concession to her parents and their expectations.

For Fatemah, Sabeen and Nadia, their life experiences prior to college were broader than the other participants. The cultural capital accumulated through travel and experience of other cultures gives them an increased sense of agency and a more reflective approach. They are more vocal in expressing opinions and making comparisons, something that the less experienced participants are more reluctant to do, and which could be a reflection of their level of agency. This increased agency could be attributed to their additional cultural capital. Fatemah, a mature student with a degree from an overseas university, is outspoken and confident.

For Sara and Haya, it appears at first glance that higher education has not enabled the opportunities to reposition themselves within the field. Both have aspirations to travel and study in Australia but, realistically, this is unlikely to happen. For Sara, a non-citizen with no official paperwork, it is impossible; for Haya, her father's laughter speaks volumes; however, neither student is prepared (at this stage) to give up her aspirations. Higher education can provide a safety net, of sorts, that delays the reality of the "real world". While some students reflect on their future lives, others are able to suspend the future reality, especially if they know that their aspirations will not be fulfilled. In such a situation, individuals move from a reflective state to a non-reflective state where they accept the limitations of the field. As previously discussed, accepting one's position in the field can still be an active choice and, in some instances (for perhaps Sara and Haya), it can be indicative of strong agency as it indicates a reflective decision to maintain her position in the field.

Despite the college's female-only field, social hierarchy generally remains the same as in the *outside* world and, for most students, the gap in capital remains, and consequently the inequality. Students are identified by family name and status, and social groupings reflect this. Outside the empowering environment of the college, the participants' varying levels of agency may not be as strong as the patriarchal engendered society asserts itself, but that doesn't necessarily mean that their agency will not come to fruition. Higher education, and specifically the single-female environment, provides opportunities for students to increase their agency, but this does not always transfer to the macro-level of society and the workplace.

A greater sense of agency results in an increased ability to reflect on their future opportunities. Aspirations become more attainable, or at least seem more attainable, when an individual is more aware of their agency and able to recognize it as a tool for growth. Higher education is transformative. Unlike high school and earlier education, it can provide opportunities the possibility of breaking the cycle of production and reproduction. It can be a time and place to accumulate cultural capital and encourage habitus transformation (von Rosenberg, 2016, p. 1486). For Sabeen and Reem, their moment of realisation shows them what they *don't want*, as opposed to what they *do*. Their reflective choice and employment of habitus means that they go against their family wishes, forfeiting an increased level of capital and an improved position. The important point to make from this is that it is a choice.

On a national level, women are being encouraged to think beyond their limitations and cultural expectations. It is an ambitious policy and one that will not bring change overnight. There is a

tension between what policy states and what social and familial expectations dictate. As described by Mahbub (2015) and Fathi (2018), many of the opportunities that students aspire to while in higher education will be curtailed by the social and cultural expectations and gendered practices of the workplace. Some, like Aisha and Anfal will have increased opportunities but they will still have to conform to the social, familial and cultural expectations. Some, like Nourah and Afrar, will not acquiesce to the patriarchy despite its powerful influence in their lives; others with less agency, like Sara and Haya will. For some, like Nadia, familial and marital issues will determine how far their aspirations can be realized. Then, there is a student like Fatemah, whose husband encouraged her to return to university after two years and graduate. Similarly, there is obedient Haya, who already accepts that her as-yet-undetermined husband will make her future decisions for her, and then there is a Reem, who through her loving but unfulfilling marriage decided that her life choices thus far were not what she wanted and had the agency to make the change.

An increasing number of female graduates enter higher education with the hopes of graduating into well-paid jobs with career paths for advancement. The policies of female education and employment advocated by the Kuwaiti government do not necessarily translate into real opportunities. There may be “other paths for a woman than conventional marriage and motherhood” (Shafak, 2011, p.176), but that is not a reality for most girls. Increasingly, young women are trying to find a balance between the well-educated modern women and the traditional, subservient daughter or wife. Higher education gives them the glimpse of opportunities, but their aspirations are difficult to attain. Identifying their key learning experiences and examining how these learning experiences shape their student identities will



help to understand how these young women see themselves in the wider field of local society, and where they see the future opportunities for change.

## Chapter 6: Conclusion

### 6.1. Summary of Research

The concept of aspiration and voice was one of great interest to me and one that was articulated during the taught stage of this doctoral journey (Sellar & Gale, 2011). It vocalized what I wanted to know. I wanted to hear the students' voices. I wanted to hear, first-hand, what they thought about things like their education and opportunities and I wanted to know what they hoped for the future. Where did they see themselves going? What did they see as their opportunities? How did they feel about their experiences and opportunities? My aim in this study was to give voice to the students. In order to do this, I wanted them to develop and articulate their sense of student identity to see how they position themselves in the structures that surround them - past, present and future. To do this, I needed the participants to answer the questions: (1) what factors do they report as having influenced their identities as a student of HE, and (2) how do they feel their student identities impact their progression to and through HE.

When I first went to this country, it was 1996 and I was 26 years old. I had travelled and worked in Asia and Europe, but this was my first experience of the Middle East. I set out with some preconceptions of the country, the culture and the people, but I would like to think I had a relatively open mind that was open to new learning experiences. I had no interest in proving any stereotype to be true and absolutely no interest in some misplaced ideological desire to impose the cultural values of a western society. In many social circles, the colonial legacy remained as did the postcolonial attitude that Europe was modern; the east was not (Abu-Lughod, 1998, p.14) still prevailed. As I met local women, I realized how tired they were of being defined by

outsiders, particularly those who came to the Gulf to “empower” women and “rescue them from their cultures” and “suppression” (Abu-Lughod, 2013, p.7). This is where the concept of voice began to emerge as one of interest to me. This initial interest developed further as I increasingly recognized that there was an obvious disjuncture between these attitudes and the lives and experiences of the girls and women I met daily.

The initial concept behind my research study was not gender-based. In fact, I was particularly conscious to avoid the gender issue, preferring instead to contextualise it as a study of contemporary students in a particular setting - a private HE institution. This would be an appropriate study for the current time in which Gulf countries are seeing a rapid increase in the number of higher education institutions and overseas campuses. However, this is a female-only college and this thesis is not a comparative study of male and female experiences, so it has evolved into a thesis that includes a gender-based focus and inevitably considers the gendered role of women and how this impacts the development of their identity.

The main aim was to give voice to the students. It is their voice that is predominant in this thesis as they narrate their life stories and describe their constantly evolving identities to the reader. This thesis allows them to speak for themselves and voice their own narratives while focusing on the research questions: (1) what factors do participants report as having influenced their identity as a student in HE, and (2) how do they feel their identity influences their progression to, through and beyond HE. There were two phases in the study: (1) the recruitment and selection of the participants, and (2) the interviews. The recruitment was done by email and also on paper in

order to reach as many students as possible. Diversity, not typicality was important for the study, and the selection of participants was based on the levels of cultural capital available to each volunteer, as defined by their respective answers to several questions. The focus of the questions was on family education and student aspirations. Students with aspirations that did not reflect their level of cultural capital were of particular interest. After the selection process was completed, each student was contacted and invited to meet with me for an interview. The semi-structured interviews were designed to encourage conversation but remain focused on specific topics – family education, personal education experiences, and aspirations.

Conducting any research that requires people to talk about themselves and their experiences can be a challenge. This study was no different and so it had to be presented and conducted sensitively if I wanted it to be successful in generating sufficient (and useful) data. Participants needed to have trust in the process, and an understanding of the purpose and aims of the study was integral to this. Information was provided in a clear and concise manner, and questions were encouraged. Participants were volunteers and were told they could stop the interview and/or withdraw from the study at any time. During the interview, most participants remained focused on the topic. Some participants, like Sabeen and Nadia, shared a great deal of information and details about their experiences and aspirations; others, like Noura and Fatemah, chose to share more personal, intimate details, which showed their frustrations with life, family and education; others, like Haya and Sara, chose to share less information. The differences in what and how each participant shared their story reflects the richness of life history research. Every participant's conversation was valuable. How they share information can be as valuable as what they share.

In order for this study to happen, the participants had to be comfortable in their setting. The college is significantly different in many ways from the university, not least because it is private, it is female only, and it has a small infrastructure. There was no formal Student Support Department from 2010 to 2015 and, so, the responsibility for pastoral care was added to the academic counselling responsibilities for the various Heads of Departments. As Head of the Foundation Department, I was responsible for all new students entering the college – responsible for their academics and their welfare. Whether in the classroom or in my office, students came and talked to me. They knew of my local experience and I increasingly found myself in the dual role of outsider/insider (Al-Makhamreh & Lewando-Hunt, 2008). I was someone who knew the country, its people and culture, while I was enough of an outsider to be a confidant to some of their worries, realities and life stories. Being an outsider, in their opinion, meant I was less likely to judge them. Each time they talked to me, I saw a different personality and a different aspect of culture and tradition. They wanted to be heard, whether this was because they were sensitive to the stereotypical western view of young Muslim women or because they felt they could talk openly to me without judgement. I am sure there were different reasons for each student, but whatever the individual reasons, for six years I was privileged to hear their stories and share their life experiences.

The immediate setting of the college made this study more feasible. As discussed in the previous chapter, the female-oriented setting is one that encourages independence and agency. Several of the participants in this study have sufficient agency to tell their life stories in any setting, but this specific setting gave some students a supportive environment in which they an opportunity to use

their voice in a way that they may not have been comfortable doing elsewhere. Even the students with higher levels of agency, might find it very difficult, if not impossible, to tell their stories in a larger setting. This is reflected in the challenges that face graduates when moving from a female-only college to the wider workplace and society are a constant challenge for many graduates. The reality of taking their place in a patriarchal society, with restrictions on employment and participation, emphasizes the importance of HE institutions providing a space for students to use their voice. Enabling them to use their voice gives them a platform to articulate their experiences and aspirations and, in doing so, identify the factors that they perceive as having made progression possible.

Three main factors were identified, by the participants, as having influenced the development of their identity as a student of HE. These three factors are (1) parental expectation, (2) the influence of a key person, and (3) epiphany - a moment (or moments) of realization. These three sections were further broken down into subsections. As with the main themes, the subsections were determined by the data analysis and shared across all or most participants.

By using Bourdieu's framework of habitus, capital and field, I was able to compare the levels and use of capital within these themes in order to determine how each participant negotiates their identity in the tensions between agency and structure. This analysis then enabled me to examine and answer the second research question – how the participants feel their student identity influences their progress to, through and beyond HE. Chapter 5 discusses this question by analysing the data through the impact of a key influencer and single-gender environment. Both

of these areas emerged in the data analysis as being significantly influential on how their student identities impact their progression in education. Specifically, the gendered expectations and social structures impact their student identity but through higher education, opportunities arise (though not always taken) to use agency to realise their aspirations and shape their identity.

## 6.2. Contribution of Findings

The aim of this research study was to give voice to the students. They were being asked to tell me their experiences in education and their aspirations for the future. By narrating and discussing their learning experiences, in the broader sense of life experiences and not specifically academic experiences, it was possible for them to identify the factors that they perceived as having influenced their identity as a student of HE to identify factors. Once they had identified their influential factors, they could then describe how these factors influence their progress to, through and beyond HE – past, present and future.

The focus is education, but education is part of the wider social context. Despite the government policies advocated and funding education for all citizens and especially females, social inequalities prevalent in society transfer into higher education. Local society is highly stratified according to tradition and socio-economic status and these social boundaries are reflected in higher education – through choice of degree to institution to future opportunities (Reay, et. al., 2005). By being aware of the significant factors and their significance, we can look at how to improve their current higher education experience and look to enhancing their future experiences while developing their opportunities.

This findings in this thesis emphasise the need to understand the factors that influence the student identity. These factors are the key to a positive learning experience in HE and progression to, through and beyond HE. As a practitioner, the findings help me to have a better understand the reasons for students' performance and motivation and, when appropriate, use the knowledge gained through this study to increase capital for students who have less. Access to support networks and resources that specifically target the low levels of capital can help assist them in their progression and reduce attrition rates for the institution. Students whose parental expectations and aspirations are not aligned with their own, can be supported and mentored to ensure that they are making decisions reflectively and not impulsively. Sabeen and Sara, for example, are both aware of the opportunities that HE offers, but both have chosen not to capitalize on these opportunities. While this may be seen as a non-reflective employment of habitus, the data shows that the degree of reflection was high – they are both fully cognisant of their choices and the implications for their future, and so it is a reflective employment, or at least an example of a move from the reflective to a non-reflective in which they accept the limitations of their field due to new circumstances – divorce in Sara's case, and family socio-economic circumstances in Sabeen's case. This study has taught me the importance of taking the time to understand the “why” and not just the “what” in students' decisions and actions.

For students who have no key person of influence, faculty can help to guide and provide the necessary support. Several students mentioned a faculty member as being influential in their development of a student identity; thus, faculty are able to replicate the positive relationship that may be lacking at home. This also applies to students, like Noura, who have a negative relationship with a parent. Recognising factors that may inhibit students means additional



resources can be applied to negotiate their challenging circumstances and improve their learning experience, ultimately helping them progress through HE. Students like Reem, Sabeen and Nadia may be able to renegotiate their future roles within their families and redefine their aspirations but that is not the case for all students and that needs to be recognised.

As a practitioner, the study has shown me the challenges and opportunities that my students experienced and continue to experience on a daily basis. The more we learn about these factors and how they positively or negatively influence a student's identity, the better equipped we are to enhance our students learning experiences. Additionally, this study has shown me the importance of guiding and encouraging students to recognise moments of realisation. The ability to recognise these moments empowers them and helps them to increase their own agency. Recognising and acknowledging epiphanies shows growth. It helps students to gain control of their own learning experience and reflect on their identity within the context of HE. This increase in agency and self-awareness can enhance their progression.

A primary role of the college is to provide an, environment where young women, who may not be comfortable enough to express themselves publicly can express themselves and learn to become leaders. Within this field, they are able to express their personalities and gain confidence through taking initiatives. One of the primary contributions of this thesis is the participants' voices. Their experiences are rich in detail and provide a great deal of information about how young female students feel in the HE environment in this specific country in the Middle East. Their life stories and subsequent life histories offer new knowledge and insight into the lives and

aspirations of young women in HE, as perceived from within. This reiterates the initial focus on hearing their lived experiences as told from within.

The problem arises when these graduates enter the job market and have to re-adjust to the social norms of the conservative male-dominated society. In the opinion of the college President, the college provides the “initial seed...all the basic ingredients for success” but, from there, he considers their future success to be dependent on their individual personality. This sentiment suggests that continuous improvement is determined by an individual’s choices in a world of equal opportunities. This statement emphasizes a pre-determined strength of agency over structure; it does not take into account the complex and contradictory value system of a country which publicly empowers women through education and employment while enforcing a strictly conservative patriarchal society in which customs and traditions remain relatively non-negotiable. Whether women can transition successfully or not into the workplace and forge a career, remains a controversial issue.

The research process has had a significant impact on me, personally. As I have stated previously, it was important to me that it was the students’ voices that were being heard. The subjectivity of the research methods (which are acknowledge in chapter 3) were minimized as much as possible so that their stories could be told as accurately as possible. On a personal gain, I have gained an enormous respect for the students, and their ownership of their own stories. Their strength and determination were the impetus for the initial research proposal, and so came as no surprise, but as the study progressed, the amount of details they were prepared to share, and the honesty in which they did so, was humbling. At times, it was overwhelming, but I hope that I have done

justice to their stories and taken their trust in me to make a small difference in the educational experience for future students.

### 6.3. Future Research

This research is based on a specific college in a Middle Eastern country. It is a private local campus of an international vocational college, and English is the medium of instruction. Higher education is expanding in the Gulf states, but research on the opportunities for the younger generation of citizens is still relatively limited. This study is one small piece of research that looks at a small group of female students. Although its diversity does make it relevant for other institutions and higher education policy-makers, its scope is limited as the college is currently the only all-female English-medium higher education institution.

In his study on countries in the Middle East, Groeblacher states that socio-economic differences between countries is huge (example, Yemen and Qatar), and government institutions are very different (example of Iran, Lebanon, and Saudi Arabia) and, therefore while there may be some similarities, any apparent “unity” is geographical and not determined by religion or culture (Groeblacher, 2012). Furthermore, entities are not static and as they develop, so does the need for further research. This thesis is specific to the context of a female-only college in one country and, any broad generalisations should be avoided.

This thesis has shown that students want their voices to be heard and they want their aspirations to be respected and validated. Single-gender discursive environments, referred to as “e-hijab”

(Bunt in Piela, 2013, p.395) offer a female-safe zone in which women can discuss identity in “freedom from the [proverbial] male gaze. While there is existing research on single-gender education, there is relatively less for this region and this would be an interesting area for further research.

Further research needs to take the role of the research into consideration and therefore include the positionality of the outsider/insider as counsellor and other cultural sensitivities of young female students, (Ahmed, et.al., 2010). These could be identified and addressed in the working discussion. As part of the discussion, specific stages of support could be identified and discussed. These stages of support could include major transitions, especially the transition from school to higher education and the transition from higher education to the employment market.

The college offers young women a “protective environment” chosen by many parents who traditionally would not have allowed their daughters to leave the house to study in higher education. The large co-ed colleges and universities would be impossible for such girls to attend and so this college captured a small corner of the market in attracting these girls. However, the female-only status, has its disadvantages for future opportunities. Even during the higher education experience, some activities prove to be very problematic. For example, the exchange student programmes that were established (to Australia and the USA) never came to fruition despite extensive planning and funding. Furthermore, every semester, the design internships that happen in the third semester of the courses are always problematic. Some students were not allowed to participate in internships (despite being a requirement for graduation from the main campus) and, so, additional provisions have to be made for them to intern at this site.

These two examples illustrate the difficulty facing the college in finding ways to enhance the skills and experiences of their students while not compromising on the traditional core values that their families want to maintain. The college President estimates a timeframe of three to six years for an exchange programme to be fully implemented (and then only for a small number of students), but that would seem optimistic, in my opinion. It also makes us consider the reality for Sara and Haya, two participants who aspire to travel and study in Australia but come from families that would never permit them to travel overseas. Their aspirations, although fervently held on to, would seem impossible in this context. Whether they realise it or not, cannot be determined. Further research on the progress of these students would be needed to examine the realities of their transition from higher education and the realisation (or not) of their aspirations. This would be beneficial for institutions and policy makers as they try to enhance educational experiences and that successfully transition into employment opportunities.

#### 6.4. Recommendations for Practice

“Success in the education system is arguably predicated on having the right kinds of cultural and social capital and also habitus” (Bourdieu, 1986 in Crozier and Reay, 2011, p.146). Cultural and social capital have long been considered as primary factors that determine a person’s access to education and subsequent academic success. However, there are always exceptions to the “rule” and high levels of cultural and social capital are not guarantees of academic success. Using Bourdieusian concepts of capital, it is possible to analyse the different levels of capital at each individual’s disposal to determine what factors impact an individual’s identity as a student in higher education. Such identification is intended to inform and ultimately facilitate the

development of institutional policies and strategies that can identify, support and, when necessary replicate, the levels of capital identified as crucial in the progression of students to, through and beyond higher education.

From my experience of working at the college, the management is genuinely interested in engaging faculty with policy creation and implementation. The college has expressed an interest in my developing this thesis into a working paper with the eventual aim to create policies that positively impact the students and their experience of higher education. I would like this thesis to be the impetus for an institutional discussion that could lead to a faculty-led project. A faculty-led initiative would create experiences to draw on over the framework of my findings and develop the study to be an ongoing collaborative tool for the professional development and improved practice for other practitioners.

The aim of the research was to give voice to the participants so they could identify the factors that influenced their identity as a student and evaluate how their student identities impact their progress in higher education. The purpose was to use this knowledge to improve the student experience. The institution at which this research study was based has a limited and underdeveloped student support department. Indeed, as stated earlier, for the majority of my time as head of department, I was also responsible for providing support services for the students in my department. This encompassed everything from academic to personal issues. This needs to be improved. If the student voice is to be heard, then a first step is to establish a fully resourced Student Support Department with a focus on the student experience before and during higher education. Currently, there is no policy for collecting and recording student experiences and

background information. Student files are sparse and contain little information other than grades and limited comments from previous institutions. There is no formal provision for counselling (academic or personal) and no formal means for recording and sharing communication about individual students between faculty and departments.

If institutions genuinely want to enhance the learning experience and help the progression of student to and through higher education, there needs to be a focus on the individual and their lived experiences. As part of the Student Support Services, all students entering the college should be appointed an academic counsellor. This counsellor would help them transition into the college and remain with them throughout their higher education experience. The first requirement would be to establish a relationship with the student and start to build a record of their learning experiences (past and present). This conversation is the beginning of the process in which the student will learn to recognise and, eventually, define their student identity. Based on my findings, I would suggest that students are encouraged to identify key people of influence and possible pivotal moments in their learning and discuss their aspirations and future expectations. Obviously, not all of these would be immediately identifiable, and the counselling process would be ongoing throughout their higher education experience. Counsellors would also look for signs of “cumulative habituation” (Bourdieu, 1984; Denzin, 1989) which may influence the student’s future choices and aspirations (for example Noura and Haya’s fathers or Reem’s mother), and any absence of key people of influence. In instances where key people are absent, students often look to faculty to provide support. This was evident with Afrar, Aisha and Nadia who all identified faculty as a source for empowering their student identity. An improved procedure for

communication across all departments (including Student Support Services) would facilitate this and enhance the learning experience for many students.

Consolidation of the information accrued through regular formal student meetings, can be a valuable resource for practitioners and can enhance future policy creation. There should be a policy of formal record keeping, derived from student meetings, for this to be valuable. Valuable information can be gained from the lived experiences of students and it is vital that this information is recorded and used as a basis for institutional growth and self-improvement. As I have stated several times, this thesis is not a deficit-driven study and it is the voices of the participants that are important. Using students' experiences, the institution and faculty can recognise areas for improvement and work towards improving the learning experience for future students. Experiences of students, like Noura and Aisha who talked of 'expected failures' that grew into pivotal moments - what made the difference and how can we replicate this or reposition for future students? Using their histories, they can be examples of growth and improvement.

There is a tendency to focus more on the quantitative and not the qualitative, and in my opinion, this doesn't allow us to see the richness of detail and emotive experiences that shape identity. An institutional policy of listening to the students, through regular documented meetings, can guide current and future students and help them identify sources of support (internal and external) that will help them develop their agency and student identity. This would include the experiences that influence their habitus, including their role within their families and their identities as



daughters, sisters, wives, and mothers in addition to their identities as students and young Muslim women.

Furthermore, if practitioners are encouraged to focus on the identity in equal measure to the performance of students, they can enrich the learning which encourages increased agency. Recognising how different students employ habitus, enables teachers and faculty to implement structures that can help students renegotiate their position and opportunities. This does not mean they challenge rules directly; instead, they can learn how to work within the rules and limitations to maximise opportunities and potential. Students who have fewer options and less available choice externally can learn to reposition themselves through their own agency and by employing their habitus reflectively. Actions such as these can be further developed to work toward mitigating the reproduction of inequality, even if that is limited to higher education. Increased agency within one field can be a source of empowerment and that can be transferred to another field over time.

The wider implications of this thesis are harder to assess as the scope of the study is limited to a specific college in one Middle Eastern country. As with any life history research, there are limitations. This thesis may not answer any questions definitively, but it does offer new knowledge in the field of identity studies. It provides an in-depth analysis of experiences that contribute to the development of student identity and thus can contribute to future change. Knowing our students' lived experiences, as narrated in their own words, enables us to learn from our students and make informed decisions and implement policies that can positively impact future students' experiences and opportunities. As this thesis shows, students genuinely

lack the facility and opportunity to talk openly and honestly about their experiences and aspirations. They want to discuss their experiences and opportunities and, by creating an environment in which they feel safe and heard, they are able to develop their identities. Such dialogue can provide “significant insights into the future directions of women’s education in the current age” (Mahbub, 2015, p.872)

Policy is always easier to write than to implement. Change takes time, and it can start in many different places, including with the individual. It requires agency and opportunity and, as evident in this research, and through the words and experiences of ten young women, higher education offers both. It offers them the chance to change, however, small that change may be, it is no less significant for the opportunity of wider change. The fact that all these young women are currently in higher education means that the official policies are being implemented and that is a sign of progress.

Women are indispensable partners in social development. As the number of female students in higher education expands, opportunities for equality will increase. Their career advancement may be slower than that for males, but progress has already been made and will continue as the need for educated citizens to fill private and public sector jobs increases. In this era of social media, the number of female entrepreneurs, previously locked out of the private sector through lack of skills and opportunities, is growing rapidly. As my findings show, not all individuals are able to fulfil their aspirations, but even within strict parameters, there can be some change and repositioning. This is echoed by Haya, who is confident in her future, declaring, “I feel I am

strong. I can do it” and reiterated by Afrar, “I will continue working [after marriage]. I’m not studying all that time to keep myself in the home. No way.”

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1: Ethical Approval

Dear Claire Hamilton

I am pleased to inform you that the EdD. Virtual Programme Research Ethics Committee (VPREC) has approved your application for ethical approval for your study. Details and conditions of the approval can be found below.

Sub-Committee:	EdD. Virtual Programme Research Ethics Committee (VPREC)
Review type:	Expedited
PI:	
School:	Lifelong Learning
Title:	
First Reviewer:	Prof. Morag A. Gray
Second Reviewer:	Dr. Janis McIntyre
Other members of the Committee	Dr. Lucilla Crosta, Dr. Marco Matellini
Date of Approval:	17 <sup>th</sup> February 2015

The application was APPROVED subject to the following conditions:

#### Conditions

1	Mandatory	M: All serious adverse events must be reported to the VPREC within 24 hours of their occurrence, via the EdD Thesis Primary Supervisor.
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This approval applies for the duration of the research. If it is proposed to extend the duration of the study as specified in the application form, the Sub-Committee should be notified. If it is proposed to make an amendment to the research, you should notify the Sub-Committee by following the Notice of Amendment procedure outlined at <http://www.liv.ac.uk/media/livacuk/researchethics/notice%20of%20amendment.doc>.

Where your research includes elements that are not conducted in the UK, approval to proceed is further conditional upon a thorough risk assessment of the site and local permission to carry out the research, including, where such a body exists, local research ethics committee approval. No documentation of local permission is required (a) if the researcher will simply be asking organizations to distribute research invitations on the researcher's behalf, or (b) if the researcher is using only public means to identify/contact participants. When medical, educational, or business records are analysed or used to identify potential research participants, the site needs to explicitly approve access to data for research purposes (even if the researcher normally has access to that data to perform his or her job).

**Please note that the approval to proceed depends also on research proposal approval.**

Kind regards,

Morag Gray,

Chair, EdD. VPREC



## Appendix 2: Letter of Invitation to Participate

Dear Students/Alumni,

Hello! My name is Claire Hamilton. I am Head of Foundation Studies at [name of college]. Many of you may already know me. I am currently doing my Doctorate in Higher Education at the University of Liverpool, UK. As part of my doctoral studies, I have chosen to do my research on the students and the alumni at [this college]. In order to do this, I need some volunteers to help me with the research. **This is my invitation to you to participate.** But first, let me answer a few questions you may want to ask about the research study.

**What are you researching?** I plan to study the past and present learning experiences and opportunities that have brought you to where you are today.

**Why do you want to research this?** I want to use the information you to better understand the experiences and factors that contribute to your success as a student. This will be used to identify ways in which we (name of college) can help to improve the educational experience at [name of college].

**What will I be required to do for this study?** All I require from you is one or two hours of your time to meet with me either at [name of college] or at a mutually agreed location and answer some questions about your life, your educational experiences and your future plans/hopes. The information you share with me will be recorded and written into a narrative account. The information gathered will used for my doctoral thesis.

**Can I read what you wrote?** Absolutely. You will be given a chance to read the account of our interview and check for accuracy and fairness. You will also be given an opportunity to add or clarify information.

**What if I agree to participate and then change my mind?** You are free to withdraw at any time during the study. This will not affect your studies or wider educational experience.

**Will people know who I am?** No. All information will be anonymised. That means that no one will know who took part in the research. The only person who will know your name is me.

**What if I would like to take part but am a little unsure?** You are very welcome to come and talk to me and ask me any questions you may have. If you prefer, you can contact my doctoral supervisor, Dr. Michael Watts, at michael.watts@online.liverpool.ac.uk.

**I am interested. What should I do next?** If you are interested, please take 5 minutes to complete the brief questionnaire and return it to me. I will use the information provided to select students and alumni to be part of the study. The information you provide in the questionnaire will not be used in the study.

**What if I am selected?** If you are selected, I will email or text you and invite you to participate. I will send you a Participant Information Sheet about the research and a Consent Form for you to sign. You will have time to decide if you are still willing to participate. Again, if you have any questions at this stage, please come and talk to me or the person that gave this to you.

**What if I am not selected?** You will receive an email from me, thanking you for your interest.

Thank you very much for reading this. I appreciate any time and effort you have put into considering my request.

Claire Hamilton

Appendix 3: Selection Questionnaire

**Questionnaire**

The questions below are for selection purposes only. The information you provide will not be used in the study. Please answer the questions and return to me to me by email ([c.hamilton@.....](mailto:c.hamilton@.....)) or to the person that gave this to you.

1. Age    17-18                      19 -21                      22 – 25                      25-29                      30+
2. Major: \_\_\_\_\_
3. Where did you go to high school? Please give the school name & the area (e.g.....)  
 School name: \_\_\_\_\_                      Area: \_\_\_\_\_
4. Did you attend any other colleges or universities before coming to this college? Yes No
5. What do your parents do?                      Mother: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Father: \_\_\_\_\_
6. What level of education do the following members of your family have? (Circle one)
  - a. Father: University/College                      High School                      None
  - b. Mother: University/College                      High School                      None
7. How many siblings do you have?  
 Sisters: \_\_\_\_\_                      Brothers: \_\_\_\_\_
8. Do/Did they attend college or university?  
 Sisters:                      Yes                      No                      I don't have any  
 Brothers:                      Yes                      No                      I don't have any
9. Are you married?                      Yes                      No
10. What do you hope to do in the future?

Please give an email where I can contact you if you are selected for the study. \_\_\_\_\_

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix 4: Interview Schedule

Participants will be asked to provide examples where pertinent and the question “What do you think about this” will be asked at relevant intervals to add contextual data. The aim of the schedule is to progress from self → family → opinion(s).

1. Background Information:
  - What education do you have?
  - How did you learn English? Tell me about your English language education in school and outside school.
  - What have been your experiences of learning? (Describe your learning experiences)
2. Biographic data:
  - What are you parents’ occupations? What education did they receive?
  - How many siblings do you have? What education did they receive/what occupations do they have?
  - What level of education do your friends and extended family have?
3. Familial attitude to female education:
  - Who (if anyone) has encourage you to pursue higher education?
  - Have you met any resistance to education? If so, from whom?
4. Transition from school to college:
  - How did you choose this college/your major?
  - How did you feel about your choice?
  - What do you think now you are here?
5. What are your future plans?

Additional questions:

- a. **Reading & Books:** Do you read (Arabic/English)? Were you encouraged to read as a child? Do you see your parents reading? Do you have books at home?
- b. **Travel:** Where have you travelled (countries)? What do you do on holiday? Do you visit museums?
- c. How do you spend your free time?

## Appendix 5: Example of Coding

**Student D** (2 years completed)**1. Categories**

- Age 20; youngest of five children (1 boy, 4 girls). Non-citizen, born here “this is the home for us”. Parents born in [other Middle Eastern country]. Father came aged 7; mother at 17 after marriage.
- Mother left school at 17, married immediately. Father left after high school/college.
- One sister went to college (16-18); two went to HE in other (Banking & Finance and Accountant). Studying here = problematic (“not too many universities”) due to **nationality**. All married, oldest two don’t work. One lives in in other country with husband. Brother went to college, worked for IT company & now in family business with father “generation to generation”. He says he doesn’t need to study (“he’s a boy” – her words) as he has his business, “he wants to be a boss”. **Gender**
- Went to private [other nationals] school here, as did all her siblings and cousins. Non-citizen teachers, national board exams, Urdu “it is the main thing....home language”. Doesn’t speak Arabic or remember much of it from school. Studies at school were difficult (she says this several times) and she worked hard at school despite phase of misbehaving (“I always used to have fun with my friends”). Learned the value of education at high school “If you want to be something, you must have education...and after this, I am keep improving myself more and more”. This (BHCK) is easy for her because “they (school) already prepared us for high level”. Only failed once at Urdu (classical Urdu). She knows she didn’t study for it and was able to repeat it and do well. GPA is 3.97 down from 4.00 due to attendance.
- [Name of private university] was her first choice but she took a vacation and when she returned had to wait for Ministry papers, by then Admission had closed. Went to [other Middle Eastern country] for 6 months. Will continue there after graduation to do BA. After that, **she’s not sure**...Masters or work.
- **Motivated/Driven:** if you sit at home “we get lazy and you don’t have anything. You don’t have an aim if you sit like this at home”.
- Mother is “concerned about education”. Very supportive but not pushy; they do not force them (but motivate and encourage). Sisters are always reading and studying. Her mother’s “wish/desire” is for all her children to be educated “to face the world because...if you are educated you can face anything. You can face all the problems in life”. She agrees with her mother. Father is also supportive, drives her to college each day (a two hour journey each way). Family stress education. **Key Person**
- Education = independence (she mentions this numerous times), financially, personality, communication, broader (open) thinking. It’s a reality of life that no one knows what will happen

(her words) so we should prepare ourselves for any problems. Education prepares us (human beings) for anything as it gives us status and independence. Very motivated to study, “I am here to study, to learn something new each day”.

- Marriage: (hesitation, becomes demure). She doesn't want to work after marriage as her priority will be her husband and in-laws. Her sister works as her in-laws are educated but it all (90 to 95%) **depends** on them. **Tradition**. “Whatever my husband will decide”. Different side to her personality. Although she says she doesn't have to follow her husband if he is wrong, she talks about compromise and her mother telling her she must learn to compromise. **Contradiction** evident – **tradition and gender**. “You have to follow no problem; it's a big thing after marriage if you stand up for yourself, but...” suggests she has seen her mother stand up and she believes you should.
- Mother says she must compromise but she believes in standing up for herself (including in marriage). Strong character (as evident from standing up to other students and refusing to work with some). She doesn't want to depend on others (including her father) “I want to do something by myself. I have the aim to fulfill my own desire by my own money”. Mature in acknowledging and owning mistakes. Gives an example of falling out with a close friend and resolving the situation maturely. Confident.
- Likes women-only college, “comfortable”. **Nationality**. Has problems and issues with local (citizen) students. Describes them as lazy, always wanting her to do the work and ask the questions but not prepared to do any work. She studies “hard and well” and is evidently resentful and defiant. Looks down on their abilities. She sticks with a few girls who don't give her trouble (and are mostly non-citizens). “They think if you belong from different nationality you are nothing in front of them and they make fun in Arabic” which they (her and the other non-citizen students) can understand. “It's difficult to make friends with them because I belong from different, I have different thinking, they have different thinking, so most of the time it merge into problems and everything”.
- Doesn't drive but is learning. Father wants her to drive herself to college – practical.

## 2: Forms of Capital

### Social Capital

- Traditionally dressed (abaya and black hijab).
- Traditional gender roles, especially in marriage.

### Economic Capital

- Limited.

### Cultural Capital

- Nationality is non-citizen.

- Speak native language at home; she doesn't speak Arabic. Father does. English is good.
- Travel limited to [other Middle Eastern country] for family reasons.

Academic Capital

- Parents did not attend H.E. Both encourage education and want their children educated.
- Education = independence (financial, personal, communicative).