

**Precarious pasts and fragile futures: are we creating a student
commutercariat?**

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Abstract

Higher education is widely promoted as a route to social mobility, yet significant inequalities persist in access and participation. Expansion has not eliminated structural inequalities nor fair access, instead it has created fragile transitions and precarious futures as new entrants increasingly decide to 'stay local'.

This study focuses on first-year undergraduate students at a post-1992 university in the Midlands who travel to their local university. It challenges deficit-based constructions of "non-traditional" students, arguing that commuting has become increasingly normal despite being associated with marginalisation and reduced belonging. Using a Foucauldian framework, the research examines how commuter students are problematised through educational discourse.

Qualitative data from 44 Education Studies students explores identity, precarity, belonging, engagement, retention, and the complex realities of transitioning to university within a context of social and economic disadvantage. It examines the fragility of their educational experiences and subsequent instrumental approach to university study and their pragmatic responses. Students who travel to study are aspirational and agentic but are subject to a discourse of being risky, and lacking belonging. Yet, student commuters, without due recognition and focus are becoming the 'student commutercariat,' contributing and adjusting to an outdated anachronistic university experience.

Recommendations include a consideration of precarious transitions by addressing the student commuter discourse, recognition and empowerment through providing sensible admissions, advice and rationalising entry to HE. It proposes considering university enculturation through establishing that students travel to study as the norm, thus challenging a normative discourse and to ensure a more equitable university experience.

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Chapter one

1.1 Introduction

Transition to university for many young adults is a normal trajectory, with Kenyon (2024, p.115) estimating in 2021 that 53% of young adults in the UK had decided to go to university. In 2022/23, 49% of state school pupils from England had started higher education (HE) by age 25 (Bolton, 2026, para. 2). The Sutton Trust (2021a, p.1) identifies HE as a key driver of social mobility, with students from widening participation backgrounds as beneficiaries. As Christie and Burke (2021, p.87) consider, 'families look to universities to provide a launchpad to future career success', and as Amaral (2022, p.28) argues, entry to HE is associated with improved living standards and more broadly, as a crucial factor in economic development. Government policy has been focused on equity of access. Yet, as Thomas (2022, p.107) perceives, the mixed goals of HE function as a 'compromise' or tension between social justice principles of equity and access against the need to address competitive productivity through the development of human capital.

There is a dominant tradition of policies aimed at diversifying and expanding university entrance (Brooks, 2019, p107; Thomas, 2020, p.291; Rainford, 2023, p.411). Amaral (2022, p.29) outlines arguments for the diversification of entry to HE, such as alternative choices for students which may respond to student needs and local labour market requirements. Policy enactment may also create other inequities, as massification may create new opportunities, but of lower worth (Arum et al. 2022, p.2). The 'positional good' of HE creates courses which are of higher status, driven by elite universities who aim for 'consumer preferment, social status and the academic status...that helps to maintain their social status' (Marginson, 2004, p.210). As Thomas (2022, p.93) outlines, expansion latterly through the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act, has not substantially impacted upon inequality in participation, particularly for under-represented groups. This is related to stratification of opportunity and local choice of institution.

Participation rates in HE vary across the UK and despite the created unitary system, stratified choice of university is rooted in the perception of the value of different universities (Thomas, 2022, p.93-4). As well as value perception, participation rates vary significantly within geographical regions (Donnelly and Gamsu, 2020, p.2), having a strong correlation with economic affluence (Hindle et al. 2021, p.2). Jin and Ball (2021, p.609) and Callender (2022, p.124) identify that students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds have been able to take advantage of HE expansion, particularly to elite institutions. As Boliver's study (2015, p.609) examined, the 'university system is a differentiated rather than a unitary one' with students from 'non-traditional backgrounds' concentrated in post-1992 universities'. Post-1992 universities' student populations are less academically successful, less socioeconomically advantaged, and overall, these universities have less resources than all other universities (Boliver, 2015, p.613).

As Crozier (2005, p.596) and Danvers and Hinton-Smith (2021, p.99) examine, inequalities in access to HE are the result of the formation of educational gaps which start early, and which necessitate a full understanding of the mechanism and context of decision-making by young adults. Further challenges for young adults, embarking in HE, are the effects of navigating an uncertain, hyper instrumental and disjointed educational system (Wyn, 2019, p.91; Billingham and Gillon, 2023, p.298). These are compounded by continuing financial pressures for students (The Sutton Trust, 2023, p.23) and challenges to graduate employment. Jordan (2025, para.1) notes how the cost-of-living influences student mobility. Increasingly choice of university is also related to availability of additional financial support at individual universities to minimise cost along with geographical proximity. As part of an upward trend, in 2024, 30% of UK 18-year-olds applying to university intended to live at home and of those, over half 'of the most disadvantaged students chose to live at home during their studies, compared to fewer than one in five of the least disadvantaged' (Jordan, 2025, para. 3).

1. 2 The study

This study focused on the experiences of young adults in their first year of undergraduate study at a post-1992 university in the Midlands. Originally, the study was underpinned by a conceptual lens of transition to university. However, through an inductive process, encompassing attention to research participant self and social identity, an understanding of the movement between local but divergent social worlds and participant spatial conceptualisation of the constructed university, there was a necessity to progressively focus the research question (Altrichter et al.1993). The predominant consideration was the concept of self/social identity with the pluralist construction of the undergraduate, particularly in post-1992 universities, as more likely to be a commuter student with a range of non-traditional characteristics.

Commuter students are frequently constructed as 'non-traditional' (Holton, 2018, p.556; Hallam, 2023, p.374; Kenyon, 2024, p.116; Tett et al. 2025, p.476) as opposed to traditional students who reside on campus on in student accommodation. This binary is a 'dualistic classification' (Holton, 2018, p.556) relying on 'implicit temporal comparison' (Sykes, 2021. p.120) is anachronistic and problematising. Non-traditional students are seen to have 'complicated transitions' (Sykes, 2021, p.122), positioned in deficit, and commuting students as absent in their belongingness, resistant to participation beyond lectures (Holloway-Friesen, 2018, p.88). Commuting students are non-traditional in their non-residential status yet are problematised and othered. Further, the non-traditional student is aligned with a range of characteristic demographic or socioeconomic complexities. As Turner, Webb and Pritchard (2025, p.762) comment, 'there is considerable heterogeneity amongst students' with commuting being both a reason for and cause of 'non-traditionalism', a further construct of 'othering'. Whilst studies and policies continue to position commuting to university as a 'characteristic of marginalisation' (Tett et al.

2025, p.476), particularly at elite universities, increasingly commuting to university is a norm (Jordan, 2025, para.5).

This study explains the contextualised, localised, constructed social worlds of commuting students and using a Foucauldian lens explores the problematisation of the commuting student. Foucault (1984a, p.381) provides a methodological tool of problematisation which provides coherence to the problem as well as the illumination of solutions. Secondly, it examines the formation of the commuter student as an 'ontology of the present' (Foucault, 1984b, p.46) to examine the conditions and current knowledge of the formation, the discourse of the student commuter with an evolution into a 'student commutercariat'. The notion of the 'student commutercariat' represents through a Foucauldian theoretical perspective, a subjectification process of the formation of a student commuter, considered non-traditional, problematic, and subsequently objectified. Lastly, it uses the concept of precarity and whilst noting Bourdieu's (1988) encapsulation of *précarité* as an employment condition, this is considered context specific, limited in moving beyond the contextual specific socio-economic focus of deficit.

A broad exploration of precarity is required, from a political-economic perspective, to examine the potential of recognition of the vulnerability of the human state as an ethical potential. Exploration of precarity is discussed in chapter three as both a societal contributing factor of the construction of the commuter student as well as a potential space of validation and authentic freedom. Foucault (1990b, p.36) perceives freedom as 'managing to grasp why and how that-which-is might no longer be that-which-is...any description must always be made in accordance with these kinds of virtual fracture which open up the space of freedom'. Foucault (2020) considers that people are the products of complex interactions of practices and that total knowledge of these is illusory. Alternatively, there are spaces of potential, and partial knowledge which enable a rejection of those which are 'intolerable'. Recognition and validation of the vulnerable human state may provide spaces of freedom. A recognition of the formation of the student 'commutercariat' is essential.

1.3 Rationale

This study was developed as a result of observed experiences, interactions with first year undergraduates, lecturers and scrutiny of university data. As a course leader and teaching first year undergraduate students in a post-1992 university, key themes emerged. Mulder et al. (2022, p.1) reported contemporaneously how university students exhibit feelings of 'being overwhelmed and emotionally exhausted' with resultant concerns for study engagement. The concept of feeling overwhelmed is developed in other literature eliding engagement and 'belonginess'. Lizarte Simón et al. (2024, p.5) establish a link to self-efficacy and academic engagement where students feel they need to shape their studies. Mulder et al. (2022, p.2) consider shaping as a need for hyper-organisation to meet conflicting demands, anxieties and roles. First year students may be conflicted, with a need to maintain higher levels of academic endeavour, seeing university as a transactional encounter but uncertain

how to manage a complex enculturation process. They experience further complexities, with a perception that commuting students engage less with social and university systems (Riddell et al. 2025, p.15). The sense of belonging is a contested, politicised, constructed concept (Tett et al. 2025, p.477) and is a discourse of idealised university engagement which will be considered further in chapter three. Lack of 'belongingness' is a key feature of the problematisation of the student commuter.

Groves et al.'s (2015, p.28) study with respondents from a post-1992 university used a conceptual model to examine the relationship between intrinsic motivation, feelings of competence and transactional expectations. They established that individual expectations of HE are strongly linked to extrinsic goals, they are transactional in their initial response to study, but uncertain how to manage with fears about their competency (Groves et al. 2015, p.34). First year education students reported feelings of disengagement, and these were reflected in formal and informal university-wide statistical evaluation tools. Engagement is also linked to the second issue of retention, progression and attrition. As Thomas (2020, p.6) and Riddell et al. (2025, p.146) indicate, commuting students prioritise their construction of 'academic studies' confronting the hegemonic discourse of an essentialised normative discourse of 'belongingness'.

Retention and attrition are a key issue for universities, financially and reputationally, and there is substantial literature relating to concerns. Non-traditional groups, so those targeted as widening access participants, are considered vulnerable to attrition (Boddy, 2020, p.240; Black, 2024, p.1520) and a student's first year is considered the riskiest (Henderson et al. 2019, p.5). Black (2024, p.1520) suggests that students from backgrounds of non-traditional, lower socio-economic status, and first in family to attend a university, present specific challenges such as 'culture shock and alienation' which are complex and individualised. This is related to social-psychological and environmental factors. She suggests that the complexity of social alienation or a perception of alienation 'creates tensions within the individual'. Tensions may also go as far as to create an aversion towards the new positioning in social settings' (Black, 2024, p.1527). Boddy (2020, p.240) concurs adding academic integration as a further consideration. However, Boddy's (2020, p.246) qualitative study reveals emotional engagement, expressed as connectivity, as a factor in attrition. There is a detachment from university as aspirations and subsequent expectations diverge from the emerging construction of student identity which is manifested in academic performance. These complex concerns contributed to considering how to understand the first year experience and to devise a study to gather data *in situ*, with following data collection to gather contextual data from participants as a life history approach.

1.4 Theoretical framework

Decisions considering theoretical framing are key and for this study, choices were related to an inductive process of data analysis and close reading. Pierre Bourdieu's work is used extensively in literature relating to entry to the field, the potential of habitus as agency and the structural implications of forms of capitals in HE, for example, see Holton (2018, p.556-569), Bathmaker (2021, p.75-86), Reay (2021, p.53-64) and Baines (2024, p8-38). Partial consideration of this analysis will follow in chapter three, especially in terms of scholarship which explores theories examining the reproduction of cultural and social inequalities within education, 'and the legitimisation of these inequalities through misrecognition' (Rawolle and Lingard, 2022, p.205). Bourdieu's work exposes embedded inequalities in the structure and functioning of educational institutions. The associated scholarship and efforts to address these embedded inequalities are insightful, leading to ongoing initiatives such as access and widening participation to HE for students with certain social, cultural and economic characteristics. These policy enactments and initiatives relating to widening participation may be considered problematising as they deflect from societal deficit and are also reductionist in allocating and measuring, within the defining categories. Widening participation, a policy approach, is enshrined in discourse whilst exposing inequalities, contributes to problematisation through policy enactments of sorting. Despite these initiatives, inequalities remain (Sumner, 2022, p.39) and it is essential to expose and critically question new forms of power from a socio-historical context. Foucault's work encompasses the tools of analysis between power, knowledge and the subject which enables an understanding of these forms of power (Oksala, 2007, p.1).

Foucault and Bourdieu were contemporaneous, as part of the post-war French intellectual generation, engaged in a cross-fertilisation of disciplines, explored post-modernist discourse, developing conceptual thinking tools yet without offering solutions (Grenfell, 2014, p.55). However, whilst both provide intellectual tools, Foucault captures the fluid uncertainty of post-modernism, questioning norms, alerting society to the potential of homogeneity and exclusion. Foucault's work considered what an individual is within modern society and, despite a normative thinking of progressive modernity, the persistence of inequalities in social relations and the boundaries of freedoms (McNay, 1994, p.2). Foucault applied concepts throughout his oeuvre to question truths expressed through normalised behaviours, offering a 'box of tools' to consider power and knowledge and the implications for control and constraint of the human condition (Foucault, 1984a, p.381-390). He argued that power is not necessarily repressive as it shifts, taking on new forms, heightening the importance of critically questioning its formation and impact. Foucault elucidates how individuals occupy positions in society that the sociohistorical context provides and constructs (Taylor, 2011, p.3).

This study uses a conceptual tool of problematisation to examine the creation of the student 'commutercariat'. It also considers power as emanating from discourse,

means and techniques to create a normalised construct of a student commuter within a discourse of 'non-traditionalism'. Power technologies are the exercising of modern state power, oriented towards individuals, with attached forms of rationality (Oksala, 2007, p.83). Disciplinary power as examined by Foucault is understanding the normalisation of types of 'self'. Students are drenched in types of 'self' with an intense and normalised inner responsibility for improvement, material success and excellence. Students' constructions of self are subjective and individualised, but they are objectified as students have encountered an education system that has constituted them. Their constructed identities are emergent through educational classifications, where their social realities are entangled by theoretical objectification (Foucault, 2020, p.194). Foucault provides a theoretical lens to examine the subjectification process through societal norms of educational practices and processes within the socio-economic landscape. Students' constructed selves are created by norms of aspiration, idealised self-concept and the impact of educational practices of division into individuals as subjects but objectified by ranking and order (Foucault, 2020, p.184).

The composite term 'power/knowledge' encapsulates the creation of knowledges within and around forms of power. 'Power is not an institution, and not a structure; neither is it a certain strength we are endowed with; it is the name that one attributes to a complex strategical situation in a particular society' (Foucault, 1990a, p.93). The naming of student commuters in discourse is outlined in chapter two, and the subsequent categorisation rouses the apparatus of widening access and participation. It provides knowledge and new truths of commuter students, yet as Foucault examines, with knowledge are forms of power and objectification. Foucault enables the exposure of these mechanisms.

1.5 The site and cohort

This study was completed at a post-1992 university in the north Midlands in a post-industrial city experiencing long term social and economic deprivation (Etherington, 2020, p.4). The university sits in a 'cold spot' in ranking for progression to university, with the local community in the lowest 20% nationally for entry to HE (DfE, 2016; Baines, 2024, p.8). At this post-1992 university, in 2021, 59% of the total number of undergraduates were commuting students. In 2024 HESA data measures a further increase of commuting student to 65% of the total number (HESA, 2026). Please note that in this study, the term commuting student is a student who does **not** reside on campus or in student accommodation, irrespective of their journey time to university and they consider themselves as living at home and going to university.

The main study cohort were 44 participants who were first year undergraduates studying for an Education Studies degree.

1.6 The Data

Qualitative data was collected illustrating student participants' manifestations of their constructed selves. Initial research focused on creating collages as self-representational artefacts, followed by the use of peer conversations to explain collages. As planned, this was followed by research gathering rich student narratives through life history interactions to contextualise these constructions. The COVID-19 pandemic changed educational approaches from March 2020 which necessitated a further requirement for ethical approval. The study was paused, along with data gathering, thinking and writing for this thesis; where relevant, changes to research practice have been explained, and data reporting reflects the impact of this global crisis.

1.7 Positionality

It is recognised that this research is value laden as it is insider research, with themes of social justice as well as implications of research positionality by proximity to participants. Positionality refers to the researcher and the political and social context of the study (Moewaka Barnes and McCreanor, 2022, p.367). Positionality is also linked to power and control and researcher identity, which is a determining factor for this research as well as relational factors.

The social location of research in the field by an insider researcher concerns issues of power and positionality. Similarly, positionality is a slippery concept, constituted of researcher social attributes, gender, ethnicity for example, but which form a unique construction of a researcher which is embodied in every aspect of the research practice. Dwyer and Buckle (2009, p.59) challenge the binary notion of insider-outsider researcher which suggests a simplification of roles and positions, where insider-outsider researching is related to role and context. A more important aspect is the researcher's motives and personal history which has drawn them to a particular inquiry (Caelli et al. 2003, p.7). As in this type of study, 'a researcher's positionality is constructed and mediated through the situatedness of becoming a researcher' (Caelli et al. 2003, p.5). Key concerns as an insider researcher were linked to role conflict and identity, boundary conflicts, power relations, relationships and impartiality. Broader concerns are linked to sociopolitical context of the study within a Foucauldian theoretical framework. Practical approaches were taken to mitigate for aspects of insider researching, and these included applying ethical and methodological adjustments. Reflexivity, as a process of internal dialogue, sensitivity and self-knowledge, included reflection and processing approaches critically (Berger, 2015, p.220). Further explanation is in chapter four.

1.8 A note about social categories

All language contains labels and social categorising is politicised (Riddell et al. 2025, p.9) and rightly contentious but is inevitable in considering the uniqueness and similarity of individuals subject to norms and behaviours and objectified by their

defined status. The Law Society (2024) argues for emphasis on how individuals describe themselves and adopt their descriptions where possible, thus ethically, this has been adhered to. Overall, there remains social categorisations, and these are used sensitively and respectfully in a thesis considering aspects of social justice, with no intention to be reductive. This study is about the HE system in England, although research from other global educational systems has been consulted and where relevant noted.

1.9 Research question

Changes to research questions are detailed in chapter four. The final research questions were:

Why have students decided to go to university?

What was their background before starting HE?

What has led them to study locally?

1.10 Organisation

Chapter two provides the theoretical framework. It includes an explanation of problematisation and how it works towards constructing the problematised student commuter. The discourse of the commuter student demonstrates how operationalising knowledge/power measures the student commuter, positioning this construction against normative judgments. **Chapter three** provides a literature review which examines the historical and contextual construct of undergraduate student commuters. It considers how commuter students are defined and subsequently problematised. A second theme is precarity, outlining how precarity manifests societally, socially and spatially.

In chapter four, changes to research question direction are examined and methodological decision-making is explained, drawing attention to research design and outlining ethical approaches. Student cohort, application of ethics and research procedures are considered. This leads to **chapter five** which includes findings and analysis from collage and conversations data, used as starting points for gathering data from life history participants. Pen portraits of life history participants follow. In **chapter six** findings and analysis are organised into key themes. This chapter examines the local context of commuting students and the precarious embodied enculturation process for student commuters. Recommendations are explained in **chapter seven**, including contribution to knowledge, limitations and a conclusion.

Chapter two

2.1 Introduction

Chapter one provided an introduction to this thesis. This chapter introduces the underpinning social theory derived from Michel Foucault (1926-1984) which forms an overarching framework. Social theories provide concepts, ideas and frameworks to explain or illuminate, critique educational practices and examine the social relations between power, education and social justice (Murphy, 2022, p.21). Engaging with social theories illuminates and exposes educational processes as contextual and politicised. A summary of the phases of Foucault's work follows providing context for the use of theory as an explanatory tool. This is followed by critique, before an explanation of the theoretical framework.

Foucault's theorising is used in three different ways; the concept of problematisation as a tool of deep questioning of the construction of the student as a commuter. Secondly, as a theoretical underpinning, disciplinary processes provide explanation of the mechanisms used to construct the student commuter with evolution of a student commutercariat as an inevitability. Lastly, the formation of discourse is foundational in creating the student commuter and using a Foucauldian perspective, discourse analysis illustrates this process. Figure 2.1 demonstrates the interconnection of these themes.

Chapter three examines the historical and social context of construction of the student commuter and subsequent application of Foucauldian approaches to this construction.

2.2 Background

Michel Foucault was a French philosopher, theorist, critic and intellectual who strategically used different genres to purposefully question the assumed progressive nature of societal development. He provides intellectual theoretical tools to question these assumptions, arguing against universal and absolute knowledge (Rabinow, 1994, p.4; Oksala, 2007, p.2; Taylor, 2011, p.3). He focuses on examining how power, haphazardly and intermittently, flows within societal mechanisms (Foucault, 1982, p.208). For educational practitioners, his analysis demonstrates how 'apparently emancipatory educational practices often contain oppressive dimensions' (Brookfield, 2005, p.121) providing conceptual tools to critique a society focused on normative homogeneity.

Foucault's theorising is frequently organised chronologically as archaeologies, genealogies and ethics which are representational of a series of studies to uncover understandings of late modernity (Allen, 2022, p.70). Although Oksala (2007, p.3) cautions against such a neat division, suggesting a heuristic model. These applied methodologies demand attention to social practices using 'innovative uses of

historiography' (Oksala, 2007, p.2) to question accepted truths of progress and to critique the modern order.

Foucault's literary style challenged the academic canon and for Oksala (2007, p.23), evocatively and deliberately, as Foucault engages the senses, promulgating a reaction. The use of the term archaeology is a metaphor for uncovering thinking about the history of certain truths or knowledge systems (Gutting, 2014, p.130). Foucault's approach was to examine discourse and the formations of certain truths. These formations of truth are ways of showing how social description is created or formed as an unstable discourse. Allen (2022, p.72) suggests that Foucault was engaged with structuralism, a refining process, which was seeking to de-stabilise by examining the 'structural rules that governed discourse'. McNay (1994, p.3) sees this as enabling Foucault to seek connections, the strata of knowledge production and to set aside the notion of societal progress and improvement as an inevitability of time and age, as normative. It confronts the dialectical approach to historical change. In this earlier phase, Foucault's work has been critiqued as 'quasi structuralist theory' (Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1982, p.43) and Gutting (2014, p.15) critiques the relationship between different historical ages, used as a framing device by Foucault, questioning the necessary or selective breaks or processes of thinking that Foucault uncovers through discourse analysis. The archaeological phase foregrounds discourse analysis as a tool but is insufficient without overlaying further theoretical approaches (Allen, 2022, p.72). Foucault's response was to develop further ontological tools.

Foucault's adjustment to the genealogical turn, as Gutting (2014, p.18) identifies, does not represent abandoning the archaeological approach, which is accommodated, but no longer at the centre of thinking. Whilst the archaeological phase focussed on ordering, making discursive formations possible, genealogy is about the formation of knowledge and relations of power within institutions and the interplay with the construction of individuals as an 'exercise of power' (Allen 2022, p.73). Unconventional historiography is again applied, but this is considered in relation to the development of institutions and their management of individuals, and this enables Foucault to examine the 'constitution of the subject – subjectivation' (Oksala, 2007, p.58). The formation of the individual as a subject was possible only within the practices of power and knowledge and identities are fashioned from, and constituted within, a set of existing parameters within institutions. The formation of the subject is to achieve normalisation which as Foucault (2020, p.184) states, 'imposes homogeneity' but also 'functions within a system of formal equity, since within a homogeneity that is the rule, the norm introduces, as a useful imperative and as a result of measurement, all the shading of individual differences'. Foucault's historiography demonstrates that this is a piecemeal, uneven process, but the pioneering, in early practice, of forms of discipline, evolves into a 'quiet' modern power (Fraser, 1989, p.24). In *Discipline and Punish* (Foucault, 2020), this quiet modern power in 'caring' institutions is examined (Marshall, 1990, p.15). In these

institutions, knowledge of people is gathered, their attitudes and behaviours, including self-knowledge, and these are used to shape behaviours, to categorise, correct and constitute the subject. This shaping of individuals is achieved within educational institutions, their discourse and practices legitimise these changes and claims of truth contribute to knowledge and further established discourse. Foucault (2020, p.170) referred to these institutions as disciplinary institutions and to practices as 'simple instruments'.

Foucault's (1984c, p.343) final phase, of ethics, examines the importance of thinking critically, and to address 'the ethico-political choice we have to make every day'. This emphasises curiosity and questioning, especially when faced with contingency. As Taylor and Vintges (2004, p.2-3) examine, Foucault writes about political and ethical agency. This is to develop a framework of personal ethical politics which imagines a critical engagement with societal norms, but which is openly manifested in commitment and responsibility.

2.3 Critique of Foucault

Foucault is often considered as unsystematic (Oksala, 2007, p.2; Taylor, 2011, p.1). He rejected categorisation, stating that 'each new work profoundly changes the terms of thinking which I had reached with the previous work. In this sense I consider myself more an experimenter than a theorist; I don't develop deductive systems to apply uniformly in different fields of research' (Foucault, 2000e, p.240). The formation of different systems of thinking creates, for some, a lack of coherence, as Foucault crossed disciplines of philosophy and history. Foucault 'methodologically uses historiography as a philosophical method' (Oksala, 2007, p.2), challenging orders of progress, the prominent intellectual voice of reason and change, and the 'activist cause' (Fendler, 2004, p.448). A sharp focus of Foucault's work is the revelation of fragmentary, fluid and unconventional contemporary power relations and a lack of recourse to established, yet de-stabilised notions of justice (Taylor, 2011, p.2). As Rabinow (1984, p.27) says 'what Foucault proffers.....is a heroic refusal to sentimentalize the past in any way or to shirk the necessity of facing the future as dangerous but open'.

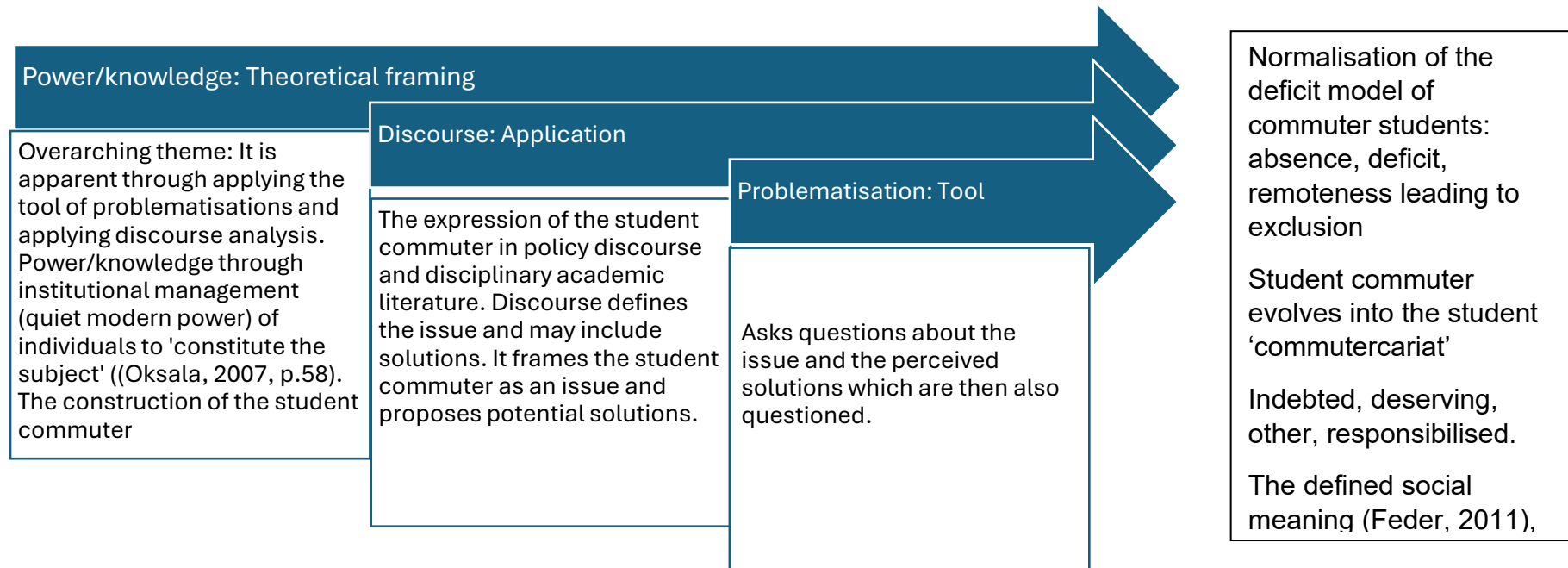
Further critique of Foucault is the absence of solution. Taylor (2011, p.3) considers this as a fundamental misreading of Foucault who strives to ensure power is conceptualised as unstable and both pernicious and productive. Foucault is engaged with mechanisms of uncovering normative approaches and injustices, not solution finding. Fraser (1989, p.19) requests that there is clarity related to the rejection of a politicised stance and more importance attached to situated theorising. Fraser (1989, p.20) challenges Foucault's genealogical approach as linking practices, procedures, institutions, operations and objects into a specified concept of power/knowledge regime which function as a form of social constraint. Subsequent networks of social practices coalesce in discourse, but which remains unstable. A further concern is related to Foucault's choice of text, the 'construal' and in particular, Foucault's

interpretative gaze (Fraser 1989, p.21), questioning the selection of texts underpinning discussion. Whilst Fraser (1989, p.30) argues that Foucault is able to identify and critique problematic aspects of contemporary society, there is an absence of reasons for rejection of these aspects. Interestingly Fraser (1989, p.19) notes the importance of Foucault's methodological decision-making in treating state power as politically and ethically problematising.

A final challenge is Foucault's constant revisions towards resolving tensions (Lynch, 2014, p.123), where a restlessness is evident in formative works. For example, the concept of discourse, a centrality of his work in *Archaeology of Knowledge* (1974) is adjusted in later texts. A further consideration is the challenges in translation (Feder, 2014, p.68) where linguistic nuance defies description.

In this thesis and illustrated in figure 2.1, Foucault's philosophical method is considered as a strength as it enables the application of tools to uncover and conceptualise the construction of the student commuter as a complexity of power-laden processes. Three key elements: problematisation of the student commuter, the formation of the construct of the student commuter and the reflective discourse which sustains the problematised construct and moves towards the formation of the student commutercariat are now considered.

Figure 2.1: The formation of the student commuter



2.4 Problematisation

Problematisation is an analysis tool providing structural underpinning and is a key concept of Foucault's methodological approach. Koopman (2014, p.400) argues that problematisation is a conceptual thread throughout Foucault's oeuvre. Foucault described problematisation as a way of thinking about the solutions to difficulties and 'the conditions in which possible responses can be given; it defines the elements that will constitute what the different solutions attempt to respond to' (Foucault, 1984a, p.389). Koopman (2014, p.400) usefully defines problematisation as both verb and noun capturing Foucault's methodological dualism. As a verb, problematisation reveals an examination of normative and assumed societal behaviours, for example, the assumption of commuter students as non-traditional and considered 'at risk' (OfS, 2024) or marginalised (Riddell et al. 2025, p.6-7). However, a questioning of these forms reveals problematisation as a noun and a way of revealing and questioning those mechanisms. The problematisation of the commuter student demonstrates how solutions are formational and derivative.

Gutting (2005, p.103) and Fendler (2010, p.8) describe problematisation as a potent form of critique, revealing both limitations of solutions and normalising practices. Problematisation articulates embedded social power relations as it provides a lens of sensitivity to otherwise taken for granted assumptions. As demonstrated in figure 2.1 problematisation is used as a tool when examining the formation of the student commuter. The construct of the student commuter can be seen to be framed as a policy problem and in academic discourse, as a problem for HE institutions to resolve. Problematisation of this discursive construction show the predominance of reductionist narratives and solutions. The application of a problematisation as a theoretical tool is included in chapters three and five.

2.5 The disciplinary processes of power/knowledge

Foucault's genealogical phase considered the central concept of a new form of power; disciplinary power. Hoffman (2011, p.27) considers disciplinary power as crucial to understanding the trajectory of Foucault's thought. Foucault's contention is that sovereign power has been replaced by power which is more complex, 'omnipresent' and manifested in techniques and practices which are diverse and contextual (Brookfield, 2005, p.126). This contrasts, as Brookfield (2005, p.127) contends, with a 'top-down analysis of power'. Lynch (2011, p.13) sees Foucault as articulating the concept of power using both empirical materials and theorising.

Foucault enables an understanding of power within education processes and practices as complex, potentially both liberatory for some, but also repressive for others. Power, through normative techniques and practices becomes that which is also exercised by 'people on themselves in specific day-to-day practices of their

lives' (Brookfield, 2005, p.121). The construction of the student commuter is in response to these specific practices.

The text, *Discipline and Punish* (2020), emphasises the historically contingent, yet arbitrary elements of the techniques of disciplinary power, the 'multitude of often minor processes, of different origin and scattered location [which]...converge and produce the blueprint of a general method' (Foucault, 2020, p.138) which is enshrined as quiet, modern power. *Discipline and Punish* (2020), explaining the development of social institutions, uncovers how power and knowledge intersect, constructing individuals as objects of knowledge (Allen, 2022, p.75). As demonstrated in Figure 2.1 and illustrated further in Figure 2.2, disciplinary power uses a series of technologies which can be examined in relation to the construct of the student commuter. The use of disciplinary techniques as 'simple instruments' (Foucault, 2020, p.170) of construction include specific tools which regulate and organise individuals into normalised behaviours. Gore (1995, p.166) argues that the institution of schooling produces its own 'regime of pedagogy, a set of power-knowledge relations of discourses and practices'. This is constraining and demonstrates the micro application of disciplinary processes in educational sites. As Foucault (2020, p.170). writes, "Discipline 'makes' individuals; it is the specific techniques of a power that regards individuals as objects and as instruments of its exercise". Disciplinary power, therefore, produces individuals as its objects, constructed by processes and this knowledge is of the self and a power internalised and acted upon by the self as power/knowledge. It shapes and permeates. This is demonstrated in Figure 2.2.

Table 2.1 How are disciplinary processes of power/knowledge operationalised to create the student commuter?

Concept	How does Foucault describe this process?	Manifestation and mechanism
Classification, difference and individualism Formational	'progressive objectification and the ever more subtle partitioning of individual behaviour' (Foucault, 2020, p.173)	The production of knowledge about individuals (Gore, 1995, p.175) The formation of possible actions and construction of classification mechanisms. This leads to 'Responsibilised' choice-making (Drew, 2019, p.543) The use of differentiation, comparison and self-classification
Macro and micro spatial division Student commuters have complex relationships with spaces. They are transient boundary crossers and create and interact in liminal spaces. Space can be power but can also be problematic Divisional	'space is fundamental in any exercise of power' (Foucault, 2000d, p.361) 'the disciplines create complex spaces that are at once architectural, functional and hierarchical'. (Foucault, 2020, p.148).	Higher education institutions are hierarchical. There are 'cold spots' of provision. Spaces can create individuals, and individuals can create spaces. University spaces are marketized, disciplining students as consumers, blurring lines between the social, visual and the studious. The distribution of individuals and patterns as an exercise of power (Gore, 1995, p.177)

Surveillance: Hierarchical observation Examination and maintenance of the self	'The power in the hierarchized surveillance of the disciplines is not possessed as a thing or transferred as property; it functions like a piece of machinery' (Foucault, 2020, p.177).	Striving to meet norms as a familiarity of the mechanisms of surveillance. Observations of the self and a striving to be an individual (Gore, 1995, 170) They must be monitored as they are in the category of the 'other' Student commuters are to be monitored, recorded and watched
Normalisation	'The perpetual penalty that traverses all points and supervises every instant in the disciplinary institutions compares, differentiates, hierarchises, homogenises, excludes. In short, it normalises. (Foucault, 2020, p.183)	Measuring and classification to ensure a norm but in so do create 'the other' Normalising judgement of minimum thresholds and an aspirational optimum 'The defining of the pathological' (Gore, 1995 p.173) Problematising student commuters epitomise a category of the other as they do not meet the norm Being the 'other' can lead to exclusion

a. Classification, difference and individualism: Formational

As illustrated in Figure 2.2, commuter students are constructed through classification. This classification adds to previous classification processes within educational processes and practices. This process enables a comparison with norms as well as contributing to knowledge of individual's mutual constitution, it classifies and subjectifies. The measurement of difference and the organisation of classification 'asserts the truth of the standard' (Feder, 2011, p.63).

The classification of commuter student enhances the difference and enables other differences to become apparent. This enables judgements to be made about the commuter student, for example, as non-traditional as opposed to traditional students and so promotes problematising through discourse. Foucault (1982, p.208) describes this as 'dividing practices...the subject is either divided inside himself or divided from others'. Foucault's contention is the marking out of difference, that this classification, formed in educational processes and practices, ensures the individual is a subject. The knowledge of an individual enables a power, this power/knowledge thus predominates. For commuter students, their commuting classification implicates other characteristics. As Drew (2019, p.542) discusses, naming is cemented in discourse and the student commuter is both classified as a truth and contributes to what is considered a norm.

b. Macro and micro spatial division

As Figure 2.2 demonstrates, disciplinary power uses spaces in different ways, but overall spaces add to the construction of individuals and their actions. Hoffman (2011, p.28) sees this as a meticulous reconfiguring which is embodied and the spatial dimension is a manifestation of this reconfiguration. Foucault (2020, p.141) calls this 'enclosure'. The spatial dimension also includes partitioning and distribution. There is a macro spatial dimension of those seeking to go to university which is geographical and hierarchical. Student commuters are subject to spatial distribution as outlined in chapter three, they are geographically centred and classified.

Micro spatial division is manifested in campus spaces which are often portioned and this is examined further in chapter three. As Foucault (2020, p.157) considers, this constitutes a 'taking charge of time of individual existences; for regulating... to capitalise the time of individuals'. This softer disciplinary regime normalises blurred boundaries, providing an illusion of freedom, devaluing certain behaviours and coding spaces. It is this habituation, the targeting of the body into the correct use of the space as a perpetual progress (Foucault, 2020, p.157) which is a discipline, a compulsion.

c. Surveillance: monitor and self-monitor

A component of disciplinary power is the plurality of surveillance as described in Figure 2.2. There is a hierarchy of observation, which 'functions as a network of relations from top to bottom' (Foucault, 2020, p.176). Commuting students are considered non-traditional students and 'at risk' as described in the following section. They are observed, monitored and counted. The Office for Students (2022) creates a

range of surveillance measures to monitor student outcomes against student characteristics. HESA (Higher Education Student Data) monitor data by term-time accommodation and higher education institution. Individual institutions monitor attendance, performance and engagement as documented by localised policy documents with expectations and overt electronic monitoring (University documentation, 2026). Surveillance operates as datafication (Wilson and Ross, 2023, p.304), the gathering of data as monitoring and quantifying. Foucault (2020, p.176-77) considers this as 'functional surveillance...this network 'holds' the whole together and traverses it in its entirety with effects of power that derive from one another: supervisors, perpetually supervised'. The recording of practices enables the measurement of commuting students against targets and performance. Wilson and Ross (2023, p.305) notes that objectification and quantification of data is problematising, providing divisions and constructing grouping.

Micro surveillance was conceived by Foucault's (2020, p.201) use of the device of the Panopticon, to 'induce... a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power'. This design illustrates 'quiet' power of surveillance, the uncertainty of being observed, self-monitoring, demarcation of individuals and influences of self-perception (Hope, 2022, p. 93). The implication of a panoptical society for Foucault (2020, p.195-228) is that permanent surveillance, by a few, operationalise individuals to strive towards normative behaviours by self-management (Hope, 2022, p.94-5). Surveillance is a mechanism contributing to the social production of knowledge of commuter students. It accumulates and legitimises data constructing discourse and regimes of truth.

d. Normalisation: the construction of the student commuter

As illustrated in Figures 2.1 and 2.2, normalisation is the culmination of disciplinary processes (McWhorter, 2014, p.316). Normalising techniques are 'the disciplinary techniques that operate within norms, measuring individuals and classifying them with regard to standards of normality' (McWhorter, 2014, p.317). Normalising provides standards of comparison, of potential, of the constructed ideal and individuals modify behaviours in attempts to replicate a norm (Oksala, 2007, p.59). As Foucault (2020, p.183) describes this process as 'the perpetual penalty that traverses all points and supervises every instant in the disciplinary institutions compares, differentiates, hierarchises, homogenises, excludes. In short, it normalises'. Ball (1990, p.2) examines normalisation as a central concept as it enables the description and subsequent judgement of normal and thus what is abnormal and Feder, (2011, p.62) as the 'institutionalisation of the norm, of what counts as normal, indicating the pervasive standards that structure and define social meaning'.

Commuter students are non-traditional, they sit outside the normative views of students as exemplified in chapter three and are constructed with distinctive social characteristics (Riddell et al. 2025, p.25-49). These processes are formational and divisive. Drew (2019, p.542) argues that normalisation is promoted in discourse and central is the propagation of 'idealised social behaviours'. An ideal norm is a traditional student who is constructed as exhibiting the desired norm. Discourse,

promoting the ideal, provides aspirational and advantageous ways of behaving, and so subjects are 'responsibilised' 'to ensure they make the correct choices' Drew (2019, p.542). This also leads to a responsabilising self-monitoring. Student commuters attempt to move towards the ideal, instrumentally and behaviourally in ways to meet the normative ideal.

2.6 Discourse and the formation of the student commuter

As Ball (1990, p.3) examines, educational sites provide potent examples of the development, selection and distribution of discursive practices. Foucault (1981, p.64) outlines, 'any system of education is a political way of maintaining or modifying the appropriation of discourses, along with the knowledges and powers which they carry'. This is developed further in Foucault's (2020, p.189-192) consideration of discourse in *Discipline and Punish* which situates discourse as an exemplification of power-knowledge. Discourse thus arranges power-knowledge into a structure or system. It provides the vehicle for both explanation and the field of power.

There are two forms of discourse which potentially construct the student commuter. Firstly, related to education as a discipline. As discussed in chapter three, reasons for commuting to university as opposed to living on a campus or student housing can be traced to societal changes, processes of precarity, economic pragmatism and a longer term trajectory of the reconfiguration of the types of students in HE (Holton, 2018, p.556). The concept of the 'student commuter' in academic studies has contributed to the formation of the discourse of student commuters, it has contributed to the homogenising construct.

Chapter three extends this discussion, but examples of this discourse provide background. Historically, spatial mobilities were researched by Christie (2007, p.2445) who argued that those choosing to live at home and attend their local university was contrasted with normative traditional students. Living at home students were considered to be disadvantaged, excluded and impoverished (Christie, 2007, 2445). Pokorny, Holley and Kane (2017, p.543) considered the rise of the 'stayeducation', with first year students opting to commute and failing to 'belong' to university, and Brooman and Darwent (2014, p.1537) noting how students 'living at home...miss out on activities and have a lower sense of belonging'. This earlier literature contributes to the formation of the student commuter. These studies are foundational, as Foucault (1972, p.49) explains, discourses 'are practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak...discourse are about objects; they do not identify objects, they constitute them'. As chapter three examines, this discourse adds to the social production of meanings and subjectivities of commuting students. Danaher et al. (2000, p.33) consider discourse as a way that individuals in cultural fields understand knowledges, but that a field converses of 'itself to itself'. It develops, coalescing in line with dominant, potentially ideologically bound discursive formation. Discourses are constructed and redrawn by those using them (Ball, 1990, p.2). Commuting students are both constructed and confirmed in discourse and in a

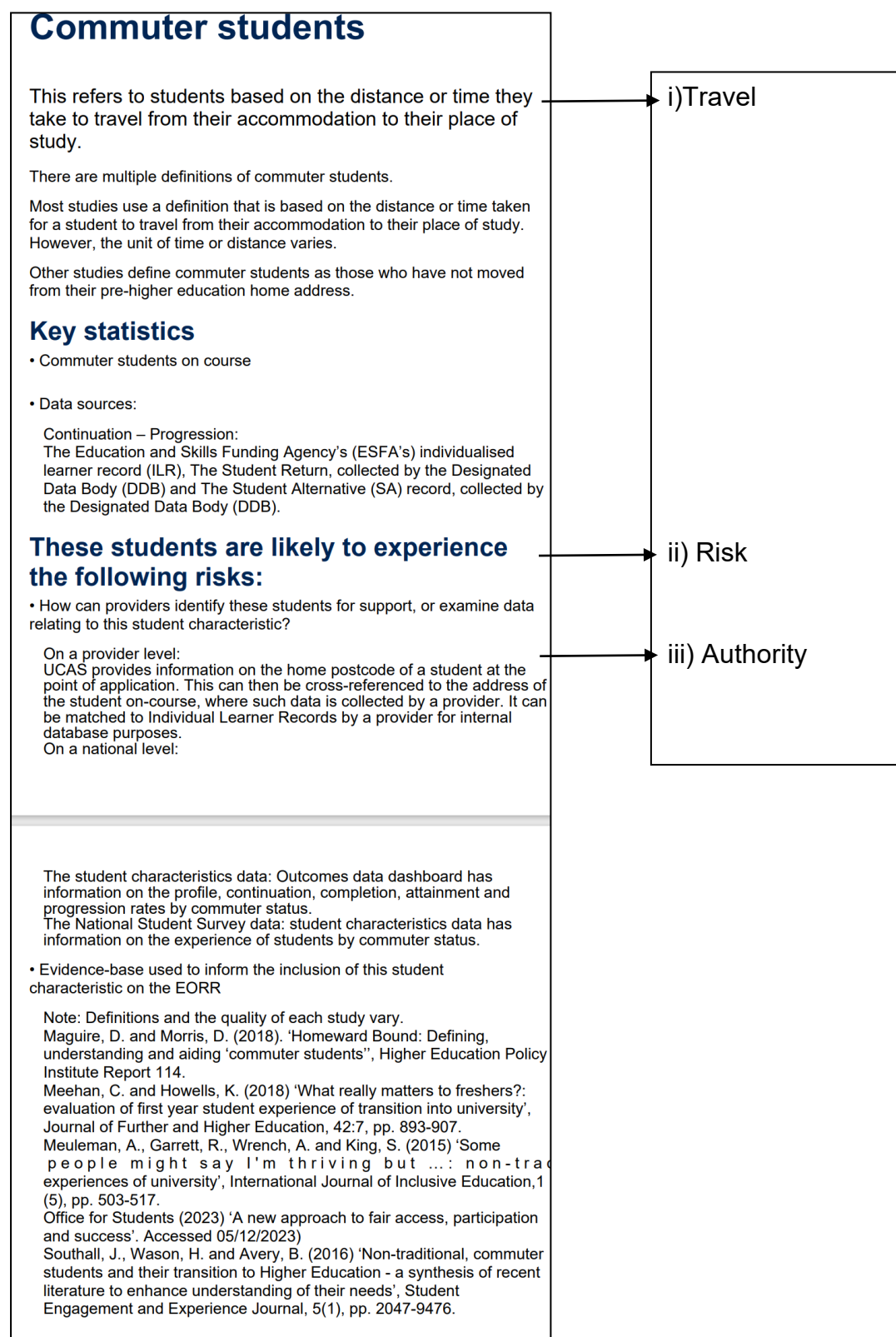
more detailed analysis in chapter three, academic discourse continues to problematise commuting students through a lens of belongingness and normative values.

Secondly, discourse and subsequent problematising is apparent in policy documents. As Knight et al. (1990, p.133) consider 'policies attempt to represent the world in factual terms so that certain kinds of practices flow 'naturally' from them'. An important, recent discourse is how the Office for Students (OfS) conceptualise commuter students (OfS, 2025) as this discourse is formational, shaping the policy narrative, but also shaping the student commuter. Analysis of the policy discourse is an important component of understanding the construct of the student commuter. The unravelling of discourse is a tool of reflective critique and demonstrates the problematisation of the commuter student.

2.7 Discourse analysis: *Characteristics of Commuter Students* (OfS, 2025) (Figure 2.2)

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) uncovers ideologies, systems and approaches and agency with social structures, providing a paradigm of deconstruction (Fairclough, 1993, p.136), adjusting this to encompass Foucauldian Discourse Analysis (FDA) adds a lens of exploring power relations. It is an approach to policy analysis, situating policy as constitutive social practice. In this instance, policy is considered as contributing to the subjectivity of a commuting student, outlining a problematising narrative. FDA brings to the fore the relationship between discursive formation and practices, how policy is enacted as a process, but more importantly how a policy discourse becomes the social production of knowledge (Foucault, 1972, p.25). Foucault conceptualises discourse as 'a set of practices which try to keep statements and utterances in circulation or try to seclude them from others and 'exclude' those statements from circulation' (Khan and MacEachen, 2021, p.5). FDA seeks opaque relationships between power and knowledge. It brings together the concept of discourse and language to elucidate the linguistic content, structure and historical specificity (Ball, 1990, p. 3), considering why, at a certain time, some things become discourse and others do not (Foucault, 1972, p.29). As within the development of institutional practices, such as policy production and enactment, social practices become normalised.

Figure 2.2 Extract from: *Office for Students (2025) Student Characteristics: Commuter Students: Equality of Opportunity Register (EORR)*



Whilst Hyatt (2013, p.837) provides a framework to examine how social actors construct social worlds, the addition of FDA adds the interconnected contextual power of 'games of truth... 'the understanding of how truth games are set up and how they are connected with power relations' (Foucault, 1984d, p.297). This framework is based on Fairclough's (1993, p.138) critical framing. There are two key approaches; the contextualisation of the discourse and the deconstruction of discourse (Hyatt, 2013, p.838-842). The contextualisation process reveals the site and scope, target audience and authority. The deconstruction of discourse considers language and the words of enactment. FDA adds questioning, and consideration of how analysis of a discourse does not reveal truths but contributes to the construction of a social world. Discourse does not determine, but is interventional and formational (Khan and MacEachen, 2021, p.5):

a. contextualisation of the discourse.

The Characteristics of Commuter Studies (Figure 2.2) is located in the Office for Students (OfS) website. This site is open access, with information for both students and 'providers'. The OfS is the regulatory body for HE in England, established by the Higher Education and Research Act 2017 (Thomas, 2022, p.104-105). It operates as an 'executive non-departmental public body, sponsored by the Department for Education' (gov.uk., ND). HE providers must register with the OfS; they are also monitored and regulated.

Driven by HE expansion, the OfS represents centralised, authoritative and governmental oversight of the university system. This is operationalised by OfS scrutiny using quality systems, accountability and regulation (Bradley and Quigley, 2023, p.1292). Yet as Oliver (2025, p.209) argues, the OfS faces a dilemma. The OfS increasingly oversees a marketplace of HE yet is positioned as both policing and managing the marketplace and as Oliver (2025, p.210) maintains, is not independent of government. A further consideration is the positioning of the student within this organisation as 'consumer'. A divisive label and one that has been rejected by those 'consumers' that it intends to protect (OfS, 2025). The OfS, therefore, positions the student consumer in a marketplace, yet assumes accountability within an obscure power relationship.

The OfS website reveals an opaque complexity of purpose. It provides authoritative content with the opening statement positioned for students: 'We want every student to have a fulfilling experience of higher education that enriches their lives and careers' (OfS, 2025). This suggests that there is potential agency in this discourse, yet it is where students are framed as needing fulfilment and enrichment, and a discourse of 'career' predominates. In an opinion piece examining OfS research into student perceptions (*Understanding the student interest* (OfS, 2025), Dickinson and Kernohan (2025, para. 4) establish further contradictions. The OfS regulatory framework is designed to protect 'the student interest', yet there is little clarity about

what this signifies, potential sanctions and their equitable application and there is an implied constructed homogenised student body.

A key historical goal of the OfS is related to widening participation. This has been an active policy and was further enacted from 2018 by *Access and Participation Plans* (APPs) to ensure that universities are meeting widening participation policy initiatives (Moore et al. 2023, p.1). The monitoring of APPs changed in 2022, by evaluating widening participation actions and considering the quality of HE and school/college partnerships. APPs have, as Thomas (2022, p.105) outlines an explicit focus on students' lifecycles, measuring access, success and progression to employment or further study. APPs frame issues without context 'of cultural and historical situatedness of institutional contexts' (Sabri, 2023, p.531). Thus, they problematise by framing without context and are hindered by ineffective evaluation of long-term policy commitment (Sabri, 2023, p.531-2). As Moore et al. (2023, p.3) finds, APP evaluation regimes remain confused, caught between external oversight or by the use of internal exploration of cause and effects. This is supported by Clements (2023, p.73) using CDA to examine APP guidance evaluation framing, and confirming that performativity predominates, with providers solely seeking to 'achieve satisfaction from the regulator' as opposed to challenge or questioning the pervasive discourse of widening participation.

The Equality of Opportunity Risk Register (EORR) was initiated in 2023 as part of regulatory guidance to ensure 'access, success and progress for underrepresented students' (OfS, 2025). This section of the website compartmentalises students into categories, noting 'risks' that may affect access and participation in HE study and providing a risk matrix. This section is targeted at 'providers' of HE. The risk matrix suggests context as potential students can be subjectified by multiple 'risks'; however, this lacks nuance. The Sutton Trust (2023: p.23) cautions that this approach enables universities to 'cherry pick access gaps which are the easiest to tackle, and risks that the sector will ignore persistent gaps'. The risk narrative constructs students sustaining a potent discourse of adjustment.

In order to meet equality of opportunity targets, 'risk' students are categorised as those 'who do not experience equality of opportunity in higher education' and 'where possible, providers should explore...who is at risk, how they may be affected and how they can contribute to addressing the risk' (OfS, 2025). There are 13 potential student characteristics, which include 'first in family' and student commuters' (OfS, 2025). Whilst social mobility may be considered as a policy driver, regulatory control is a lever, and this is evident in this discursive formation.

Hyatt (2013, p.838-839) writes about the purpose and justification of discourse through the concept of warrant, or authority. This section of the webpages attempts to establish academic and evidential warrant with reference to literature and quantitative data. This demonstrates limited research, lack of neutrality and

credibility as material is dated, with a lack of independent statistics. Adding FDA enables an unravelling of the silence or absence within this discourse

b. The deconstruction of discourse

i) Travel

Figure 2.3 demonstrates the discourse of the 'commuter student' focuses on components of travel, time and distance. Commuter students thus go from their accommodation to their place of study. The dominant norm or value is that of travel, there is no context for the rationale of this statement. It is implicitly an 'issue'. This is compounded by a further statement, 'other studies define commuter students as those who have not moved' (OfS, 2025) which highlights that actually commuter students have not moved, they are still at their pre-education address. This discourse ignores how university systems do not explicitly consider the student commuter, the geography of educational provision (Gamsu and Donnelly, 2021, p.370), and that those who live on campus are increasingly at elite universities and are becoming the minority. The lack of conceptual understanding as FDS demonstrates reveals an opaque categorisation. Student commuters in this discourse challenge the legitimate 'traditional' student, they are risky and problematic. This is suggested by reference to statistical analysis alluding to 'continuation and retention'.

ii) Risk

This is conceptualised through surveillance processes which classify commuter students into those that do not achieve, continue or progress. This reinforces a normalisation process which problematises commuter students and also instigates comparison. Risk seems to be established through quantitative data (e.g. reference to post code data) with an absence of student contribution. The document does not identify 'risk' as such, failing to capture the problematising of a student persona it is creating.

iii) Authority

Authority for establishing this problematised group is referenced to academic literature. This aligns to a social practice of seeking 'evidence-based' authority, so replicating a university narrative. It also demonstrates how discourse is formational adding to the constructed problematised narrative of students who do not live on campus. However, this narrative is constructed from a dated and indirect literature search; Maguire and Morris (2018) is based on data from 2015 and sponsored by UPP, an organisation that provides residential accommodation for university students; Meehan and Howell's (2018) study is based on data gathered between 2008 and 2012, has a focus on first year transitions and does not directly consider commuting students; Meuleman et al.'s (2014) Australian study has a focus on non-traditional students, a Bourdesian thematic analysis and a focus on first year

transitions and on campus loneliness; Southall, Wason and Avery's (2016) study is based on a small review of 25 students, and a literature scoping activity. The more current document is the OfS website and refers to APPs without further supporting data.

The discourse related to student commuters creates socially produced knowledge. Academic literature production and interpretation, and policy statements containing overt statements of monitoring and surveillance, demonstrate a series of mechanisms of accumulation of these knowledges. These enable dominant discourse and 'regimes of truth.' (Foucault, 2000c, p.131). For Foucault (2000c, p.132), a regime of truth is 'a system of ordered procedures for the production, regulation, distribution, circulation and operation of statements'. Dominant discourse as Brookfield (2005, p.138) considers holds common views, establishes rules and reflects predominant power structures. Commuter students are subject to a regime of truth that positions them as non-traditional, absent, marginalised and in deficit. These regimes of truth are considered in chapter three.

2.8 Conclusion

This chapter has explained the social theory which provides explanation and a conceptual tool to understand the construction of student commuters. The use of the theory and the use of the tool of problematisation provide illustration and ways of challenging discourse as both politized and contextual.

Chapter three reviews literature which contextualises the construction of the student commuter through three themes of social, societal and spatial precarity. Chapter three examines the historical and social context of construction of the student commuter and subsequent application of Foucauldian approaches to this construction. It considers literature relating to the social world of participants prior to entering HE and determining factors relating to staying local and commuting to university in line with the research questions.

Chapter three: Literature Review

3.1 Introduction

Chapter two explained aspects of Foucault's theoretical underpinning to examine the construction of the student commuter. The first section of chapter three contextualises this construction. It examines the reported increase of commuting students in HE, the lack of definition, incomplete sector monitoring and the uneven geographical distribution across higher education institutions.

Secondly, it considers the historically and politically contingent dispersed practices which contribute to the formation of the student commuter and subsequent problematisation. It provides context for exploration of the social worlds of students deciding to go to university and choices to decide to study locally, reporting on literature which contributes to understanding in line with the research questions. This chapter is organised thematically.

The themes are explained as **societal**, **social** and **spatial** construction of the commuting student which contributes to precarity. Precarity is a concept of insecurity and instability which foregrounds subjectivities but is uneven, embodied and individualised. Precarity is a contributory factor overshadowing the student commuter. As Holton and Finn (2018, p.2) contend, HE students who reject types of mobilities are caught in a binary of residential/non-residential, traditional/non-traditional and seen as 'missing out' or 'second best'. They are problematised as lacking belonging (Riddell et al, 2025 p.13) and characterised as risky and disengaged from a normative university experience.

The following two sections, 3.2 and 3.3 examine the grouping or construction of those who commute or travel to study at a university.

3.2 How many undergraduates are student commuters?

Traditionally undergraduates moved away from home to start a full-time residential university course (Donnelly and Gamsu, 2018, p 961; Webb and Turner, 2020, p.1320; Henderson, 2020a, p.1). Going to university was considered a rite of passage (Riddell et al. 2025, p.11) with the legacy of grammar and boarding schools underpinning the pattern of leaving home. Despite this legacy, increasingly students are commuters to their place of study. They do not reside on a campus, or in university accommodation or local rented student accommodation, nor return to a home address outside of term time. They commute to their nearest university and remain in their family home.

The number of student commuters is increasing. As early as 2007, Christie (2007, p.2446) was reporting 25% of students as 'living at home'. Stability is suggested until 2018, with Maguire and Morris (2018, p.14) estimating that around 25% of undergraduates were commuters. However, more recently Kenyon (2024, p.116) consider 40% of undergraduates as commuters, with continuing uneven UK geographical distribution. In a recent large-scale UK wide survey, 46% of

respondents identified as commuters (Blackbullion, 2026). Thomas (2020a, p.292) outlines how individual universities have much higher concentrations of commuting students. For example, a report from Brunel University (Chappell et al. 2020, p.9) has seen 'an increase in the proportion of commuter students, with 45% of undergraduates living more than five miles away from campus and 26% more than 10 miles away in 2018/19'. Kenyon (2024, p.123) reported that 76% of students attending Canterbury Christ Church University were commuters.

There remains limited empirical research, with commuting students less likely to be identified, profiled or tracked (Webb and Turner, 2020, p.1320; Riddell et al. 2025 p.3). Donnelly and Gamsu (2020, p.11) identify a higher concentration of student commuters in post-1992 universities and in the north of England. Researchers have described commuting students as 'invisible' prior to statutory monitoring practices (Turner, Webb and Pritchard, 2025, p.762). Overall, there is an absence of data relating to student commuters, including longitudinal research examining their career trajectory and social mobility.

3.3 How are commuting students defined?

There is no single definition of a university student commuter (Thomas, 2020a, p.292). This has implications for monitoring, benchmarking and analysis in literature, including policy discourse. As outlined in chapter two, in a topic briefing, the Office for Students (OfS) (2024) define commuting students as part of student characteristics analysis and subsequently 'at risk'. Student commuters are placed in a category of 'non-traditional' and problematised by complex reconfigurations of the non-traditional. A further definition is non-residential and explanations of types of mobility within a complex demographic of 'living arrangements' (Holton, 2018, p.556).

Extant literature provides a plethora of definition and potential framing. Smith et al. (2023, p.3) describe commuting students as driving to campus, as opposed to residing on campus, Hill et al. (2024, p.91) as students who remain in the family home or their own home and who live outside a university city. Stalmirska and Mellon (2022, p.2) describe commuter students as 'living at home (either in the parental house or owned or privately rented accommodation)' and Riddell et al. (2025, p.2) similarly, as students who have the same address during semester and vacation. Travel time and distance is also used as a defining factor (Hill et al. 2024, p.91), but this may not account for the potential of deep inequalities in transport infrastructure (Kenyon, 2024, p.117) which may impact upon mobilities and potential mobilities.

The uncertainty of definition may undermine approaches to support commuting students (Turner, Webb and Pritchard, 2025, p.762). Although, the binary between non-residential and residential students creates a positioning, particularly of a commuting student. Commuting is foregrounded as a characteristic of difference. Commuting students may lack the on-campus dynamic of a traditional student

identity (Kenyon, 2024, p.117) and due to their transience are not fully immersed in a university enculturation process. They are absent from the desired university experience.

There is a complexity and positioning of commuting students as non-traditional. Structural changes in HE are reflected in the reconfiguration of types of students attending university (Holton, 2018, p.557). Expanded HE has resulted in expanded student numbers with the concept of non-traditional students an unpinning feature of widening access initiatives. Christie (2007, p.2446) identifies non-traditional as 'a catch-all term generally used to refer to students who would not, in previous generations, have been expected to attend university' and Thomas (2022, p.114) considers key student characteristics as 'socio-economic background, gender, age, ethnic origin, prior educational attainment, motivation and educational pathway' as part of the measurement of student success. Non-traditional students are a construction, an intertwinement of the gathering of knowledge for the formation of the student, a patterning of subjectivities. These subjectivities correspond to mechanisms of comparison and measurements of retention and student success, and commuting students adds a further contribution to the formation of social knowledge and subsequent problematisation as outlined in chapter two. These subjectivities produce knowledge of individuals, where there remains a 'partitioning' (Foucault, 2020, p.173) and the construction of classification mechanisms.

It is the production of social knowledge of the student commuter which contributes to the construction of the non-traditional student who is problematised. However, social knowledge of student commuters, their defining non-traditional characteristics, evolves from a complexity of societal experiences. These societal experiences contribute to embodied precarity and the development of subjectivities.

Whilst sections 3.2 and 3.3 have provided understandings of the construct of the student commuter, the following sections provide historical and societal context for the formation of subjectivities. In response to research questions, this section contextualises decisions to go to university and how decisions are within social worlds, it considers the formation of subjectivities which lead to decisions to choose local offerings. Subjectivities are formed through educational dividing practices, and these overshadow subsequent preparation for HE. Further challenge is due to financial, economic and employment potential leading to economic pragmatism.

3.4 Societal precarity: the background of education and transition to higher education

a. A stratified educational system

In late modernity, those considering university entry have experienced modern compulsory schooling, subject to policy fluidity, as governments respond to complex global changes (Furlong, 2019, p.4; Wyn, 2019, p.91). As the Sutton Trust (2024, p.1) report, the attainment gap, a measure of educational outcomes and social mobility between students from higher and lower affluent backgrounds, had throughout the early 2010s, been gradually decreasing. Progress in closing the gap

slowed in 2017 and accelerated by the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, has ‘from 2020, widened considerably, with 10 years of progress now wiped out’. (The Sutton Trust, 2024, p.1).

Schooling is designed by a range of social actors, who formulate educational discourse situated in a wider context of historical, political, economic, social and cultural change. Ball and Collet-Sabé (2022, p.989) usefully invoke the contextualised historicism of schooling using the Foucauldian tool of episteme (épistémé) to critique the current schooling system. This conceptual tool is a device to examine the prevailing order of knowledge within a historical time and was devised by Foucault (1989) during his archaeological approach as outlined in chapter two. It enables an understanding of the connectedness of concepts in a field of knowledge. Ball and Collet-Sabé (2022, p.989) use this tool to trace the ‘epistemic apparatus of schooling, which overlaps and interweaves...generating certain discourses, and the modalities of subjectification which arise from them’. This enables an understanding of the techniques of schooling and an ‘observational knowledge, a clinical knowledge...a certain technical knowledge’ and subsequent outcomes which contribute to the construction of the student commuter (Foucault, 2000a, p.63).

Ball and Collet-Sabé (2022, p.989) suggest that the historical dimensions of the school episteme are a set of institutional practices to create ‘nation-state subjects, productive and useful’. Policies are formed as discourse and this is operationalised as educational practice, considered normatively as a panacea for stalling economic and technological development (Ball, 2017, p.27; Reay, 2017, p.326; West and Wolfe, 2021, p.24). Education policy development has become a construction of free-market choices, with subsequent piecemeal centralisation of educational policy statement and enactment, with quasi devolution of policy changes, resulting in a fragmented and ideologised education system (Ball, 2017, p.37; West and Wolfe, 2021, p.25). Foucault (2000b, p.230) would argue that this policy discourse creates ‘the established domains in which the practice of true and false can be made at once ordered and pertinent’.

Ball and Collet-Sabé (2022, p.988) argue that schooling, as an institution of normalisation, ‘locates, evaluates and labels in an entanglement of physical, cultural, cognitive and emotional elements...it hails and labels us’. Schooling creates, for individuals, an aggregation of discursive currency of qualification and performance categorisation. These processes of disciplinary power, enacting ‘a system of representation that constructs regimes of truths for who we are and what we may become’ (Ball and Collet-Sabé, 2022, p.988) were outlined in chapter two. As Foucault (2000b, p.231) exemplifies, ‘discipline isn’t the expression of an “ideal type”...it’s the generalisation and interconnection of different techniques themselves, designed in response to localised requirements’.

Young adults must navigate through a system which problematises individuals who seek to achieve normative credentials. Barker and Hoskins (2021, p.108) argue that as soon as children start formal education, 'they experience a social-class filtering effect that shapes and determines their school experience'. Young adults' aspirations and sustaining influences are linked to possibilities, and these are shaped early. However, educational policy has driven social congestion and competition, particularly in entry to university, without substantially improving fair access in local contexts (Sumner, 2022, p.38). These knowledges of individuals produce a 'set of universals that articulate and normalise one way of being...the modern school episteme ignores, excludes or stigmatises other possibilities of being (or diversities) of culture, class, gender, sexuality, indigeneity, diversity, ethnicity, ability etc.' (Ball and Collet-Sabé, 2022, p.992). As Crozier and Davies (2007, p.311) suggest, schooling is a site of verifying inequalities and Foucault (2020, p.227), the operation of disciplinary power as to 'characterise, classify, specialise; they distribute along a scale, around a norm, hierarchise individuals in relation to one another and, if necessary, disqualify and invalidate'.

A final dimension is legitimacy of policy through expertise and moral judgements, operationalised as a discourse of school reforming, accounting and managing. This is the 'science of the state', as overt surveillance of the mechanism (Foucault, 1996, p.42). Jones (2016a, p.145) considers this 'a new paradigm of research and policy, that of school effectiveness and improvement'. These new technologies reflect and identify evidential effects of policy enactment, and the improved management of school's capacity to deliver educational outcomes. However, whilst measurement of outcomes and a focus on standards addresses perceived issues, these technologies do not attend to issues of failing schools, social inequalities in the educational system and inequities in entry to school. As Ball and Collet-Sabé, (2022, p.994) argue, this discourse necessarily filters, but legitimises and as Jones (2016a, p.169) exemplifies, may lead to policy fragmentation with Ball (2018, p.207) agreeing. A reform agenda and the discourse of modernisation has led to educational policy decisions subject to centralised regulation through government. However, localised operational policy enactments are decentralized. Educational expertise is entrusted to those able to enact professionalised knowledge and local communities are considered immaterial. Brighouse and Waters (2022: p. 74) concur, identifying that the Department for Education communicates directly with schools in unprecedented levels and that there is 'a complex and intriguing web of policy relationships'. West and Wolfe (2021, p.23-24) consider educational policy developments related to the development of academy schools, arguing that a fragmented system of secondary education raises issues of local democratic accountability and the creation of opaque school admissions policies. Academisation can be seen as the 'age of the "examining" school (Foucault, 2020, p.187), where pupils are assessed at every stage including initial admission to school.

This complex sorting through systematic organisation creates objectified states and forms compliance to potential norms of local opportunity. Routes to HE are negotiated for many within restricted local opportunities in post-compulsory education and preparation for HE. These localised opportunities overshadow potential.

b. Post-compulsory education

Hodgson and Spours (2020, p.128) examine the complexities of a fractured secondary schooling and opportunity landscapes which may lead to a myriad of educational routes after age sixteen as young adults have navigated their way through a diverse, marketized, competitive education system (Pring, 2012, p.748). In general, there are more young people, aged 16-18 years old continuing to participate in full time education and this continues to increase, with around 47% studying in school sixth form or college and 37% at a general further education (FE) or specialist college (The Sutton Trust, 2021b, p.3).

Young adults' transitions to HE is related to their preparation and qualifications. Whilst there is a normalised discourse of a trajectory to HE, for many, the gaining of the correct traditional credentials becomes fractured. The Sutton Trust (2021b: p.8) identify that 'it is particularly between the ages of 16-18 when young people from disadvantaged and more advantaged backgrounds separate into different types of education, with FE tending to serve more the disadvantaged'. Those studying in a further education college are more likely to study vocational qualifications, and as the Sutton Trust (2021b, p.2-3) note, whilst there are potentially longer term positive labour market outcomes for those with lower level qualifications, the advantages of studying at a FE college and progressing to HE for those from more disadvantaged background is not conclusive. The Sutton Trust (2021b, p.4) does establish that those studying at sixth form, either school or college, mainly study 'A' Levels, whilst those at FE colleges study a variety of qualifications (including 'A' Levels) and are less likely to enter HE. This is confirmed by Dickinson, Rubio and Hughes (2022, p.25) who established, those studying level three vocational routes, as opposed to conventional 'A' Levels, were less likely to apply to university. In a large cohort 2019 study, 22% of students taking higher level vocational courses applied to university compared to 71% of those taking the conventional 'A' level route (DfE, 2019).

Rogers and Spour's (2020, p.1243) research identified that progression routes towards HE for young adults from middling and lower economic status remain complex, as these groups are more vulnerable to restricted localised opportunities including employment, further and HE potential. In addition, there is confusion about the purpose and currency of different educational qualifications

c. Choice and careers

Career decision-making for those considering HE entry is affected by opportunity structures, locally and nationally and whilst Dickinson, Rubio and Hughes (2022,

p.48) consider pragmatic rationality a key feature of decision-making, types of schooling, experiences of dividing practices and constructions of objectified status overshadow and create precarious choice-making. Mann et al. (2024, p.3) establishes that students from lower socio-economic backgrounds engage less in career development, and in England, career expectations are 'aligned poorly with patterns of labour market demand'. Despite policy decisions promoting widening access to HE, Quyoum et al. (2021, p.54) in their empirical study concur, identifying the importance of information, advice and guidance in a stratified educational system. However, there is variability in consistency and opportunity to access guidance due to long term policy change (Jones, 2016a, p.169). The Social Mobility Commission (2021, para.15) identify significant gaps in careers guidance provision noting geographical discrepancies in availability of opportunity and that "young people from poorer families often 'under-match on university courses".

As Dickinson, Rubio and Hughes (2022, p7) consider, careers education, particularly related to vocational education is 'patterned'. In a stratified system, those with lower attainment are directed towards vocational education. This is in line with normalising judgements, foundational from schooling which produces distribution. This sorting means a division and subsequent exclusion as Foucault (2020, p. 184) argues as individuals move into 'the membership of a homogeneous social body'.

When researching further education students, Quyoum et al. (2021, p.55-57) identify the implications of patterning, for those considering HE. They established that FE students have awareness of advice agencies in college but remained disengaged. Respondents reported that college staff devalued their family's opinions about HE and so avoided accessing further support. Information was considered generic and impersonal, conflicting with students' constructed complex subjectivities. Thompson (2020, p.912) confirms this challenge, noting the complexities of career decision-making, citing intersectionality as a key factor. Dickinson, Rubio and Hughes (2022, p.11) also establish insufficient guidance, identifying how young adults require confidence and 'tools' to negotiate advice and gain agency to act on it.

Quyoum et al.'s (2021, p.67) study reports how respondents saw others as 'chosen for university'. As Foucault (2020, p.194) considers, young adults are acting on their 'fabricated selves', through the technologies of schooling which have created individuals who have experienced normalising and comparison judgements. They use self-surveillance in an attitude of traditional compliance. Thompson (2020, p.912) identifies further ambiguities between the potential for advice for certain respondents, as decisions about university also focused on a balance between longer term stable employment opportunities, accruing debt and managing financial risk taking. Overall, potential HE students navigate local complexities within their objectified normalised potential.

Quyoun et al.'s (2021, p.67-68) study demonstrates that young adults considering university need to be malleable and responsive (Lundahl and Brunila, 2020, p.188) to potential opportunities that require individualised navigation. This is supported by Thompson's (2020, p.915) empirical study which focussed on school leavers in Wolverhampton (West Midlands). He established the importance of a framework of advice, as decisions were identified as 'ad hoc', arguing for a 'scaffolding' approach which takes into account the complex routes into adulthood (Thompson, 2020, p.922). Henderson et al.'s (2019, p.5) study confirms the importance of information provision, particularly for first in family students as there will be gaps and often asymmetrical understandings of the quality differences amongst differing universities, so students may not consider the contextual potential of university admissions systems. As the Social Mobility Commission (2021) and Dickinson, Rubio and Hughes (2022, p.49) establish, school pupils and college students receive guidance that is dependent on the school or college they attend, whether it has a sixth form, and lastly, teacher's or lecturer's perceptions of their academic ability.

d. apprenticeships as a route to higher education

It is evident that some young adults embark on apprenticeships prior to entry to HE. There is little academic literature that explores the use of an apprenticeship qualification as an entry route to HE. As Sodhi (2026, p.441) comments, there is an absence of the 'theorisation of apprenticeships as part of a holistic social justice infrastructure'.

Apprenticeships were substantially revived in 1994 becoming politically important as a policy approach to improving employability and upskilling the workforce. Development from 2017 led to the requirement that larger employers contribute to an apprenticeship levy leading to expansion in higher level apprenticeships through degree apprenticeships (Ryan, 2020, p.105). However, this evolution combined with an overall decline in the number of apprenticeships has mainly affected lower level apprenticeships, with an increase at higher levels (degree apprenticeships) (The Sutton Trust, 2022b, p.4). As Sodhi (2026, p.444) confirms, apprenticeships have long been positioned as 'second-tier options' for those in need of practical pathways.

As Hodgson and Spours (2020, p.136) outline, apprenticeships are not well understood, and young adults often drift onto apprenticeships due to a lack of opportunity as opposed to affirmative decision-making. The Sutton Trust (2022b) also established that young adults may complete multiple apprenticeships. Although Ryan (2020, p.106) identifies apprenticeships as potential drivers of absolute social mobility, they are not necessarily a secure route for entry to university as they are dominated by lower vocational level provision, a 'thin' curriculum, potentially lengthy training (Ryan, 2020, p.107-8) with an opaque application process (Dickinson, Rubio and Hughes, 2022, p.51). As Dickinson, Rubio and Hughes (2022, p.7) indicate, apprenticeships are not 'a significant option for many young adults', establishing the complex and localised variety of transition routes and a lack of recognition with

university applications. The advent of higher level degree apprenticeships as identified by the Social Mobility Commission (2021) and the Sutton Trust (2022b, p.4) has continued educational stratification. Those living in areas of post-industrial decline are least likely to benefit from degree apprenticeship, with 5% of degree level apprentices from lower social economic backgrounds (Sodhi, 2026, p.444). Those from lower-socio economic backgrounds remain in lower-paid sectors, driven by private providers of hospitality, retail and social care.

Hodgson and Spours (2020, p.137) suggest that apprenticeships are a feature of neo-liberal policies to de-regulate labour markets. For young adults, they create insecure working and promote lower labour costs with decisions about embarking on an apprenticeship framed within socio-structural constraints, such as localised opportunity (Atkins, 2017, p.642). Ryan and Lőrinc's (2018, p.764) empirical study of apprentices in London reveal similar narratives for those choosing apprenticeships which relate to constructed learner identity, problematising educational policies and structural constraints. In this study young adults identified feasibility and lower risk as contributing factors in their decision-making, with earning a wage, a key driver (Ryan and Lőrinc 2018, p.765).

Apprenticeship as a route to HE is precarious as The Sutton Trust (2022b, p.36) report high levels of 'non-achievement and early dropout'. This report considers overall improvement in the quality of apprenticeships, but this provision has not 'benefitted disadvantaged groups' and thus does not strongly contribute to improving social mobility' (The Sutton Trust, 2022b, p.28).

Potential students have experienced precarious trajectories towards HE, negotiating complexity, gathering credentials and managing subjectivities within localised opportunities. Educational policies and practices construct potential student entry to university and this is within a landscape of opportunity which is mediated by classification and spatial potential. This provides a background to choices to stay local.

3.5 Societal precarity: pragmatic approaches to the cost of higher education

A second theme of societal precarity and the decision to commute is the cost of university. Mobilities are impacted by the cost of HE and wider societal pressures. This political and historical context of societal precarity contributes to the construction of the student commuter who necessarily adapts to financial precarity. Commuting, as opposed to residing at university, reflects a pragmatic and instrumental response to the personal cost of HE. Precarity is manifested in financial and employment decision-making. Extant literature highlights the advent of changes to student funding as a prominent feature of decisions to engage in economic pragmatism and manage opportunity costs (Webb and Turner, 2020, p.1330; Stalmirska and Mellon, 2022, p.4).

Funding for HE has been subject to policy change since 1990 and has 'culminated in a funding system predicated on student loan debt' (Callender, 2022, p. 134). In

2019-2020, 95% of the 1.5 million undergraduates in England took out a government-funded student loan (Boatman et al. 2022, p.200) and in 2018, England had the highest average student loan debt at graduation across OECD countries (OECD, 2019). London Economics (2024, p.10) report that 'in England most of the cost of higher education is borne by the student/graduate.'

Boatman et al. (2022, p.200) perceive student loans as 'cost sharing', an investment in HE, thus addressing socio-economic inequalities to ensure that liquidity constraints are not an access barrier (Callender, 2022, p.125). However, the change of policy means the costs of university is loaded onto students and families as a regressive fiscal approach (Evans and Donnelly, 2018, p.1270). The cost to students and families is ostensibly offset by the private benefit/graduate premium of long term potential earnings, with loans presented as an 'instrument to achieve fairness' (Callender, 2022, p.141). Secondly, repayment regimes are only required when debtors' incomes are sufficient to facilitate payment as they are income contingent (Chapman, Dearden and Doan, 2020, p.87). There is a balance for students between repayment systems, their earnings and cost of living. Callender (2022, p.132) estimates that 83% of students will not repay their loans before their debt is forgiven.

Potential students conceptualise loans and debt in different ways and according to Callender and Melis (2022, p.481) and Jones (2016b, p.278) there is 'statistically significant, class-based difference in attitudes towards debt'. Jones (2016b, p.280) and Evans and Donnelly (2018, p.1272) suggest that there is complexity of participation decisions by potential HE students. Jones (2016b, p.280) identifies that paying to go to university is framed as a 'loan' but perceptions are of 'debt', and non-participation in HE is often blamed on individual young adults, not making appropriate choices, as well as governments not providing appropriate messages. Acceptance of a loan is as a possible action but promotes an action of 'responsibilised' choice-making as the discourse of acceptance of student loans and HE emerge as the norms.

Jones' (2016b, p.283-5) study of potential undergraduates from lower participation in HE schools, demonstrate confusion and suspicion. Participants expressed misunderstandings strongly linked to risk, repayment of loans, debt acquisition and potential graduate employment. There was rejection of university based on an anxiety of 'fitting in', finding long term well-paid employment and strong debt aversion. A more nuanced study of young adults' attitudes by Danvers and Hinton-Smith (2021, p.70) identified how debt was an 'embodied worry' caught within concepts of aspiration and progression. Callender and Melis (2022, p.481) find that those students who are debt averse, attempt to use strategies to minimise debt, and have fewer positive attitudes to HE and Callender (2022, p.150) reports that 'student loans can curtail student choices'.

Jones (2016b, p.285) and Reay (2021, p.56) report that students from lower socio-economic backgrounds reject university for many reasons, for example, lifestyle aversion to university is intertwined with cost, and cost is used as a justification for rejection. This is similar to anxieties related to failure, self-doubt and negative self-appraisal, where payment is linked to risk and potential attrition (Danvers and Hinton-Smith, 2021, p.114). Harrison et al. (2013, p.23) considered this a 'debt-resigned front' which masks academic self-doubt and negative self-appraisal, as a result of dividing practices. Interestingly, their studies also demonstrate how some participants consider self-fulfilment, status enhancement and a chance to be socially mobile as potential outcomes of HE and are less averse to loans. These views are also supported by Evans and Donnelly (2018, p.1275) who established that potential students consider debt instrumentally, as part of their human capital development, recognising the dearth of local opportunities and a need to gain advantage. Their work is supported by Boatman et al. (2022, p.212) who established a toleration of loans for participants in their study and Danvers and Hinton-Smith (2021, p.109) explore the concept of 'apprehension of risk' and the concept of the 'deserving consumer'. These studies identify complexities in engagement with student loans, debt aversion and anxieties related to precarity and the positioning of students as consumers in a HE market. Danvers and Hinton-Smith's (2021, p.108) study identifies the concept of debt as not 'an abstract concept', the anticipated risk of debt shapes everyday practicalities.

Both Jones (2016b, p.290) and Evans and Donnelly (2018, p.1277) report that participants consider enrolling only at their local university. There is a recognition of few alternatives in a fractured labour market, where further credentials are required and with a resignation of incurring debt. Evans and Donnelly (2018, p.1278) argue that there is a legitimisation of going to university and accepting student loans as part of policy rhetoric. They consider this a discourse of subjective positioning where potential students are expected to self-invest with student loans part of the 'self-creating and entrepreneurial self which seeks to maximise their chances of success' (Evans and Donnelly, 2018, p.1270). As Callender and Melis (2022, p.479) discuss, policy discourse positions student finance as the ability for students to choice-make as rational agents. Original policy discourse emphasised the potential of choice-making: 'we want to ensure that the new student finance regime supports student choice, and in turn student choice drives competition, including on price' (BIS, 2011, p.19). Ultimately, this rhetoric ignores the contextual factors, such as socio-economic backgrounds, resources and local landscape influencing prospective student choice making and embodied anxieties related to risk taking. White and Lee (2020, p.829) add that decision-making related to localism is also intersected by an absence of the recognition of costs of travel, so proximity becomes a defining factor in decision-making of applying to a local university. They establish that where students live near a 'high ranking' university there is a '12% increase in the probability of applying to those institutions' (White and Lee, 2020, p. 829) and students with lower incomes

restrict their university applications geographically to potentially a 10km radius to minimise cost.

a. Economic pragmatism

An effect of the perception and reality of student loans is to study locally, engaging in economic pragmatism as identified by student commuters (Evans and Donnelly, 2018, p.1278; Callender, 2022, p.135). Debt is normative, seen as part of a self-improvement narrative, but shapes university entry, with staying local and commuting a way to mitigate cost. There may be an impact on choice of subject and institution. Prospective HE students are caught between agency and reality as a result of structural opportunity, normative discourse and material constraints. Harris et al. (2021, p.133) challenge the normative discourse related to student loans, considering them as a form of symbolic violence, as loan strategies are legitimised without recourse, establishing the hidden effects on student outcomes and psychological well-being. Harris et al. (2021, p.135) and Callender and Davis (2024, p.944) consider student loans as problematised, with findings that graduates have mixed views of student loans with dependency and internalised indebtedness at the extreme of anxieties which continue to overshadow financial decision-making.

Callender and Melis (2022, p.481) identify pragmatic strategies to minimise costs, such as proximity to home, and consider that student mobility is a major dimension of inequalities in HE. A further impact of managing cost is seeking employment. Finn, Ingram and Allen (2021, p.245) argue that some students will be able to maximise their returns on loans by choice-making instrumentally to choose higher ranking universities, and subjects with a more secure graduate premium. Although others choose vocational courses in the public sector as students consider these roles have higher employment potential. Callender and Melis (2022, p.482) find a link between those students who minimise costs, as more likely to transition from further education colleges, study vocational subjects and are interested in university for financial as opposed to social reasons. This may subsequently affect employment opportunities. Callender et al. (2020, p.111) argue that 'the average pecuniary benefits of HE rarely account for all costs including opportunity costs, tuition fees and the long-term servicing of student loan debt which eats into the graduate lifetime earning premium'. They note the lack of longitudinal studies exploring the link of long term student loan debt with impacts on health, capacity, home buying and social and economic mobility.

3.6 Societal precarity: employment and cost of living

Young adults have experienced a decline in the stability of employment including an impact on graduate employment (Goring et al. 2023, p.3). This instability may be a strong factor in choosing to go to university, course choice and studying locally. Kelly (2017, p.59), MacDonald (2019, p.156) and Nico (2021, p.201) characterise the

economic consequences of post-industrialisation for young adults as increasing instability of employment, manifested as low paid, short-term and zero hours contracts, as well as underemployment and credentialism, with overall degradation of employment opportunities. Precarious employment predominantly affects those in lower socio-economic groups. However, recent studies also indicate that graduates, and middle-class young adults are also affected (Green and Henseke, 2020, p.182-3). Whilst instability of employment is historically common for young adults as they embark on first careers, MacDonald (2019, p.157) argues that precariousness in employment has increased. Rubery et al. (2018, p.510) consider precarity as normalised, with young adults trapped in financial insecurity. They usefully define the nature of precarious work as an absence of the standards of an employment relationship, such as social protections and 'is associated with low pay, insufficient and variable hours, short term contracts and limited social protection rights' (Rubery et al. 2018, p.510). Alberti et al. (2018, p. 449) agree, identifying the 'subjective feeling of precarity', emphasising the issues of lost recognition and lack of social integration for individuals within communities. This leads to individualised and embodied insecurity both subjectively and objectively.

Overall, Devany et al. (2020, p.86) suggest that for many there is an experience of a 'web of precarity', navigating through labour and housing markets with insecurity impacting on aspirations, choice and agency. Berry and McDaniel (2022, p.323) add that precarious labour market conditions disproportionately affect young adults. Kelly (2017, p.64) following from Bauman (2011) develops the concept of liquidity, suggesting the need for hyper flexibility where the self becomes the enterprise, where moral imperatives of work and the self inevitably conflict, as responsibility for self-work is already mortgaged through precarity, risk strategies and debt evasion. Precarious work, before and during university study, is now a common experience.

In a large student survey, Neves et al. (2025, p.11) indicate how cost-of-living concerns dominates perceptions of the value of university and the ONS (2023) confirms students reporting a rise in their living costs. As well as a substantial increase in the cost-of-living there are changes to how undergraduate seek paid work. Historically, undergraduate students have been largely measured as working solely out of term time. Neves et al. (2025, p.31) report an increase in undergraduates 'who work for pay during term time' establishing that 68% of undergraduate participants were working at an average of 13.1 hours per week. They also establish that students who work for pay are often those with additional responsibilities, 'with extremely high numbers of commuters and carers also in paid employment, with only a small majority of these cohorts who do not work' (Neves et al. 2025 p.33). Jones and Bell (2025, p.3) note a continued pressure for undergraduates who increasingly need to work to maintain basic living standards and to fund their studies. Francis et al. (2025, p.684) note that combined studying and working creates potential longer term financial problems for students but also that 'institutions are challenged by the needs of these students...who might need

extra academic support, flexibility and resources'. It is interesting to note a change in emphasis, with a problematisation of the commuting student.

3.7 Spatial mobilities and precarity: geographical constraints and choice of university

Commuting students experience different mobilities to university and interact with university spaces in differing ways. Firstly, in choice of university, subjectivity and perceptions of local mobilities with subsequent implications for course choice and secondly, in boundary crossing and resolving societal and spatial narratives.

A common and persistent discourse related to commuter students is the perception of their immobility venturing to their local university and their adoption has the addition of an implied comparison with traditional students. Donnelly and Gamsu (2022, p. 1220) consider HE student spatial mobilities, identifying a contributory factor as 'an historically uneven spatial patterning of economic development and prosperity within the UK'. This is intertwined with ethnicities and marginalisation. They argue that a legacy of post-industrial decline overshadow 'the spatial imaginaries of young people in terms of how they relationally construct dominant (for example, London) and dominated places' (Donnelly and Gamsu, 2022, p. 1220). The concept of 'spatial imaginaries' add to understandings of how places have ascribed meanings and are relationally constructed, so challenge the deficit of immobility linked to local student commuters.

The stratification of HE affects commuter numbers, with elite universities continuing to predominantly attract traditional students, intent on forming adult identities by residing on campus (Thomas, 2020a, p.293). Gamsu and Donnelly's (2021, p.371) study uses models of socio-spatial trajectories to identify how middle-class parents are agile in identifying prestigious schools for their children, and as Ball (2018, p.226) adds, crossing boundaries to do so. This is replicated in transition to university. There are 'distinct socio-spatial hierarchies of schools and universities and geographies of class formation' (Gamsu and Donnelly, 2021, p.373), and where 'social class is intimately bound up within conceptualisations of place' (Donnelly and Gamsu, 2022, p.1233). Gamsu and Donnelly's (2021, p.372) study considers the geography of education in relation to uneven economic development and class formation and identify how student transition is closely linked to cultural and regional economic divisions and in some cases, the flow to certain universities which creates regional boundaries. This cultural and regional consideration adds to the complexity and unique context of student commuters. Henderson (2020a, p.3) also notes 'geographical inequalities in the provision of HE which intersect with societal narratives of student mobilities', considering the importance of place, with strong connections between social class and mobile educational trajectories.

Student commuters are bounded by contextual opportunity as there are disparities between university options within an uneven geographical distribution of HE (White and Lee, 2020, p.826; Donnelly and Gamsu, 2022, p.1218). The limiting of opportunity due to spatial differences remains entrenched in the UK (Haldane, 2024)

and recent studies demonstrate how post-industrial communities are often 'cold spots' for HE. As White and Lee (2020, p.838) and Renton et al. (2024, para.6) examine, place-based HE infrastructure is not part of HE policy and 'there has been no government body in England with responsibility for addressing cold spots in higher education'. Baines (2024, p.9) establishes that where there is a distinct 'cold spot' potential students stay local. Student commuters may be bounded by a local opportunity landscape, which may mean less choice of degree, type, approach and availability. These structural inequalities contribute to precarity as they bound mobility, restricting opportunity to local offerings. This adds to the narrative that commuting students are often pragmatic in their choice of course or provider (Turner, Webb and Pritchard, 2025, p.770).

Despite a unitary system of HE, a binary system of pre- and post-1992 status is prevalent (Reay, 2018, p.531). Post-1992 universities are associated with diverse and local student populations and vocational provision. Croxford and Raffe (2015, p.1625) and Sumner (2022, p.38) indicate a continuity with the hierarchical structuring of universities. This has an implication of the social demography of students who socially select their university 'with entry requirements as a proxy for quality' Sumner (2022, p.40).

a. Spatial mobilities and precarity: In two worlds

Student commuters experience different physical mobilities, yet as Saker et al. (2025, p.5) indicate, there is lack of qualitative research regarding the lived experience of commuting spaces. Extant literature suggests longer commuting times contribute to persistence with studies (Hallam, 2023, p.374) and commuting students experience mobile spaces which may include multiple modes of transport, cost of travel, time and convenience (Saker et al. 2025, p.14). Saker et al. (2025, p.15) also add that those who travel may contribute to tensions between the idealised educational engagement and the reality of managing an enculturation process and the surfacing of a deficit model of those who choose to commute.

As Webb and Turner (2020, p.1329) and Smith et al. (2023, p.1) consider, commuting students are moving between and through different worlds whilst constructed as a homogenous group. The post-modern student identity, as Hill et al. (2024, p.93) establishes, is hybridised, subject to the re-making of interactions, as the student encounters the university as a construction. Hill et al.'s (2024, p.92) study reveals complexities of student commuters, who have different ways of engaging with university systems, and who construct themselves within liminal spaces and managing a 'blurring' of boundaries. The reach of a university is within 'multiple digital, leisure, domestic and learning spaces, indicating that the geographical, cultural and emotional boundaries of the university as a place and as a set of interactions extend beyond campus' (Hill et al. 2024, p.107). Correspondingly, Kenyon's (2024, p.125) study situates commuter students as unique, but often negotiating feelings of disconnection as outliers in their local and familiar space. Kenyon's (2024, p.125) study examines experiences of commuting students as

being within liminal spaces, as caught in a transition or transient and experiencing cultural exclusion. University spaces are normatively constructed for traditional students and commuting students are transient.

Holton and Finn (2018, p.7), whilst rejecting the binary of on campus/not on campus, utilise a model of mobility in university spaces. They consider a 'mobile dwelling framework' which is intersected by the relationship and emotional intensity of work, study and home through a lens of feelings, pauses and belonging within geographical spaces. Holton and Finn's (2018, p.5) study is pertinent, particularly in considering belonging in their analysis of living at home yet commuting students. Students can feel belonging to a university without presence, they can dwell and interact with their university construct remotely, going to university physically in a known space also changes the relationship with the spaces. This can be contrasted with the 'on campus' student who may have less interaction with unknown spaces outside the university campus. Commuter students and on campus students have different mobilities and boundary crossings, and dwell in different spaces. This enables students to engage in different types of mobilities and has implications for all students in how they negotiate and connect to 'the spaces in-between place and mobilities' (Holton and Finn, 2018, p.20). However, as Kenyon (2024, p.127) outlines commuter students are often in a 'tense' space or 'disconnected', as commuting can be tedious and stressful, and boundary crossing contributes to anxieties as students with multiple roles have intersecting commitments and identities. Student commuter mobilities, thus, may be more challenging.

Austin and Sharr (2021, p.70) explore the dynamic and evolving post-modern university estate and the development of space, considering it as a 'remaking' in line with the neoliberalism economy of marketisation and consumerism. They argue that universities have invested heavily in the 'lounge space'. These are quasi study spaces, 'semi-private spaces, replicating a networking networked social space' (Austin and Sharr, 2021, p.81) imbued with technologies, they simulate a consumerist economy of visibility and opportunity. Saker et al. (2025, p.4) contrast the redefined spaces as inviting the 'exemplary consumer' with a constant marketisation using branded facilities and Austin and Sharr (2021, p.84) where 'study is promoted as an experience to be facilitated and consumed, to see and be seen'. This contrasts with the reported needs of student commuters who seek sheltering, practical, well-equipped, free social spaces (Chappell et al. 2020, p.29; Riddell et al. 2025, p.153). Commuter students request dedicated spaces where needs are recognised (Chappell et al, 2020, p. 31). Tett et al. (2025, p.489) suggestions lack of affirmation through space is exclusionary and normative assumptions of needs of students and particularly marginalised or non-traditional as politicised and cultural. Saker et al. (2025, p. 4) recognises that commuter students use spaces to support the prioritisation of academic studies as opposed to a perception of how students may use spaces. Thomas (2020a, p.299) concurs with a noted priority of academic work, seeking quieter, academic spaces.

Commuting students are attempting to transgress objectified states, whilst they may have potential mobilities, the complex objectified individual struggles across multiple boundaries. Sumner's (2022, p.49) qualitative study outlines how those entering a post-1992 university reach for an 'educational sanctuary', and risk to mobilities is minimised by localism or the familiar. This was 'mediated by their class background...with similar dispositions and values to theirs' and this was intersected by the convenience of and familiarity with a university campus (Sumner, 2022, p.42). Student commuters are agentic in their decisions to choose the familiar, accepting aligned value systems. These minimise risks both financially and in experiencing and interacting with local known spaces.

3.8 Social precarity: the discursive formation of the commuter student

As outlined in chapter two, the characteristics of commuter students are framed overtly in Office for Students discourse. This policy, which identifies commuter students as 'at risk' without context, substantial evidence or a clear narrative contributes to the discursive formation of the commuter student. Foucault (1990a, p.101) examined the use of discourse as a primary arena where power manifests, as an instrument of power, whilst cautioning that discourse is fragmentary and unstable, and can be 'a hindrance and a stumbling block'. The discourse of the HE student, a complexity of statements which coalesce to provide a construction(s) of the student body as an expression of the subjectification process, contributes to the objectified commuter student who may share other 'non-traditional' characteristics (Thomas, 2020a, p.291). There are key themes which contribute to this discourse, and these include the 'deserving' student who has benefitted from widening participation, policies attending to social mobility and the appropriate 'responsibilised', aspirational, imaginary HE student (Danvers and Hinton-Smith, 2021, p.115). These themes are formational, and adding to these are the characteristics of difference, such as 'non-traditional' and 'first in family or first-generation'. This model of both deserving and imaginary can be contrasted with the problematised commuter student who is reported as struggling to belong, achieve and present themselves normatively in an anticipated imagined student persona. As Thomas (2020a, p.291) reports, commuter students do not meet expected norms of engagement nor academic success, they do not participate in enhancement or social activities. Their lack of perceived engagement is seen as contributory to their lack of academic success and narratives remain 'deficit-focused' (Turner, Webb and Pritchard, 2025, p.762).

a. widening participation

Access to university for many resides within a discourse of aspiration, widening access and social mobility and these terms remain political and contested (Rainford, 2023, p.415). This discourse is focused on expanding entry to HE for under-represented groups and includes policy approaches, policy enactment and 'governments emphasising their success in both increasing HE participation and closing a participation gap between rich and poor' (Danvers and Hinton-Smith, 2021,

p.99). Kenyon (2024, p.116) suggests that ‘widening enrolment alone does not guarantee equality of experience or outcome’, with insufficient adaptability in current provision for an increasingly heterogeneous student body. Despite long term policies of widening participation, for students from economically or socially disadvantaged backgrounds, HE remains less accessible (Danvers and Hinton-Smith, 2021, p.99; Kaidong Yu, 2022, p.1116). In recognition, Negrea and Gartland (2025, p. 4) call for a ‘reconceptualization of widening participation that adopts a holistic, student-lifestyle approach rather than narrow, entry-focused interventions.’ This is in response to policy churn with a plethora of initiatives ranging from outreach work (Rainford, 2023, p. 412) to accountability metrics through the Office for Students and APPs, as discussed in Chapter two.

Widening participation initiatives take many forms, with Negrea and Gartland’s (2025, p.15) systematic review identifying potentially 24 categories of under-represented groups in HE. Counter to this concept, Brooks and O’Shea (2021, p.24-7) reimagines the construct of the student through the lens of student as learner, consumer, citizen, worker and socialite. However, this ignores the contextual shaping and the construction of the widening participation student, subject to opportunity but also persistent inequalities. This imaginary also sets the aside the notion of the student as potential parent, care-giver, work experience volunteer, full or part time worker during study and commuting (Jacklin and Le Riche, 2009, p.735). Danvers and Hinton-Smith’s (2021, p.115) study demonstrates there is an ‘imaginary of the widening participation student’ and how measurements of disadvantage, perceptions of place and allocation of opportunity contribute to a discourse of ‘deservedness’. They consider widening participation efforts as lacking context, with a perception of the importance of individualised responsibility and aspiration intersecting with deep assumptions of the positioning of value and the consumerist model of HE (Danvers and Hinton-Smith, 2021, p.102).

Widening participation and non-traditional are two broad categories that are used to characterise a group of HE students. They are identified as those who are going to typically encounter higher levels of challenge throughout their educational experiences (Universities UK, 2024; Jones and Bell, 2025, p.2). This includes a grouping of students from ‘lower socio-economic backgrounds, students who are first in their families to enter HE, students who live in the family home while studying (commuter students), student who come from care backgrounds, mature students and disabled students, as well as those from minoritised groups and refugees’ (Jones and Bell, 2025, p.2). As Ambrose (2025, p.90) argues, discourse frames, reinforces normative assumptions and attributes responsibilities to individuals. Despite this discourse, there is a complexity of idealised aspirations and the nuance of individual lives, as potential students respond to context and accept their individualised responsibility for readiness for HE, their striving for normalisation within their constructed subjectivities. Riddell et al. (2025, p.16-17) argue that commuting students are non-traditional and benefit from widening participation as

they are more likely to sit in marginalised grouping and they experience 'emotional work' in their enculturation process. This reductive characterisation adds to the homogenising grouping of the 'other' and the problematising of marks of difference which higher education institutions are engaged with from accountability pressures, but which commuter students experience.

b. social mobility and aspiration

Maslen (2019, p.602) considers the manipulation of educational policy to achieve social mobility as problematising. It enables structural societal issues to be ignored, creating a meritocracy, where it is an individual's responsibility to take charge of their learning and careers. Brown and James (2020, p.7) label it as a moral imperative, suggesting it acknowledges class but also denies it. Intergenerational mobility will be the result of educational expansion but this suggests that a labour market for employment will be created. Ball (2017, p.216) considers social mobility as a concept of the redistribution of possibility, but without recourse to potential. It resides in educational policy but is detached from redistribution of resources (Avis, 2014, p.65) as it is ill-defined, reachable only through achievement. As Danvers and Hinton-Smith (2021, p.100) examine, there is complexity between the promise of social mobility, the positioning of potential students as 'agentic choosers', and marketing which promotes new opportunities, juxtaposed with anxieties related to cost and investment. The concept of 'agentic choosers' removes context, suggesting the potential of choice and a readiness to engage the power to do so.

Rainford (2023, p.415) explores, in relation to the concept of 'agentic choosers' (Danvers and Hinton-Smith, 2021, p.100) aspiration and probable and potential selves. Aspiration is framed as a 'quality' and 'high' levels of aspiration and 'raising' aspirations have been articulated in government policy approaches as key policy drivers (Lumb et al. 2021, p.540; Rainford, 2023, p.412). Aspiration, as Rainford (2023, p.413) suggests can be problematised, with policy statements based on assumptions, 'that where educational achievement is low there is a lack of aspiration, that aspiration is the limiting factor to educational achievement and that employment is contingent on educational outcomes'. As Lumb and Bunn (2021, p.163) comment, there are complexities, arising from types of educational attainment, a challenge to the persistent discourse related to simple aspiration raising initiatives and an idealised aspiration of mobility and middle-class. Young adults' aspirations, attitudes and subsequent behaviours may vary dependent on their local opportunity landscape, school experiences, cultural and contextual factors as outlined in section 3.4 (Price et al. 2025, p.2). Rainford (2023, p.415) identifies that expectations need to be considered with aspiration, as expectations may provide understanding of valid and workable selves as opposed to imagined and unachievable selves. Overall, 'raising' aspirations are positioned within powerful discourse, but they are 'fluid, complex, intimate dimensions of ongoing identity formation' (Lumb et al. 2021, p.545) with interventions resulting in ineffective initiatives.

Rainford (2023, p.414) argues that aspiration is framed narrowly, by a concept of progression to HE, and studies have demonstrated that young adults, despite the discourse of deficit aspirations look towards secure employment and participation in university (Anders, 2017; Danvers and Hinton-Smith, 2021; Price et al. 2025, p.11). Danvers and Hinton-Smith's (2021, p.111) findings confirm the ability of young adults to decode the predominant discourse of achievement at HE and also demonstrate awareness of the university study as challenging and potentially attritional.

In line with a discourse related to aspiration, participation and enterprise, is the concept of first in family or first-generation students. This is a further classification or dividing practice that may be intersected by being a commuter. It is also a category that positions students as 'outsiders' and as McDonald (2024, p.186) considers, embodies shame and othering as students lack an anchoring of networks and knowledge.

c. the discourse of first in family (FiF)

The concept of first in family (FiF) has originated from American and Australian literature and is often interchangeable with the term of 'first-generation student'. It is related to widening access discourse and is considered as an overt measure of social mobility (Henderson et al. 2020, p.734). FiF is included in the OfS Equality of Opportunity Risk Register (OfS, 2024) 'referring to a student whose parents or guardian do not have any experience of higher education'. The guidance highlights extensive risks for this group of students directing HE institutions to address risks through their Access and Participation Plans (APPs). The positioning and problematising of this group, within this discourse, exemplifies a resultant neediness and adaptation, ignoring complexity and contextual features

Further literature adds to a problematised definition leading to opaque understandings and potential difficulties in comparisons. O'Shea et al. (2024, p.ix) defines a FiF student 'as no-one in the immediate family of origin, including siblings or parents, having previously attended a higher education institution or having completed a university degree'. Forsyth et al. (2021, p.308) consider a more nuanced definition, arguing that FiF students occupy spaces of intersection, particularly of race, gender and class, which affect their place in the unfamiliar. Although considering FiF as a homogenous group is useful for policy writers as it offers up, as Henderson et al. (2020, p.737) argue, concrete evidence of educational mobility from an intergenerational and operational perspective. Although Patfield et al. (2022, p.1138) considers it is 'the quintessential concern of widening participation' enabling universities to expand recruitment in a competitive university sector and meet equity targets.

FiF students attract research through a discourse of a problematised and problematising group, from recruitment through to attrition and retention (Patfield et al. 2022, p.1138). As Henderson et al. (2020, p.736) and Coombs (2022, p.12) report, there is an absence of studies that explore FiF students and their potential

attrition. Coombs (2022, p.12) adds that first-generation students are less likely to be studying at an elite institution, thus contributing to horizontal stratification. She adds that there continues to be a challenge in identifying who is FiF as there is 'no easily accessible administrative database capturing information about parental education' as prospective students are asked to self-declare parental education (Coombs, 2022, p.19). Coombs (2022, p.19) also notes the merging of FiF as code for 'low-income'.

The prevailing constructed discourse of FiF students is that they are at risk of not meeting the norms of university study (Spiegler and Bednarek, 2013, p.319; OfS, 2026). Forsyth et al. (2021, p.309) consider the discourse of deficit as troubling leaving students prone to being stereotyped. However, as O'Shea et al. (2024, p.16) states, FiF students in America and Australia are reported as twice as likely to leave university before completion and take longer to complete degrees. O'Shea et al.'s (2024) extensive Australian study challenges the discourse of deficit framing to consider the realities and intricacies of student lived experiences such as preparedness for university study, establishing that dispositions and skills were largely absent in preparation, and that this was compounded by unrealistic expectations from friends and family. Ivemark and Ambrose (2021, p.192) add to this discussion where a longer and more pertinent view of socialisation processes and experiences over life history considers individual's resources in their adjustments to a HE enculturation process.

e. addressing capitals

Prominent theorising related to FiF discourse frequently uses Bourdieu's theories (Ivemark and Ambrose 2021; Patfield et al. 2022; O'Shea, 2024). Ivemark and Ambrose (2021, p.192) use the lens of habitus adaptation (Bourdieu, 1986) and conceptualised levels of adjustment to university study. Their findings suggest that there is a complex interplay between early socialisation, educational encounters throughout schooling and the development of cultural capitals and these findings concur with Henderson et al.'s (2020, p.748) UK study. Positive educational encounters, which strengthened habitus adaptation included; finding schooling positive, engaging in schooling opportunities and self-efficacy. Habitus adaptation, characterised by a swift and focused enculturation process, enabling adjustment, was also linked to higher forms of self-efficacy in university study (Ivemark and Ambrose, 2021, p.198). However, this frames those students who are FiF by their characteristics. This is problematising first-generation students with a temptation of correction by expected adaptation, which can be manipulated in university processes. This theoretical approach removes the need to question established normative processes and promotes an enculturation process that can be seen as a further manifestation of a subjective process. Widening participation initiatives ostensibly address forms of capital accumulation, with Bourdieu's theorising as a tempting rationale. As Ivemark and Ambrose, (2021, p.203) note, socioeconomic variables need to be combined with contextual socialisation practices. It can be

argued that widening participation initiatives may have addressed capital accumulation but have failed to 'negate the persistence of inequalities' (Danvers and Hinton-Smith, 2021, p.99). This type of academic discourse, as considered in chapter two, can be critiqued as Foucault (1981) outlines, they ensure that types of narratives are sustained, they sustain certain types of discourse as opposed to others which challenge normative statements.

Both Forsyth et al. (2021, p.309) and O'Shea et al. (2024: p.66) argue that a focus on individual factors affecting non-traditional students entering university 'implies responsibility at an individual level for successful navigation of university study'. They suggest that there is an important institutional requirement to question assumptions. Forsyth et al. (2021, p.318) examine the use of inclusive developmental strategies. They identified that university staff struggled with concepts of belonging, staff had expectations of the necessity for students to 'shape shift' (Forsyth et al. (2021, p.316). This includes expectations that students will have appropriate academic skills and an ability to embrace transformational opportunity. O'Shea et al. (2024, p.71) argues that because FiF are 'outsiders' they are invisible to a normalising enculturation process. However, as Henderson et al.'s (2020, p.744) study identifies, some courses have a high concentration of FiF students and exploring contextual organisational and structural barriers to enculturation is essential. Whilst policy makers may favour the concept of widening access, Forsyth et al. (2021, p.308) examine the concept of 'out of place' and that FiF students are without knowledge of the subjectivising hidden curricula essential to university success and enculturation.

Henderson et al. (2020, p. 744) completed a quantitative study of FiF UK students, they established that about a third of all students in their research cohort are FiF and when looking at subjects taken at university by their research cohort of FiF students, education has the highest share of 87%, followed by business studies. They surmise, considering other subject data, that FiF students study subjects that 'offer relatively good labour market perspectives but are not overly competitive, rather than subjects that are associated either with very low wage returns or with very high entrance requirements' (Henderson et al. 2020, p.733). Henderson et al.'s (2020: p.734) study is pertinent as it confirms concentrations of FiF students in subject disciplines and institutions and that 'FiF students are less likely to graduate from elite universities and are at greater risk of dropout in general, even after prior educational attainment and socioeconomic status are taken into account'. As Coombs (2022, p.14) adds, FiF students are 25% more likely to attend a post-1992 university, with non FiF students 50% more likely to attend an elite university. Patfield et al. (2022, p.1138) adds to this study by considering that FiF is a narrow definition and consider demographic intersectionality within the homogenised group of FiF students.

It is evident that there are tacit university assumptions with regard to students who are routinely categorised as FiF (Patfield et al. 2022, p. 1139; O'Shea et al. 2024, p.269). This is especially relevant for new students to a post-1992 university who have complex, non-traditional educational and vocational backgrounds and are likely

commuter students with multiple roles. O'Shea et al. (2024, p.83) argue that many FiF students demonstrate awareness of their local community strengths, resilience and adaptation strategies, but also the importance of recognising and working with complexities which are often driven by university systems and approaches.

A second strand of O'Shea et al.'s (2024, p.82) study is related to validation, where students feel that they are not valued as themselves as they do not meet the normalised societal constructed identity and this mismatch leads to 'othering'. This may have further implications as established by Payne et al. (2023, p.793) that first-generation students negotiate help-seeking processes in different ways, and that they have harvested and stored personal approaches to managing problem-solving which are self-reliant. Students can perceive help-seeking as reflective of deficit, and this fits with their objectified schooling experiences of divided practices.

3.9 The problematisation of the commuter student and the rise of the student commutercariat

The previous sections have considered the contingent historical and contextual formation of the commuter student. This final section considers the overt problematisation of the student commuter through the concept of 'belonging'. The tool of problematising the commuter student is to 'give coherence to the extant problematisation that is the object on which it operates' (Koopman, 2014, 400). As Foucault (1984a) considers, the tool of problematisation both unpicks the grouping of contingent practices, as well as unravelling the subsequent formation of new practices and the foundation of discourse as illustrated in chapter two. This section identifies the key themes of the problematised commuter student.

Commuter students are generally framed through the lens of the traditional and residential student and subject to a distinct 'deficit' narrative (Saker et al. 2025, p.2). This deficit narrative is further complicated by the insight that commuting students may share attributes that further categorise them yet are also the very reason they commute to a local university (Kenyon, 2024, p.116-117). Mobilities is a further framing device, with commuting students both mobile in their commute, but immobile in their inability to be immersed in the university culture. Problematisation becomes most overt in the discourse of student commuters as lacking belonging and disengaged.

Belonging, in the discourse of the idealised student, is characterised as academic, enhancement and social engagement (Thomas and Jones, 2017, p.6). Levels of interaction are proof of belongingness and absence or rejection of activities as disengagement. An important element of commuter students is a perceived absence of the ability to 'belong' at university. Commuter students are problematised for their deficiency in this normative requirement as their transience is assumed to ensure that their university experience is fleeting. Superficial attendance is also characterised by an absence of engaging in enhancement opportunities (Thomas and Jones, 2017, p.7).

Extant literature demonstrates a concern with belongingness which strongly corresponds to the perception of (dis)engagement. As outlined in chapter two, discursive practices lead to discursive knowledge, where individuals are expected to behave in certain ways (Foucault, 1990a). Thomas (2020a, p.291) reports that 'commuting students tend to have lower rates of engagement in academic, enhancement and social activities within their place of study.' An early study by Maguire and Morris (2018, p.35) reveals a normative view of commuting students often perceived as in deficit due to an absence of developing 'belonging' to university. Maguire and Morris (2018, p.9) consider that for the commuter-student, 'the travel between their residence and principal study location materially affects their ability to succeed in higher education'. The importance of commuter students being present at university and in the moment of the formation of the traditional undergraduate student is a key feature of this discourse. In contrast, Kenyon (2024, p.125) establishes that commuting students experience 'mobility-related educational exclusion'. Kenyon (2024, p.126) explores the disconnection from university due to disorientation and frequent movement between home and university and incompatibility with expectations of university study. Exclusion was experienced as students transferred between liminal spaces, expressing feelings of marginalisation and disconnection which continued as the 'other' in university spaces (Kenyon, 2024, p.125).

Narratives of student commuters focus on deficit, such as inability to network, disinterest in embracing the university experience and being underprepared. Universities report subsequent concerns related to less academic engagement, academic failure, employment challenges and a reductive student experience (Chappell et al. 2020, p.19-26). This overt problematisation works towards creating a subjectivity of the student commuter through a process of discourse and normalising classification. In contrast to the narrative of a commuter student deficit of belongingness, Crawford and McKenzie (2022, para. 6) examine the perception of 'not being allowed to belong'. Those who are outside the norm and who need to be 'fixed' by attendance and integration. The concept of 'belonging' can also be considered as a discourse from a site of power as a university is a 'hierarchical social space...with multiple versions of imagined belonging' (Thomas, 2015, p.41).

As Tett et al. (2025, p.477) explain, defining belongingness is challenging, but emphasises the concept of social connections, the place and the political. The importance of connection is established in further literature (Allen et al. 2024, p.3) with a recognition that it is shaped culturally and contextually. Frequently, belonging is often framed as 'fitting in' or as assimilation. Allen et al. (2024, p.22) in a systematic literature review establish four key determinants of belonging at university: institution-wide approach, inclusive environments, educator practice and quality relationships. Interestingly, they note the absence of research with a focus on unique student populations. These studies concur with the importance of connection. As Ahn and Davis (2020, p.622-3) examine, engagement, participation and belonging elide. Interestingly Allen et al. (2024, p.27) note the dominant culture of

studies which focus on traditional students, and traditional norms, as opposed to those who have more diverse perspectives. They suggest that the concept of belonging is complex and sense of belonging, holistic rather than singular in dimension (Allen et al. 2024, p.28-9).

Thomas (2020a, p.297) suggests that commuter students prioritise academic engagement above social interaction. She theorises that commuting first-generation students have insufficient capitals to recognise the importance of actively engaging in capital building activities such as networking. The use of the term 'capital' invokes Bourdieu, with a ready adjustment to capital allocation as a potential. However, Webb and Turner (2020, p.1330) counter, considering this as strategic and logistical choice-making. The concept of belonging, as expressed as participating in activities or not, is reductive, as participation does not necessarily mean belonging. McDonald (2024; p.184) conceptualises belonging in a university as fluid and unpredictable as it is not achieved, but is akin to membership which is 'experienced at the level of the individual as both internalised and embodied'. It is related to spaces, and how spaces are encountered as well as conceived and constructed. Belonging is navigating in social spaces, interwoven with success and failure, but experienced through intersectionality of gender, social class and further social characteristics of commuting.

3.10 Conclusion

This review has examined the complexity of the social category, the student commuter. It has established that student commuters are created through a range of social mechanisms which coalesce with precarity. Problematizing the construct of the student commuter reveals a plethora of normative assumptions which position student commuters. Student commuters are assumed to be considered 'at risk' and a range of solutions contribute to the deficit; widening participation creates the deserving student and social characteristics analysis adds to a discourse of othering. The potential sharing of other non-traditional characteristics adds to a discourse of difference.

Potential students have experience societal precarity through an education system that uses quiet power to form subjectivities, readying potential students towards possible trajectories. A stratified, complex, hierarchical education system supports these subjectivities. Potential students engage in strategies to mitigate risk and opportunity such as economic pragmatism, localism and restricted mobility. Spatial precarity contributes to form the student commuter.

The discourse of the deserving student is formed through providing initiatives of widening participation, promotion of social mobility and aspiration and a superficial narrative of strengthening social and cultural capitals. These are undermined by a discourse of student characteristics of predominantly FiF but with risk a predominant feature of difference.

This thesis contends that societal, social and spatial precarity lead to the construction of the student commuter. Yet the student commuter is non-traditional, contrasted with the traditional, in deficit, transient and incomplete. The student 'commutercariat' is an inevitable outcome of economic precarity, restricted local opportunity, marginalising and othering as HE remains anachronistic. It is important to research this formation and the following chapter explains the methodological decision-making to do so.

Chapter four: Methodology

4.1 Introduction

This chapter provides a justification for the research approach and an explanation of methodological decision-making. This study questioned the transitional experiences of education undergraduates in the first year of university study at a post-1992 institution with 44 students in the initial research cohort and five students in the second cohort. There were two research phases with an adjustment to the study focus after phase one data collection and analysis. Emergent qualitative data from phase one research participants provided overarching conceptualising of a constructed world that was local, where travel to and from university was normalised. There were subsequent adjustments to research questions and subsequent data gathering in phase two (Table 4.1) to consider the constructed social world of commuters to university as this construction challenged the concept of transition. Pink (2013, p.18) writes about data collection approaches in an ethnographic context and how methods of data collection have a trajectory as they transform in response to participants, the researcher, the research questions and the context.

This chapter explains the evolution of the project, the ontological and epistemological decision-making, and choice of research tools to gather qualitative data. It includes detail about the research cohorts, ethical approaches, a reflective section relating to positionality and lastly the phases of the project including the pilot and data collections through phase one and two. The final section explains data analysis. As Burton et al. (2014, p.55) state, terminology within educational research is contentious and for clarity, this thesis has used a constructionist paradigm within a critical ethnographic tradition. Using two research tools, qualitative data was gathered from an initial cohort of 44 participants and a subsequent cohort of five participants.

4.2 Ontological and epistemological decision-making

As Twining et al. (2017, p.A4) say, research is 'based on theory' with a need to ensure an explicit ontological and epistemological position which relates to the study and tools. Methodologies are framed by the ontological and epistemological stance. From an ontological perspective, reality is considered as a multi-dimensional construct. In this thesis, individual's understandings of the social world are constructed and developing understandings of individual's constructions of their worlds is research worthy (Staller and Chen, 2022, p.157). Considering the theoretical underpinning of the study and the implication of a Foucauldian perspective, this is an inevitable process. This has implications for research methodologies which need to ensure that participants' social worlds are accepted as diverse and respected. It situates the researcher as an insider, also forming knowledge constructs. There is also recognition that researchers are embedded within their research and this research, from a social justice agenda, is concerned with uncovering power struggles and judgements. Johnson and Parry (2015, p.13)

see social justice as an 'epistemology that values emotions, personal relationships, an ethic of care, political praxis and multivocality to purposefully reveal inequity'. These key perspectives were foundational to this research.

The purposeful epistemology relating to uncovering inequity sits within constructionism, recognising that an individual interacts and moves through a world built on unique understandings of themselves within that world (Cohen et al. 2018, p.23). The interactions are with others, with perceptions, with society; however, it is understood that these interactions build further perceptions and evoke further responses. This epistemological approach had subsequent implications for research design which initially explored students' transitions within university and deepened to examine the construction of the commuting student. Crotty (2015, p.42) defines constructionism as 'all knowledge, and therefore all meaningful reality as such, is contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world'. This methodological stance focused on researching close to the construction of the participant's social world, using elements of ethnographic researching. This rejects the notion of a fixed or pre-determined social reality and instead it focuses on the social world, meanings and 'notions of reality as contingent and dynamic in order to understand the socio-culturally constructed meaning of the individuals' experiences' (Khan and MacEachen, 2021, p.1).

Gergen (2015, p.6) maintains that individuals construct their own truths about their understanding of their social worlds. The embodied experiences of individuals is within a culture of constructions, especially within educational institutions driving cultural norms. However, there is a tension between the ability to construct and societal tensions to construct in certain ways. There is an interplay between agency and if individuals have agency in their construction. This research aims to explore this tension, recognising the embeddedness of individuals within culture and their social worlds. It researched their responses to forms and approaches of cultural and social constructions, how individuals have potential educational identities and how these constructions are re-ordered. The theoretical positioning of Foucauldian perspectives provides a lens to do so. It is the initial construction of how university, as a social construction, changes from being an object into a subjective experience. The social and cultural experiences from which new students derive their thoughts are important both prior to and within the dynamic and shifting experiences and the formation of sense making (Gergen, 2015, p.16). Realities are constructed 'through a system of socio-cultural and interpersonal interactions in everyday lives' and these are 'externalised, objectified and internalised' (Khan and MacEachen, 2021, p.2) This research explored this dynamic from an insider perspective.

As Crotty (2015, p.54) discusses, individuals are exploring their worlds from certain perspectives or realities. There is an emphasis on the social perspective of this construction and students also have a basis of some forms of understood reality. Crotty (2015, p.58) emphasises the importance of culture as a construction, which is

already inhabited and describing constructionism as individuals being part of this objective world and interacting with it, and others within it. The subsequent interaction with the university, the construct of engagement as a student, means a subjective encounter, and thus constructionism represents individuals making sense of their social world and new encounters. As Gergen (2015, p.225) considers, constructionism is an epistemological resource, 'it welcomes critical discussion'. Crotty (2015, p.64) argues similarly, but also that social constructionism is relational and contextual with potential implications for knowledge claims. This criticality, the relational and contextual construction provide tools of inquiry. Khan and MacEachen (2021, p.3) argue that social constructionism may articulate normalised constructions and rationality without soliciting 'unsuccessful, marginalised, untold, and unspoken voices and silences' nor challenge the 'taken for granted'. In order to deepen analysis, then a 'power lens' may disrupt, add, or exemplify (Frost et al. 2010, p. 454). Added to social constructionism as an epistemology, is an application of Foucauldian Discourse Analysis (FDA) which enables 'power' to be considered as it enables exploration of 'social legitimacy' (Khan and MacEachen, 2021, p.2).

A further characteristic of the research is that it sits within an ethnographic tradition. As O'Reilly (2009, p.52-56) considers, one goal of ethnographic research is to gain a participant perspective. Critical ethnographic research has a focus of obtaining rich contextual data, of recognising the importance of social change and moving beyond the 'taken for granted' (O'Reilly 2009, p.52-56). It enables, in line with Foucault's (2000b, p.226) methodological discussions, the raising of questions, problematisations and uncovering concerns about inequalities (Adamson, 2022, p.1587). Punch and Oancea (2014, p.161) characterise ethnographic studies as 'evolving' with likely adjustments to approaches and particularly between different stages of data collection.

Ethnography as a research approach is wide ranging. Punch and Oancea (2014, p.161) consider it as both a process of researching and product, examining and investing in the research process to establish individual's constructions of their truths. Other borrowed elements from the ethnographic tradition include the use of the institutional setting and, as a researcher, becoming part of the research field and ethically, developing sensitivity to participants. Ethnographic approaches demand careful listening and questioning, thus creating interpretations and sharing interpretations (O'Reilly, 2009, p.52-56). It means paying attention to social interactions with the researched to ensure multivocality. Critical within this, is the desire to uncover culturally defined meanings; Cohen et al. (2018, p.20) identify these approaches as 'verstehen' meaning understanding, and in particular social meaning.

4.3 Research Approach: Qualitative data gathering

From an epistemological standpoint with assumptions about knowledge formation seen as constructed, qualitative data gathering would provide diverse perspectives, bringing attention to an ethics of care by sensitivity to participant voice.

Silverman (2020, p.272) considers that ethnographic researching implies observing in detail the 'what' of social interactions in an environment. This reveals the immersion and development of cultural meanings by a group constructing their understandings of this culture. Qualitative data includes rich description of the perceptions and explanations of each participant's sense making, their linking of experiences and how their constructions developed and how these constructions were explained (Denscombe, 2021, p.291). To address the research questions data was gathered as summarised in Table 4.1. This qualitative data was in the form of collages and subsequent peer conversations, followed by written transcripts of videoed life history interactions. Collages provided qualitative data contributing signifiers, and the verbal explanation of these by participants, providing symbolic significance of behaviours. Life history transcripts provided cultural descriptions of constructions of lives (Punch and Oancea, 2014, p.201).

Table 4.1: Relationship between data collection phases, participants, the research strategy and research sub-questions

Data Collection: Phases, methods and instruments	Participants	Approach Techniques Strategy Purpose	Research question (RQ)/sub- questions (SQ)
Pilot study Small group creative activity: Tablecloth of transition	Education Studies Second year undergraduate cohort 12 students	Purpose: Check timing and convenience, research tools, methods, sample size and approach. Reflect on ethical decision-making Check relevance of research tools to research question(s) Scrutinise data Reflection of ethical insider researching Talking to participants about the experience of providing data to move towards 'reciprocal relationality' (Gorman, 2024, p.173).	RQ How might students be supported with transition to a post-1992 university? SQs What are students' expectations of HE? Are there ways to support transition to HE? Are there pedagogical approaches that support transitions during the first year of an education degree?
Phase one: A. Collage making B. Group conversations and participant recording (student led)	Education Studies First year undergraduate cohort 44 students	• Convenient use of a classroom. Additional session after teaching • Designed as a social activity with open choices to attend • Open choice in use of materials to create textual and visual data • Choice of Individual/group working • Choice of resources and 'found' images • Rich conversations reviewing collages	RQ How might students be supported with transition to a post-1992 university? SQs Why have students decided to go to university and how have they got there? What do they think about their transitional experiences

		Participants noted ideas exploring enculturation processes	during their first year at university? How might a post-1992 university respond to students?
Phase two: Life history interactions	5 students from Education Studies First year undergraduate cohort	- Participants volunteered from the whole cohort - On Teams (Microsoft App). Students could choose whether to use their camera - Individually - Two to three hours per participant with an average of three meetings. - Conversational - Summarising with each participant to check understanding - During semester two of first year study and two semesters of second year study.	RQs Why have students decided to go to university? What was their background before starting HE? What has led them to study locally?

4.4 The research cohort

Participants were undergraduates studying a degree in education studies at a post-1992 university in the north Midlands. A key aspect of students attending a post-1992 university is that their entry qualifications will largely be vocational and increasingly a hybrid of academic and vocational. For this study, this is intensified, as in this north Midlands city, the structure of local secondary schools provides few opportunities to access sixth form in school, where, 'A' Levels, are more likely to be offered. Therefore, many prospective undergraduates attend either a selective city sixth form college providing 'A' Levels, or a FE college to gain entry qualifications through vocational pathways, hybrid qualifications, access courses or via apprenticeships. UCAS (2017) data reveals that the ratio of entrants with A Levels to BTECs or mixtures fell from 7:1 in 2008 to 3:1 in 2017. Overall, students entering HE with vocational qualifications has been considered as an enabling factor for students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds who are able to use these qualifications as entry (OECD, 2021). In a stratified educational system, whilst BTECs enable access, there is evidence of a relationship between these entry qualification and university outcomes of attrition, retention and class of degree (Dilnot et al. 2023, p.1143).

Commuter students are defined as those that remain in the family home during their studies irrespective of their journey time to university. Commuter students are reported to have lower social engagement when studying at university (UPP, 2025, p.24) and have lower rates of success (Thomas, 2020, p.4). They are more likely to have family responsibilities, work part time and come from a lower socio-economic group (Baines, 2024, p.9; UPP, 2025, p.23).

4.5 Sampling approach

Sampling in qualitative researching is driven by research questions, which suggest a deliberate or purposive sampling strategy. The validity of a study relies on an appropriate sample population. Researching in a post-1992 university with a representative undergraduate course provided an opportunity. The sampling approach was, therefore, purposive, opportunistic and convenient (Punch and Oancea, 2014, p.211). The complete cohort of first year undergraduate students as a research cohort was convenient. Ethically, as an insider and their lecturer, there was an opportunity, due to their availability in teaching sessions, to gain informed consent and enable participants to decide if they wanted to participate. Data gathering was as an inclusive additional activity, organised so that non-attendees were not compromised and designed to respect participant timetable commitments. The research was introduced to each cohort through informal meetings and information (participant information sheet) was provided for potential participants to scrutinise before deciding on participation.

Tables 4.2, 4.3 and 4.4 provide sample detail. The pilot study cohort was a random volunteer sample of second year students. Phase one included the complete cohort of first year students. There was no exclusion or inclusion within this cohort. Phase two sampling was considered carefully and ethically and was a random volunteer sample derived from phase one (Burton et al. 2014, p.98). Whilst Burton et al. (2014, p.98) may consider this reduces validity, ethically it lessened the potential of coercion and concurrently raised the potential of hearing participant voice and providing rich data. Cohen et al. (2018, p.224) consider that in qualitative researching, groups are representative of themselves, with decisions related to 'fitness for purpose'. At all stages, participants were enabled to withdraw from the research.

The research cohort included a high proportion of commuting students (95%) from non-traditional backgrounds, and more females than males. Commuting students self-identified as students who did not live on campus or in local student accommodation, commuting from home to university. The cohort for the pilot study (table 4.2) compromised second year students, phase one (Table 4.3) was the complete first year undergraduate cohort for BA (Hons) Education Studies. Phase two (Table 4.5) was five students from the first-year cohort (see chapter five for pen portraits)

Table 4.2 Pilot study cohort

Course and year of study Full time undergraduate	Number in study	Proportion of commuting students	Total cohort of second year students
BA (Hons) Education Studies Second year	12 (22% of cohort)	100% commuting to university	54

Table 4.3 Phase one cohort

Course and year of study Full time undergraduate	Total cohort of first year students	Number in study	Proportion of commuting students	Mature students	Male to Female ratio
BA (Hons) Education Studies First year	49	44 (90% of cohort)	42 (95% of cohort)	12	40:4

Table 4.4 provides opening information of the phase two cohort. As this was a small and identifiable cohort, confidentiality was particularly important. To maintain

confidentiality, minimal demographic data was collected and any identifiable data from transcripts was removed. Participants selected their own pseudonyms, which also encouraged openness and involvement (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2022, p. 113). Pen portraits (Chapter five) were created by sharing of personal stories.

Table 4.4 Phase two cohort

Participant Pseudonyms	Background	First in family to attend university?	Commuting student?	Qualifications prior to university entry	Through clearing?	Aspirations
Eve	Living with parents, no siblings. Attended local schools and sixth form. Completed an apprenticeship before deciding to go to university. Described parents as working class.	Yes	Yes, and continuing to live with parents	Sixth Form: Hybrid A Level/BTEC Apprenticeship in school administration at level 3	Yes	Teaching primary (PGCE)
Moir	Mother is a single parent who works in social care, has three siblings. Migrated from West Africa to Europe and then to the UK.	Yes	Yes, started in local rented accommodation. Returned to family home and now commuting	Primary education in West Africa Secondary education in Europe and then FE college BTEC level three/Access course at College	Yes	Educational practitioner
Angie	Described parents as working class. Mature student with two children. Husband works in IT and is a graduate. Worked as a cleaner before university entry. Described background as working class	No (husband) not parents/sibling	Yes, married and local	Left school after GCSEs and then worked. Pre-university free short course as a mature student entrant. 4 GCSEs	No	Teacher in SEND
Marty	Estranged from mother. Extended family support and has a partner who is also a FT student.	Yes	Yes, independent renting but commuting	Sixth form incomplete Science Access course at College	Yes	Educational practitioner (SEND)

Janis	Parents and twin sister in a nearby town. Described parents as working class.	Yes	Yes, on campus for one semester, then commuting from family home.	Sixth form incomplete Level 2 and Level 3 apprenticeship in supporting learning completed in a primary school	Yes	Teaching primary (PGCE)
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4.6 Ethics

Research in social sciences overwhelmingly relies on participants providing data which will be examined, scrutinised and judged by researchers. Sikes (2010: p.11) goes further suggesting that writing about research participants is 're-presenting lives and is both social and political'. She astutely makes the point that this is a 'heavy ethical burden'.

Interestingly much literature related to the application of ethics in research foregrounds the researcher. Denscombe's (2021, p.311) view, for example, is that the application of ethical obligation is driven by societal norms and conventions grounded by the researcher. Whilst this is critical, as the researcher is key to ethical principles, both in attention and application, it may mean that participants are considered as a homogenous group, without due attention to the situatedness of ethics (Cohen et al. 2018, p.229). Walliman (2018, p.51) talks about two ethical issues, the researcher's approach to their participants and the researcher's value system relating to integrity and honesty and whilst important, potentially continues to obscure the participant. It is important, therefore, to have heightened awareness of how data is harvested in different ways, be reflective that data harvesting is from individuals who may feel less or more empowered or even ambivalent and who need to be at the centre of ethical decision making. This is particularly important in types of ethnographic research. Extant literature provides a starting point. Denscombe (2021, p.309-315) identifies four ethical principles; protecting participants' interests, the avoidance of deception and the application of integrity, voluntary participation based on informed consent and overarching legal compliance. However, qualitative research relies on relationships which may be considered as a problem of power and exploitation. It was important that data collection approaches consider the intersection of power as new students may consider research gathering as performance checking. Life course histories pose ethical challenges as it positions participants as disempowered tellers, revealing judgemental complexities.

Responding to this, the overarching ethical approach was grounded in relational and situational approaches and considering Nodding's (2010, p.391) ethics of care. This included being ethical by recognition of dialogue and communication, acknowledging dynamics of being seen and the creation of safe spaces of research. It is also important to acknowledge the university as a 'site of power' (McDonald, 2024, p.186) and to acknowledge the ethical overshadowing.

Ethical approaches were operationalised in two ways. Firstly, it was important to meet institutional policy (Appendix 3). There was strong consideration of overt responsible research practice when planning and executing this study. Ethical approval was agreed through Staffordshire University ethical process and use of BERA Ethical Guidelines (2018; 2024) was applied. This included maintaining

confidentiality, protecting data and applying ethical approaches when working with identifiable groups of participants.

Adherence to institutional policies and procedures were also applied such as revised ethical approval for changes to data collection approaches due to COVID-19 pandemic restrictions (see Appendix 2). BERA (2018, p.2) identify the importance of ethical decision-making as ongoing, deliberative and 'as an iterative process of assessing and reassessing'. Key points from these ethical guidance tools are related to careful consideration of responsibilities to participants and a focus on forms of respectful behaviours. This included requesting informed consent at every stage, and opportunities to question; transparency, revealing clearly the research approach and information seeking; overt right to withdraw from the data collection approaches; careful consideration of privacy, anonymity and data storage (BERA, 2018, p.2-9); sharing research outcomes and data during phase two, piloting to check ethical approaches and reflecting with participants.

Secondly, it was important to think about situational ethical approaches, setting aside tick box approaches (Bradley and Kavanagh, 2024, p.36) as ethics in practice moves beyond procedures to siting ethical behaviours as well as asking questions of positionality. There are limitations in institutional ethical frameworks. Specific actions provided transparency and elements of dialogical data collection (Cohen et al. 2018, p.296) strengthened participant voice and data analysis. Using ethics of care, included:

- Using the pilot study as a dialogue to discuss ethical approaches with participants, checking materials, co-creating tools, talking through data with participants and determining research questions. Checking if participants felt represented in the data and checking communication and paperwork. Lastly talking through research within a university and acknowledging power dynamics and participants' comments about being participants.
- For phase one and two, adjusting responsibilities of summative assignment marking and personalised academic mentoring to ensure participants were distanced from the researcher and felt in a safe space with research and their ongoing academic journey. Checking informed consent at all stages. Discussing approaches with a critical friend. Reflective journalling and reflexivity in practice. Overall, there was attention to adjusting data collection approaches (Table 4.1) and asking participants about their data and their reflections. This created opportunities for validation of voice.

4.7 Insider research and ethics

There are advantages of insider research, including the proximity and established relationships with the research cohort, convenience and researching opportunity. There is also valuable contextual insight. However, insider research poses ethical dilemmas linked to the position of power and obligations and pressures upon participants and the researcher. Ethical tensions may also be created by issues

linked to identity and difference. As Brooks et al. (2014, p.159) identify, power differentials may not be asymmetric and may be obscured. However, the researcher is centred within research and there is 'no pretence of dispassionate objectivity' (Bukamal, 2022, p.327) as the researcher is an active agent in acquiring knowledge. The researcher is framed as an insider but this framing reflects a dual role of teacher and researcher and this adds complexity. The deep knowledge of participants who continue their educational experiences after research needs to be considered (Poulton, 2023, p.576). In the longer term, this meant adjusting mentor and tutor relationships with the continued agreement of individual participants, particularly those in phase two. An overarching concept was applying an ethics of care. Ethics of care (Brooks et al. 2014, p.20) sits within relational ethics with ethical actions means situating ethical approaches by developing relationships and responding to vulnerability and this was enacted as described in section 4.8.

Brooks et al. (2014, p.112) consider some of the ethical tensions exhibited by researching 'down'. Insider research creates specific tensions. This may suggest imbalance but in reality, is much more complex and is related to, as Foucault (1982, p.209) identifies 'power relations which are very complex', with different positions and patterns within different fields. Power may also emanate from identity and positionality which shifts for both participants and researcher and includes such fields, for example, of age, class, gender, ethnicity, which may intersect (Brooks et al, 2014, p.114). Biographical details and lived identity cannot be changed but awareness can. Sikes (2010, p.12) suggested that researcher-writers provide their version of reality when reporting the data with the researcher-writers values and beliefs being implicated in the creation and within that reporting. A further consideration was the university as a construct of power, recognising the need for formal and informal ethical approaches which maintained informed consent and brought this construct to the fore. The pilot study enabled adjustments to the process for phase one and two.

The life history approach included aspects of multiple layering and elements of co-construction (Bathmaker and Harnett, 2010, p.4) and therefore, discussing 'the nature of the gaze' (Sikes, 2010, p.15), making it overt, especially in interpretive moments, was completed with those sharing their stories and this included social and political concepts. During life history interactions, the nature of the researcher's gaze, was at times, made explicit. This was most apparent as life history interactions and 'talk' took place during the COVID-19 pandemic and shared experiences were a discussion point. This is where the auto/biographical epistemological relationship was close as both participant and researcher discussed shared experience and relational ethics of care of, and for each other, was apparent. There was also attention to creating safe spaces and ensuring validation in line with ethics of care perspectives (Noddings, 2010, p.392).

4.8 Ethical re-approval

In March 2020, face to face teaching and learning was suspended due to the COVID-19 pandemic (manifested in policy and contact restriction measures), educational organisation's closure meant adaptations to social science research practice (Newman et al. 2021, p.3). In response, there was a temporary pause in collecting data as organisations, teachers and students reacted to a dynamic change. The research was paused to adjust data gathering approaches and submit documentation.

After a substantial delay, there was a required re-submission of ethics forms and the re-statement of approval. In response, there were changes to the second phase of data collection. There was an application of situational ethical approaches as life history interactions took place took place online using Microsoft Teams App. As Pherali et al. (2025, p.98) consider, these changes created a unique ethical challenge, but also opportunities, institutionally as well as philosophically, methodologically and theoretically. Pherali et al's (2025, p.116) study identified the change in research activity 'as a 'relationship' with commitment and responsibility between researchers and participants', but also noting how 'homes became research spaces...with challenge to shared space and consideration of vulnerability of participant and researcher'. Implications are that there was a shared commitment to research, and shared experiences, there was also difficult ethical demands of privacy and the complexity of invading personal space. Sikes (2010, p.17) identifies the unique ethical challenge of qualitative research. De Vos (2021, p.70) and Pherali et al. (2025, p.117) note the risk and responsibilities with online interviews, suggesting privacy and confidentiality as imperative as participants may be unable to access safe spaces. Fan et al. (2023, p.333) exposes the lack of attention to 'researcher's lived experiences' in making adaptations to online interviews.

Considering ethics of care (Noddings, 2010, p.393), there were three main responses; an iterative risk approach, considering ethics as relational and co-creating, and lastly openness and commitment. The iterative risk approach was to consider each interactional encounter carefully. This included, talking carefully and transparently with participants, identifying their confidence in their technological space, checking consent and understandings. An unknowingness across societal norms and approaches required care. An advantage was that cohort two were familiar, with established relationships. Therefore, an opening social meeting was used to build participant and researcher confidence and to recognise emotional well-being and to nurture social responsibility. This included:

- Checking technology, mute and camera settings
- Demonstrate use of privacy settings (virtual backgrounds, Newman et al. 2021, p.5)
- Show participants how to access to transcripts and recordings
- Use of headphones

The COVID-19 pandemic established fragility and uncertainty in participants and researcher, and this emotional dimension was shared (Brooks et al. 2014, p.20), care was reciprocal as knowledge of, and between, participant and researcher developed. In response, changes to the interactional approach took place: making interactions shorter, spending social (wellbeing) talk time, summarising key points from transcripts, checking privacy and signposting support systems and news. A challenge was the use of personal spaces, as Fan et al. (2023, p.337) examines, the incursion of private space was negotiated carefully, so interactions took place at times where privacy could be sustained and there were agreements (both researcher and participant) to suspend interactions due to unforeseen interruptions (Newman et al. 2021, p.5). An outcome was rich data, as participants were committed to the interactions, deepening engagement as the interactions were blurred between personal and life storying (Pilbeam et al. 2022, p.4). However, it was important to be wary of processing experiences, and as researcher, to carefully listening and interact as discussed by Rogers (1945, p.281). In the final interactions, there was debriefing and closure. This was discussed with participants once COVID-19 restrictions began to be lifted. There were agreements made with regard to sharing the findings and reinforcement of anonymity of data.

4.9 Positionality and self-appraisal

Positionality is an important concept as it represents the relationship between the context of the research and participants. Researchers make 'myriad choice moments' (McMahon et al. 2025, p.66) and processes can perpetuate marginalisation. It is important to acknowledge potential blind spots, power divergence and reflexivity. Reflexive consideration may not mitigate completely and there is recognition of an incomplete picture of the 'living context and its complexity' (Gorman, 2025, p.165). As well as the range of approaches discussed (see 4.6, 4.7 and 4.8), there was a process of sharing personal biographies and transparency in discussing a university as a site of power and potential. Sharing and discussing research questions and approach was also pertinent. Personal experiences of university entry as a FiF entrant and deep interest in HE policy making as being considered politicised was overtly discussed and recognised as subjective.

Berger (2015, p.220) talks about the importance of researchers focusing on 'self-knowledge and sensitivity' and sees reflexivity as mitigating positionality through self-appraisal. Self-appraisal may also enable researchers to see data and its complex meanings and challenge linear perceptions. In order to address positionality, a self-appraisal approach was taken within the research journal as detailed in table 4.5. Berger (2015, p.220) considers three impacts of research and these have been converted into a model. Self-reflection in column three are notes from the research journal.

Table 4.5 Research positionality: self-appraisal approach (adapted from Berger, 2015, p.220)

	Researcher positionality and impact (Berger, 2015, p.200)	Personal adaption/self-appraisal	Reflection
1.	Affect access to the 'field' Sites of power	Removal from sites of contention Reflective journalling Establishing relationships Transparency Communication Critical friend	Attention to data analysis and sensitivity Adjustment to organisational responsibilities e.g. assessing and mentoring roles were re-assigned Raise with critical friend?
2.	Shaping of the researcher-researched relationship	Power dynamics, so removal from direct assessing Reflection of shared narratives Noting participant talk Overt discussion as a university as a site of inequality/power.	Enhanced communication Adjustments to data gathering Important to clarify terminology
3.	Worldview and background of the researcher	Openness in research objectives and interest in undergraduate transitions Partial biographical details shared	Sharing of worldview enabled co-creation of data between participants Challenge to assumptions Covid-19 damage to personal and professional self-respect?

4.10 Data collection phases

a. Pilot study:

Piloting during a research project is multi-purpose (Cohen et al. 2018, p.272) and Malmqvist et al. (2019, p.2) consider a typology of pilot studies, overall pilot studies have a primary purpose of increasing the quality of research. The purpose of this small pilot was to observe engagement and participation when using research tools use. It also acted as consideration of ethical approaches, reflection of research questions, to enable a scrutiny of data and to debrief with participants to enable transparency and co-creation.

The pilot study took place with second year BA (Hons) Education Studies students as they completed their second year. All second year students were invited to a voluntary meeting, post teaching and on campus. The research proposal was shared in a meeting, information participation sheets distributed and a convenient volunteer sample was created as students self-selected and could choose to attend the research session the following day. Table 4.2 outlines this cohort. Following informed consent and completion of ethical documents, participants completed a practical group activity 'Tablecloth of Transition' as outlined in table 4.6. This was one session, organised outside the formal timetable. There were four activities:

Table 4.6 Pilot study data gathering

Activity	Data gathering activities	Prompt questions
1	Ethics reminders Individual reflection followed by feedback Conversations stickers and anonymised self-selected sharing Personal Post-it notes created	1. Please can you explain what you were doing before you started the degree 2. What were your reasons for embarking on the course?
2	Group activity using artefacts Tablecloths and pens	What helped or hindered your transition to university?
3	Group discussion Consensus	What advice would you provide to your first year self?
4	Follow up activity and debriefing. This included informal conversations about the research process with participants. Reflection and discussion with a critical friend.	

On completion and debrief with students, reflection with a critical friend, the following approaches were considered for phase one data collection:

- Confirmation of use of a practical activity as engagement and interaction of participants was high and positive feedback from participants enabled rich data collection.
- Adjustment to research questions
- Ethical and positionality awareness leading to use of a 'firewall' between participants and sharing
- Scrutinising of data with reflection on format and analysis. It was important to ask participants to engage with and articulate their constructions through the lens of artifacts. This enabled a clarity of participants' explanations and constructions. It enabled participants to select key constructions. It confirmed the importance of two stages, creation of data and participant explanation of data
- Transparency with co-creation of research approach discussed with the volunteer sample.
- Ethical approaches adjusted (see section 4.6)

b. Phase one data collection

The evolution of the research approach is demonstrated in Table 4.1 and this section explains the first phase to gathering data. The research cohort is detailed in Table 4.3 and table 4.7 provides a summary of the structure and approach of data collection

a. Collages

This phase was designed as a result of the pilot study debrief with participants, personal reflection, application of ethics and scrutiny of the data. This demonstrated the efficacy of a practical approach to data collection which enabled stronger participant engagement, confidence and discussion. This approach enabled rich data to be generated in a practical, social environment.

The creation of collages, followed by participant consensual conversations was used as a data collection method. As Gauntlett and Holzwarth (2006, p.82) discuss, a creative activity, in making an artefact is a way for participants to express ideas by map making, 'by using hands and bodies as well as the mind'. Creating collages requires minimum artistic transformation as materials are drawn from the everyday, providing a vehicle of enquiry (James et al. 2026, p.493). Gauntlett and Holzwarth (2006, p.84) see visual methods as an enabling methodology, allowing participants to control and explore, which moves beyond participants using language to describe their constructions to where they can reflect in building a representation. Rose (2016, p.20) argues that in late modernity there is an ocularcentric climate, as social life is constructed through visual moments, aided by digital manipulation. This data collection approach was a response to the proliferation and interaction with visual culture in postmodernity. Considering qualitative data approaches, Butler-Kisber and Poldma (2010, p.3) suggest three uses of collage, as 'reflective process, a type of elicitation and an approach of conceptualising thoughts'. Collages are used as research artefacts in different disciplinary fields, and in this study as an arts-informed inquiry with relational and allegorical qualities, with recognition of residual ambiguities. They are a form of elicitation, additional to other data and illustrative of concepts (Butler-Kisber, 2018, p.6). The use of collage as elicitation has been used by Culshaw (2019, p.269), for example, to enable research participants to unravel their constructions and to conceptualise ideas and subjectivities. Collages provoked choice in representations (Roberts and Woods, 2018) as well as capturing a process of knowledge production which is non-threatening yet aesthetic (James et al. 2006, p.493).

b. Conversations

The development of collages was social, interactive, non-threatening and creative. It included the interplay of image and language and the potential empowerment of participants in the creation of their stories and expressions of their constructions (Liebenberg, 2009, p.442; Roberts and Woods, 2018, p.627). Requesting participants to engage in sense-making of their collages provided interpretations and

narrations. Roberts and Wood (2018, p. 629) describe this process as 'encouraging participants to surface and represent their feelings' and this enabled expressions of tentative thoughts and reflections through visual juxtaposition (Butler-Kisber, 2018, p.7). It was important that participants brought meaning and that this emerged as representational of personal constructions, articulated in safe groups (Hammond and Wellington, 2021, p.134). Figure 4.1 is an example of how one group of participants choose to display their collages making choices of positioning and linking and providing participants with agency and their data.

Figure 4.1: Group display of collage for conversations



Participants were asked to record their ideas generated from these rich discussions. This elicitation discussion enabled a more nuanced understanding. Mannay (2016,

p.43) talks about the participatory importance of gathering understandings, within the context as opposed to isolated imaginings of what collages may represent. However, she argues, as does Liebenberg (2009, p.444) that discussions where participants are interpreting and answering questions about their visual constructions is elicitation and not voice. Responses were provoked by the researcher, and as demonstrated by Figure 4.1, collages were also contextualised by being in an audience university space.

The practical steps of data collection: collage and conversations

First year education students attend formal university study and seminars for twelve hours per week of direct contact in their first semester. I taught six hours of this allocation, using additional time to complete the research. Data collection took place after formal timetabled seminars which are designed as interactive sessions using media, physical and made artefacts, group work, discussion, explanation and individual work. Data collection took place in the university space as an additional activity but which was not a timetabled session. As explained in section 4.6 participants were given information about the project. Activities did not require any skilled knowledge, were active and social and as they were at the end of sessions, participants could choose to participate. Informed consent, repeated at every session, included verbal explanation, an information sheet and written consent. There was no exclusion criteria as all first year education studies students were invited to participate. Table 4.7 outlines the application of ethical practical approaches.

The creation of collages, using 'found' images, visually revealing narratives of university and transitions gathered data that was textual and visual, providing signifiers and which was gathered *in situ*, so providing snapshots of individualised, transient constructions of encountering the university. Participants were given choices of media, unstructured time and choices of working individually, or in pairs or friendship groups. Participants could attend for all three sessions if they chose or skip any additional sessions. Table 4.7 demonstrates the approach to data collection.

Table 4.7 Structure and approach of collage and conversation data collection

Activity	Posed question	Materials	Application of ethics
Collage creation	What are my reflections on educational experiences and me as I have now started university?	1.Size/colour of light card, with A2, A3 or A4 and 'post-it' notes, tissue paper, geometrical shapes and paper straws. 2.Tools: scissors, pens/pencils and	Participants were invited to identify their personal and group ethical 'ground rules' to enable openness, rights to withdraw and deepen the understanding of shared narratives (Denscombe, 2021, p.309).

		glue, students could draw and make items. 3. A range of found images/text from a broad selection of modern media e.g. magazines, newspapers and comics.	Participants examined concepts of peer confidentiality and choice of participation, their collage display and re-iterated their informed consent verbally in recognising the potential of levels of agency in choosing their level of participation in the activity (see section 4.16).
Conversations	1.What are your hopes and fears as you start university? 2. How has what has gone before helped you to get ready for university?	Three stages of participant activity in generating conversations data a. Empathetic looking across collages to establish levels of understanding. Participants were requested to use structured empathetic looking (Rose, 2016, p.309), to reflect on their constructions and to be mindful and ethically responsive of their and other's attention, time, construction and sharing. This was to consider what images may be representing (Butler-Kisber, 2018, p.14), providing a general overview of collage creation, but as a social and collaborative endeavour. b. Organising of collages into groups as loose themes. Participants were encouraged to think about what they had created and look at other's work. Roberts and Woods (2018 p.632) call this process as looking for 'striking elements'. This replicated a perceptual emphasis of appreciation, but also scanning (Bresler, 2006: p.56) and a deliberate approach of 'moving closer'. c. Create a response to questions. Lastly, participants were encouraged to create and share ideas in response to the two questions, again collaboratively and to acknowledge depth and construction. Completed data was gathered ethically by checking with participants and requesting anonymity.	

Once participants had completed the activity, data was in the form of written artefacts such as 'post-it' notes and 'flip chart' paper which included images and written notes (figure 5.1). This data was subsequently analysed. This led to phase two of data collection.

Phase two

Following data collection from phase one and data analysis, the research moved into the second phase and there was an adjustment to the research questions. Phase

one data demonstrated, as outlined in chapter five, that participants conceptualised university entry as proximal, being minimally mobile but boundary crossing to an unknown. Their construction individualised and modified by contextual demands, limitations and pragmatism. It was only a part of a social world construction and was not necessarily central, nested within other significant and expectant challenges. It was a constructed enculturation process that was contextual in the local environment and through a lens of commuting to university as opposed to residing on campus. The construction of the undergraduate was partitioned within other social roles, cultural within a context and nearby to the known environment. Secondly, participants were subjective, instrumental and engaged in economic pragmatism as student travellers to university, as detailed in chapter five and six.

It was planned that phase two would necessarily gather data that explored the constructed social world in depth and more contextually. Phase two was designed to enrich establish data with depth and context, exploring concepts of mobility and travel to identify subjectivities of student commuters who do not construct themselves as commuters.

Phase two data collection examined this construction. Guided life history interactions with participants took place from October 2020 to June 2022. This intensive, personal and detailed life history of individuals coming to the end of their first/second years which provided rich contextual data. Changes to research questions are detailed in table 4.1.

a. Life history data collection

Life history research provides rich contextual understandings of how individuals construct their social world. Denscombe (2021, p.82) considers this as a type of narrative, but that construction of stories provides representation of lives, and as a device that enables personalised explanation of circumstance and reaction. Elliott (2005, p.3) defines narrative as organisation of a sequence of events so that events are 'understood through its relation to that whole'. Life history interactions in this study relied on 'talk', with a blurring of narrative and life history but with an inductive approach of emergent themes of education, the local university, choice-making and context to provide 'thick descriptions' (Hammond and Wellington, 2021, p.115).

For this study, representations of educational experiences, the context, both historical and cultural are important stories, revealing personal constructions. Life history has the potential to provide 'a deep and thorough examination of individual subjectivities' (Chewinski and Corrigan-Brown, 2022, p.1). Narratives provide the social context of experiences but also include representations of the self within the explanations. Leigh-Osroosh and Faircloth (2025, p.1128) write about 'storywork' from a personal, living theory perspective, but highlight the importance of respect and care where others articulate their stories. The concept of storying in this thesis is acceptance that these are deeply personal, incomplete but representative. It is also accepted that participants will organise their constructions of their life history, most

likely as a narrative and will select, interpret and revise. It is important to engage in 'empathetic imagination' (Hammond and Wellington, 2021, p.115) to visualise constructions described by participants and to report these accordingly and within context.

Life history in this study focuses on how educational experiences and the rationale for educational study have led to university. Elliott (2005, p.21) suggests types of event histories as frameworks for recall where versions of a life is being constructed. Individuals are making sense of their cultural and historical experiences as interpretations of reality within constructionism are relativist. Individuals' interactions with society will be divergent but life history research provides opportunities for hearing these interpretations (Bathmaker and Harnett, 2010, p.4).

Elliott (2005, p.18) examines the historical background to the life course research approach articulated as the life course paradigm. This suggests that individual's agency is intersected by broad cultural and historical context, with a range of studies demonstrating factors interfering with trajectory. Elliott (2005, p.20) considers that life course analysis needs to be thorough as it may reveal less about agentic reactions to societal structural and cultural changes and more about variations in innate capacities of participants. Harnett (2010, p.164) goes further, arguing for the interplay of historical, spatial and social contexts in the construction of individual's lives and that exploring these intersections is an important aspect of life history research. This interplay is the difference between the narrative or the story and the contextualised life history approach (Goodson and Sikes, 2001, p.17; Bathmaker and Harnett, 2010, p.5). Harnett (2010, p.164) considers an interplay of societal factors and in addition, this is also considered through a Foucauldian perspective to uncover how power is relational, potentially productive as well as oppressive (Khan and MacEachen, 2021, p. 2).

In this study, 'the assumption is that the world is interpretative and the individual, rather than being reactive, is a creator of that world' (Tierney, 2010, p.132). Life history provides a way of expanding and understanding the creation of individual understandings of personal worlds within social contexts which are 'played out' (Punch and Oancea, 2014, p.201). It provides an individualised description provided by the creator of the world as they identify it. As Punch and Oancea (2014, p.201) contemplate, life history provides data that is within a broad context and less prone to fragmentation, and as a narrative, purposeful in capturing lived experiences. Life histories enables talking where listening becomes important and where potentially power dynamics may shift. However, as Crotty (2015) says, this is not a 'straightforward representation of reality'. It is interpreted and there is a double issue of the lens of the researcher. It provides both a whole world view and the interaction of individuals within that social reality.

Silverman (2020, p.228) argues that gathering life history in an ethnographic sense reveals description but that within constructionist approaches, there is an emphasis on implicit meanings, understanding assumptions and asking participants to define

and clarify meanings. Life history enables an opportunity to consider the establishment of meanings in 'talk' and explanations of social processes. However, as Silverman (2020. p.143) contends, social processes are individualised by the participant, suggesting that total or complete data is impossible, but that 'hyphenated phenomena' may be derived from multiple data sets. It is important to consider that life history research in this study seeks not to develop reductionist narratives of constructed lives to convey a specific truth.

This study used life history interactions as a way of capturing complexity, ambiguity and types of 'noise' (Bathmaker and Harnett, 2010, p. 3-4). The notion of the 'self' is unstable, contextualised, subjective, real and imagined (Goodson and Sikes, 2001, p.15). Interactions enabled participants to talk about their constructions of present, past and imagined university experience. Participants were asked to talk about their educational experiences prior to university, their choice of university and course. This naturally included contextual details, social-cultural understandings, local worlds as student commuters and their placing of themselves in the social world.

b. The practical steps of data collection: life history interactions

Life history was gathered using guided interactions. These were virtual, using the university Microsoft app Teams. This was due to COVID-19 policy and practice restrictions. As Fan et al. (2023: p.337) discuss, online interviewing has been seen as a 'second choice' approach. However, they argue as does Woodyatt et al. (2016, p.746) and Thunberg and Arnell (2021, p.765) that data quality and quantity is unaffected by being gathered online and as discussed in section 4.8 an ethical iterative reflexive approach was applied which resulted in an ethics of care approach. Prior to the interactions, participants were sent, via email, an information sheet, consent form and the main themes. These were discussed at the opening meeting. Participants discussed their ethical choices and were given opportunities to:

1. Decide if they were comfortable with the interactions(s) being recorded and their rights to withdraw
2. Their views on the research themes and if there were areas that they did not want to talk about
3. Whether they wanted their cameras on or off
4. If they wanted to read or have the transcript explained before second interactions
5. All participants had access to the transcripts created by the app as there was shared ownership.
6. Shared agreement of ground rules to protect confidentiality. This took the form of how the interaction would be managed and agreed timings, convenience and privacy.

c. Guided interactions to gather life history

Many texts identify data collection interviews as unstructured, semi or structured (Burton et al. 2014, p.134; Punch and Oancea, 2014, p.183). Although Punch and Oancea (2014, p.183) use a continuum model of interaction. For this thesis, data collection used 'guided' interactions, where broad topics were shared before and during the interaction (see appendix 2). These opening themes were generated from data gathered in collage conversations. This approach deliberately resembled an ethnographic interview, where complex behaviours can be described, individual meanings, their symbolic and cultural contextual interpretations articulated (Punch and Oancea (2014, p.161). The use of prompts and clarifying questions ensured that interactions moved towards a non-directional approach. Rogers (1945, p.281-4) developed approaches to interviewing procedures within therapeutic environments and these techniques were later developed by sociologists as a methodological tool (Lee, 2011, p.123). The advantages of non-directive interview approaches lie in encouraging participants to assign importance to themes and also using a mirroring back process to understand and confirm significance. These techniques were used to enable participants to freely construct their narrative and to enable a checking back process was capturing what they wanted to say, with the researcher attempting to take a more neutral but interactional position Lee, 2011, p.135). As Lee (2011, p. 136) suggests, there are criticisms of non-directive interview approaches. Specifically, data collection as potentially bland, where interactions drift, and where rapport predominates, with collusion between participant and interviewer, as opposed to rigorous data collection. To mitigate against these potential concerns, attention to ethical approaches was important as non-directive approaches enable participants to set their pace. Secondly, interactions were framed, with a re-focus at points in the discussion. Reflective points were identified and discussed, and individual participants ascribed meaning, deepened thinking, considered initial thoughts. A strong advantage in these interactions was familiarity as participants had shared experiences with the researcher.

4.11 Data Analysis

Introduction

Qualitative data needs to be sifted, organised and the constituent relationships explored (Hammond and Wellington, 2021, p.153). The scrutiny of data can only take place once it has been cleaned, collated, summarised, coded and then considered thematically. A process of selecting and coding was applied to all three phases of the data gathering and initially for the pilot study data and phase one data (collage and conversations), an inductive analysis was applied. However, as Hammond and Wellington (2021, p.9) identify with different data collection approaches and thematic seeking, there may be a mixture of deductive and inductive approaches as an abductive analysis. Thus, for the final data analysis of phase three data (life history interactions), there was both an inductive process of generating categories, as well as a deductive analysis. Inductive analysis of data from phase

one, lead to the consideration of the student as commuter, as a proposition, and this construction was then considered carefully in a deductive manner but was continually re-examined in the light of findings. Thinking through coding and subsequent themes became an iterative process, 'a kind of switching back and forth' between expectations and findings (Hammond and Wellington, 2021, p.9). The data was in different forms and required careful data analysis. As Braun and Clarke (2006, p.77) identify, 'patterns, themes and categories do not emerge on their own. They are driven by what the inquirer wants to know and how the inquirer interprets what the data are telling her or him according to subscribed theoretical frameworks'.

Foucauldian Discourse Analysis (FDA) was applied to policy analysis in chapter two to consider policy formation and the construction of the student commuter in OfS discourse, exposing silences, power processes and shaping of a narrative of reduction. This application focused on formation, 'the different modes by which, in our culture, human beings are made subjects' (Foucault, 1982, p.208). A second application of FDA was used as a final step of data analysis of life history interactions. It was to consider how each participant constructed their narratives which 'reproduce and/or disrupt dominant discourses' of being a non-traditional student (Khan and MacEachen, 2021, p.7). It was applied to data themes and verbatim narratives to understand contextual constructions and the embedded creation of mobility/immobility of the student commuter. Table 4.8 summarises the data analysis approach for each phase of the research. There is an example of data analysis in appendix 4.

Table 4.8 Summary of data analysis

Research Tool	Data characteristics		Data analysis
Pilot study	The creation of artefacts • Text generated from talk/conversation		• Pilot of the application of simplified thematic analysis (Adapted from Kushnir (2025, p.9): Figure 4.2
Collages and conversations (phase one)	Collages: Characteristics • Text • Use of found image • Freestyle • Social • Creative	Relational characteristics • Signs • Spaces • Colour Peer conversations • Narrative • Explanations • Talk • Text creation	• Participants to consider how they looked at and discussed collages using an applied process (Table 4.7) • Application of simplified thematic analysis (Adapted from Kushnir (2025, p.9): Figure 4.2
Life history interactions (phase two)	Life history interactions • Verbal • Online • Video Creation of transcripts which were checked and cleaned for clarity		• Review and note taking between interactions • Content analysis • Themes exploration using Braun and Clarke (2006) • Deepening of themes and exploration using Foucauldian Discourse Analysis (FDA) (Khan and MacEachen, 2021)

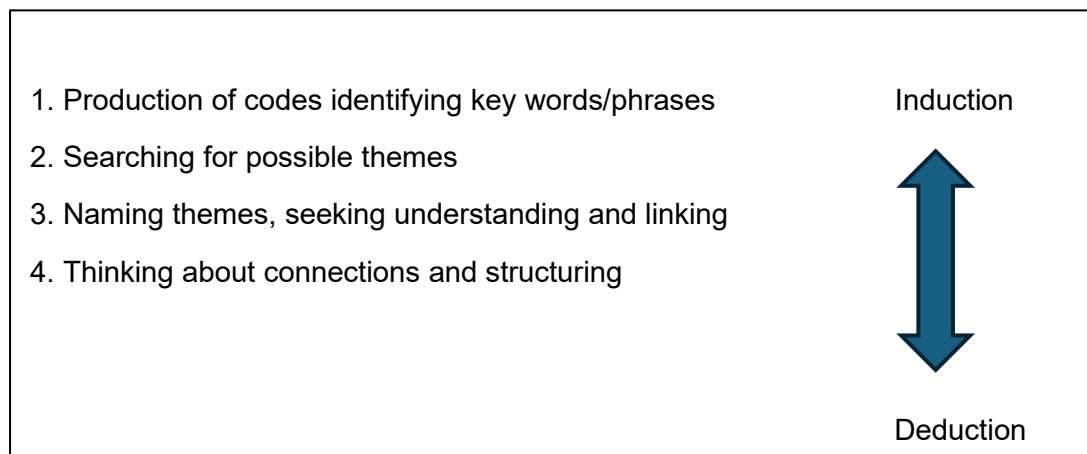
a. Phase one data analysis

The goal of this opening data analysis was to examine the key themes as a precursor to considering and using these themes in life history interviews. Collages provided prompts for subsequent conversations between participants.

The stages of thematic analysis of conversations from collages was:

- i. **Reading and understanding the textual artefacts** that were representative of the peer conversations around their created collages. These texts were then interrogated
- ii. **Application of the process (figure 4.1)**

Figure 4.2 Thematic analysis of data from collages and conversations (adapted from Kushnir, 2025)



This is a rigorous and overt analytical approach, which reveals multiple truths. It also positions the researcher as a subjective interpreter of data. The work in Appendix 3 demonstrates the application of this process (figure 4.1) to the data set. The application of a thematic analysis model demonstrated emerging themes within the context of exploring and defining a theoretical underpinning of the study (Kushnir, 2025, p. 9-10).

b. Phase two data analysis

The use of an adapted model for collage conversations enabled consideration of models and approaches to interactions and data analysis. Thematic analysis is a tool or process used as a driver of looking and re-looking at data. There was extensive data gathered from life history interactions. This took the form of transcripts and videos. The data gathered from conversations provided starting points for interactions, as they enabled some comparisons and ideas to consider in relation to theories.

A reflective journal was maintained during the process and these recorded notes, ideas and information related to context, positionality and thinking about participants' explanations of their constructed worlds. These notes resemble 'memo-writing' as described by Silverman (2020: p.126) as 'walking a particular kind of tightrope'. Silverman (2020, p.126-7) suggests that these can be misrepresentational, too analytical, representing a closing down of data. However, these were used as 'notes to self' but also 'notes to the participant'. Initial ideas were captured, but also to check with the participant by asking at the next interaction and asking if there were aspects that the participant wanted to add, change, deepen or remove. They were recognition that I was also constructing what I was hearing (Charmaz, 2021) and acknowledge that there is heightened thinking of the centrality of a researcher in the process. At further interactions, these notes were explored, and additions to data continued.

Familiarisation proceeded analysis with repeated reading of the transcripts to support immersion within the data. This stage was demanding emotionally as participants shared personal experiences relating to educational encounters, challenges and managing difficulties to secure a place at university and subsequent reflections on futures. Reflection and discussion was required to separate the emotional response from the analytical process (Braun and Clarke, 2021; Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2022, p.139).

Familiarisation was followed by coding and initial codes were generated inductively, meaning they were developed from the data rather than imposed beforehand. Braun and Clarke (2021) emphasise that thematic analysis is interpretive rather than mechanical; it was important to engage with data so that themes are emergent. Coding allows patterns to be identified and these were thematically organised through establishing relationships between the codes. The analysis involved iterative movement among transcripts, codes, themes, and the research aim, which kept the analysis grounded in participant narratives whilst developing coherent thematic interpretations. Finally Foucauldian Discourse Analysis (FDA) was applied to the overarching themes.

Stages of analysis:

- a. The data from transcripts was tidied by watching and listening and correcting the written transcripts and reflections. Further reflections were added to the reflective journal as key points.
- b. Transcripts were content analysed, looking for similar themes. This became more aligned to looking at narratives and asking questions of the data. Participants' explanations focused on directed asking and construction exploration. Coding and 'notes to self' were brought together.
- c. Identification and review of key themes and explanations which were conceptualised into overarching themes as explained in Table 4.8

Table 4.9 Example of shaping of themes after coding

Theme	Explanation/shaping concepts using FDA	Concepts
Precarity	Reference to debt Strategies of economic pragmatism Family constraints Local decision-making Silence Choice First in Family Space and locality Power and freedoms of expression	Precarity manifested through: Spatial Societal Social
Discourse and resistance	Positivity Meeting aspirations Crafting Community adherence Fluidity of power potential	
Student commuter	Resistance to poverty of the university space Identification of environment Liminality and crossing boundaries Anti-home Rejection of labelling through silence	

- d. Consideration of the concept of the 'student commutercariat'. Re-reading data and exploration of implications. Linking with theoretical concerns. Repeating of the process to build this theory. Use of FDA
- e. Establishing verbatim participant extracts to support transparency and maintain the centrality of participant voice in preparation for chapter five and six. Talking to participants about their representation through pen portraits and ensuring anonymity by removing specific details,

4.12 Conclusion

This chapter has provided an overview of the approach to research methodological decision-making, the use of research tools to gather data and how the data was subsequently analysed. It has confirmed how researching was reflexive and ethical and how researching was adapted to take into account the COVID-19 pandemic. Rich data was gathered and analysed. The reflective approach enabled a consideration of data in terms of who is speaking and from where (Alejandro, 2021, p. 2). There has been an attempt to be explicit in the practice of research and to

consider the framing of participants and how they self-identify. There has been a questioning of approaches, a reflexivity and an acknowledged consideration of the social construction of knowledge, the multiple layers of potential. It has also included moral and ethical considerations, a consideration of privilege and power (Hayes, 2023, p.1384), and a deep questioning of the lived experience of a researcher with recognition of that participants are deeply knowledgeable, shaping their constructed social world, and it is imperative to report on this shaping.

In chapter five, opening data from collage conversations is analysed and there are pen portraits of the smaller life history cohort. Chapter six provides further findings and analysis of life history interactions.

Chapter 5 Findings and Analysis: Phase one data

5.1 Introduction

This chapter reports on phase one data findings. Data findings show the emerging constructions of decisions to enter HE which are overshadowed by anxiety and uncertainty. There are key themes of staying local to study, economic pragmatism to limit costs, the potential of opportunity and the striving for congruence. Attending the 'local' university as a commuter was a normalised choice. Participants did not identify themselves as commuters as travelling to university was normal.

Images one to three provide illustrative examples of participant organisation of collages prior to conversations. Images three to six illustrate examples of participant generated data from subsequent participant conversations

Figures 5.1: Participant organised collage formations in preparation for conversations



Figure one:



Figure two:



Figure three:

5.2 Conversation findings

Findings from conversations were analysed using Kushnir's (2025, p.9) thematic analysis as discussed in chapter four. Table 5.1 was derived from steps one to three of the analysis and provide opening themes. Table 5.2 was created as a result of stage four analysis as outlined in Figure 4.2. It shows the connections and refining of data.

Figure 5.2: Participant data generated from conversations

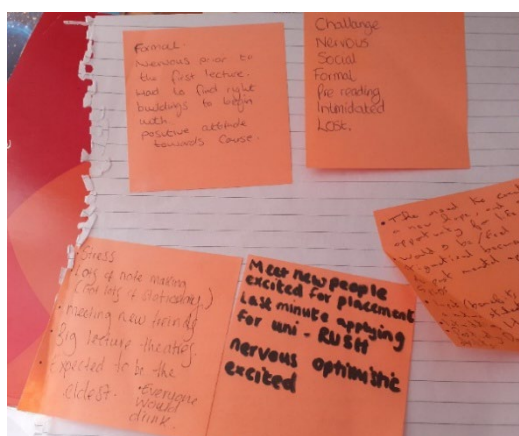


Image four:

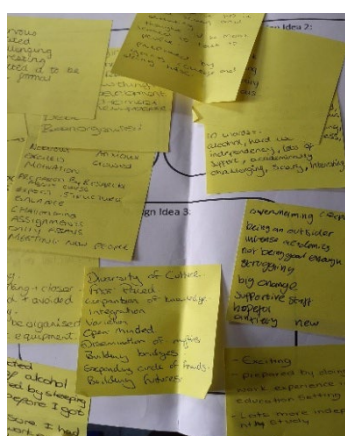


Image five:



Image six:

Table 5.1 Opening themes and data from conversations

Theme	Analysis	Participant verbatim comments
Economic resources and resilience	- Managing costs - Resources needed - Childcare - Debt - Home	<i>'I need to work so I can support myself through uni on top of my student loan'</i> <i>'I need to work to support my family. Help me feel comfortable in day to day living, to allow succession'</i> <i>'staying at home'</i>
Strangeness	- Strange environment - Crossing boundaries - Local but remote - persona	<i>'I am worried about working alongside study'</i> <i>'having to start over is hard'</i> <i>'I drive past but now I'm here, it's different'</i>
Ill-prepared	- lack of planning - last minute - change - family expectations - local	<i>'it's on my doorstep but this is the first time here'</i> <i>'Last minute applying for uni'</i> <i>'A big RUSH'</i> <i>'Why visit? I know where it is?'</i>
Stigma	- fitting in - being a person at uni - being older - being a parent	<i>'will I be the only person who's different?'</i> <i>'Being judged'</i>

	• working and studying • not being clever	
Hard	• overwhelmed • failing • found out • panic • blending in • too hard • struggle • doubt	<i>'At school I always had to dumb myself down to fit in, lacking self belief and confidence and worried about fitting in'</i> <i>'I am not sure that school or college helped me'</i> <i>'really challenging'</i>
Frightened	• No friends • Different • Fearful • Confidence • alone	<i>'unsure who was going to be here, frightened about the first day'.</i> <i>'scary'</i> <i>'no option, need a better job'</i>
Social context	• new people • making friends • maintaining existing friends • being local and home	<i>'I want to now meet new people and make new friends due to feeling like old friendships have not worked'</i> <i>'be near to friends'</i> <i>'near home and I can stay at home'</i>
Work	• better paid work • future • role models • able to work/keep job • expectations	<i>'this is a chance and I need to do well, get a better job'.</i> <i>'support from my family helps but I need to show them I can do it'.</i> <i>'A degree and university experience could also improve my future job prospects, but time to do it all?'</i>
Excitement	• hope • positive expectations • newness • personal development • opportunities • emotional • New perspective.	<i>'I need to create a new hope, and an opportunity for life'</i> <i>'There wasn't much about college but work experience did help me decide'</i>
Future building	• Being a teacher • Working in school • Opportunity to build a future • Leave current work • Relief	<i>'it gives me real life experience while still being supported'</i> <i>'The bank of futures'</i> <i>'stay at home and go to uni'</i>

Table 5.2: Themes and adaptations to research questions

Opening themes	Secondary themes	Final themes (see section 5.3)	Adaptations to research questions
Economic resources and resilience	Costs Money Work Local	Economic pragmatism Localism Congruence Opportunity Precarity	Sub-questions (<i>constructions of the invisible commuter</i>) What is the relationship between staying local and going to university? How have decisions been made about going to university? How are transitions viewed or is this redundant? The constructed commuter student?
Work			
Strangeness			
Ill-prepared			
Stigma			
Hard			
Frightened	Community Anxiety Fitting in Social cohesion Necessity		
Social context			Refined research questions for phase two Why have students decided to go to university? What was their background before starting HE? What has led them to study locally?
Excitement			
Future building	Local opportunities Personal journeys		

Data findings established key themes of staying local to study, economic pragmatism, the potential of opportunity and the striving for congruence. These themes provided a basis for phase two data collection. Chapter six reports on findings from phase two.

Data findings from phase one are significant, showing decision-making towards HE entry as contextually overshadowed by the local opportunity landscape and secondly, far reaching familial and community responsibilities. Participants talked about '*staying at home*' and going to university as opposed to commuting. The construct of the commuting student is abstract as it is entirely normalised. As Foucault (2020) examines, and as discussed in chapter three, normalisation emerges from the concretion of disciplinary practices to manage individuals towards appropriate trajectories.

Data from phase one provides an initial rationale for this abstraction. As considered in chapter three, societal precarity as outlined by Devany et al. (2020, p.86) is manifested in careful negotiation of potential and with precarity impacting on choice of university and course a contributory factor.

a. Economic pragmatism and localism

Data demonstrated a recognition of limited potential in current opportunities and participants looked forward to developing their skills and expanding their local employment potential. Berry and McDaniel (2022, p.330) argue that precarious labour market opportunities profoundly affect young adults in the longer term, with a 'creeping professionalism and growing pressure to obtain a degree'. Whilst some participants expressed entry to university as an opportunity, many considered entry as an inevitability. This aligns to increasing credentialism and as discussed by Berry and McDaniel's (2022, p.323) empirical study as young adults are managing change but not necessarily agreeing with it as it is 'internalised'. Decisions to stay local and remain at home were articulated and elided as '*staying at home and going to university*'. Aspiration was related to realising opportunity and this was expressed as '*change and better jobs*'. There was also evidence of the importance of place, with strong attachments to place as part of generational and community cohesion (McDonald, 2024, p.185).

One aspect of going to university were participants' explanations of a lack of preparation. This included later applications and lack of time to prepare due to work and also participants seeing the university as '*too local*' to visit in advance. As Gandy et al. (2024, p.2514) examines, students who apply conventionally to university are able to exert leverage, develop confidence and manage change as university systems may be activated earlier. Those who apply later accumulate risk and as Gandy et al. (2024, p.2500) suggest, may not be 'ready' for HE. Later (clearing) applications can be as high as 25% for post-1992 universities (Gandy et al. 2024, p. 2514). Commuting to a local university may result in lack of preparedness as proximity is considered as familiarity.

Participants identified '*debt*' and '*money worries*' as key points. Economic pragmatism was manifested in planning to work during study, longer term employment aspirations and '*staying at home*'. Participants constructed university study as interrelated to costing money, '*debt*', the need to maintain part-time work and aspirational future work. Callender et al. (2020, p.108-11) outline how student loan debt influences future life choices, potential home ownership, mental health and lifetime financial well-being whilst noting the absence of longitudinal studies. Lainio and Brooks (2021, p.225) go further considering that student loan debt creates 'intergenerational dependencies'.

Danvers and Hinton-Smith (2021, p.102) outline a student tolerance of debt as it is conceived as unavoidable. However, many students perceive a loan as a debt and not an investment, and debt is considered as a risk to be averted by engaging in strategies to minimise debt in the first place. Danvers and Hinton-Smith (2021, p.117) consider that debt is an embodied anxiety and likened to fear and pressure and Finn, Ingram and Allen (2021, p.247) that the burden of debt is normalised 'which obscures entrenched inequalities'

Aspirational future work was constructed as the ability to earn more and secure higher paid and stable work after graduation with participants expressing transactional reasons for attending university, '*I need to improve my job prospects...get a better job*'. Localism and commuting contribute to financial stability and minimising cost were intertwined with university study to minimise risk. Finn, Ingram and Allen (2021, p.253) consider that undergraduates are 'insuring' themselves against precarious futures, with HE as 'perfunctory', a fitting in with other roles and responsibilities.

b. Congruence

Participants expressed doubt about '*fitting in*' and managing '*change*'. This was constructed in different ways and at times focused on spatial and contextual familiarity/unfamiliarity (Bathmaker, 2021, p.78). There was a strong consideration of links to family, for example, familial expectations, '*they want me to do well*', and negotiating responsibilities of '*childcare*' and '*the expense*' and so becoming a university student was held at a distance. A non-residential status at university was explained as staying at home and many participants focused on maintaining their established social community, yet also developing new communities, '*I want to meet new people... I have my friends at home as well*'. They are oscillating between an existing persona and the construction/addition of a student commuter. This 'fitting in' is complex and contextualised, and Bathmaker, (2021, p83) calls this a 'contradictory in-between class'. Participants expressed doubts reflecting a challenge of acceptance, '*being an outsider...overwhelming...hard for me*'. The contradictions of oscillation were possibly further manifested in anxieties of personas and negotiating the social context of crossing boundaries. Contradiction was apparent in participants desiring social opportunities whilst maintaining networks with boundary crossing provoking anxiety, participants reporting that they '*block and avoid*' uncomfortable

lectures, 'worry' and '*finding study daunting*' was reported. McDonald (2024, p.186) considers that students, particularly those from widening participation backgrounds experience social dislocation as they do not meet normative expectations of HE students.

c. Opportunity with precarity

Participants identified the need to upskill to improve employment prospects, the potential for higher paid, secure and professional opportunities. Other participants expressed pressure, to meet expectations, and this was linked to hope for future generations, or demonstrating to families, that achievement was possible, '*being able to improve quality of life for my family both now and in the years to come*'. Work and change of circumstance were considered as hopes by participants, '*To find a new career, one with meaning and something that makes a difference*'. This theme is linked to future building but expressions reveal instrumental decision-making. Some participants linked this hope to change for their own children and to act as role models.

As Kaidong Yu (2022, p.1129) discusses in a longitudinal study of undergraduate 'working class' students, improved job prospects are a primary goal but participants make complex decisions, balancing necessary changes against the possible and achievable. This was partly driven by 'positional competition' (Brown, 2003: p.143), a reflection of credentialism in the job market, and the necessity to meet the accepted norms, within diminishing employment prospects which are geographical and contextual.

5.3 Conclusion

Data findings identified the constructions of participants' initial experiences of university and choice to attend HE within a lens of local and contextual potential. Participant construction of HE is within a pragmatic dimension of potential, entirely constrained by normative societal behaviours and expectations (Foucault, 1984a, p.389) as examined in chapter three. They are negotiating within constraints of potential. As examined in chapter two, discourse of students who commute constitutes the concept. Students do not construct themselves as commuters, but societal, academic and foundational discourse does. Policy narrative adds to this formation.

As a result of these findings and the foregrounding of context, it was important to examine the construction of the student commuter. Phase two data collection contrasted with phase one and as explained in chapter four was an immersive approach to gathering life history narratives from a volunteer sample of participants from the phase one study.

5.4 Pen portraits

In preparation for chapter six, pen portraits of the research cohort for phase two follow. Pen portraits are included as they present participants as individuals whilst preserving the complexity and context of their subsequent data. They provide contextual, temporal, schematic and cultural approaches in their narrative structuring. There was a deliberate approach to avoid specific demographic data and for participants to decide their personal identifiers. Pen portraits initiated active collaboration and the researcher shared her own biography for transparency and as a means to 'deconstruct the discursive practices through which one's subjectivity has been constituted' (Goodson and Sikes, 2001, p.86). Participants were invited to talk about themselves at the start of interactions. In line with transparency, each participant chose a pseudonym, read and adjusted these portraits.

Angie

Angie was the oldest participant, in her early thirties, was born and grew up in the university city. She described her local retired parents and wider family as working class. Angie is married, has two children and her husband is a graduate, working in information technologies. She completed secondary schooling at a local high school leaving with four GCSEs (English, mathematics, science and geography). As there was no sixth form at her school she left to go to college to study health and social care (BTEC). Angie subsequently left college after a few months as she was not enjoying it and she needed to work. After casual retail and then social care work, she started an apprenticeship in health and social care with a large private training organisation and completed qualifications at level 2 and 3. After completing her qualifications, she continued to work and was given more responsibility, starting to manage staff. She subsequently met her future husband and decided to marry. Angie had worked in health and social care for just under five years. However, her work was disrupted when there was a dispute with her employer about time off for her honeymoon and so she left work. She then had some casual work through agencies but once she had her first child, she was unable to work shifts due to issues with securing child care. Once her youngest child was a little older, she started to consider university and was encouraged by her husband. After going to a university open day, she completed a university organised preparation course. This was free, convenient and local, providing entry to university courses through widening participation initiatives. She was encouraged by this experience and decided to apply. Angie latterly delayed her application as her family subsequently moved to the edge of the city, and so she needed a car to ensure she could commute and manage school and nursery pick up. She opted to take a job as a school cleaner so that she could save for a car and she could work when her husband was at home. Angie completed a ten week university run preparation course (earning level 3 credits) and then applied to university for education studies. Angie received additional financial support from the university to support her

childcare costs. Angie commuted from her family home to university by car. Her journey varied between 30 to 40 minutes.

Marty

Marty was born and raised in a large northern city. His parents are separated and currently Marty is estranged from his family. Marty is close to a maternal aunt and cousins and also his partner's family. Marty lives in rented accommodation with his partner in another city and commutes to university using public transport. A reason for studying at a different city is related to his estrangement. Marty completed five GCSEs at a high school and then stayed on at sixth form. He completed A Levels but did not pass, he stayed at school for an additional year but again did not secure the required grades. Marty left school, and he continued to work in retail, moving away from the family home and living with other relatives. Marty was supported by family to apply for voluntary work with a city-wide charity that provided mentoring and learning support in secondary schools. Marty described this organisation as providing volunteering work as learning mentors to young people, whilst also receiving personal mentoring support. This year long experience enabled Marty to regain confidence. He was encouraged to return to college, completing a part time access course in science which was the only local FE access course available. This was part time and Marty combined it with retail work. Marty applied to university as his partner was at the same university, although a year ahead. Marty commuted to university using public transport, taking approximately 90 minutes.

Eve

Eve was born and lives in the university city. She is an only child and described her parents as once working class, her father had worked as an engineer, but both parents are now mainly retired, both are from the local area. Neither parent has a degree, Eve's mother worked part time in various unskilled roles. Currently, Eve lives at home with them but hopes to be able to marry and set up her own home in the future. Eve described her family as close knit, she provides care for her maternal grandparents, and she has many friends in her local community church which is important to her. Eve completed GCSEs at a local secondary school, achieving five passes but not science and then stayed on at school to complete two A levels in psychology and sociology. Originally, she was interested in interior design as she enjoyed art at school but she abandoned A Level art. However, other friends were thinking about university and Eve was unsure what courses might be available. Eve was uncertain about career paths but was also aware of what her parents thought about career plans and what was available. She left school after completing her qualifications and because she was uncertain, she started work in her local primary school in the school office as an administrative assistant. Eve secured this job through her friendship group in the local community. The primary school she worked at created an apprenticeship in business administration which Eve accepted. Eve said that she appreciated earning money during her apprenticeships as it enabled her to learn to drive and buy a car and she was able to be more independent, such

as going on holidays with friends. Eve increasingly helped teachers in school, and they talked to Eve about teaching and she occasionally was able to work in classrooms and did some outreach work. Eve was unhappy with her apprenticeship, completed through a local college which she thought was poorly organised. She finished her level three apprenticeship but was told that due to restructuring, she was unlikely to be offered a job in September. This uncertainty led her to apply in August through clearing for the BA (Hons) Primary Teaching with QTS. Eve thought that she could start the degree in January giving her time to prepare, she didn't apply elsewhere. Eve wanted to stay at home and did not consider moving away to university because of cost. However, she was told she would need to complete a science qualification before she could start in September, and there was a cost to taking this qualification, and so decided she would re-consider what she wanted to do. In September she was offered a place on the BA (Hons) Education Studies degree which she accepted. Eve resigned from her role to attend university. Eve had two other part time jobs, both in office administration through an agency and she was also a part-time university recruitment ambassador. Eve commuted to university by car, taking between 20 to 30 minutes.

Janis

Janis was born and grew up in a local market town; the university city is the nearest university. Janis has a twin sister and a younger brother. Her parents divorced when Janis was twelve and her mother subsequently remarried and Janis lives with her step dad, mum and family. Neither parent or sibling has a degree. Janis described her family relationships as difficult and this tension is mainly centred on her twin sister. Her mother works as a teaching assistant and her step dad works for a distribution company. Janis attended primary and a large secondary academy school local to her. Janis has four GCSEs. She stayed at school to complete a BTEC in health and social care and an A Level in sociology. Her local town operates a consortium of A levels/BTECs in different schools, but she didn't want to travel to other schools, so stayed at school sixth form and took what was available. At the end of sixth form she looked for something related to education as she had been working as a tutor with children who lived nearby and really enjoyed the work. Janis also worked in retail part time. Janis started an apprenticeship as a teaching assistant in a village school about eight miles from the town, using the local bus service to commute. The apprenticeship was through a local FE college. Janis completed both level two and level three qualifications and was still trying to complete her apprenticeship before coming to university. Janis talked about being inspired in school by other teaching staff and the teacher she worked with encouraged her to apply to university. She applied for the BA (Hons) Primary Teaching with QTS but as she had completed an apprenticeship, she did not have enough UCAS points as so she transferred to the BA (Hons) in Education Studies. When Janis started university she lived in shared private student accommodation but the relationship with other students quickly broke down and so Janis moved back home as she lost her deposit and had to continue to pay rent. Janis worked in retail, babysitting and tutoring in her

local community. Janis hoped to return to rented accommodation in her third year of study. Janis used public transport (bus and train) to commute to university. Her journey time was 40 to 60 minutes.

Moira

Moira was born in West Africa, and as a young person, her family relocated to Europe. Moira went to school in a European country and is multi-lingual. Moira considers English her 'third' language. Moira is the eldest of four sisters. Her parents separated when Moira was fifteen and later her mother and siblings moved to the UK. Her father, a motor mechanic stayed in Europe and Moira had little contact with him. Moira's mother worked in social care and neither parent went to university. At school and then vocational college in Europe, Moira was considering accountancy as she enjoyed mathematics at school. Moira had no expectation of going to university and had decided to complete qualifications whilst working, a normalised trajectory and financially more secure.

In her late teens, the family moved to the UK and Moira struggled as she lost friends and family. Her mother made the decision to move as she considered that there were more opportunities for her four daughters and changes to migration legislation accelerated this decision. Moira struggled with adapting to a new educational setting, a FE college. Moira had studied English at school and at college, but she was aware that she needed to improve as language development in her previous college was insufficient. Her qualifications, gained at school and college in a European country were not recognised. Once in England Moira attended a general FE college, completing entry level courses, and then GCSEs and level three qualifications in childcare BTEC Diploma. Moira felt that some of these courses were repetitive and unnecessary and she was going backwards. As part of her college course Moira completed a work placement in a primary school and early years and changed her mind about her career choices. In the UK she considered becoming a teacher, spending time researching her career options.

Moira is close to her family and as the eldest feels she has many responsibilities. Her mother encouraged her to think about going to university. Moira applied for the BA (Hons) Primary Teaching with QTS but did not secure sufficient UCAS points. Moira was offered BA (Hons) Education Studies and accepted. Moira worked in retail part time. She commuted to university using public transport and her journey time was between 60 to 90 minutes. She hoped to move into local rented accommodation in her third year but this is dependent on her family.

Conclusion

The opening data from phase one enabled key themes to be considered in preparation for phase two. These key themes were starting points for gathering rich data to provide an understanding of the context and constructions of those who travel or commute to university but remain at home. Data gathered from life history participants is presented in chapter six.

Chapter 6: Findings and Analysis: phase two

6.1 Introduction

Findings and analysis from chapter five demonstrated emergent constructions of contextual and local decision-making processes affecting university choice and entry. This chapter presents rich data with subsequent analysis from life history interactions. It provides explanation of the construction of the student commuter.

It is organised into three overarching sections which include sub-sections. Section one provides data and analysis of contextual trajectories to university. These demonstrate societal precarity through themes of complex decision-making related to gaining qualifications to enter university, complex trajectories related to staying local and the importance of key changers. Section two reports on spatial precarity. It explores the macro geographical context of university choices and the micro space, the way a student commuter needs to craft their local university environment. Section three focuses on social precarity and economic pragmatism and how these overshadow decisions to stay local.

6.2 Section one: Societal precarity and contextual transitions to university

This section examines participants' rich descriptions of their decision-making and transitional experiences. These trajectories were complex, personalised and haphazard. Data provided key themes reflecting the construction of transition through a lens of precarity. This demonstrates how students from post-industrial, HE 'cold' spots, decide to go to their 'local' university (Baines, 2024, p.9) and their complex transitions to achieve their perceptions of a normative goal of HE. It considers the research questions focus on decision-making, background and local choice-making.

The concept of precarity was a theme throughout the findings. In late modernity it can be traced in a variety of ways, as an intersection of societal determinants, such as stratified educational opportunity (Schoon, 2021, p.47; Quyoum et al. 2021 p.2) and economic and geographical constraints (MacDonald, 2019, p.160). Precarity can also be conceptualised as personal uncertainty, despite young adults exploring aspiration as possible selves (Rainford, 2023, p.413). Precarity affects decision-making, as explained by participants in this study, as precarity is felt financially, socially and spatially. Increasingly it is becoming a normative experience for some undergraduates. There were key themes in the data that reflect a prism of structural constraints contributing to precarity and these structural constraints intersect with the construction of the student commuter. Foucault (1982, p.212) as outlined in chapter two talks about the disciplinary processes of power/knowledge which have 'categorised the individual, marks him by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him which he must recognise and which others have to recognise in him'. There is an inevitability of the construction of the student commuter who has been constituted through categorisation, constrained by local opportunity and engaged in pragmatic choices.

a. complex decision-making

Table 6.1 illustrates the description provided by participants of their trajectory prior to university study and decisions about university application. Four participants, Marty, Eve, Moira and Janis were first in family (FiF) to attend university. These participants represent first-generation undergraduates who are more prevalent in post-1992 universities (Coombs, 2022, p.14). All participants can be considered as non-traditional, formed by and subject to a discourse of widening participation and subsequent categorising.

Table 6.1 Participants' educational and work trajectories prior to entering university

Participant	Immediate educational experience prior to going to university	Did they apply in advance using the University Central Admissions System (UCAS)?	Did they apply to university through the late UCAS 'clearing' system?
Eve First in family	Apprenticeship: school administration	No	Yes Applied three weeks prior to starting university to BA (Hons) Primary Education with QTS. Application was unsuccessful and transferred to BA (Hons) Education Studies.
Moira First in family	Full-time college/part time work	No	Yes Applied to BA (Hons) Primary Education with QTS. Transferred to BA (Hons) Education Studies
Angie Husband a graduate Mature student	Full time parent/part time work/Short Access Course at the university	Yes	No, UCAS application in November to Education Studies and received unconditional offer. Attended university open days
Marty First in family	Part-time access course in college/part time work	No	Yes to Education Studies
Janis First in family	Apprenticeship: school teaching assistant (TA)	No	Yes Applied three weeks prior to starting university to BA (Hons) Primary Education with QTS. Application was unsuccessful, transferred

			to BA (Hons) Education Studies
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As demonstrated in table 6.1, Angie, as a mature student, had completed a non-traditional route to university, postponing study as she moved into independent adulthood with family responsibilities. Whilst Angie's trajectory was extended and unexpected, Marty, Eve, Moira and Janis as FiF students demonstrated complexity amidst financial and social precarity in their trajectories towards university. When considering when and how students applied to university, only Angie used the conventional approach, applying earlier, enabling preparation and planning. Other participants, as demonstrated in table 6.1 used the 'clearing' entry system (Gandy et al. 2024, p.2498) to university and with imminent transition, were negotiating a transition with minimum preparation both practically and physically. Gandy et al. (2024, p.2514) see this group of students as 'missing out on any pre-arrival support...to integrate... and thus potentially influence retention and continuation'.

As data demonstrates, whilst FiF does not necessarily signify a lack of preparation, participants in this study experienced protracted and misaligned trajectories to HE with late decision-making affected by economic pragmatism. Decision-making was intensely contextualised and personalised and was in response to withdrawn or lack of contextual potential, such as employment, progression and apprenticeships, imagined futures and the desire to meet the discourse of opportunity. Despite this, agency and resistance were exhibited, and motivators interceded in different ways to support navigation. It is important to consider the longer term, complex and contextual experiences of these FiF, non-traditional students in university 'cold spots'.

Angie, when talking about her schooling and brief time at a Further Education College (FE), did not consider university, and had no recollection of any discussion in school. In contrast, Marty and Eve, had conceptualised going to university as part of aspirational futures, and these aspirations were developed to expectations in secondary school. Marty and Eve talked about university entry as a normative trajectory, Marty said: *'I had thought about uni at school, but I needed to figure out how I was going to get to uni'* and Eve explained: *'that university was sort of on my list'*. Both Marty and Eve had considered university as a longer term goal. The complexities of going to university for Marty and Eve were affected by the need to gain additional required entry qualifications, develop related experiences but also to continue to earn through working, whilst adding to their qualifications. For Marty and Eve, university was an expectation although negotiating access to university was more complex. They were striving to meet perceived societal expectations; both talked about their peers from school being at university and meeting competitive norms of educational trajectories. Marty and Eve needed time to choice-make, to conceptualise what university could provide, yet continuing to be aware of the self as

enterprise (Kelly, 2017, p.58). Eve, as Sumner (2002, p.46) considers, had 'internalised the dominant narrative of university study' as essential and normative. Eve positioned herself against friends from school, making comparisons about her trajectory as opposed to others from her school peer group:

'I was going to be another year behind my friends...they had all gone to university straight away... so I felt I was like only a year or two behind.. and I didn't want to be doing more than a year or two' (Eve)

Marty's transition to university was reflective of insufficient qualifications, a need to resolve confidence and move towards independence from a challenging insecure estranged family background as Marty strived to remain independent from his family. Marty attended an access to university course at college to gain level three qualifications for entry. As a requirement of his course, he also completed work experience in a secondary school. To develop confidence, Marty secured a mentoring role in a secondary school, established by a city organisation which worked with young people experiencing challenging life experiences. Marty was attending an access course, structured as full-time, working in retail with a contract of 16 hours and also working two days a week as a mentor in a secondary school. Marty described his role as a mentor as '*crucial*' as it '*gave me hope about what I might be able to do...especially after school*'.

Eve and Marty were negotiating complex trajectories which included additional study, part-time employment, volunteering and gaining work experience. As Patfield et al. (2022, p.1138-9) discusses there is a problematisation of FiF students, who are often seen as sharing a 'set of problems', 'constructed as first-generation entrants in binary opposition to their peers with university-educated parents'. The implication for Patfield et al. (2022, p.1139-40) is that students are presumed as a homogeneous group, who need to accumulate or to be 'filled up'.

Janis provides a contrast to Marty and Eve as she had not considered university when at secondary school. She talked about a lack of direction when considering university and university '*was not something she had thought about in detail at school*'. Janis had developed an interest in working in a primary school as she had provided informal, unpaid tutoring to primary age children in her local community, but she was uncertain about longer term aims. Janis talked about this role as, '*helping some kids in my street with reading and it has just grown from that*'. Janis also worked part-time in retail which '*was not going anywhere*'. She subsequently embarked on an apprenticeship in school because she '*didn't really know what I wanted to get into or have a direction or anything I can do....I wasn't really sure*'. Janis said that her final decision to go to university was because of uncertainty with employment after her apprenticeship was ending:

'they were saying that they weren't sure whether they were going to keep apprentices for the next year....so having a staff reshuffle....so I may as well go and do it properly...Oh, I'll just go to uni then' (Janis).

Janis decided to go to university because she saw it as a way of continuing to work in a school. For Janis, going to university was unexpected.

Angie's husband was a graduate and his support for her desire to gain qualifications had enabled her to conceptualise university as an outward and agentic opportunity. As Angie had stability, she was able to plan, taking time to navigate her trajectory and to ensure that she had the resources to complete HE as a student-parent. Angie was introduced to the potential of university later, after life course changes of marriage and starting a family. Angie was motivated by support from her immediate family, the importance of financial stability and opportunities to improve life chances for her children. Angie had the benefit of her husband, who as a graduate, had encouraged her:

'I have never really known for sure what I want to do...my husband went to uni when he was a kid and it was vastly different for him...but he was okay with it, like with me going' (Angie).

Angie described how his support was critical for her, as he *'knew what it was like'* and *'was happy to see me get going'*. Angie's transition to university was substantially extended, due to practical changes to lifestyle, financial pressures, time, a need to organise her commute, gaining an entry qualification and managing childcare commitments. Angie also needed a bridge between her construction of university as a potential opportunity and her aspirational intentions. Angie talked about this conflict as *'an awkward fight with myself...not sure if it was for me'*. McDonald (2024, p.184-5) highlights how those crossing boundaries to middle-class space and aspiration can *'be fraught with anxieties about potential failure'*. For Angie, her ability to complete a short part-time preparation course (on a university campus) with *'other people a bit like me'* was important. This course, providing an entry qualification for mature students, also supported Angie in developing her social interaction, by explanation of, and support with, her course choice, application to university and applying for student funding. Angie visited the university during two open days, strengthening an enculturation process of familiarity. It enabled Angie to make a connection and cross a boundary (McDonald, 2024, p.186) and manage feelings of social dislocation.

Similar to Angie, Moira's decision to attend university was complex. Predominantly Moira's decision was linked to her migration to the UK as a teenager, moving from an environment with limited educational opportunities to a large town in the West Midlands. Moira felt that this provided an unexpected expansion of her potential educational choices. However, her status in her family as the oldest sibling was an additional pressure and this provoked expectations from her mother. Moira talked about university as:

'I never thought that I would have ever gone to university. This was my plan, was to never go to uni because I didn't think I could have like become what I am today...I didn't have the motivation really' (Moira)

Moir's schooling in Europe was in a small urban area and university was a remote potential. For Moira, thinking about university was due to her family, also deepened by expectations as the eldest sibling in a one parent family and her extended education at a FE College in the UK. Moira demonstrates extensive 'identity work' with adjustment to her understandings of social positioning, internalising her lack of potential (McDonald, 2024, p.189), she is working on 'finding herself' and in later conversations sees her authentic self the need to 'work hard'.

Whilst Angie was able to develop her aspirations as a student which were substantiated by her family and her adult independence, Angie clearly demonstrates the overshadowing of an educational system that has constructed her. Marty and Eve had longer term aspirations as FiF students but both experienced challenges from their families. Marty, due to family breakdown was estranged from his immediate family and Eve, as an only child provided minimal information to her parents about the realities of attending university and costs:

'my parents, as they are retired preferred it when I was working and liked me doing an apprenticeship as they like, could see it was a job, they were less sure about me going to university. I didn't really tell them about my loan and I also continued to work part-time, so they went with it really.' (Eve)

Moir's aspirations developed in relation to her migration to England and potential entry to university. Janis also developed her aspirations but was less supported than Moira. Janis described her family as:

'not really interested, they didn't know what going to university means and they weren't able to provide any help, like money. When I decided to commute, so I went back home, they expected me to pay some rent for food and also help around the house.' (Janis)

Janis commented that her family, her twin particularly saw;

'university as like college, they don't know what it might mean for me and that they were fine but didn't realise that sometimes I needed to work or study...once I started going...then they asked me about it, but the money and student loans did cause some arguments once they realised what it meant and so there were some flash arguing about it, mainly my step-dad, he wasn't sure about the loan'. (Janis)

Janis characterised her family as less interested in her future, identifying that her family had neither understanding of interest of what she did at university, seeing it as an extension of her time at college as part of her apprenticeship. The length and cost of university being a 'flash' point of family disagreement and Janis described how this became an issue for her with discussion primarily linked to her student loan and an implication of gaining debt.

Participant data findings from life history interactions demonstrate differing levels of familial support, which is predominantly unfocussed apart from Angie's tangible experience and more distant for Marty as it flows from his extended family. They

experienced complex trajectories requiring different entry routes and complex decision-making.

6.3 Discussion

Participant data demonstrates complex decision-making which is overshadowed by incomplete qualifications. Angie, as a mature student used a specific route for mature students providing entry to her local university. As Dilnot et al. (2023, p.1144) identify an increasing proportion of English students going to university have vocational as opposed to academic qualifications. As the OECD (2021, p.176) outline, this meets widening participation criteria targeted 'for students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds'. However, as Dilnot et al. (2023, p.1153) establish, entering university with vocational qualifications increases risk of attrition and students with lower socioeconomic status have an increased risk of non-completion and achieving lower classification degrees.

Fracture in educational trajectories was experienced, with a strive towards credential gaining through vocational qualifications, apprenticeships and access courses. Research by The Sutton Trust (2021b, p.3) and Dickinson, Rubio and Hughes (2022, p.51) confirm how those with vocational qualifications are less likely to apply to HE and will experience complex progression routes as exemplified by Eve, Janis and Angie.

Participants had experienced a schooling system that has constituted a normalising process of the desire to enter university as exemplified by Marty and Eve, but which had largely failed in enabling this trajectory. As Ball and Collet-Sabé (2022, p.4) discuss, schooling is an institution of normalising, with 'social-class filtering' (Barker and Hoskins, 2021, p.108). This shapes trajectory and progression by sorting, contributing to a construct of aspiration. The cultural construct of class norms is contributory. As Drew (2019, p.541) considers, there is an inevitability about the subjectification of students in schools, through the formation of idealised subjects, the separation of non-ideal dispositions and subsequent disciplinary interactions, leading to educational hierarchies. Foucault's (2020, p.138) scholarship examines the techniques of disciplinary power as well as the formation of 'truths' which form a discourse creating possible actions and the production of ideals that individuals should normatively aspire to (Drew, 2019, p.543). Schools are sites of this formation and operationalisation of discourse, creating a currency of qualification and performative categorisation which overshadow individual aspiration. As The Sutton Trust (2021b, p.8) identify, those from different socio-economic backgrounds are sorted, with FE more prevalent for students 'serving the more disadvantaged'. Drew (2019, p.541) considers further that discourse promotes idealised aspirations through 'responsibilised choice in ways that might secure access to the privileges that flow from choosing to behave in ways idealised by the discourse'. As discussed in chapter two, classification systems are formational and pervasive. Thus, participants in this study demonstrate 'responsibilised choices' which is privileged in discourse but at the same time, marginalising as they inevitably strive for university

entry within complexity, unable to operationalise the appropriate formation. In a stratified education system, as Boliver (2015, p.609) examines, post-1992 universities have higher levels of students with non-traditional backgrounds. Students self-select to maintain their subjectified personas.

Overlaying the subjectification process are further educational policy developments which have led to a fractured secondary school sector (Hodgson and Spours 2020, p.139; Billingham and Gillon, 2023, p.298). Sorting and stratification results in educational routes which may restrict the potential to enter a university sector that is itself stratified (Boliver, 2015, p.609-10; Hansen et al. 2023, p.298). Finally, localised opportunities restrict potential. Participant educational transitional experiences confirm Rogers and Spours (2020, p.1247) research, that there is a vulnerability in transition for those from lower and middling income which is restricted by localised opportunity of FE and HE and this is consider further in section 6.3.

b. Complex trajectories and precarity

Transition to university for participants was complex, individualised, linking to localised opportunities and a need to gather qualifications for entry to university.

Whilst Janis and Eve completed apprenticeships prior to starting university, others experienced ongoing precarity and individual complexities. Marty had experienced a *'family breakdown'* during sixth form, leading to estrangement from his parent. He left the family home to live with his extended family. This created an interruption in his schooling and an incomplete 'A' level course and subsequent failure:

'Anyway, like when I finished sixth form, I failed everything. Essentially, I did fail twice, I failed twice! So, I gave up on academic stuff. So, I put the idea of uni out of my head.'

Marty had rejected university and continued to work in retail which was a job he had secured at school. As Marty was looking for full-time work, his local jobcentre helped him with applying to work with an organisation that supported young people (aged 18 to 25) in crisis. This organisation provided Marty with a placement as a part time volunteer mentor in a secondary school, combining this with an access course:

'And at the end of the year, they support you into getting on with what you want to do and most people on my team had a degree, and so I was like, I haven't been to uni yet, so I'm gonna figure out how to get into uni as a starting point. So I did the access course because I had nowhere near enough A levels'.

Marty's access course enabled him to gain UCAS points for university study although as he was working he had limited options:

I just remember it being called an access to HE course. Technically, it as classed as a nursing one, 'cause I did biology, psychology and sociology as my three subjects in it. But it was just the most relevant one I could pick'.

Marty described this course as:

'It was alright. I did it for the points...it was two days a week so I did three hours here and there...and I was working part-time alongside it, doing my mentoring...to be fair, I skipped out a lot, I would turn up at the start, because I was working the days I wasn't in college...I was exhausted...working in retail was awful' (Marty).

Marty's strategy was to be minimally present, gather the work and complete it when he could:

'I would sign the register, stay an hour and then get food and stuff because I was just so tired, um yeah, but it didn't feel like preparation for university'.

Marty displayed instrumental and strategic approaches to study, balancing work commitments with study as Marty needed to live independently. Moira similarly had an extended trajectory to university. As her European qualifications lacked recognition, she started at entry level at a local FE college. Moira considered that her spoken English (her third language) was *'really bad'*, so improving English was an acknowledged goal, this led to repetition of subjects that she had confidence in:

'I did entry level and then did level one maths and English, but my level of English, I couldn't speak well, but I could understand it. It was all easy to do, especially maths, and my mum said, why don't you do GCSE? But I was still doing level 1 and then level 2, so it took ages, but then eventually they let me do GCSEs and I should have done that in maths straightaway, and then I wanted to go to uni at that point' (Moira)

Whilst Moira was interested in accountancy, she was directed to a teaching assistant course as she was told she was too late to enrol:

'So there was a course going on called, working with children and I was like, I don't mind that cause I've always wanted to, like socialise with like people and children, interact with children. I talked to my mum about it, I didn't talk to anyone about it in college...I didn't have a tutor or anything, so I did that for a year. So after that I saw my English teacher, I told her I wanted to go to university and she said about an access course. So then I did that as I had my GCSEs.'

Moira was sanguine about her protracted studies, she called it *'starting over in a different place'*. Moira talked about:

'needing someone to give you guidance, and apart from my mum and later on my English teacher, there wasn't anyone like interested. I focused on myself, and my job at Home and Bargains at the weekend' (Moira).

Moira talked about struggling with her access course as she found the coursework difficult with less time to complete academic work for college and extra homework. Moira had a job in retail to contribute to the family income. She also completed a volunteer placement in a school to support her application to primary education Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) course at university and she talked about the need *'to really focus on my course, because there were exams'*. Moira did not secure a place for her university first choice, despite her additional qualifications and

contextual skills of gaining volunteer experiences as she did not secure sufficient UCAS points. She subsequently changed course to education studies:

'I got a place on the QTS, but my grades at college, I wasn't able to get through with my grades, so that's why I did education. I was really upset about it, I really wanted to do that and then become a teacher. I think that it was probably all too much'.

Janis, Angie and Eve had completed secondary schooling and for differing reasons had completed apprenticeships. Angie, Janis and Eve's apprenticeships were in the public sector, Angie in health and social care and completed just after leaving school, and Janis as an early year's apprentice and Eve as a school office administrator. All three participants commented on a lack of opportunity as part of their apprenticeship choice, and characterised these experiences as inevitable due to local circumstances, lack of information, financial instability and restricted opportunity.

Janis and Eve used their apprenticeship as entry to university as they were uncertain about careers. Prior to their apprenticeships, Janis and Eve were working in part-time, short-term contracted retail employment, jobs they had secured when in school. Both Janis and Eve talked about few opportunities for full time work in their areas, Janis said that:

'I didn't really know what I wanted to get into or have a direction or anything I can do...I needed another job 'cause I was fed up with the job I was working. There weren't any jobs that I wanted and commuting is hard without a car' (Janis)

After leaving school, Janis was unsure about her choices and continued to work part-time in a local supermarket, a part time job that she had secured during her sixth-form at school. Janis talked about her job as:

'it was not really going anywhere. Nothing for me, not long term' (Janis)

As well as part-time work, Janis had developed an interest in working with children as she had started to tutor two children who lived in the same street and she was interested in working in a school and learning about teaching and school administration. After leaving school, Janis was unable to find work in school, so she looked at other opportunities:

'so I found this apprenticeship but I didn't really understand apprenticeships, so I ended up doing level two, which is a GCSE equivalence, which is annoying because I could have done the level three, but I had no idea...so then the level three. There was nothing much else I could do with no jobs that I wanted' (Janis)

She thought that an 'apprenticeship was a 'good way to get things like we get paid to learn'. Janis secured her apprenticeship independently and did not seek advice beyond her family. She had talked to her step-father about it as her parents wanted her to 'get a proper job'. It was at a primary school in another small town, included visits from a tutor from an FE college to complete a portfolio of assessed work,

leading to a qualification in supporting teaching and learning in school. Janis commuted using the local bus service as there was nothing nearer for her. As Janis described, that despite her GCSEs, she completed both level two and three, repeating a level of unnecessary qualifications.

Janis and Eve used their apprenticeships as navigation tools to manage uncertainties and precarity and as a negotiation of the tension between opportunities to gain skills, earn a wage, and seek imagined and independent futures. They were attracted by the ability to develop their skills as well as gain an income. Whilst Janis enjoyed the experiential opportunities in school and enjoyed working with teachers, she found that her apprenticeship training was repetitive. The Sutton Trust (2025, p.14-15) report on the diversity of apprenticeship training and the variability of provision, finding that there is a 'shadow landscape of apprenticeships with little training and/or sub-minimum wages'. Janis was unaware of the structure and organisation of the programme and found opaque demands of written work a heavy burden. As Janis explains that she:

'went along with it because I didn't understand until afterwards. It was just expected....it was really poorly organised...it was awful.....I didn't go to college as it was all folders and writing as homework...I liked being in the school and the work side, as it was different....but the apprenticeship itself...I got to the end and she said (the college contact), well you've still got this work to do'. (Janis)

Eve and Janis applied for apprenticeships as they saw them as a way of 'getting paid to learn' (Janis). Eve completed an apprenticeship at a familiar local school within her community, and it was a local job for her which she could commute to. She worked as a school administrator. She did not 'want to go through routes of progression' and described her apprenticeship as an 'easy' option but 'just about all that was on offer'. She also explained that it also placated her family who were concerned about university and wanted her to move into employment. Eve saw her apprenticeship as one of few options for her, an inevitability as it was an easier option. Eve's experiences of using an apprenticeship as an unimagined transition to university was similar to Janis.

Janis and Eve valued their practical experiences in school but felt that these were not rewarded when applying for university, and this was related to being an 'apprentice', considered as not quite a 'proper job'. Janis described her work as:

'the practical stuff I did was good, I would work from 12 noon until 6, cover the afterschool club if needs be, once they realised I could be trusted, beyond little jobs and making tea and coffee, it was lovely, as the teachers gave me groups to work with....but it didn't count for much though, and I think that's to do with the apprenticeship'. (Janis)

Patfield et al. (2022, p.1140) suggests that prospective first-generation students have different networks, and that a continuum of their position and entry to university is more relevant and demonstrative of the dynamic mobilising of networks to confront

the objectified status of underachievement in secondary school. These participants sought potential, Janis and Eve using an apprenticeship as a stepping stone to university, as they could continue to earn and gain additional qualifications. Marty used an access course, whilst continuing to work, Moira added qualifications at her local college and Angie gained credentials through part-time university provision. These convoluted pathways represent precarity and are part of the construction of the student commuter displaying 'responsibilised choices' Drew (2019, p.541).

Participants talked about lack of preparation for university, gaining additional qualifications, and the need to understand a complex system, as Lundahl and Brunila (2020, p.187) identify, young adults need to meet the demands of a precision education model, by awareness, responsive and agility at appropriate times to secure a place at a local university. Quyoum et al's (2021, p.4) study reveals the complexities for entrants to university to engage and act upon advice and support in a stratified education system establishing how participants' subjectivities are positioned as 'chosen for university'. Whilst Marty and Eve have recollections of broad educational decision-making relating to HE, Janis, Moira and Angie do not. This is a socially produced silence, Khan and MacEachen (2024, p.6) would consider this as 'untold' and suggests that Janis, Moira and Angie are outside the norms of 'chosen for university' (Quyoum et al's 2021, p.4). Quyoum et al. (2021, p.9-11) consider the lack of longer term planning by potential students who tend to focus on current studies and financial stability and that schools and colleges 'cherry-pick' groups of students for information about vocational pathways.

Longer term policy changes to information, advice and guidance has restricted the potential to access impartial advice unless students are in school or college (Watts, 2008, p.4). Thompson (2020, p.912) suggests that this is particularly evident for those considering HE who may not follow a 'rational process'. As The Sutton Trust (2022c, p.20) considers, there is a postcode lottery of provision, even in secondary schools. Quyoum et al. (2021, p.4) expand, there is an absence of expertise and tailored advice, with more generic online advice which does not match the complexities of educational experiences, hybridised qualifications and complex university requirements. It corresponds to a discursive formation of those destined for university, Eve relied on information gathered previously from her secondary school, informal discussion with school friends, similar to Janis, through talking with teachers at the school where she completed her apprenticeship.

Quyoum et al's (2021, p.7) study demonstrates how participants self-select types of advice. Their study established how some potential university students studying at a general FE college did not access advice as their objectified construction of their potential did not enable them to engage agency in meeting their aspirations (Quyoum et al. 2021, p.8). Others report more tangible concerns, misinformation and experiencing a devalued persona as they were concerned about cost, accessibility, commuting and accruing debt (Thompson, 2020, p.919). Quyoum et al. (2021, p.7-9) identifies that a type of persona is required, unquestioning and accepting of the

complexities of entry to university, compliant and docile (Foucault, 2020, p.149). As Henderson et al., (2020, p.736) expand, advice is particularly important for FiF students, with asymmetrical knowledge of university stratification, systems and potential.

Each of these participants have benefitted from opportunities to attend HE due to educational expansion (The Sutton Trust, 2021a, p.3-4) and increasing participation through widening access initiatives that valued non-traditional qualification routes (Henderson et al., 2020, p.746) which are more evident in post-1992 universities. Although, as O'Shea (2016, p.62) notes, FiF students experience detours and changes, intersected by social, economic and cultural factors. She contends that FiF mature students in particular experience doubt and uncertainty, which can be overwhelming. O'Shea et al.'s (2024, p.17) study explores the concept of validation, where students' backgrounds, history, self-concept lacks value, and they feel mismatched in their aspirations and the enculturation processes.

As Field (2024, p.i830) comments, progression routes are complex for those with lower incomes, an apprenticeship may be a localised option, particularly in a post-industrial landscape where there is insecure employment and a predominance of lower income households (Etherington, 2020, p.2). The choice of embarking on an apprenticeship is contextualised, framed within socio-structural constraints (Ryan and Lorinc, 2018, p.764). For Janis, Eve and Angie, this also includes expectations from their family, as Dickinson, Rubio and Hughes (2022, p.17) considers, families are supportive of apprenticeships, as they are viewed as employment and training. Dickinson, Rubio and Hughes (2022, p.10) outline that young people see their family as trusted 'influencers', and that vocational options are held in 'high esteem by parents' as these options are considered as relating to entering the labour market. Ryan (2020) considers that apprenticeships are a potential route which contributes to social mobility. Although Dickinson, Rubio and Hughes (2022, p.19) establish that often parents are confused and ill-informed about apprenticeships, particularly relating to secure work post-apprenticeship. Janis and Eve discussed their choices with their families who were supportive and they used their apprenticeships as ways of gaining experiences and an additional qualification. It delayed starting university, introducing stability and enabling stronger career choices, through interaction with communities of practice and gaining experiences. Sodhi (2026, p.440) argues that apprenticeships remain 'embedded within structures of educational and social stratification'. For Janis and Eve, it did not lead them to their original course choice as some vocational qualifications may secure fewer UCAS tariff points (UCAS, 2023) and it did not address Eve's lack of the required GCSEs for teacher education. Janis also felt she had repeated lower level qualifications, and that her programme was disorganised, similar findings to some provision established by The Sutton Trust (2022b, p.33) where the quality of apprenticeships did not benefit more disadvantaged groups. Whilst Janis and Eve completed their apprenticeship, it did not guarantee full-time employment with their employer-led provision and whilst their apprenticeship provided identity work, feelings of insecurity (Alberti et al., 2018,

p.448) contributed to a move to university study. Janis said: *'they weren't sure whether they were going to keep apprentices for the next year...and there weren't any vacancies'*. Janis had planned to continue to work in school but lack of opportunity, similar to Eve, led her to applying to university. Sodhi (2026, p.445) confirms that certain apprenticeship sectors become 'holding zones' for precarious employment and low-skill trajectory.

The Sutton Trust (2025, p29) are critical of current apprenticeship provision, arguing for expansion targeted at groups, particularly young people, to widen access, and the requirement for substantial investment through bursaries and targeted, individualised financial support. The Sutton Trust (2025: p.29) considers apprenticeships create barriers to the rest of the education system and where potential progression to degree apprenticeships are 'increasingly going to those from less deprived areas, with the proportion of those young people completing degree apprenticeships eligible for free school meals being lower than for those young people doing undergraduate degrees'. As Dickinson, Rubio and Hughes (2022, p.29) confirm, apprenticeships are now less of an option for young people, due to their localised provision, perceptions and partial confirmation of insecurity of longer term career trajectory. Apprenticeships are used by older adults (aged over 25) to career change and as training opportunities (The Sutton Trust, 2025, p.65), so denying young people potential places

c. Key changes

A key point which emerged from life history interactions was the interjection by others, 'key changers', at significant points in participants' experiences. This aligns with Patfield et al.'s (2022, p.1140) findings which relate to the concept of non-familial assets with experiential knowledge of university. They challenge participants' objectified identities, enabling participants to question and adjust their potential agency. Some of these interjections by others were within families but key changers were also others within specific educational communities of practice. These communities of practice should be further harnessed to identify and develop potential practitioners.

These interjections by individuals within complex educational trajectories both disrupted and provoked. For Moira and Angie, important interjection came from close family members who disrupted their constructed, objectified selves. Angie received permissions and encouragement from her husband who enabled her to cross boundaries, such as visiting the university, *'I came to the university on a open day...and spoke to people about psychology, midwifery and went through everything and then I settled on the education studies or the early years one but it just wasn't the right time'*. Angie decided that her youngest child required expensive and unobtainable childcare, and she also needed to work to buy a car for her commute to campus, deferring her entry for a further year. A further prompt was Angie's husband who talked to her about university:

'my husband went to university, like when he was a kid, a teenager and it was vastly different for him...like he warned me about, you know the young ones not really caring, drinking and all that lot, but then he also said that there was some older people there, like dads and mums and stuff and I was more interested...cos they would be in the same wavelength as me'.

For Moira, the interjection was from her mother but was contextualised due to other family members and responsibilities:

'She was the one who told me that I need to do higher education, she, my mom, has always been like you need to focus with your studies and get something to do...she's my role model...and I think in life, you need someone who you are able to like, go and speak to and say I'm confused'.

Moira is also the oldest sibling and felt that she also needed to be a role model, she said that she has talked to her sisters explaining that:

'University has made me understand my career pathway as my younger sister was struggling, that's helped her think about what she wants to do'.

Encounters with teaching practitioners in their apprenticeship roles in school were important for Janis and Eve, and for Marty it was both mentoring and being mentored that provided disruptors to potential constructions. For Janis, working as an apprentice teaching assistant enabled her to understand educational experiences, and Janis tapped into valuable experiential knowledge as part of a community of practice:

'I asked a teacher I was working with, two teachers, they were amazing. Actually, they're like, yeah, go and do it. And I was like, okay, will you help me?'

Conversations with teaching practitioners enabled Janis to understand how to apply to university, course choice, and how she could become a teacher. Janis was able to request help through developing a relationship with her community of practice in a primary school. Janis also received validation from educational professional practitioners, and this altered her perceptions. Marty's experience was similar and equally important:

'I loved what I did as a mentor in a secondary school... I worked with kind of a focused list of students per term... I would support them in kind of subjects they were having difficulty in or having behaviour problems in' (Marty).

Marty described how his school groups trusted him, sharing their issues, but also *'saw him for real'*, for Marty, this challenged how he considered himself within education. Marty also received support from his community of practice in school and the organisation which had placed him in school and these experiences enabled him to re-think going to university.

As O'Shea et al. (2024, p. 127-9) discusses, decisions about university entry are within temporal and relational contexts, yet significant others can add direction.

Baines (2024) empirical study demonstrates similar findings relating to family connections but does not measure wider networks for local commuting students, nor the perception of 'dividends as drivers'. O'Shea et al. (2024, p.135) consider that motivations and aspirations are often perceived as dividends, especially for FiF students challenging a discourse. These 'dividends' include work within communities, developing the self, role modelling for others, especially children and significant others add to and illuminate these processes. The disruption of the objectified docile persona is evident. Participants conceptualise potential study as being able to contribute to their social worlds, moving beyond instrumentalism to contribution. Moira previously talked about being a role model for her sisters. Angie talked about '*supporting my children and my family*' and Janis '*being an even better tutor...and making a difference*'. These are additional motivations, challenge a discourse of individualism and position commuter students enacting communitarian initiatives within their structural and contextual limits (O'Shea et al. 2024, p.137).

d. Conclusion

This section has explained the complexity of decision-making and subsequent complexity of trajectory to university. The next section considers spatial precarity. This section explores the contextual spatial landscape of entry to higher education.

6.4 Spatial precarity: local geographies

a. Introduction

Spatial precarity relates to the constructed division of spaces as outlined in chapter two and three. There are two themes, a macro spatial overshadowing of HE due to geographical hot spots and cold spots, driven by contextual factors of post-industrial decline but also interlayered by the division of spaces. 'Cold spots' are areas that either offer no university provision, restricted subject choice, or less access. As undergraduates increasingly commute, this restricts potential especially for universities with poor transport infrastructure serving rural areas (Muradás-Taylor and Taylor, 2024, p.93). This spatial distribution of higher education, of cold and hot spots, as well as the stratified higher education landscape produces a hierarchical distribution of students who routinely and passively traverse to universities fitting their subjectivities. Complexities of individual lives converge as the context of schooling and educational trajectories overshadow, provoking an interference of potential. Life history participants talked about managing different roles and negotiating different identities and these were intertwined with staying local related to family, community, economic pragmatism, realistic travel and acceptance of local offerings. As outlined in chapter two, Foucault (2000d, p.352) traces the development of spaces and infrastructure as an extension of government rationalities, and importantly the concept of spatial distribution as maintaining classification. Foucault (2000d, p.361-2) conceives fundamentality that space is an 'exercise of power' and a system spanning 'the entire social space' (Foucault, 2000a, p.71). He argues that 'spatialization', the use of physical classification, produce

arrangements and organisations which divide and classify emphasising 'social hierarchies' (Foucault, 2000d, p.363).

It also relates to undergraduate identities overshadowed by boundary crossing and contextual potentials. Participants did not identify themselves as commuters and travelling to university as opposed to residing on campus was normalised, corresponding to the concept of the invisibility and problematised definition of commuting students (Turner, Webb and Pritchard, 2025, p.762). Participants also demonstrate how individualised circumstances, pragmatic approaches and agentic decision-making interact within contextual potential. A second theme is the micro spatial division and how student commuters interact with the university spaces and promotes consideration of their mobilities.

6.5 Macro spatial division

Data analysis from phase one demonstrated a construction of the local 'student'. This was characterised as non-residential, journeying to university, a strong family focus with participants rooted in their local communities. Data gathered in phase two, from life history participants, contribute to a deeper understanding of spatial precarity, proximity and orientation.

Life history participants overtly talked about family responsibilities and connections as a rationale for attending their choice of university. For Janis and Moira, it was related to familial responsibilities and complex relationships

'there's lots of family stuff which gets in the way, yeah, it's a bit of a mess. And then I moved, but it didn't work out, and then that created more issues as they don't see me as a uni student really...catching the train everyday' (Janis)

'I think there is a lot of responsibilities and expectations for me... from my mom and my sisters. I need to be close at hand as they are all younger than me' (Moira).

Janis had experienced disagreements with her family about going to university and she talked most overtly about negotiating complexity as a commuting student. Janis lacked validation from her close family whilst striving for independence. She had attempted independence through living on campus, but the breakdown of her tenancy impacted on her emotionally and financially.

Moira, as the eldest sibling, supported her mother with parenting and was expected to present as a role model, driving aspirations for her siblings as well as providing practical support. Both Moira and Janis aspired to embrace independence as residential traditional students but did not identify this as a realistic goal. Moira talked about living on campus, *'possibly in third year when my sister is older'*. Janis was not planning to return to campus as it was *'too expensive'*.

Angie's rational approach was related to maintaining her family contract:

There wasn't an option of anywhere else, kids and nursery, not costing too much in after school and some help with nursery fees, and also it's easy to drive to, just off the main road, other parents...I felt comfortable' (Angie)

Angie is pragmatic, confined by a need to stay local, constrained economically and practically. Angie talked about the university as familiar to her, minimising negotiating further entry requirements at other universities and '*comfortable*' in her local community. She alludes to additional financial support provided by the university. She expressed realism about managing her student parent role and negotiating complex and temporal childcare arrangements. She also identified the lack of local choice through reduced options. Proximity and economic pragmatism is also a theme of Eve's decision-making:

'I save money by being at home, I know it's not the best university, but it's nearby...I can drive to it...I know where and...I had to think about my parents and friends...I know round here...my church...I'm not into student socialising' (Eve)

Eve demonstrates pragmatism, linking choice of university to familiarity, reflecting on her local community and a dichotomy of staying local and or other choices which would result in fracture. Eve articulated awareness of university status and a lens of '*not the best*'. She further confirmed her choices:

'but I chose to go to not just because of its reputation'

Eve rationalised her choice through economic pragmatism. She overtly identified student finance as '*debt*' and considered that she would manage financially by '*living at home*'. Eve is circumspect, evaluating choices. She also demonstrates perceptions of university life contractually, contrasting safe socialisation with an imaginary university culture characterised by inappropriate social behaviours as she comments:

'I am not interested in the drinking and going out to ... on the campus...that's not for me'

Economic pragmatism and complex family dynamics contribute to Marty's decision-making:

I commute sometimes with my partner, but this is far enough away from where I grew up...we don't want to be on campus as it's kinda cheaper where we are' (Marty).

Participants considered living at home and travelling to university as normalised and were unaware of others in their social group who were residential students.

Staying local was also a feature of university subject choices. Eve, Janis, Moira and Marty talked about their final degree choice through expressions of resignation, only Angie had been overt in her subject choices and was aware of course implications:

'I looked at everything...I went to psychology, midwifery, social work...and went through all the things that were interesting...I liked the way that I could look at education generally, wasn't sure if I want to be a teacher' (Angie).

Moira's choice of subject was as a second choice as she secured insufficient UCAS points and Eve was resigned to local study.

'I saw that you could study to be a teacher, but I didn't really know what education studies was, but that's what was offered, so I like, okay, went for it...need to be nearby' (Moira)

'it's what's available here... no other choice really, it would have be this one, even second choice...I never thought about moving' (Eve)

6.6 Discussion: macro spatial precarity

These findings demonstrate a range of reasons for location of studies and commuting to university. These contrast with a prominent discourse of undergraduate study as one of mobility. Geographical mobility, a rite of passage, to leave home and go to university as a residential dweller, is a traditional and potent discourse (Riddell et al. 2025, p.11). Gamsu and Donnelly (2021, p.370) used social network analysis to establish spatial pathways for those from elite schools to university and establish the 'relational construction of place and the distinct geographies of class formation within the spatial transition from home to university'. Sumner (2022, p.39) considers this as maintaining class-based stratification, where 'working-class students are more likely to be found within the more diverse and inclusive post-1992 universities'.

Donnelly and Gamsu (2022, p. 1220-1) explore spatial mobilities as a strong factor in choice of university as there is an uneven pattern of economic development and with post-industrial decline overshadowing potential mobilities. They consider the concept of 'spatial imaginaries' where place has meaning (Donnelly and Gamsu, 2022, p. 1218). Eve demonstrates awareness, firstly contrasting mobility with a potential loss of her community, but also recognition of the university status:

'But like there are better universities academically that I had a choice of going to... but I chose to go to ... not just because of its reputation, but because of the life it that enabled me to have...

As Donnelly and Gamsu (2022, p.1219) establish, spatial imaginaries are constrained by local possibility but are also constructed or are situational, with relational familiarity as they are ascribed meanings. Limited opportunity is related to 'cold spots' where a post-1992 university, situated in an area of lower progression to higher education, whilst a choice for many, will have a subsequent impact on local offerings. Danvers and Hinton-Smith (2021, p.98) suggest that 'cold spots' attract widening participation initiatives, contributing a discourse of subjectification and the implication of this discourse is examined further in the final section. 'Cold spots matter' according to Muradás-Taylor and Taylor (2024, p.93) arguing the importance

of provision variety for those studying locally. An impact of higher levels of commuting students as opposed to a university recruiting residential or traditional students is the absence of 'studentification'. 'Studentification' is often considered negatively, as an influx of residential students creating potential societal conflict, detrimental effects on housing markets and the downgrading of physical spaces (Kinton et al. 2018, p. 243). However, as Kinton et al. (2018, 243) establishes, residential students can be change agents, triggering urban regeneration as the student lifestyle is increasingly commodified with universities relying on income generation.

The choice to stay local is related to cost, but also forms of placed commitment (Henderson, 2020b, p.334) and a different and contrasting engagement with a local area and university which is definitional (Holdsworth, 2009, p.226). Henderson (2020b, p.335) considers the relationship of individual narratives to place and how narratives of subjectivity are connected to place. These narratives are threaded with contextual inequalities of post-industrial decline. Henderson (2020b, p.333) considers the complex relationship between a university and its location.

Eve demonstrates the strongest understanding of the university with a 'reputational affect' (Henderson 2020, p.338), commenting '*there are better universities academically*' but choosing to stay local. Eve sets aside her concern as place and people have become engrained and embodied with her choice. Angie's connection, whilst threaded with meeting demands of time and family commitment, is related to familiarity and knowingness as she said, '*I felt comfortable...it was near, easy to find*'. Sumner (2022, p.42) demonstrates how many students who are striving for entry to university seek risk aversion strategies and an alignment of values and dispositions. She goes further, considering positioning and in line with Foucault's concept of normalisation, where prospective students position themselves as 'not smart enough' to go to an elite university adapting to the local offering (Sumner, 2022, p.44).

Donnelly and Gamsu's (2022, p.1233) study contextualises this spatial dimension. This classification is hierarchical and is sustained by other disciplinary processes that specify the student commuter. Student commuters are concentrated in post-1992 universities (Stalmirska and Mellon, 2022, p.1474). Segmentation is also evident earlier, as potential higher education students are divided by vocational or academic progression routes (Rogers and Spours, 2020, p.129; Dickinson, Rubio and Hughes, 2022, p.10). Student commuters are considered both mobile and immobile. As Christie (2007, p.2445) contends, neoliberal educational discourse values geographical mobility.

6.7 Micro spatial precarity

Micro spatial precarity relates to the institutional space with associated residential spaces and how students who commute use spaces. Participants talked about how

they use the university facilities and buildings beyond their timetabled lectures and seminars.

'If I was coming in, I used the library as it was a quiet space and the tech building to meet my mentor, because it's a pretty nice space to go and work in' (Marty)

'I like the library and not going was a massive deal for me...I get some books, do some work and reading, have a coffee and time for me as a student' (Angie)

'I liked the independence level that I have at university' (Eve)

Participants described their use of university spaces as focussed, and different spaces were used for multiple tasks related to efficient use of time to complete academic work. Marty experienced the longest commute of around 90 minutes using public transport. As Saker et al. (2025, p.3) outline, there is little scholarly work relating to the lived mobility of longer distance travelling commuting students. Marty conceptualises his time as limited, demonstrates different uses of space and talked about *'using the day'* for multiple tasks, completing work in the library, meeting academic staff such as tutors and mentors, occasionally meeting his partner and going to lectures. Those students who commute longer distances are strategic in their time at university, actively decision making based on 'the temporalities, geography and economics of their commute' (Chappell, 2020, p.17). All participants in this cohort travelled to the university, with Eve and Angie having a shorter journey time of 20 minutes. This made little difference to descriptions of the use of space and how time was spent on campus.

Marty, similar to other participants did not identify social interactions or participating in additional enrichment activities as typical of time at university. They demonstrate strategic decision-making, using time, space, interactions and social learning opportunities agentically and pragmatically (Chappell, 2020, p.21; Hill et al., 2024). As Saker et al. (2025, p.4) examines, commuters choose quieter environments to complete work, rejecting the 'lounge space' (Austin and Sharr, 2021, p.81) and focusing on spaces that were quiet, well-resourced and private, as Marty said:

'the library is usually quiet enough that I didn't need to go and find another space on campus' (Marty)

'the library in B Building has spaces that are designated as quiet, I need that' (Angie)

Tett et al. (2025, p.489) establishes that non-residential students seek spaces where they can study, rest and eat without incurring additional costs and Eve talked about intensive studying, being focused and minimising costs. Participants compared use of campus space advantageously, positioning space against 'home space'.

'on certain days I would just go to the library to study 'cause I was very much into it. If I went to the library, had my snacks out I could get a lot of work done. Yeah, I think I do work there really well, going home, there's nowhere quiet' (Eve)

Moira talked about coming onto campus when she needed to and using the time:

'I try to go to all lectures, but if I am here, then I'm gonna use the whole day' (Moir)

Sykes (2021, p.112) considers that the student experience is now commodified, the promotion of an idealised lifestyle is a seductive marketing tool for universities, with a blurring of boundaries and spaces. Tett et al. (2025, p.493) finds that university spaces are unrepresentative of the broader university community and associated needs and Chappell (2020, p.30), similar, finding that non-residential students request spaces that are practical and respond to a diversity of needs. Participants talked about limited space at home and distractions:

'If I was at home and my siblings were there. I wasn't able to concentrate... I need to look after my little sister because she was struggling, or someone wants the laptop (Moir)

'there's no down time at home...I struggle to do work...and I could be really focused at uni as I knew I had some time' (Angie)

'my home is a different space from uni' (Eve)

Holton and Finn (2018, p.4) consider mobile dwelling and how local students create spaces and cross boundaries, but for whom mobility is intertwined with their university belongingness. There is an adaptation to what is available and a crafting of university spaces for individual needs or tasks. They reject the 'lounge space' lifestyle which Austin and Sharr (2021, p.88) characterise as 'hyper-visibility' positioning the student as casual consumer, spaces which are pseudo-homely, faux, branded, where visibility and surveillance predominate. For Austin and Sharr (2021, p.88) the lounge space 'normalises an economic regime where the boundary between leisure and labour becomes harder to draw'.

As Austin and Sharr (2021, p.70) and Troiani and Dutson (2021, p.6) contend, university campus space is presented as a branded, marketised space, shaping student behaviours of flexibility and informality. There is an absence of spatial design as reflective of actual student behaviours or awareness of needs of commuting students (Akkurt and Akbulut, 2025, p. 3). As Austin and Sharr (2021, p.70) examine, universities have invested in a predominance of 'lounge' space, which 'blends the architectural imagery of city, home, and leisure using familiar interior design tropes from contemporary cafe and hospitality brands'. This configuration is reflective of 'at home' spaces, a dominant neoliberal subjectivity of potential choice of options, possible agency, but spaces are neither for study nor socialising. They are subject to overt and covert surveillance, open to the need to be hyper-vigilant with blurred space and blurred boundaries. Lounge spaces, as open spaces, are semi-public requiring a constant attention to self and desired image, promoting an illusion of freedoms of time and consumption. These spaces construct the student as consumer, provide an imagining of endless time and studying as a social activity. 'Students become habituated to using services while they simultaneously provide them, producing as they consume, and consuming as they produce' (Austin and Sharr, 2021, p.90).

Participants establish types of belonging in the crafting of spaces which is agentic and individualised. Holton and Finn (2018, p.16) consider the mobility, or the commuting, of living at home students as the inhabited experience of university as a part and experience of belonging. Commuter students are characterised as immobile, dwelling in the local, but their mobilities are defining and necessary. As Hill et al. (2024, p.92-4) discusses, those who travel to study construct the university space as they cross boundaries, they necessarily craft spaces. For Eve and Angie, this enables a stepping beyond their subjectivities as Eve talked about '*independence*' and Angie '*space for me*'. Whilst their transience on campus is perceived as 'other', non-traditional, this transience and crafting provokes a potential to create change and re-centre the practice of exploring who goes to a university campus. This is a deconstructing a binary of non-traditional and traditional and associated subjectivities. McDonald (2024, p.191) agrees identifying in her study that students from non-traditional backgrounds craft spaces despite feelings of 'surveillance...watching others but also being watched' which characterise the lounge space prevalent in university campuses.

This section has outlined the partitioning of commuter students, both from a macro emphasis of a flow towards institutions and secondly considering the crafting of the micro environment to suit participants' boundary crossings to subvert the neo-liberal university agenda of consumer students as opposed to commuter student. McDonald (2024, p.184) talks about the perceptions of social spaces and how they are interpreted and experienced, individually and personally with connections between spaces and forms of belonging neither fixed nor uniform. Foucault (2000d, p. 350) sees the use of space as political, part of quiet power, and as systems of regulation. Student commuters locate, in this study to local spaces, spaces of 'sanctuary' Sumner (2021, p.44) and spaces where they 'fit' (Bathmaker, 2021, p.79). This is important as the final section presents and analyses data relating to social precarity at university, including the contested concept of belonging which is intertwined with university space as formational and crafted.

6.8 Social precarity

a. Introduction

In the previous sections, findings established that participants experienced precarity driven by societal contextual norms and spatial boundaries that lead to the construction of the student commuter. In this final section, the dichotomy of the widening participation student and the discourse of social mobility as opposed to an absence of belonging and enculturation process are examined. As Danvers and Hinton-Smith (2021, p.99) examine, despite long term initiatives addressing equalities in entry to university, 'there are now new and emergent insecurities' which challenge the discourse. It is a contention that the new insecurity is the construction of the student commuter, syphoned into restricted pathways in a system predicated on traditional residential normalised students.

Data from participants demonstrates a mismatch between expectations of university study and their initial experiences. As Bathmaker (2021, p.83) and Riddell et al. (2025, p.11) examine, students may experience a smooth transition, but for others, with more complex trajectories and non-traditional backgrounds, there may be a conscious review of how and where they fit in at university and this is expressed outwardly as acceptance of deficit.

Participants from both datasets reported the need to be 'university ready' but without conceptualising or considering how to prepare for study. Participants articulated expectations of a potential struggle, academically and for Angie as fitting in. These considerations of facing difficulty are derived from idealised versions of aspirational mobility, perceived as difficult, which Rainford (2023, p.413) considers as aspirational expectations, but which are 'fluid' (Lumb et al. 2021, p.540).

Life history participants reflected on their initial constructions of what they considered university would be and how they would respond. Both Eve and Moira describe their opening perceptions of university study as difficult and personally challenging, particularly through a lens of academic skills and aspirational standards of excellence:

'there's gonna be like really high standards, right, you have to come...and...to be already perfect' (Eve)

'I can remember, I thought university was, um, hard, very, very hard work...I would need to do a lot more and work hard' (Moira)

Angie described university in terms of internalised anxiety, making links to her stronger subjects at school, despite attending a preparation course:

'I thought I'd be okay with it, because I was good at English in school, so I thought I can write, I can write...um... I don't really know really, hard, I guess, having to work harder' (Angie)

University study was constructed as aspirational with a requirement for 'perfection' and for Janis this was related to academic writing and referencing which she contrasted with experiences of completing academic work during her apprenticeship. Janis talked about:

'I thought there's gonna be like, really high standards. Right? You have to come in order to be perfect at, like academic work....their gonna expect us to already know academic writing and referencing.. and I hadn't done that on my apprenticeship...it was never needed' (Janis).

McDonald (2024, p.194), in an empirical study of non-traditional female undergraduates, find that there is a positioning of gender and class with a neoliberal discourse that values individual responsibility such as hard work and deservedness. There is a comparison with idealised personas and overt markers of success and

sensing failure enables a construction of a subjectivity of expectation of difficulty and uncomfortableness which is internalised.

Other expectations of university focused on personal validation and recognition. Participants expected experiences at university to be more isolating. Imaginaries of study focused on larger groups in distinct university spaces. Eve for example said that she expected it was going to be:

'a little bit more impersonal than it was like. I was expecting to be a dot in a room....I was expecting to just sit there, type, go home and I think that was my biggest shock as well'.

Eve's overall expectation of university demonstrated instrumentalism. Eve was planning for university to be distant and impersonal, she was planning to *'go to the lectures and then come home'* and this fitted with her constructed persona of a commuting student, as someone who required minimal interaction, self-reliant and self-contained.

This is similar to Marty who considered university as academic work and positioning himself as immediately expecting to *'fail'*:

'I expected to be behind immediately...as far as writing an essay or the academic side of uni, I had no idea, I was just, well, a blank piece of paper really... I am used to being a bit of a failure...at school' (Marty).

Participants positioned higher education as remote and remoteness was both internalised and also positioned as an exclusive type of academic behaviour. This was conceived as an in depth knowledge and application of academic behaviours which would immediately be beyond reach. Both Eve and Janis talked about the importance of being *'perfect'*. The university, as a remote place of *'hard'* work, despite its proximity, exemplifies the challenge of crossing boundaries as discussed in section 6.6 but also the striving to meet norms of university study.

Policy development in the university sector has focused traditionally on widening participation (Thomas, 2020b, p.2). Participants demonstrate a persistence in gaining university entry through the acceptance of their academic qualifications through lower tariff (UCAS) boundaries. They also demonstrate instability, precarity and a maintenance of inequality in their transition to university, aligning to Danvers and Hinton-Smith (2021, p.99) critique of a higher education system creating new insecurities. Participants have internalised potential failure or an absence of the required university skills. Perceptions are of struggle and questions of how to *'fit in'*.

Overall, progression is mediated within a challenging educational system and a stratified university structure (Boliver, 2015, p.609) where potential students need to be *'agentic choosers'*. As outlined in chapter two, commuter students are non-traditional, sitting outsider the normative construction, as Foucault (2020, p.183) conceptualises normalisation, as *'comparing, differentiating, homogenising and excluding'*. Thus, potential students, seeking entry to higher education as

commuters and with complex contextual boundaries, are subjected to potential pathways that promote 'idealised social behaviours, and 'responsibilised' (Drew, 2019, p.542) to become agentic choosers. As Danvers and Hinton-Smith (2021, p.100) contend this is set against risk taking in investment in higher education through student loans and precarious future employment potential.

Agentic choosing was expressed by all participants, through the mediation of the challenge of university academic study and striving to meet norms. Reay's (2018: p.532) study outlines how students from lower socio-economic groups expressed 'confusions and ambiguities about the sort of self they were seeking which was rarely the case for middle class students'. As Furlong (2019, p.3) contends, there may be uncertainty and insecurity about the longer term trajectory towards adulthood, and there is a struggle with the discourse of the idealised undergraduate as explored by (Rönnlund, 2020, p.19), who is authentic and agentic, able to readily choice-make.

These constructions of university, as challenge, leads to considering this as a personalised and coherent narrative of a potential risky imagined future. As Henderson (2020: p.4) discusses, for those embarking on mobilities, this articulation of imagined futures 'populates the present experience...and its location in the embodied present'. For student commuters, as well as articulating and managing perceptions of themselves as engaging in risky mobilities, there is also the proximity of the location of their potential site of struggle and subjectification through educational processes.

Price et al. (2025, p.2) argues that aspirations and expectations elide and this is particularly relevant for those from disadvantaged neighbourhoods. Corresponding to participants of this study, Price et al.'s (2025, p.2) study is focused on a post-industrial area with 'higher levels of community need and poor opportunities' The findings of Price et al.'s (2025, p.10) research, exploring aspiration through a lens of self-concept, recognises how self-concept is linked to academic aspirational selves, 'emphasising the importance of academic self-concept as an internal factor that can motivate students to pursue goals or aspirational possible selves'. There is an emphasis on academic self-concept and aspirations being relevant and appropriate for localised opportunity. In line with this study, often initiatives focussed on widening access and bridging to university are not context specific, lacking the nuance of understanding local availability of realistic opportunity at the local university level. Only Angie was able to take advantage of a university initiative enabling her to gain entry. Hansen et al. (2023, p.299) agrees, where perceptions of potential are influenced by perceptions of local opportunity and employment. The narratives expressed by participants represent the concept that university is going to be 'hard work' as part of the concept of meritocracy. Identifying with difficulty promotes heightened sensitivity to difficulty and an alignment with the entrepreneurial self (Goring et al., 2023, p.2), accepting that whilst opportunity is provided, outcomes may be different. A further consideration is the impact of dividing practices and

objectification, where participants have experienced classification. Marty expresses this most strongly, as a mantra of *'failure'*.

Participants also talked about their choice of university through imagined futures. The imaginary was through a lens of recognition of less potential and a desire to improve their future through opportunity. Participants expressed imagined futures as stronger potential for more choices. Moira talked about *'better future careers perspectives...like better opportunities'*. However, Moira also talked about university as potentially overwhelming and needing support to substantiate her choices. She expressed *'being terrified of presentations... looking at the workload... I needed my mom to calm me down and help me choose'*. Eve's choice was through a lens of *'progression in having better opportunities'*. Eve saw better opportunities as *'having a nice life'*. She goes on to say:

'I want the best grade I can out of my degree and my whole principle of going to University at the start was to get the best degree... I do pay for the privilege of going to University... and I pay for the same amount at any other University... I needed a degree so without a decent degree I don't see it is worth it'

Eve talks about *'paying'* and reflects a transactional approach in response to the consumerist model of higher education. Danvers and Hinton-Smith (2021, p.102-3) see this as *'repositioning of responsibility'* and that there is an assumption that young adults will make correct choices in line with the normative view, successfully engage and accept the collective value of higher education despite personal investment and apprehension of unavoidable student loans. Eve is most overt in expressing her university experience as a consumer and engages in pragmatic strategies to minimise costs. As both Rainford (2023, p.412) and Danvers and Hinton-Smith (2021, p.102-3) examine, widening participation as a policy strategy is framed through a lens of economic and employment aspiration. This is compounded by educational policy-makers (DfE, 2017) considering young adults as having *'agentic freedoms'* (Barker and Hoskins, 2021, p.110). Rainford (2023, p.412-3) contends that this is based on assumptions of educational achievement and employment outcomes and subsequently problematises those who do not hold normative aspirational views. Overall, agentic choosing of higher education resides within a discourse of positivity and is seen as unproblematised (Danvers and Hinton-Smith (2021, p.110-2)

Danvers and Hinton-Smith (2021, p.102-3) consider that widening participation initiatives operate within a deeply marketized higher education sector which leads to possible unfulfilled promise of secure future employment. Complexities of educational attainment and a dearth of localised opportunity contribute further. Rainford (2023, p.415) identifies how normative aspirational views are also formed through normative constructs of mobility with those who choose to live locally and study locally facing a reductive view of their aspirations and labelled as having *'limited horizons'*. Both Rainford (2023, p.415) and Danvers and Hinton-Smith (2021, p.103-4) consider normative aspiration expectations add to the construction of the

widening participation student. Barker and Hoskins (2021, p.112) consider that educational practices are entrenched with 'patterns of advantage and disadvantage' and this sustains normative perceptions of deservedness. Lumb et al. (2021, p.542) go further suggesting that widening participation initiatives reproduce fracture as they ensure that 'powerful knowledge' is sustained by certain groups, and others are excluded.

b. A social constructed narrative of employment and 'employability'

In their constructions of university study and approaches to managing constructions, participants adhere to dominant social imaginaries (Rizvi and Lingard, 2011, p.34) of normative aspirations despite a required persistence to meet norms. This aligns to the normative framing of individuals and Lumb and Bunn (2021, p.163) argue that dominant social imaginaries shape possibilities. Normalisation for Foucault (2020, p.101) ensures that there are standards of comparison, those that do not meet the norm can be re-aligned to meet the norm or named as different. Lumb and Bunn (2021, p.164) suggest that 'the rampant construction of an individual student determined by his or her own internal capacities has become the norm within educational policy'. These internal capacities are focused on employment as an outcome of higher education. Participants talked about the potential of their university experience and how it relates to longer term employment. Eve merges her ability to achieve high grades with the potential opportunities that may be offered to her.

'My greatest test at University is the grades that I get or the job opportunity that I get'... I went to university to get a decent degree and if I don't get a first, I will be disappointed (Eve)

For Marty, Janis and Angie, it is about seeking alternatives to 'crappy jobs' and 'dead end work'.

'I don't plan. I'm not thinking I'm doing this degree to get this specific job, but a better job, something that isn't retail, I've done enough of 16 hour contracts in dead end Sainsburys' (Marty)

'I've done loads of crappy jobs, but this degree is about a better job and yes, maybe in a school, I'm unsure... I have time to mess it up yet' (Janis)

'not really thinking jobs and things about jobs as it's something in the future, I can always go back to care work I suppose (Angie)

In current policy documents and statements, higher education is constructed with a 'focus on the types of employability, human capital, development of skills and competencies that promote an efficient and competitive workforce in global knowledge economic and markets' (Burke, 2020, p.2). Employability, a nebulous concept, relies on types of overt performativity (Lumb and Bunn, 2021, p.168) and for Eve converges and is internalised as essential to achieve higher grades which will lead to a 'decent degree'. Eve's construction is that a 'good' degree will lead to a

'better job' with other participants identifying '*opportunity*' as a consequence of degree level study. This cohesive internalised construction shifts the focus to individuals, who are required to develop responsibility, seek validation and demonstrate qualities of resilience. Lumb and Bunn (2021, p.173) argue that the framing of higher education as a route to being employable is an epistemology 'that forecloses particular ways of being'. Symonds (2021, p.185) concurs and invoking Friere's (1985, p.100) concept of 'learners as empty vessels', sees employability initiatives as framing a student subjectivity as currently unemployable as there is a vacuum of employment readiness which needs to be part of the undergraduate experience. Employability, similar to the potentials of university study is not contextualised within localised opportunity. It is a further categorisation, a dominant social imaginary of a construction of a university student (Lumb and Bunn (2021, p.177) and adds to a Foucauldian discourse of shaping.

d. Being at university: Student commuter and student worker

Student commuters are subject to complex subjectivities. Whilst Brooks and O'Shea (2021, p.26) explore these student constructions as contested complexities through the lens of students as consumers as opposed to students as citizens, a further construction is student as worker. Recent student surveys examine how many undergraduate students are in part-time employment, for financial reasons at all stages of their undergraduate study including term time to supplement basic incomes (Neves et al. 2025, p.31). Economic pragmatism, instability and precarity have challenged the discourse of students as occasional part-time workers.

All participants in this study worked part-time. Work varied in commitment, time and opportunity, but was a central feature of where they choose to study, the implications of financial commitments and contextual opportunity. Participants generally were reliant on additional work to support living costs. Angie, Janis and Eve justified their work:

'pay the bills, have some money as student loans were spent quickly as they didn't go very far' (Angie).

'help my family and pay for food and extras' (Janis)

'be a bit more independent' (Eve)

'I help my mom as she works in care and I am the eldest, so I add to the food bill' (Moir)

Participants worked in precarious, low paid work and identified experiences of employment characterised by zero hours contracts, or fixed hourly contracts of 12 to 16 hours. Alberti et al. (2018, p.451) suggest that precarious work is a broad term but is characterised by conditions of employment that include the reduction of expected benefits, such as leave entitlement, as well as unusual hours of working, shorter shifts and irregular work hours. Extant literature suggests that precarious work is normalised for young adults (under 25), (Alberti et al. 2018, p.451;

MacDonald, 2019, p.157; Furlong, 2019, p.4). MacDonald (2019, p.158) positions precarious work as destabilising.

Risk aversion strategies were described by participants to manage precarity, such as maintaining more than one job to ensure sufficient hours of work, registering with different employment agencies and responding to employers requesting further hours. Participants worked in employment sectors of retail or hospitality (Oke et al. 2023, p.1665), as well as for educational agencies, providing ad hoc school staff, or in health and social care. In line with Rydzik and Bal's (2024, p.1) study, they experienced 'personal insecurity' identified as 'structurally entrenched and underpinned by transactional employment relations'. This resulted in lack of certainty about work hours, unusual shift patterns, minimal hours or short hourly contracts and lack of flexibility.

Participants also talked about negotiating hours with employers who wanted to know semester timetables so that work could be planned around student availability. It is well established that hyper flexibility in contractual hours is overtly advantageous for both HE students and employers in these employment sectors. However, Rydzik and Bal's (2024, p.562) study demonstrates that student-workers are seen as transient and dispensable with the contractual nature of employment developing hyper-transactional employment relationships. As MacDonald (2019, p.159) suggests, perceptions, aspirations and agentic power are denied in this precarious social environment and constructed selves further reduced by a risk aversion and overt compliance to neoliberal market demands, loading individualism and responsibility into precarious uncertainty. Moira, for example, described her difficulties in negotiating work hours and how she organised hours around completing university assignments ensuring that she completed assignments in readiness to be available for working hours:

'I was contracted to work eight hours, but I would do more, sometimes I would do like 20 because I could manage, as I would know my assignment was done by then, but they would always want extra hours to suit them and I was always having to sort it out as it changed weekly'. (Moira)

'there was often messing about with my shifts, wanting to know my timetable, but work is work' (Marty)

Other participants expanded on managing paid work and university study as challenging and all participants expected to negotiate work around commitments at university. They confirmed that they did not receive routine financial support from parents and guardians and did not expect to at any stage, although ad hoc support for specific items was confirmed by three respondents. Harris, Vigurs and Jones (2016, p.142) confirm that students, particularly from lower socio-economic backgrounds or from groups considered to be linked to widening participation initiatives employ strategies to reduce debt. Rydzik and Bal (2024, p. 564) maintain that students are impoverished by the need to work as they are denied opportunities

to engage in developing social contracts at university. Interestingly these are factors that are conceptualised as evidence that commuter students lack belonging as discussed in the final section. MacDonald (2019, p.157) goes further suggesting that precarity, whilst commonplace for undergraduates, is extending into graduate work resulting in graduates unable to transition into graduate roles and who remain trapped in forms of underemployment. A further factor is localised employment opportunities which further polarise potential graduate work.

Participants frequently need more than one work role to ensure financial stability; Eve's narrative reveals anxieties about precarity and managing financially as well as sustaining her idealised constructed self at university.

'it was hard 'cause like I had to, well, I ended up in January leaving one of the jobs, as I was working two jobs and studying, and I was at breaking point but it was hard to sustain everything else and get higher grades' (Eve).

Moira worked in retail and again described working hours as anything between:

'yeah, 20 to 25 sometimes, Tuesday and Thursdays and another day that I didn't have a seminar, and four hours on Saturday and Sunday' (Moira).

Moira described how she had always worked in retail and when she started at university she continued with her job as *'there wasn't a lot available'*. She characterised her work in retail as steady and that she was guaranteed some minimum hours, but it would vary:

I was told that I had eight hours on my contract, and that I could call for more, and she would call back sometimes, but it did depend on the manager and what was wanted. I worked throughout the year as I needed the money'.

Neves et al. (2025, p.31) contrasts traditional and non-traditional student employment patterns. They identify substantial changes in work patterns with undergraduate students now working throughout their university courses including term time. They also establish that non-traditional students are those in 'the student cohorts with the highest propensity to work for pay and were more often those with higher levels of additional responsibility in other areas outside their studies... with high numbers of commuters and carers' (Neves et al. 2025, p.33). The increase in hourly paid work during study is linked to cost of living with participants identifying the need to work to fund basic living expenses. Moira, Janis and Eve talked about paid work as contributing to household budgets and this is in line with Jones and Bell's (2025, p.11) study. This study identifies employment vulnerability and how attendance is prioritised, forgoing attendance 'at non-essential events' to ensure that sufficient paid work offset gaps between student loans and the increase in cost of living and rent payments (Jones and Bell, 2025, p.13-14).

e. Economic pragmatism and understandings of debt

All participants engaged in economic pragmatism. Eve overtly talked about debt, framing her student loan as debt as Callender (2022, p.136) discusses. As Mazhari and Atherton (2020, p.13) explore, there is a correlation between concerns with student finance and the consideration of HE as personally valuable and applicable. A personalised weighing of value of university is more prevalent in disadvantaged students but that misunderstandings of the complex mechanism of HE funding is higher in this group, with cost as a constraining choice (Callender, 2022, p.142). Awareness of financial decision-making was a theme in phase one data and examples of economic pragmatism were present. Callender (2022, p.151) considers living at home during study in HE as a significant debt avoidance approach.

Financial insecurity, anxieties about parental contribution, lack of information about the mechanism of student finance and repayment, constrain 'student choices or impose the necessity of employment whilst studying at university' (Mazhari and Atherton, 2020, p.18). As Callender discusses (2022, p.141) policy rhetoric foregrounded debt accumulation as immaterial, especially for students, with policy change relating to student loans, predicated on a range of assumptions. Callender (2022, p.131) identifies that income-contingent loans are often considered as debt and not risk-free and these contribute to a constraining of university subject and mobilities. Clark et al. (2015, p.9) found that motivation for employment was a key 'trade off' and young people expressed meritocratic individualism, where they considered that hard work would be rewarded.

In line with Callender and Mellis (2022, p.481), Eve was the most debt averse as she was overt in a number of strategies to offset cost, such as commuting, she talked about saving money by staying local and spending a minimum amount of time at university, avoiding socialising with university peers and considering her local friendship groups important. Danvers and Hinton-Smith (2021, p.108-9) identify debt for some students as embodied and not an abstract concept. Debt is linked to risk and a strong consideration is whether accrued debt is worth it. Anxiety related to debt is also manifested in managing academic study and is noted in the following section.

Janis and Angie also discussed specific strategies to minimise cost but were more resigned to accepting opportunities (Boatman, Callender and Evans, 2022, p.200) and to self-invest. Eve, Janis and Angie do not fit the narrative of government policy that student loans ensure HE choice, they are pragmatic and demonstrate agency in a stratified HE landscape. Once at university, further strategies of using paid work during term time also contribute to the complex educational experiences of this group of students (Neves et al. 2025, p.31).

f. belonging at university

Economic precarity and employment demands potentially affect the normative assumption that students must feel a need to 'belong' at university. Student commuters, as viewed through a non-residential lens, are considered as unable to

form social connections through their absence on campus (Turner, Webb and Pritchard, 2024, p.762). Callender and Melis (2022, p.482) suggest that they have fewer chances to develop interactions and are confined to limited choices of when and how connections and belongingness is developed. Tett et al. (2025, p.476) go further, positioning belonging as an essential countermeasure to marginalisation. As outlined in chapter two and three, a lack of 'belonging' is a component of the problematisation of the student commuter.

As discussed in chapter three, belonging is not clearly defined. Although Oostergo et al. (2026, p.205) consider belonging as forms of social connection with Allen et al. (2024, p. 2-3) cautioning that conceptually, belonging is culturally contextualised, shaped potentially by a discipline area and a university. It is rooted in a human need for stability and relationships and is an outcome of interactions and structures and can be linked to forms of personal validation and recognition. Allen et al. (2024, p.26-28) providing an extensive systematic literature review provides a thematic model of determinants of belonging based on an interrelationship of four components (Oostergo et al. 2026, p.205-7). These are: 'quality relationships with peers and educators, educator practices, inclusive environments and institution-wide approaches' Allen et al. (2024, p.26-28). There is an interplay between a sense of belonging, the ability to shape belonging and connectedness, and perceptions of the ability to belong. Allen et al. (2024, p.29) identify this as a 'sense of mattering to their community'.

Participants displayed an affinity to the university in different ways, ostensibly positively and in relation to experience:

I got accepted into And it was like awesome... it was one of the best things that's happened so far' (Janis)

'my thing is that I love...university... and I did choose to come here... (Eve)

'But I love the classroom setting. Yeah, and working with students like, yeah, I really understand that it's so interactive and there's people and discussions and you feel involved' (Marty)

Participants demonstrate a shaping of belonging as identified by Allen et al. (2024, p.28). For Janis and Eve this is related to finding friendships and developing social connections, aligning to 'quality relationships' (Allen et al. 2024, p.28):

'I met ... and now we're best friends... and I have a good set of friends which I didn't think I would and they are, like, normal...I am not the only one and they know round here' (Janis)

'I realised that I wasn't the youngest and there was others my age, everybody was a lot more anxious but then I met ... and we all chatted away. I formed good friendships with them. We didn't live in student accommodation; we didn't all come straight out of school... it was a nice surprise' (Eve)

Both Janis and Eve's experiences with friendships are related to familiarity and similarity of experience. As Sumner (2021, p.44) identifies post-1992 universities offer 'spaces of educational sanctuary' and place emphasis on inclusivity and welcome but also reflect greater numbers of FiF students. Janis, Eve, Marty and Angie positioned the university as a safe space for 'fitting in' (Reay et al. 2010, p.120). Sumner (2021, p. 41) sees the choice of a post-1992 university as mediated by 'class background' reflecting similar dispositions and values and as posing less of a risk to students from non-traditional backgrounds. Angie was more specific

'there was some older people there, like dads and mums and dads and stuff so I was more interested in like the mums and dads cos they would be on the same wavelength with me, but then I also wanted to make friends and have some, you know, some people to talk to...people like me' (Angie)

Participants also shaped belonging through interactions with the wider academic and support community as articulated by Marty. Janis and Moira talked about interactions characterised by negotiating support:

Going to uni, that's a really strange idea. But I don't think I expected to do as well as I have done. I'm really proud of how far I have come. I thought I'd struggle a lot more, which is partially credit to like the uni having such a good accessibility service. They were so quick on getting support and getting the help that I was, I didn't face a lot of challenges I expected I would, like struggling to comprehend stuff and being really slow, it has been like wow. (Marty)

'And the learning was good, it was like, it wasn't too intense, and it was really interesting as well, like it wasn't like throw you in at the deep end which I liked and everyone was really helpful. It was never like. It wasn't as strict as I thought uni was going to be or it was gonna be. I don't know why I thought uni was really hard. Not that it's easy, but it's not easy, but they're not unrealistic about what you can achieve and everybody is really helpful, like they want you to do well. Which is good.' (Janis)

'Um, I think at university when speaking to the lecturer, I always ask them to like explain it to me in a different way and they are great cos they do that for. So that's how I was able to understand my learning requirements for assignments. Yeah, they sort of adjusted. And then I think oh OK this is how I need to do it.' (Moira).

Participants shape their interactions with academic staff and this aligns to Allen et al's (2024, p.28-9) study. Turner, Webb and Pritchard (2024, p.766) also establish that commuter students are 'almost twice as likely to ask questions in class... and demonstrate stronger commitment to study'. Commuting students are more likely to seek advice.

Belonging is shaped by participants through agency and by creating social interaction, seeking validation and described in terms of connectedness. This is also mediated through other roles of student commuter and student worker. Participants demonstrate a crafting of belongingness that sits with Tett et al's (2025, p.477)

model of making social connections and of maintaining a place of belonging in local communities but of facing 'exclusionary discourses'. Tett et al. (2025, p.477) examine the political as 'value systems which are used to judge which people are regarded as fully belonging'. Student commuters are non-traditional and positioned outside the norm as 'other' as they are more likely to be from widening participation backgrounds as demonstrated by the participants in this study. They do not meet the normative demands of belongingness. A student commuter is linked to 'poorer outcomes' and 'lower rates of academic belonging' (Thomas, 2019, p.293) and 'higher levels of challenge' (Jones and Bell, 2025, p.2). This contrasts with the crafting of belonging.

Participants facilitate their belongingness by sustaining other connections as Hallam (2023, p.386) examines identifying commuting students 'with a strong sense of belonging to their community, work and family...their higher education provider does not form their major identity'. Belongingness to community, work and family was expressed by participants in different ways, for Janis it was related to work in her community:

'I know that I can use university to get a job, but I have been doing tutoring as well and I'm good at it and I've seen the results and the parents have seen the result. So like, yeah, I know I can do this. Why should I need to write an essay that's fantastic, is it important? I know it didn't help the children learn that I work with' (Janis)

For Moira and Angie belongingness is linked to family commitments:

'I needed to look after my little sister because she was struggling with study and because I had my own laptop I could help her... So I stayed home to look after her and try to like do my assignment. So it's because my mom was working and I was working as well and so during assignment time it was a real struggle. But my family is important, I just get down to it' (Moira)

'I take the kids back and forth, sometimes I even take the kids out to a soft play. Let him run mad while I do some work. Yeah, I could just you know take them to the childminders, take L to school and I've just come home. If I am at home, I just come home and just, you know, do my work in my own time slowly 'cause I feel like once I get going at it, it's like I can't stop myself. It's just like my fingers just got set on fire yeah, yeah. And it takes about an hour to get into it. And when I got into it, I'm so tired. I might just go to bed now. My kids come in between the uni stuff always' (Angie)

Eve talked about her established social and familial community:

'But because I was commuting, I was willing to just like go to university, then come home, I had my support network already established and a lot of like, friendship groups, so I didn't go to university for the social aspect, I mean I have my church and family, I help with my grandparents' (Eve)

Belongingness for participants is shaped within the complexities of other roles and as Hope and Quinlan (2021, p.2544) describe, participants draw upon social networks and the known community. Eve, Angie and Moira utilise the proximity of the university to traverse boundaries and maintain social connectedness and to sustain academic work. Turner, Webb and Pritchard (2024, p.769) establish that commuter students are highly invested in timetabled sessions, but more importantly are also engaged outside timetabled sessions. They negotiate and craft.

6.9 Conclusion

There is a shift towards students choosing to stay local and study and this is particularly apparent for universities in cold spots. Staying local or commuting contradicts an assumption of moving away to study, a rite of passage. Baines (2024, p.10) considers that staying local is elided with low aspirations as a deficit option. These findings demonstrate that those who choose to stay local have complex reasons which are contextual and unique. Participants have experienced an education system that has constituted them and where structural and familial concerns overshadow agentic potential.

Key findings are that participants experienced a protracted entry to university driven by misinformation, gaining qualifications which were insufficient for entry, gaining work experience that was not considered relevant for university entry. This led to later applications and failure to secure first choice courses. Local potential of FE, lack of employment opportunities in a post-industrial landscape added to constraints. and financial constraints, economic pragmatism and staying with a local known community, that may offset precarity, create a drive towards localism. Wider spatial precarity within a stratified education system solidifies decisions.

Students who stay local confront a discourse, constructed around an imaginary of belongingness to a university. They demonstrate subjectivities through expectations of difficulty and failure, accepting the normalised discourse of social mobility, employment potential generation by gaining a degree. In response to structural constraints, normalised subjectivities, they craft forms of belonging which are personal and practical rejecting the commodified space, staying focused, aware of their communities and sustaining their potential. They respond as Foucault may have imagined within an understanding of the contingent nature of practices and exploration of potential (May, 2011, p.78). Foucault talks about the 'nature of the present...to grasp why and how that-which-is may no longer be that-which-is...kinds of virtual fracture which open up the space of freedom' (Foucault, 1990b, p.36). Foucault does not suggest that truth will be revealed, instead this is about re-forming within the potential subjective parameters, or as types of experimentation (May, 2011, p.80). Students who stay local and commute are re-forming and experimenting within their embodied subjectivities. Chapter seven outlines recommendations in response to these findings.

Chapter 7 Recommendations, limitations and conclusion

7.1 Introduction

This chapter provides a summary of the findings and reflections in response to the research questions. This leads to recommendations. A final section examines the limitations of the study, comments on generalisability and transferability and contribution to knowledge and a brief conclusion.

7.2 Summary and research questions response

This study was initially conceived as a study of transition of undergraduates to a post-1992 university in the Midlands. Following a pilot study, there were two data collection methods which were designed to capture transition moments. Phase one was designed to capture moments of transition in the university environment through a practical, collaborative activity. Following the first data collection, data findings demonstrated how participants conceptualised university entry as proximal and intensely localised. Participants characterised their entry to university within complex social worlds and their construction individualised and modified by contextual demands, limitations and pragmatism. It was only a part of a social world construction and was not necessarily central, nested within other significant and expectant challenges.

Phase two was adjusted following findings from phase one and life history interactions were used to explore the concept of being local and to contextualise participants constructed social worlds in depth.

As discussed in chapters one, four and five refined research questions focused on:

- a. Why have students decided to go to university?
- b. What was their background before starting HE?
- c. What has led them to study locally?

In response to these three research questions:

Student commuters are constructed within policy discourse and secondly through academic discourse. This discourse both cements the categorising and then problematises. Yet students who travel to study at their local university do not construct themselves overtly as commuters. Foucault's theorising enables these social practices to be exposed. As Brookfield (2005, p.121-2) conceptualises, Foucault enables an unravelling of apparent systems of emancipation within an educational context which enable a critique of taken for granted approaches.

Data from phase one demonstrates a key theme of opportunity which is conceptualised as employment and progression, and this was supported by phase two data. Employment and progression are contextualised, with participants from both phase one and two identifying limited local potential and opportunity, identifying an inevitability of entry to HE. This is normalised and phase two participants demonstrated partial awareness of implications with a stratified HE landscape. A

theme for phase two participants was related to choice, constraints overshadowing opportunity. A second theme was related to social interaction and connection. Phase one participants looked forward to expanding social worlds. Phase two participants expressed this less clearly as deepening social worlds was within constraints of managing roles of student worker and student commuter and crossing boundaries of local communities and university spaces. Added to these constraints were deeper understandings of precarious trajectories to HE and the need to employ strategies to mitigate precarity. These included staying local, employing economic pragmatism and conceptualising HE as integrated and constructed within existing social worlds. An outcome is the construction of the student commuter.

Overshadowing participants' backgrounds, choice-making to stay local and travel to study are fluid trajectories characterised by late applications to HE, misinformation, complex qualifications and employment experiences which lack academic recognition. Absence of local opportunity and structural complexities in educational policy and opportunity add constraint.

Use of Foucault's concepts also demands a break with sentimentalising the past (Rabinow, 1984, p.27) and as Taylor (2011, p.3) argues, a recognition that whilst power can be oppressive it can be perceived as productive, Foucault (1982, p.224) conceptualises power as 'elaborated, transformed, organized; it endows itself with processes which are more or less adjusted to the situation'. He goes on to say that within the adjustment is instability, 'a reciprocal appeal...a perpetual reversal' Foucault (1982, p.226). Figure 2.1 presented in chapter two illustrated the relationship between the three elements of Foucault's theorising used in this thesis. This thesis demonstrates that student commuters craft and use potentially use their contextualised constructions to form a future.

The use of a problematising lens has enabled an examination of assumed behaviours of those who commute to university. Chapter two examined policy statements and chapter three presented literature which provides a construction of student commuters, and this is considered when exploring data from participants articulating their constructed social worlds. This problematising confronts the discourse of student commuters but also situates students who commute within social power relations which are contextualised spatially, socially and societally. Those who commute necessarily engage in surprisingly different ways within these power relations.

Foucault provides an explanation of the development of modern forms of power. Foucault (1982, p.209) considers that 'it is not power, but the subject, which is the general theme of my research', exploring the concept of 'subjectification...the process of becoming an individual, i.e. becoming a 'self'- a process in which individuals are subjected and through which they actively subject themselves' (Rönningland, 2020, p.18). *Discipline and Punish* (2020) discusses the shaping of individuals and contextualises this shaping historically and at a micro-level, also demonstrating how understandings are necessarily filtered through discourse.

Educational institutions systemise this discourse and in chapter two there are examples of this process. Student commuters can be considered as constructed.

In response participants integrate local networks and communities to cross boundaries. They circumvent and seek dividends from their local communities by maintaining aspirations to challenge norms through communitarian efforts. They deploy economic pragmatism through agency. In HE they craft local spaces to create social connections and individualised forms of belonging, protecting and sustaining potential. This agentic crafting and integrating shows the potential and fluidity of forms of power as Foucault (1982, p.226) discussed. Educational institutions, wielding quiet power, 'simultaneously enable and constrain through normalising' (Taylor, 2011, p.173). Participants demonstrate that they have formed new social practices, side-stepping, setting aside, creating ways to circumvent potential subjectivities and rejecting a normative subjectivity by staying local.

This thesis demonstrates how policy and academic discourse positions students who commute, who are non-traditional, and presenting them as risky, lacking belonging, marginalised, disengaged and, indirectly, deviant as they do not meet traditional norms of achieving good degrees and are prone to attrition. These discourses ignore the contextualised trajectory to university, anachronistic systems of entry, normative accountability of qualification routes and spatial inequities. It ignores how individuals at university demonstrate a harnessing of power as Foucault (1982, p.224) suggests as transforming and organising.

7.3 Recommendations

It is important to recognise that undergraduates are more likely to travel to study (Turner et al. 2026, p.1), have complex identities and construct their university experience contextually and strategically. The findings from this thesis demonstrate resistance to potential subjectivities by individuals who navigate and decision-make strategically within localised potential. However, this study also demonstrates that without considering the student commuter as the predominant way of going to university there will be a further chasm of inequality. This chasm is a binary of those who can be on campus, considered as 'real' students or traditional students and those who are non-traditional, travelling to study. Student commuters subsidise the additional on campus facilities for a dwindling on campus group. Students commute for a variety of reasons and in this study, due to convenience, proximity, economic pragmatism and local community, and the decision is intensely personalised and contextualised. Student commuters experience a unique connection with their local university, as demonstrated in this study. Their 'belongingness' is enacted in different ways. This has implications for the organisation and cost of degrees, pedagogical approaches and a recognition that the traditional structure of degrees is anachronistic.

A further concern is the complexity of educational transition routes. A recommendation is ensuring that information-giving and advice systems are more robust, accessible and independent and address systemic inequalities.

Participants' aspirations evolve or are authored within complex worlds. The curation or making of identity, is linked to social engagement, and where imagined selves collide with communities of choice. This social engagement for participants was within education, but not part of formal schooling. It represents a different way, as it enacts individually, aspirational intent. As Goring et al. (2023) establishes, normative societal values identify young adults in a neoliberal world in a polarised way as either within a discourse of resilient and aspirational and as Foucault (2020) recognises within compliant docility to meet the normative representations within society. A recommendation is to enhance the social interactions experienced by participants within their convoluted transition to university which ignite the capacity to aspire as explored by Appadurai (2004). Appadurai (2004) provokes questioning about the concept of 'aspire' and its uneven distribution. Those who have experienced objectifying educational systems are problematised into certain of 'aspiration'. As Foucault (1990a) discussed, how individuals can forge space for aspirational work with, and of themselves.

Students experience financial precarity in efforts to attend university. Commuter students in this study employed a range of strategies to minimise costs. As recent studies suggest, increasingly students' abilities to engage in managing costs has resulted in a gap between the ability to earn and learn and a dwindling insufficient student loan (Dickinson, 2025). A recommendation is considering costs for commuting students, considering length, time and approach to degrees. This should include examining pathways, recognising experiential learning and enabling fast and slow credited routes to a degree. Thomas (2022, p.107) writes about an English HE system that continues to sustain 'effectively maintained inequality' as well as a shift in responsibility of the costs of high education from the state to the student. This creates jeopardy for pursuing equity for students from lower socio-economic status backgrounds as they inevitably will resort to strategies to support economic pragmatism but ultimately will avoid university. In line with these recommendations is the importance of providing and maintaining local opportunities for those 'cold' spots of provision. As White and Lee (2020, p.13) comment, Britain does not have an even distribution of HE provision, unlike other nations that pursued a policy to correct imbalances of HE geographical distribution. Therefore, commuting within a 'cold spot' area is accessing undergraduate study without a history of university entry, within community endorsement (Henderson, 2020).

Those who travel to study value spaces. A recommendation is recognising the needs of students who travel to university and providing a variety of spaces which considers course design. Delbert et al. (2025: p.1173) talk about 'third' spaces, 'as neither home (first space) nor work/school (the second space) and instead refers to

social, physical and virtual environments that facilitate informal interactions, collaboration and community-building’.

7.4 Generalisability and transferability contributing to knowledge

It is important to note that in the social world and as demonstrated in this study, there is a construction of truths. Generalisability, as explained by Hammond and Wellington (2021, p.95) is considered as taking an insight from one context and considering it in other contexts. It is recognised that in this study, theoretical framing developed in last century has been applied, that academic material is derived from other contexts, refashioned and rethought, and that there is a necessary re-working, constructing, linking of thoughts and ideas from academic literature, policy statements and so on and lastly as a qualitative study, an interpretation of data. There is a stretching of concepts (Hammond and Wellington, 2021, p.95). Alternatively, Urban and van Eeden-Moorefield (2018) talk about establishing trustworthiness through transferability with questions linked to providing sufficient material so that concepts are understood and research strategies are transparent with ethical considerations foregrounded. For Denscombe (2021, p.101) transferability is about inference to other similar settings, and secondly, making claims that offer that transferability. Therefore, this study offers data and findings that have transferability, particularly to post-1992 universities. Research findings from this study have been designed to illuminate, to be insightful and to encourage a re-thinking of constructions of those who choose to study in HE but also choose to commute. Foucault has provided a framing device to unravel the complexities of the construction of a student commuter.

7.5 Limitations

There are a range of limitations within this study and it is important to reflect on choices and decisions. A key limitation is the contextual nature of the study, exploring a university and a single cohort of students. Whilst it provides an in-depth snapshot of constructions of student commuters, it is limited in comparison and breadth. This links to cohorts and longitudinal potential. This study explored narratives of a small cohort of students, and following students further would have strengthened the analysis of how commuting to university affects potential trajectories. Considering aspirations and exploring their realisation would have deepened understandings of the context and construct of the life history, perhaps generationally.

The challenge of data collection was surprising. Designing research tools to consider ethical perspectives such as student time, energy and engagement was important. This remained a difficult balance, particularly in a first semester, when students may be caught in a complex enculturation process. A further challenge was thematic analysis and considering models of application where different materials had been created. Reflecting on efforts to democratise and ensure relevancy of research data

as opposed to more straightforward approaches should be considered more rigorously.

7.6 Conclusion

Student commuters are not a homogenous group, yet experience degrees of inequality. Addressing precarity in transitions by hearing participant narratives is an important starting point and will also drive recognition of how this mediates within transformative potential through choice and agency. Participants in this study found the reflective and creative approach to exploring their transitional experiences provided confirmation of their choice-making, but it also exposed challenges and inequalities in educational discourse.

Student commuters have mixed views about their transitions, whilst embracing aspirational futures. The study established that participants are aspirational whilst utilising economic pragmatism to minimise precarity. They embark on agile adjustment to manage localism, and as commuter students, to recognise role confusion and complexity. Role confusion creates liminality, between spaces, as new undergraduate student transitions are complex, due to different geographical proximity, socioeconomic status, precarity and boundary crossing. These factors instigate subjectivities in student constructions of their selfhood, which meet the objectified undergraduate who is expected to be aspirational and idealised.

A post-1992 university will continue to increasingly recruit student commuters who may be concentrated in certain disciplines. Adaption for this local and commuting cohort, to enhance enculturation and belonging, will enhance reputation and may decrease attrition. Foregrounding the student commuter is urgent university and wider society business as increasingly student commuters may become the student commutercariat.

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