

**Stories from a marginalised majority: an exploration of local live at home students and their experiences of 'student-hood'**

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## **Abstract**

This research adopts a narrative enquiry approach to explore local live at home students' first year experiences in a post-92 university and to consider why they are more likely to withdraw early from their undergraduate studies than those who live in student accommodation. Using a theoretical framework influenced by the work of Bourdieu, it uses data gathered from focus groups and individual interviews to argue that students who live at home are a resourceful and resilient group, not yet fully recognised, understood and valued by the institution. The findings of the research challenge deficit models of live at home students, demonstrating instead the richness of their experiences, including their commitment to their families, communities and to the university itself.

The research considers how, despite most of its undergraduates remaining at home, the institutional habitus is potentially alienating to that majority because it reproduces an increasingly outdated, elitist model of university life or 'student-hood' where moving away from home is considered the norm or orthodoxy. It postulates that the reproduction of this orthodoxy contributes towards live at home students feeling 'odd' or 'different' from their peers who move away to study and argues that the institution needs to consider how it more effectively serves its local students by understanding their needs and their identities.

The research finds that live at home students are beginning to challenge the orthodoxy, creating new models of student-hood which more accurately reflect the multiplicity of their lives and their identities. It concludes that, by actively supporting its local students to articulate, celebrate and promote these new models, the University can impact positively on continuation rates and more legitimately justify itself as the university **for** its city.

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*If someone tells you what a story is about, they are probably right.  
If they tell you that that is all a story is about, they are very definitely  
wrong.*

Neil Gaiman (2013): Introduction to Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*

## Chapter One: Introduction

This chapter presents the background to the research undertaken, establishing the context in which the subject was identified for investigation. It explores my positionality as a researcher, how the research focus was identified and introduces the research questions. The chapter concludes by explaining the structure of the thesis, leading into the next chapter which reviews the literature.

### 1.1 The context for the research

My research is conducted in Central University<sup>1</sup>, a post-92 urban institution which prides itself on its commitment to widening participation and to its local communities, regarding itself as the University *for* its city, an assertion which establishes its mission to serve that city and its residents.

Post-92 universities are those given university status through the Further and Higher Education Act of 1992. Prior to this, many were polytechnics focused on vocational qualifications and serving the regional economies. As Scott (2012) acknowledges, these universities tend to be less selective than those established pre-1992, admitting significantly higher numbers of students from areas of socio-economic disadvantage,

*it is the post-92 universities that have really delivered mass higher education. They have done the heavy lifting in terms of overall student expansion – and in widening participation.*

Central University's population reflects that 'heavy lifting' as seen in the percentages of students from low participation groups - sometimes problematically called 'non-traditional students' - entering undergraduate courses in 2017/18 shown in Table 1 and taken from data published by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) and used in the University's 2019 Access and Participation Plan (APP).

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<sup>1</sup> The name of the University is anonymised.

**Table 1: Admissions to Higher Education in 2017**

	<b>Black, Asian, Minority Ethnic (BAME)</b>	<b>Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD Quintile 1)</b>
<b>Sector</b>	25%	21%
<b>Central University</b>	52%	39%
<b>Faculty of Business, Legal and Social Studies</b>	65%	42%

\*IMD Quintile 1 = highest level of social and economic deprivation as indicated by Department for Communities and Local Government 2015

Widening participation as measured by university admission is not the same, however, as widening success. Sadly, as shown in HESA data presented in Table 2, not all students who go on to university complete their degrees or achieve high quality academic outcomes as measured by the Office for Students (OfS), the regulator of higher education (HE) in England. Continuation rates<sup>2</sup> are one of those outcomes, used to measure the percentages of students who withdraw from their courses within one year and two weeks of enrolment.

**Table 2: non-continuation rates in HE of 21 year olds and under on entry to university (one year after starting course)**

<b>Entry date</b>	<b>Central University</b>	<b>Sector average (England)</b>
<b>2015</b>	9.6%	6.4%
<b>2016</b>	9.8%	6.3%
<b>2015 (low participating areas)</b>	11.1%	8.7%
<b>2016 (low participating areas)</b>	11.0%	8.8%

\* A low participation neighbourhood is based on the Higher Education Funding Council England's (HEFCE) definition of areas which have low numbers of young people entering HE and first introduced in 2011/12.

The data above indicate that the performance of Central University in relation to continuation rates is worse than that of the sector overall, both for young entrants and those from areas of low participation. These data are presented to establish the institutional context for my research, raising questions about potential reasons for variation in rates across the sector and focusing my interest on what may be

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<sup>2</sup> Continuation is measured by the OfS by students who remain in higher education one year and two weeks from the date of their initial enrolment on their courses.

perceived by some as the relatively poor performance of Central University with regard to continuation in comparison with other HE institutions (HEIs).

The backdrop to my research is not restricted to the confines of Central University but falls within the broader context of HE where there is much political debate about the value, purpose and accountability of universities. This discourse is not new, but made more complex when it is considered that students pay tuition fees, normally £9250 per year and, additionally, borrow maintenance funding even if they are from low income families. My research is situated therefore within an ideological discourse where HE might be regarded as having become underpinned by the values of the marketplace and consumerism, as invoked by Browne (2010:8) in his influential report of HE funding which claims repeatedly, despite recommending the imposition of significantly higher tuition fees, to '*put students at the heart of the system*'. That discourse has contributed towards the creation of a performance culture in higher education where the 'success' of universities and their students is measured against a range of indicators, increasingly those determined by the OfS in its regulatory role. The measurement of performance brings with it the construction of groups so that '*peer comparisons*' and '*interventions*' can be made to improve '*outcomes*' in what Barber et al (2011) call – without irony – a '*deliverability model*'.

My research focus on local, live at home students, often called commuter students, is therefore located within a marketised culture of higher education which gathers data about students, categorises them into groups and measures their performance. Such categorisation is highly contestable and, as discussed in 2.1, rooted in a neoliberalist model of education which Ball (2013:132) argues transforms,

*social relations and practices into calculabilities...into the market form – with the effect of commodifying educational practice and experience.*

Ten years after the publication of Browne's Report, universities have become increasingly focused on performance targets in relation to different groups of students and their outcomes. Those outcomes have been connected both with an apparent commitment to address social injustice and as a means of ensuring that students receive 'value for money' (VfM),

*we expect to see institutions focusing their efforts on value for money for the most disadvantaged students and facing penalties if sufficient progress is not made (House of Commons Education Committee, 2018:24).*

VfM is a heavily contested concept, (Ball, 2008; Collini, 2011; Brown and Carasso, 2013; Jones et al, 2020) which contributes towards the marketisation of the university sector, influencing perceptions of the purpose of university and, of course, its 'value'. Writing about the Treasury's position on HE and alluding to its commitment to tuition fees McGettigan (2015:2) claims,

*The focus of policy has been the transformation of HE into the private good of training and the positional good of opportunity, where the returns on both are higher earnings.*

It is perhaps not surprising then that many students have been 'coaxed ...towards thinking in more commercial ways' (Jones et al, 2020:385), regarding university education largely as a means of achieving economic security,

*Future stability is a dominant motivator for current and prospective students within the context of a world that is perceived as uncertain and risky. (Unite Students, 2019:6)*

My position as Associate Dean for the Student Learning Experience within Central University's Faculty of Business, Legal and Social Studies situates my role as researcher both within the philosophical discourses about the purpose and value of HE and the institutional strategic requirement to improve performance metrics connected with continuation, degree completion and graduate-level employment. My research interest emerges partly from the tensions I experience between being accountable for the performance metrics within the Faculty and my personal belief that there is a purpose and value to higher education that transcends easily measured 'outcomes'. Despite my role being one of strategic leadership, my work frequently brings me into contact with students who, for a variety of complicated reasons, are struggling to succeed, sometimes to the point where they do not continue on their courses. Behind the metrics are stories of individual students for whom university can seem a bewildering, even painful experience. Supporting those students can be similarly complex, sometimes because university academic regulations and policies are designed to be applied consistently across all students, with little leeway for those who do not or cannot comply with expectations. The

imposition and rise of tuition fees, together with the replacement of maintenance grants with loans, means that the financial penalty for those who do not complete is very high – let alone the impact on students' confidence, self-esteem and ability to compete in the workplace.

## **1.2 Developing a research focus and rationale**

Whilst I have long had an interest in the continuation of students on their courses, this deepened in 2015/6 when withdrawal rates both across the institution and within my Faculty increased by 3% (Central University Report based on HESA data). The deterioration in what were then called progression rates was considered by the University to have been caused largely by a change in its Academic Regulations which reduced the number of resit attempts for students. It had been anticipated that this change would impact positively on behaviour, specifically a tendency for some students not to submit at first attempt, presumably because they had three further opportunities to do so. However, the change caused a very different unintended consequence, leading to more students being withdrawn from their courses as a result of academic failure. I found dealing with those students very challenging, both professionally and personally. Like many colleagues I found myself in an absurd position akin to what Hoyle and Wallace (2007:19) term '*a stance of principled infidelity*', searching for loopholes within the institutional Academic Regulations to allow students to continue - and pay for - their education. When withdrawal is inflicted on students by their own university's regulations it seems particularly harsh, counter to my belief that education is a right rather than a privilege. Such a belief is worthy but feels somewhat empty in a context where significant numbers of students, including those from areas of socio-economic deprivation, fail to continue beyond year one of their undergraduate programmes.

The rise in withdrawal rates led to a University investigation, not just into their reasons but into specific groups of students who appeared most susceptible to non-continuation. Emerging from that investigation came an institutional view that 'commuting' students are particularly at risk, a view promoted in the University's Business Intelligence report. This report, designed to improve retention and progression by alerting staff to particular challenges in student cohorts, indicated that commuting students are a discrete, potentially vulnerable group,

*... residential students were more engaged and commuting students had less interaction with Faculty staff i.e. less contact time with teaching staff and do not take advantage of extra and co-curricular activities* (Central University's Business Intelligence report on enrolled students, 2017).

I was concerned by the sweeping statements made about commuting students in that report. Not only did they appear over-general, there was no indication as to the evidence which might support them. Having been a local student who had commuted to the University myself and as a teacher of many local sixth form students whom I had encouraged to join it, I was disappointed in the characterisation of a group less engaged and less likely to take advantage of HE than those who studied away from home.

Initially my interest was confined simply to potential reasons for commuting students being more at risk of non-continuation than others; however, as I came to understand that this group constitutes a majority within the institution (68% of student intake in 2017- *Central University Strategic Plan Refresh*) I found it troubling and paradoxical that the University appears to regard most of its students as forming a potentially problematic group. The statement that commuting students '*do not take advantage*' of university opportunities seems particularly pejorative as does the identification of a group that is somehow deficient, reluctant to participate in their education. There appears therefore to be value in investigating further the experiences of local live at home students<sup>3</sup> in an institution where they form the majority of its students. It is my view that developing a research project to explore those experiences has the capacity to help the University understand its students better so that it can provide for them more effectively, thereby improving institutional continuation rates as well as impacting positively on individual lives and local communities.

### **1.3 Positionality**

This section explores my professional and personal identity in relation to my research interest. It is important to do so because research does not exist in a vacuum and is not value-free; instead, as asserted by Denzin and Lincoln (2003:33),

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<sup>3</sup> For reasons discussed in more detail in 1.5 and 2.1, my research focuses on those whom I call 'local live at home' students rather than the more generic term 'commuting' students.

*it is guided by a set of beliefs and feelings about the world and how it should be understood and studied.*

Positionality, therefore, influences the underpinning epistemology and ontology of the research, as well as its methodology.

I research from a position of leadership and influence in Central University where I am held accountable for the outcomes and improvement of performance metrics connected with student learning, including those connected with student satisfaction, continuation, attainment and employment. Stephen Ball (2003:219) might regard me as an example of '*the new hero of neoliberalism*', his ironically scathing term for managers in education whose role is to 'improve performance' as measured by data and who he argues are valued more highly than teachers/tutors. I have sympathy with that term and, whilst it may sound disingenuous, regard myself primarily and above all as a teacher, having spent most of my career teaching in sixth forms, further education colleges and university.

As a teacher I regard my role as being to nurture students to develop themselves, improve their qualifications and thereby their opportunities in life. Having always taught in areas of socio-economic deprivation, I am sympathetic to the challenges that students from those areas face and, as the first person in my family to enter HE, am acutely aware of how university has the power to transform life chances. So too do I recognise the emotional and financial investment required for many students to go to university, and the long-lasting impact should they not complete their studies. Behind the performance metrics that provide a narrative about the institution are students with unique stories and experiences. My research interest lies in those individual stories and how they can be used to influence institutional policy and practice in relation to local students who remain at home to study. The two stories below are told to explain how I developed an interest in these students and why I believe they are important as a research subject.

One of the defining moments of my career was in the mid-80s at a parents' evening in Sandwell, an area with very high levels of economic and social deprivation, where I was encouraging an extraordinarily academically able student, John, to apply to a redbrick university some distance from home. His parents, whilst enormously proud of John's achievements, asked me whether university would really be 'worth it' as he



could easily become a decorator like his father. Initially somewhat bemused that this question could be asked about someone whom I saw as having so much academic potential, I was quickly made aware that, for this family, it was far from an easy decision. I was humbled by the parents' frankness in explaining that, not only did John contribute to the family finances through his part-time job, he played a significant part in caring for his disabled sibling.

The parents' question was both profound and valid, rooted in economic and social reality: even in those days when 'free' HE appeared inviolable, there was a high cost attached to continuing in education, moving away from the local community and disrupting the family unit. Behind the question, however, was another less explicit one: was John himself 'worthy' of university? Crudely, was HE designed for 'people like him'? For John who eventually decided to go to a local university, remaining at home whilst studying was not only a pragmatic decision but, more importantly perhaps, one that made a positive long-term impact on his local community as he graduated to become a very successful teacher in Sandwell.

On reflection, it is odd that I was surprised by his parents' questions because, like John, I come from a background where HE was an alien world, out of reach for 'people like me'. I retain a vivid memory of having an interview at a northern redbrick university in the last year of my A levels, returning from it humiliated because I believed I was unworthy of a place to study English Literature there. Having been asked by the academic interviewer to talk about my favourite authors, I found myself rendered literally speechless because I was too scared to talk, confident only that I had been foolishly arrogant in applying to university and thoroughly deserving of having had to confront this 'fact'. I left the interview knowing (correctly as it turned out) I would not be offered a place, my view compounded that university was 'not for someone like me'.

Three years later I began an education degree at the polytechnic which became Central University but my identity as a student remained fragile, my confidence easily damaged. I felt 'different' from the others, perhaps because I was slightly older but also because I did not live in what were then called 'student halls of residence'. Unlike most of those who lived away from home, I worked part-time so had less time to socialise. Academically, I was an over-serious, highly conscientious

student, acutely aware of my 'luck' in being in HE so could not afford to waste it. I distanced myself from those in student accommodation, partly because I envied what appeared to be their carefree independence from family, but also because I believed I had to give my studies 100% if I were to be successful. On receiving a low grade for my first assignment, I nearly withdrew from study, saved only by a kind, patient tutor who demonstrated how I could improve future work by adopting a more academic writing style. I shudder to think how easily I might not have continued had it not been for the validation I received from that tutor and the likely impact of withdrawal on my life and that of my children. The stories above have influenced my professional behaviour, my attitude towards the students I work with and my research position, making me wish to understand how better we can support those like John and me for whom the achievement of a degree can make far-reaching differences to the lives of others – but who may face barriers that make this more difficult than institutions fully understand. I come to my research then as a kind of double 'insider', a position that stems from my senior role within Central University and as someone who has empathy with live at home students having been one myself. Those positions present what Anderson and Jones (2000:430) explain as '*unique epistemological, methodological, political, and ethical dilemmas*' which are explored in more detail in Chapter 3.

Bourdieu's theories underpin my research, providing a theoretical framework through which to position those stories. My research examines the experiences of local live at home students in the social field of their first year of undergraduate study, exploring how his theories might enable greater understanding of how their experiences differ from those who move away to study. To a lesser extent, Foucault has also influenced the theoretical position through his work on dominant discourses, marginalisation and power.

The positionality of the researcher influences the methods chosen and used to collect and analyse data. As Fine and Weis (1996:267-8) assert,

*Methods are not passive strategies. They differently produce, reveal, and enable the display of different kinds of identities.*

My social background and early career as an English teacher have impacted on the methodology used in my research. I was fortunate enough to grow up with

grandparents who told me many stories, some of which were variations of existing folk tales, some drawn from their own experiences and some completely fabricated. Most were rooted in the richness of Scottish working class culture and an oral tradition of storytelling. My childhood narratives were an eclectic mix of bible parables, fairy tales, DS Thompson cartoon strips, 1920s schoolgirl novels and salacious stories from the 'true life' magazines enjoyed by my maternal grandmother.

In an HE culture which is measured predominantly through quantitative data, stories may seem marginal and of little consequence. On the contrary, it is my view that they enrich our responses to the world, enabling us to realise that it is '*incorrigibly plural*' (MacNeice, *Snow*, 1967) and offering different ways of seeing it. In Ian McEwan's novel '*Saturday*' (2005:68), the surgeon Henry Perowne is challenged by his daughter's view that '*people can't live without stories*', claiming he is '*living proof*' that this is not so. But Perowne is proved wrong – it is literature that saves him and his daughter from the intruders who threaten their lives. McEwan mocks the rational, scientific Perowne, making him realise that stories can '*cast a spell*' and reveal psychological truths to which he had previously been oblivious.

In conducting my research, I remain fascinated by stories and the ways in which they are told and interpreted. My research adopts and is informed by a narrative enquiry approach as it seeks to explore different kinds of stories: those stories told by the institution through its presentation of data for audiences such as government funding bodies and those told by the students whose voices speak of their lived experience, adding substance and richness to the University's quantitative data. There is then a politics of storytelling in which narratives interact with power, articulating different positions within a specific field and holding different 'values'. Within the power landscape of HE, Central University's story is told largely through the measurement of a narrow range of outcomes. My professional position requires me to contribute towards that story through the development and implementation of strategy that will impact positively on those outcomes whilst my research seeks to tell a different version of that story, one that is articulated through the voices of students and which I argue is more complex, more nuanced and much richer. In doing so my research challenges the quantitative methodologies that I regard as dominating the HE story, telling it from the marketised perspective of 'inputs' and 'outputs'. Instead, the adoption of a narrative enquiry approach to the methodology reflects my belief that

personal stories and experiences are currently neglected, despite their potential to ‘*cast a spell*’ (McEwan, *ibid*), confound expectations and create new narratives about higher education.

#### **1.4 Defining the research focus and developing the research questions**

Nearly forty years on from the question asked by John’s parents, with high tuition fees and greater numbers of students entering HE, the question about the ‘worth’ both of HE itself and of its students continues to haunt me, influencing my professional practice and identity as well as my research position. It is a question that has become more poignant as successive governments ask it of universities, repositioning it as a question about ‘value for money’ both for the fee paying student and the taxpayer who, ‘*underwrites the student loan system*’ (Johnson, 2016:9).

My research interest emerges from my experiences and those of John as live at home students for whom the value of HE was not immediately apparent to us or our parents. For us and for many of the students I work with, the decision to study at university brings with it significant financial, emotional and social implications for the whole family. Failure to complete is therefore likely to impact on the family as well as the individual. My initial interest in live at home students stems from my professional role in trying to improve continuation, a role that leads me to try to discern trends and patterns in connection with withdrawal rates. In doing so I have become aware that the institution in which I work and much of the relevant literature regard what are commonly called ‘commuting students’ as being at particular risk of non-continuation.

This intrigues me on a personal level in light of the two stories above, both of which indicate that live at home students, rather than being seen as a deficit group, can be highly successful academically, going on to make a positive contribution to their local communities. Working in an institution which, as explained in more detail in Chapter 4, has particularly high numbers of live at home students and seeks to position itself as the University **for** its city, I believe it important to understand this significant group, not only so that continuation rates might be improved but to make a sustained difference to the communities we serve. Research into the experiences of those who live at home and successfully continue on their courses could be a valuable way of informing university policy and practice to make a positive impact on institutional

performance metrics and, more importantly, individual lives and the wider community. In addition, any such research would lead to greater understanding of the complexities that many of these students navigate while undertaking their degrees. This led me to develop the initial questions that formed the basis of the research, these being:

1. What are the key factors impacting on the continuation of local live at home students?
2. How does the dichotomy of living at home/moving away impact on students' experiences and perceptions of their first year of university?
3. What can the institution learn from those experiences to develop strategies that will improve the continuation rates of those who form the majority of its students: those who live locally and at home during their first year of study?

As I collected and analysed the data from the focus groups and individual interviews it became clear that the original research questions did not do justice to the richness of the stories that the participants told about their experiences of 'student-hood' or what they call 'uni-life'. Whilst these stories do indeed offer insights into why live at home students appear to be more likely to withdraw from their degree courses than those who move away, they are not fundamentally about that. Instead, these are quietly powerful stories about what it is to experience 'uni-life' from the position of living at home. In telling them, the participants confound institutional perceptions that they are somehow a problem or 'at risk' group and, instead, challenge the University to reconsider how it presents itself and its concept of student-hood so that it better reflects the experiences of the majority of its students.

The nature of narrative inquiry is that it is a collaboration between the researcher and the participants (Clandinin and Connolly, 2000:20); it is apt therefore that, through the research process, my questions shifted both in focus and priority to become these:

1. How does the dichotomy of living at home/moving away impact on students' experiences and perceptions of their first year of university?
2. What notions of 'student-hood' or 'uni-life' prevail in the institution and how do these impact on students' experiences and perceptions?

3. How can the institution reimagine and reconceptualise 'student-hood' in ways that can be identified by those who form the majority of its students: those who live locally and at home during their first year of study?

It is intended that this thesis will add to the increasing but still limited extant scholarship on students living at home, specifically those who are aged between 18 -21. As it is conducted in a post-92 institution where live at home students form the majority of the population, I believe my research to be of value in relation to policy and practice within such institutions particularly given Whyte's (2019:35) recent assertion that live at home students even those who attend universities where they form the majority are unlikely to engage fully in their studies.

### **1.5 Structure of the thesis**

This first chapter has established the background context as to why I believe that the experiences of local live at home students form a subject worthy of further investigation. It has sought to explain why the subject is of personal interest, stemming from both my professional role and my position as an educator, and of value to the institution's commitment to improve continuation rates, serve its communities and truly become the university for its city.

Chapter 2 reviews the literature connected with students who live at home during their first year of university within the context of theoretical issues and debates in relation to widening participation and continuation in post-92 HE institutions in England and Wales. On identifying the experiences of live at home students as an issue to investigate, I undertook an examination of the scholarly base underpinning this area. Through this it became apparent that, whilst there was considerable research in the USA and emerging literature in the UK, the term 'commuting students' was generally used to cover a very broad group, ranging from students who travelled considerable distances to university and those who were comparatively local. In 2018 Donnelly and Gamsu categorised commuting through different distances and their work contributed to my decision, outlined in more detail in Chapters 3 and 4, to focus on students who lived within easy commuting distance (ie 15k) of the university, a group which I characterise as 'local live at home students' to distinguish from the more generic 'commuting students'. It is important to make this distinction because much of the research undertaken in relation to commuting

students focuses on the impact of long travelling times. My interest lies in those for whom the physical distance to the University is unlikely to be a significant factor in their HE experiences.

Bourdieu's theories of the doxa, social field, habitus, capital, misrecognition and social reproduction provide the underpinning theoretical framework of my research, offering a lens through which to understand the experiences of those students in the early stages of their undergraduate degree courses as they transition from school/college to HE. Bourdieu's concept of '*the social field*', a field of play where 'players' assert their status in relation to their shared dispositions or habitus is central to my positioning of live at home students as part of a struggle to establish their identities within Central University,

*The structure of the field is a state of the power relations among the agents or institutions involved in the struggle or.....a state of the distribution of the specific capital which has been accumulated in the course of previous struggles and which orients subsequent strategies (1993:73)*

Chapter 3 sets out and justifies the research design. It considers the theoretical framework in which the research is situated, explaining the rationale for the research methodology together with the issues it raises and the specific methods used for collecting and analysing data. In addition, it discusses the rationale for using a narrative enquiry approach underpinned by a critical analysis of secondary Faculty data regarding accommodation status and withdrawals for students in their first year of undergraduate study. The critical analysis of quantitative data provides an illustrative context for an analysis of data sourced from focus groups and individual interviews. Chapter 3 explores the reasons for adopting an approach drawn from narrative enquiry in preference to alternative methodologies and the implications of this for the research design. Furthermore, this chapter justifies the decision to focus on students who were successful in continuing their education, progressing into their second year of study.

Chapter 4 begins by critically analysing institutional secondary data relating to the withdrawal rates of students within the Faculty in which the research is located as a means of establishing whether local live at home students are more susceptible to non-continuation than those who move away. This chapter includes a short section exploring how Central University presents university life in relation to live at home

students. This section is followed by the presentation and analysis of the data collected from the focus groups and interviews as a means of responding to the research questions which focus on the perceptions and experiences of local live at home students, how the institution contributes towards these and how it might reconceptualise student-hood so that it better reflects the majority of its students.

Chapter 5 explains the significance of the data and responds specifically to the final research question by considering how the findings can be used to impact on the institution. In this chapter I identify issues and problems discovered through the research process and consider further potential study opportunities that have emerged from it.



## **Chapter Two: Literature review**

This chapter reviews the relevant extant literature connected with local live at home students, a term used throughout the thesis to distinguish this group from the more generic and commonly used description 'commuting students'. Much of the literature situates live at home students within the discourse around widening participation, tending to focus on four key areas: their reasons for living at home; the impact of doing so on their experience of university; the challenges for them in transitioning to HE and, finally, the support that needs to be provided to improve and enhance their experience.

This chapter explores current key debates around widening access to universities, considering them within a context where HE has become more highly regulated through the establishment of the OfS in 2018, and marketised through the imposition of tuition fees that are typically borrowed by students from the Student Loans Company, a non-departmental public body. This exploration is important as a means of positioning live at home students within a discourse about the purpose and value of HE, a debate which shapes institutional policy and practice, including the strategies implemented to support students from a wide range of social, cultural and economic backgrounds to make successful transitions into HE. Not only does this discourse impact on universities but on students themselves, influencing their attitudes towards HE, their motivations for embarking on it and contributing towards decisions about living at home or moving away.

### **2.1 A new model of HE?**

My research is undertaken at a time of significant political debate about HE and, unexpectedly, during a period when Covid-19 is creating unprecedented challenges that require new responses from universities. It is too early to determine exactly what those responses will be, but it is noticeable that the shift towards remote learning is adding to the debate about its inclusivity and effectiveness,

*With a prolonged absence from more traditional support, many students, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, are likely to experience a dent in confidence and disconnection from learning..... Some will leave their studies (Husbands and Day, 2020).*

Prior to Covid-19 concepts of 'inclusivity' and 'effectiveness' appear to be at the heart of discourse about the purpose of universities. They capture two potentially conflicting governmental priorities as established in its recent Committee Report on HE which states a commitment to improve social justice whilst also providing value for money *'in terms of wider society, the taxpayer and the economy'* (2018:4). Indeed, the OfS's four key objectives centre on those priorities, echoing a belief in social justice through improving the participation, experience and outcomes of students in HE but, importantly, underpinning them with the need to provide VfM not just to the student but to *'secure essential benefits to employers, the economy and society'* (2018:1). It is both interesting and concerning to see how, over recent weeks and with the economic impact of Covid-19 and Brexit looming, there appears to be a shift in policy in relation to central Government's apparent commitment to social justice with the Universities Minister, Michelle Donelan, promoting what she describes as *'true social mobility'* which *'isn't about getting more people into university'* (July 1, 2020).

It will be fascinating to see how the impact of the virus contributes to what is already a well-established scholarly debate about the purpose of universities (Lyotard, 1984; Collini, 2012), a debate that even before Covid-19 had already been made more complex by a number of related factors: the rise of tuition fees funded by public money; the abolition of the 'capping' of student numbers in 2015 and the expansion in numbers of institutions able to award degrees. These factors can be seen as part of a marketisation of higher education in which measurement, target-setting and performance are regarded as essential as a means of providing choice to students who are positioned as 'consumers' and 'fee-payers', a renaming which devalues the complexity of education to a mere transaction. The White Paper, *Success as a Knowledge Economy*, (2016:33), makes it explicit through a lexis that is drawn from economics and production that one of the purposes of the OfS is to monitor a number of key performance indicators, graduate employment being the first, in order,

*to assess a range of indicators and raise red flags about shifts in provider activity or behaviour, or failure to meet a range of input and output benchmarks.*

Aligned to this, the Graduate Outcomes (GO) survey introduced in 2017 measures the salaries and job status of recent graduates. In adopting employment and salaries as key performance indicators, government has established a narrative about the purpose of HE that impacts not just on students' university choices but on their perceptions of the value of their university experiences. As the recent Unite report (2019) and the work of Thomas and Jones (2017) indicate, students are likely to be influenced by that narrative and by the prevailing economic model of HE. Indeed, Neves and Hillman's (2019:7) claim that value for money is a '*key issue*' in measuring the student experience.

Not only does government believe it has a right to accountability because of the financial investment it makes in HE (Biesta, 2010:57) but, by adopting language drawn from the marketplace, it encourages students to regard tuition fees as 'an investment' which will give them future financial advantage. Collini (2012:9) notes how in HE, '*official discourse has become increasingly coloured by an economic idiom....*'. That idiom impacts on how universities are perceived by themselves and by others, including students and what they regard as the purpose of HE. Humberstone et al (2011:16) argue that students themselves have begun to value above all else competition and individualism, concluding that,

*higher education institutions..... may on some level be affecting the values and dispositions of students....creating in some sense 'good' students for the neoliberal state.*

As Ball (2013:140) explains in his exploration of the impact of performance-driven policy in education, '*we come to want from ourselves what is wanted from us*' – an apt explanation of how policy influences students' perceptions of what HE is for, what they should expect of it and their behaviour within it, areas explored further in Chapters 4 and 5.

Such a model of HE is located in a neoliberal political framework adopted in the UK during the early Thatcher years and maintained since by the main political parties, including New Labour when in government. It is relevant to consider briefly this orthodoxy because it provides contextual information about the experiences of students, including those who live at home and, in particular, their expectations of HE.

Fundamentally, neoliberalism is founded on an economic view that market forces should prevail over state intervention and social welfare; it is not a, '*unified doctrine*' but '*an attempt to replace political judgement with economic evaluation*' (Davies, 2016:5). Neoliberalism can be persuasive because it purports to be 'common-sense', an orthodoxy that is beyond challenge, powerful because of its capacity to shift to encompass different meanings. Gramsci (1971:326) describes common-sense as '*the folklore of philosophy*', from which 'good sense' needs to be extracted in order to counteract the orthodoxy. Ball (2013:128) argues that neoliberalism has been absorbed to the point that, '*It is "in" our heads as well as "in" the economy*'. Fisher (2009:6) uses the term '*capitalist realism*' to characterise what he sees as '*a pervasive atmosphere*' that is seamless, impacting on our ability to consider alternatives founded on 'good sense'.

Much of the literature is highly critical of neoliberal models of education, Olssen and Peters (2005:324) describing them as an, '*input output system which can be reduced to an economic production function*.' Shore and Wright (2015:213) are scathing about what they regard as an audit culture where, at the expense of what really matters, '*organisations reshape their operations and values around that which is measured*'. Indeed, Collini (2012) argues that universities have lost confidence to challenge neoliberal models of education where everything must be measured, valued and judged in terms of targets and outcomes, including students who must themselves be grouped and categorised. It is perhaps understandable how, if education is seen primarily as fulfilling an economic function, it lends itself to a culture of performance which many critics (Harvey and Knight, 1996; McFarlane, 2014; Ball, 2003) regard as undermining the professionalism of academics because it values those whose roles are to measure and 'improve performance' above those who actually teach.

The impact of the current discourse on students is indicated by the concerns of graduates from 2015 (the first cohort to leave university having paid full tuition fees) who voiced high levels of anxiety about debt, employment and salaries (NUS, 2015). As mentioned above and discussed in more detail in Chapters 4 and 5 my research, like that of Neves and Hillman (2019), NUS (2015), Thomas and Jones (2017), indicates that live at home students are particularly concerned about the monetary value of HE, perhaps because they are likely to be more influenced by financial

constraints than those who are prepared to spend additional money on living away from home.

In his review of HE funding, Browne (2010) supports a culture of competition between universities where students are positioned as 'consumers' with similar rights to those of customers. Collini (2012:12) asserts that this is a problem because,

*...the model of the student as consumer is inimical to the purposes of education and the paradox of real learning is that you don't get what you want.*

A study undertaken by Bunce, Baird and Jones (2016:1) goes further, claiming that, '*...a higher consumer orientation (in students) was associated with lower academic performance.*' This is an interesting perspective in light of the attitudes of the live at home participants in my research, most of whom expressed stronger views than those who had moved away about the financial costs of university and, in addition, expressed more serious views about study in their first year, feeling disillusioned if tutors did not understand how important their academic performance is to them. As will be discussed in Chapter 4, my research does not indicate that this necessarily means that live at home students adopt a more mechanistic, consumer-led approach to their studies as characterised by Bunce et al, but that they want early validation of their academic efforts to enable them to believe that their 'investment' in HE is 'worth it'.

## **2.2 Identifying the literature**

On identifying the broad area of commuting students as an issue to investigate, I began to explore the underpinning scholarship. Much of the early literature is from the USA where it is common for students to travel into university daily. The title of Chickering's text '*Commuting Versus Resident Students*' establishes a fundamental division between those who travel and those who live on campus. It is influential in recognising that HE must meet the needs of new kinds of students, crudely categorised into three types: those from '*low socioeconomic levels with poor academic records*'; those from '*inner city streets*' entering HE through '*diverse open admissions arrangements*'; and those from the middle and upper classes who are '*cynical about the establishment*' following Vietnam and Watergate (1974:12-16). Whilst Chickering supports the need for universities to change to accommodate new

kinds of students, he remains a strong advocate of the residential experience of university as this '*makes for more powerful intellectual and personal development*' (ibid:133). Although Chickering's text is nearly 50 years old, its position on residency remains powerful in much of the literature explored in this Chapter.

Wider reading made me curious about what appears to be a paradox: on one hand there is understanding in much of the literature that HE needs to change to support new kinds of students, but on the other a belief that those students must themselves change by abandoning familial and community commitments and loyalties. I became interested in the assumptions that might lie behind such a view.

The UK literature available at the start of my investigation tended to reinforce a notion of commuting students being a troublesome peripheral group, at the margins of the mainstream student experience. The work of Holdsworth (2006; 2009) was particularly useful at the start of my research, offering insights into the perceptions of commuting students and the attitudes of others towards them. Central to those perceptions and attitudes is a sense that commuting students are 'missing out' on a significant part of university life. This resonated because of my own experience of higher education but also intrigued me: in a Faculty where most students live at home, what exactly are they missing out on? Do students themselves feel that they are missing out? If so, what might that indicate about normative views of student life within the institution?

Other influential work included that of Thomas and Jones (2017) who investigated commuting students in relation to engagement, making a number of recommendations to support them. These include the need for institutions to define what they mean by commuting students so that appropriate data can be collected and analysed in relation to this group. Recent literature has similarly begun to acknowledge that the generic term 'commuting students' is inadequate, specifically Maguire and Morris (2018:47) who call for,

*...a better way to define and compare data on commuter students, including consistency of data categorisation in HESA returns,*

and Malcolm (2014:53) who believes that the,

*...concept of commuter student is broad, lacking differentiation between older and younger students, as well as those who live in their own home.*

As mentioned in 1.5, Donnelly and Gamsu (2018:10) also recognise the current inadequacy of the term, developing instead a typology of short, medium and long distance commuting to differentiate groups of students and their university experiences. Their work influenced my decision, discussed in greater detail in Chapter 3, to narrow my initial focus on commuting students to that of 18-21 year olds who travel only short distances to university and whom I term local live at home students.

Recent literature indicates that it is an apt point in time at which to consider the experiences of students who live at home. Indeed, Whyte's report (2019: 41-2) into student accommodation calls for a national debate about why moving away to study is so highly valued and how the experience of university can be,

*...supportive, educationally enriching and open to all...(and) how this can be true for those who do not leave home.*

In a blog responding to Whyte's report, Henderson (2019) argues that,

*traditions of student residence operate according to particular sets of spatial and temporal rules which, while they remain unspoken, reinforce the dominance of the student residence as part of 'university life', perpetuating inequalities within the HE system.*

This chapter is located within this debate, exploring the literature in relation to the problematics surrounding the concept of 'non-traditional' students in HE, including normative views of student residence and the experiences of live at home students.

### **2.3 Access to HE and 'non-traditional' students**

University students are not a homogenous group and neither are universities. This section positions live at home students in the current discourse about widening access to HE and the concept of 'non-traditional' students who come from different backgrounds and with different expectations from those who dominated university entrance in the past. The section considers some of the debate surrounding widening access to university, its effects on continuation rates and its implications for institutions and their students. These areas provide a useful national context to the

university experiences of live at home students and are included because they are of particular relevance to my research questions.

The concept of widening access to HE, which is linked closely with that of ‘non-traditional’ students, brings with it some troubling discourses in connection to a number of specific areas: the position of different universities in terms of their entry requirements; the impact of these on different social and ethnic groups and the numbers of ‘widening access students’ who fail to continue beyond their first year of study. A tension exists between a political agenda which claims to support social justice whilst simultaneously promoting the marketisation of HE, thereby allowing individual universities to control their own admissions policies and academic regulations. As mentioned in 2.1, the White Paper *Success as a Knowledge Economy* (2016:15) focuses on ‘value for money’ in relation to governmental strategy which links,

*...higher education and tax data together to chart the transition of graduates...into the workplace.*

Such a strategy implies concern about the ability of graduates – and those who do not complete their degrees – to repay their loans, a concern likely to become more acute with the economic impact of Covid 19. The Paper’s apparent concern with social mobility is therefore linked closely not just with the notion of HE being an ‘investment’ which will reward the individual with a higher salary than non-graduates, but the need to demonstrate to the taxpayer the economic value of universities. In this it can be argued that the Paper and indeed the objectives of the OfS and the priorities of Central Government reinforce Ball’s (2008:17) highly critical analysis of the rhetoric of New Labour’s educational reform which,

*manages to couple improvements in social justice and equity .....to enterprise and economic success.*

Whilst in the recent past, widening access at national level focused largely on recruitment, it is now increasingly centred on continuation in HE and progression into graduate-level employment of different groups, perhaps because those metrics are aligned to narratives about value for money. Continuation rates are relevant to those narratives because those who do not complete may be unlikely to re-pay their student finance loans. Although the Augar Report (2019:81) into HE funding appears marginalised as a result of the general election that same year and the



current Covid-19 pandemic, it establishes government concerns about the student loans deficit and its impact on the taxpayer. Not only are continuation and employment metrics contained in Access and Participation Plans (APP) and the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) both of which are mechanisms deployed to measure the performance of universities, but are used to challenge the commitment of many post-1992 institutions to social justice. It is those institutions which are more likely to be adversely impacted by the methodologies used in TEF and APP because as Holmwood et al (2016:29) assert,

*(as) students from non-traditional backgrounds are more likely to drop out and less likely to secure 'good' jobs, universities taking these students will be penalised compared with more selective ones targeting students from wealthy families, thereby further retarding social mobility.*

Holmwood's position is supported by a recent study of HE attrition rates in which Crawford et al (2017:110) assert that students from the most socio-economically deprived areas are more than twice as likely to drop out of university than their more privileged peers, with over 20% of those from the very poorest areas withdrawing in comparison with less than 7% from the most affluent. The marketisation of HE appears then to have reinforced polarities across the sector whilst attributing blame for failures in improvements in social justice to those institutions who do *'the heavy lifting'* (Scott, 2012) in terms of access.

Alongside the comparatively new interest in continuation rates, the position of different universities with regard to widening access remains a subject of research at national level, particularly as more students enter HE. Whilst rises in numbers of students enrolling at university has, until recently (Donelan, 2020), been hailed by successive governments as a measure of success in creating social justice (Blair, 2001; Cameron, 2015), others claim that the current HE system merely replicates and legitimates disadvantage (Holmwood et al 2016; Blackman, 2017). Their views are vindicated by Department for Education (DfE) data indicating that the gap in progression into the most selective universities between students from independent schools and those from state-funded schools has widened over recent years. Whilst in 2008/09 62% of students from independent schools were admitted to highly selective universities compared with 25% of those from state-funded schools, in 2014/15 the first figure rose to 65% whilst the second dropped to 23%, widening the

gap from 37 percentage points to 43 (DfE, 2017:1). These gaps are not accidental, but connected with policies that have repeatedly regarded market competition as offering students 'choice' through mechanisms that measure and publicise the outcomes of individual institutions. Arguing for a new, less hierarchical HE sector, Blackman (2017:31) claims that,

*The HE sector currently both extends opportunity and entrenches class privilege, with the latter effect far outweighing the former.*

Indeed, the most recent research reinforces Blackman's view, indicating that entry to Russell Group universities<sup>4</sup> in 2017 from the most disadvantaged quintile as measured by Participation of Local Areas (POLAR) data was only 6.2% (UCAS, 2018). Nor does the research literature indicate that success at degree level eradicates social privilege. Crawford et al (2017: 130-1) found that social class and economic privilege remain significant factors in determining students' salaries, even some considerable time after graduation,

*...women from the highest income families earned 24% more than those from poorer families. In the case of men, the figure was even higher, at around 30%.*

Higher education appears then to have successfully widened participation but, as Blackman (2017:25-6) argues, created 'a sector divided by class' where post-92 institutions are,

*...concentrating working-class students and are effectively shunned by many students from wealthier backgrounds*

Blackman's assertion is supported by Crawford et al (2017:71) who found that, whilst numbers of students from disadvantaged backgrounds going to university have increased since 2012 when there was a significant rise in student tuition fees,

*...students from richer backgrounds are far more likely to enrol in higher status institutions, with long-run consequences for their careers and subsequent earnings.*

It can be argued that widening participation policies have made little impact on 'traditional universities' or indeed the social class of the majority of students who

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<sup>4</sup> A group of 24 highly-selective universities often regarded as the most prestigious in the UK

attend them. Reay (2016:18) for example asserts that widening participation policies have merely reproduced privilege,

*instead of reducing social class stratification and enhancing social mobility, mass HE in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is replicating the social class inequalities found across the school system and wider society.*

Any exploration of continuation rates is therefore complex, having different implications for different institutions and raising further questions about the economic and social impact of widening participation policies at both national and institutional levels. Widening access becomes somewhat hollow if, in addition to reinforcing social inequality, the combination of economic pressure and the failure of HE to meet the needs of some students makes them less likely to continue their degree courses.

Relevant to this argument and to my research are the findings of Donnelly and Gamsu (2018:16) which indicate that, although changes to funding and the removal of capping of student numbers have made little difference to overall national numbers of students remaining at home to study, they have impacted disproportionately on some institutions, primarily post-92 universities including Central University, which have substantially increased their proportions of live at home students whilst,

*Research-intensive institutions are dominated by students who take what is seen as the traditional 'rite of passage' of going to university; that is moving out of home and moving far away.*

I consider it relevant to position my research within the context of widening access and its impact on different groups of students. As recommended by Thomas and Jones (2017:6), data about what they term commuter students should be collected,

*in relation to the development of an appropriate definition(s) taking into account intersectionality with other student characteristics.*

I agree that live at home students should be seen in an intersectional context where their experience is influenced by more than one factor, being more likely to come from areas of disadvantage and from families where they are the first to enter HE (HEFCE, 2009), and to attend a post-92 institution (UCAS, 2018). The next sections explore live at home students in the context of some of these intersectional factors.

## 2.4 Non-traditional students: a problematic discourse

The description 'non-traditional' is normally applied to students from low income families, those who are the first in their families to go to university and those from minority ethnic backgrounds. Longden (2006), for example, defines 'non-traditional' students as those who differ significantly from those going to university in the 1970s/80s, most of whom were white, recent school-leavers with 'A' Levels, studying full-time and living in halls of residence. Recent literature recognises that the term 'non-traditional' is etymologically troubling because it regards many students as 'other', therefore having the potential to '*engender marginality and persistent inequality*' (Powell and Menendian, 2017). Rather than promoting the need for universities to change their practices as the student population changes, the term instead, '*puts blame on the individual rather than the system*' (Holmwood et al, 2016:15). By promoting the notion that students are consumers who make choices about where they study, the marketisation of HE reinforces a view that they are personally culpable if they do not continue or succeed, obscuring any interrogation of whether marketisation itself downgrades the affective relationships that learning and teaching rest upon and transforming them into 'transactions' (Cree et al, 2016). In relation to this, Tett et al (2017:169), contend that an audit culture within HE has led to the '*systemisation of care*' for students so that it is 'outsourced' to services rather than embedded in academic structures. As such, it disconnects tutors from their students by separating 'care' from teaching, devaluing any holistic concept of education where the nurturing of students is regarded as paramount to their learning. Instead, students are required to identify their own problems and seek support from the appropriate service (Quinlan, 2016), the role of the tutor being merely to 'signpost' them towards it.

The expression 'non-traditional' is also extremely misleading in taking no account of the fact that, not only are there many more universities now, there is a hugely diverse student body which cannot easily be categorised. Nor can it be assumed that 'traditional' students form the majority in all universities. In Central University for example 'traditional' students could be conceived of very differently from Longden's definition, a point that is mentioned in 1.1 and explored further in Chapter 4. Given that in 1979 only around 12% of young people in the UK entered HE compared with 50.2% in 2017/18 (DfE, 2019:1) it is unsurprising that its demography has changed

significantly. One of the results of this increase is that many students come from economic, social and ethnic backgrounds that are very different from the traditional student model of being white, middle-class and likely to move away from home to study. In addition, application rates from potential students from areas of disadvantage as measured by POLAR data have increased over the last decade, from 12.2% of students coming from areas of low participation in HE in 2006 to 22.5% in 2017 (Universities UK, 2017:10).

As demonstrated in Table 1 (p11) some universities, Central included, admit high numbers of students from areas of social and economic deprivation as measured by Indices of Multiple Deprivation (IMD). This, together with changes to funding, has led to their students being more likely to have part-time work that may not easily accommodate full-time study, thereby challenging the very notion of what it is to be a full-time student (Darmody and Fleming, 2009; Khambhaita and Bhopal, 2013). This may mean that, not only are more students more concerned about the economic implications of HE, but may be more likely to remain at home so they can retain existing paid employment, a necessity if families cannot support them financially and, indeed, if their incomes make an essential contribution to the livelihoods of those families.

Discussion about live at home students and their continuation in HE is located in the discourse surrounding the emergence of a new kind of student. In an interview about her research, Ross (2016) claims that US universities need to change in order to meet the needs of those students, arguing that the traditional culture of academia presents,

*an especially challenging mystery to be deciphered and adapted to by first-generation-to-college-students.*

She asserts that universities need to do more to support students as they enter what she regards as an arcane system so that they understand the academic 'rules of the game'. Much of the UK literature shares Ross's view that widening participation strategies are not in themselves adequate to ensure inclusion or, indeed, academic success. Several studies (Burrows, 2012; Spooner 2015; Tett et al, 2017) note how an audit culture in HE means that academic staff are distanced from their students through highly regulated systems which measure and limit teaching time. The most

recent literature asserts that universities need to change their practices so that new kinds of students, many of whom remain at home, are more likely to complete their degrees (Malcolm, 2014; McNair et al, 2016; Stuart, 2017). The provision of online learning is often regarded as being important in making HE more accessible to a wider range of students, enabling them to learn at their own pace and accommodating those who – for a range of reasons, including part-time work and domestic commitments – may not always be able to attend taught sessions. (Thomas and Jones, 2017:55; Long, 2020). However, online teaching may simply reinforce the disconnection between tutors and their students as well as exacerbating inequality. Early evidence from the current Covid-19 crisis which has replaced face to face with online teaching indicates that Central University has around 1000 students for whom the impact of remote learning has been immediately exclusive because they lack access to laptops or wifi.

Whilst I consider it important for universities to adapt their practices to meet the needs of a new kind of student who is more likely to remain at home to study, there are inherent dangers in such a construction of students because it lends itself to a deficit model which presents them as inadequate or unready for HE. As outlined in 1.2, Central University identifies what it terms commuting students as an ‘at risk’ group in its data analysis made accessible only to internal staff. Whilst intended to provide helpful information to enable students to be supported, this could contribute towards the construction of a ‘problem’ group, a situation that might be regarded as paradoxical in an institution where live at home students dominate and which regards itself as serving its local communities.

Literature both in the USA (Jehangir, 2010; McNair et al, 2016; Ross, 2016) and the UK (Christie et al, 2005; Southall et al, 2016, Stuart, 2011 and 2017) acknowledges that notions of what it is to be a student, sometimes called ‘student-hood’ (Christie et al, 2005), are changing. Some researchers argue that we should replace the ‘othering’ term ‘non-traditional’ students with that of ‘the new majority’ or ‘the underserved’ (Ross, 2016; McNair, 2019) as these more accurately describe their increasing numbers in HE and recognise that practices and policies within universities are predicated on concepts of student-hood that may no longer be as relevant as was once the case. In response to this, however, McNair et al (2016:144) also contend that it is very important for universities to demonstrate visible belief

through the expression of, '*positive and hopeful attitudes about students and their capacity to learn*', claiming that even well-intended expressions such as 'underserved' carry negative connotations that can have a detrimental impact on student self-belief. The term 'new majority' also needs to be used cautiously in UK universities where such students do not form the majority of those going to university and where there are significant demographic differences amongst HE institutions. My research, however, is conducted in a post-92 institution in which 'new majority' has validity because most of its students do not conform to the characteristics of traditional entrants to university. In its summary of OfS Equality and Diversity statistics, for example, Central University reveals that 54.8% of its new students in 2017/18 were the first in their families to enter HE, compared with 44.5% across the sector and that 37.8% were from a minority ethnic background compared with 25% across the sector. (2019:5-8)

Since the early 2000s proportions of students continuing to live at home whilst studying at undergraduate level in England and Wales have increased from around 8% in 1984/5 to around 20% in 2009 (HEFCE, 2009:2). A defining feature of Central University is that 63% of under 21 year old students continue to live at home and, in the Faculty in which the research is located, the percentage is higher at 68.4% (Central University Performance Data 2016/17). As government support through maintenance grants has been replaced by loans, more students live at home and, of those who do, they are more likely to come from the lowest socio-economic backgrounds (HEFCE, 2009). In England and Wales and as outlined by Donnelly and Gamsu (2018:4), new majority students are likely not to move away to study but to go to institutions that are near to their homes,

*Staying at home and studying locally is strongly differentiated by ethnicity and social background with students from disadvantaged groups much more likely to be living at home.*

Not only does the literature indicate that many students are concerned about the costs of university but that they are influenced by a neoliberalist view of higher education the purpose of which is economic security, its language that of the marketplace. A recent report by Unite Students (2019) refers to today's students as 'New Realists', whom Hillman (2019) claims regard,

*education as an insurance policy against the vagaries of life, and as a route to a fulfilling career and a secure home.*

Hillman's view is supported by findings taken from recent literature on students who live at home, for example Thomas and Jones (2017); Maguire and Morris (2018); HEPI (2018) all of which indicate that this group is particularly concerned with the financial aspects of going to university. These students form a majority within Central University so Hillman's characterisation of how they regard the purpose of HE is relevant to my research which focuses on their continuation on their courses. The next section provides a brief general overview of the literature connected with the conditions which contribute towards the development of a view amongst students towards HE as being 'an insurance policy' to provide them with stable and secure economic futures. The section is relevant because it helps explain the political context which shapes students' aspirations as they enter HE and, more specifically, the economics which play a part in influencing where they live which in turn impacts on how they experience student-hood or what participants in my research call 'uni-life'.

## **2.5 The dominant discourse**

In its recent study of live at home students, the National Union of Students (NUS) presents an overview of how student-hood continues to be conceptualised,

*The default image of the HE student as young, full-time and living away from their parents when attending university has changed little over the decades. This idea of a student may in turn reflect the belief that there is an ideal: students benefit most from HE under certain conditions, and those whose circumstances are different are at an automatic disadvantage (2015:11).*

This section considers how this supposed ideal continues to pervade much of the discourse surrounding live at home students and their experiences of university. Rooted in the history of universities as places of exclusivity and separation, it can be argued that it is perpetuated by those who influence policy and who themselves have experienced such a model.

In the UK for many years the dominant discourse in relation to students' living arrangements has focused on residence within student accommodation as a significant feature of transitioning to HE. Such a discourse originates in the exclusive



Oxbridge model where students and academic staff traditionally formed a community of learners, eating and socialising within their distinct colleges and remaining separate from those who were not part of that community. Niblett (1957:9) as chair of a national committee into the future of student accommodation owned by universities, concluded that,

*'the nine to five mentality' has been described to us as the great enemy of university education – the assumption..... that university experience is contained in a specific programme related to a limited working day.*

Seen from a 21<sup>st</sup> century perspective, this view appears to reflect an elitist notion of HE: only those who devote all their time to university can fully benefit from it and, further, that students are somehow separate from those whose lives must focus on the mundanities of earning a living.

The model of residence as a key part of becoming a student extends beyond the UK. When commuting students were identified as a discrete group in the US in the 1970s, the expression was used to distinguish between those who attended a residential college and those who travelled into college each day either from home or from temporary lodgings. At that time resident students were normally expected to live in the college throughout their entire time at university and were likely to be,

*from similar backgrounds and ....making a similar transition to an adult community almost as predictable and stable as the one from which they came (Chickering,1974:33).*

Significant changes have taken place in HE in both the US and the UK since then; however, the concept of moving away from the parental home to study remains dominant, as identified in a recent study of students' priorities where,

*Managing accommodation, accessing inexpensive food, and making friends were all facets of transition accorded similar importance as adaptation, to the academic environment (Kandiko and Mawer, 2013:63).*

Government policy appears to be founded on the prevailing discourse that university students live away from the parental home. Indeed, in his June 2018 speech to open the Office for Students, the then Universities Minister, Sam Gyimah, argued controversially that universities should act in *loco parentis*, thereby perpetuating the

view that students no longer live at home so are in need of surrogate parental support.

In Foucauldian terms, the prevailing '*regime of truth*' (1975:30) is one in which the normative part of being a student is regarded as making a transition from existing relationships and experiences into 'student-hood' where a community of new relationships is formed. Integral to this is an assumption that moving away from home develops what Bourdieu terms 'social capital' (1986:241),

*a benefit that accrues to the individual and the community....through the development of friendships and acquaintances (Malcolm 2014:24).*

The concept of social capital being an essential part of transitioning into HE is reflected in Southall et al's study (2016:10) which explores specifically what they call 'live at home' students, linking these to the term 'non-traditional students' and concluding that they,

*have a more specific set of needs as a result of bringing different cultural and social capital to university and then moving continuously between two different worlds.*

Whilst much of the current literature recognises that the student experience has changed significantly over recent years, a view remains that full immersion in university life – including living in student accommodation – is the best way to experience HE (Walton and Cohen, 2007; Fisher, Cavanagh and Bowles, 2011; Palmer, O'Kane and Owens, 2009). Indeed, even very recent literature continues to advocate strongly the benefits of moving away as a means of fully experiencing university. For example, in his historical analysis of student accommodation choices in which he calls for a national debate about the purpose of student residence, Whyte (2019:35) asserts that students in England and Wales differ from those elsewhere because they are significantly more likely to move away from home to study. Further, he argues that, despite its costs, there are valid reasons behind this,

*Students who remain at home find it harder to become fully engaged in university life – and students who both live at home and attend universities where the majority also live at home find it harder still.*

Exploring the reasons why live at home students may find it hard to engage in university life, Holton (2020) supports Whyte, finding that they become marginalised from,

*the more 'typical' student experience, which in turn may inhibit the acquisition and subsequent re-distribution of student-centric capital.*

Such views contribute towards a narrative that is essentially negative about the experience of live at home students, arguably without considering the benefits of such an experience – one that is considered not just satisfactory but the norm in most countries outside England and Wales. Further, Whyte's claim that live at home students find it more difficult to be fully engaged in university life appears to place the blame for this on students themselves rather than questioning the practices of universities in supporting them. Whilst Whyte (2019:44) goes on to recommend that universities must do more to '*integrate commuter students*', his analysis is rooted in a '*continuing belief that to be a student is to leave home*' (ibid: 34). Such a belief underpins much of the literature concerning live at home students, a view that 'others' and marginalises these students, even when they form the majority of the institution's population.

Recent literature (Helsen, 2013; Thomas and Jones, 2017; Maguire and Morris, 2018; Whyte, 2019) recognises the need for institutions to support live at home students through the provision of such things as better information about commuting, more coherent timetables, facilities such as study spaces, lockers and kitchens, and social events which create student communities outside of student accommodation. These recommendations are supported by literature which advocates the creation of a 'sticky campus' (Unite, 2017; JISC, 2019), one that encourages students to remain within university buildings even when not attending classes. However, there would appear to be a difference between the development of practical strategies to support those who commute and the adoption of the term 'sticky campus' which might be seen to assume that the further removed students are from their homes/parents/communities, the more likely they are to have an 'authentic' experience of student-hood. Holdsworth (2006) encapsulates the belief of many that to live at home is an inferior model of student-hood in the title of her research paper which uses a quotation from a live at home student who is often asked by peers, *Don't you think you're missing out.....?* As outlined in Chapter 4, it is a sentiment echoed to some extent by the participants in my research, even those who represent the majority of students and live at home for the duration of their courses.

In his highly controversial and well-publicised book, *'The Road to Somewhere'* Goodhart (2017) presents an argument that is even more negative and, indeed, divisive, asserting that mobility and levels of education separate social attitudes in the UK. In brief, Goodhart postulates that those who move away to university away are more likely to have a confident, socially liberal attitude towards life than those who live at home and are less confident about the world, more likely to hold socially conservative views. Maguire and Morris (2018:36) contend that, if Goodhart's analysis has validity, then there are particular implications for institutions with high numbers of live at home students in relation to how they communicate with their students and the assumptions they make about their needs. Whilst I believe Goodhart's position to be contentious, the point made by Maguire and Morris is worthy of further investigation in relation to my research questions and explored further in Chapters 4 and 5.

Some recent literature challenges negative views of live at home students, locating them in outmoded, exclusive notions of student-hood. Abrahams and Ingram (2013), for example, argue that, only when we recognise that,

*moving away to attend university is not an inherently superior way of accessing HE and 'being a student',*

but rather a socially constructed, middle-class model which is *'privileged and privileging'* (ibid) can we begin to understand alternative experiences of student-hood as having validity. Similarly, Malcolm (2014:6) positions the model of moving away to study in a historical legacy where the importance of residence within the university was paramount, thereby creating a cultural, *'propensity to do so (which) goes remarkably uncontested in modern politics'*.

What appears to be at stake is a struggle about the legitimacy and authenticity of notions of student-hood, a conflict which is reminiscent of the implicit questions asked by John's parents in 1.3 and which remain fundamental: to whom does higher education belong and who determines how it should be constituted and experienced? In viewing commuter students as *'a much misunderstood and underappreciated group of students'*, Maguire and Morris (2018: 47) raise these questions as does Henderson (2019) who calls for the normative view of student-hood involving moving away from home to be, *'noticed, de-naturalised and*

*questioned*'. To some extent Henderson's call is being addressed as academic literature about commuting students increases as more live at home students enter HE.

Such literature recognises that the rise in costs for students in HE means that many cannot afford to move away (Khambhaita and Bhopal, 2013) particularly since maintenance grants have been replaced by loans, but there are other reasons. Many students have domestic and or work commitments that make moving away impractical, some of those students being mature, with families of their own to support. The literature on commuting students (Chickering, 1974; de Beer et al, 2009; Cotton and Wilson, 2006) has traditionally focused on these issues, identifying long travel times and other commitments as barriers to full engagement with HE. This, however, assumes that live at home students travel significant distances to university and does not fully consider other, perhaps more complex, factors. For example, some students attend colleges or schools which have strong links with a local university making application to that institution almost the 'norm'; some students wish to fulfil parental wishes by remaining at home, or indeed are given no choice by their families perhaps because of cultural reasons or domestic commitments, and some make last-minute decisions to go to university making it more practical to live at home. All of these factors assume that living at home results from limited choice but this needs more exploration because, not only is there likely to be a diverse range of reasons, such an assumption may be based on a concept of student-hood that is increasingly outdated, belonging to a privileged view of the purpose of HE and how it should be experienced.

Research into academic outcomes for live at home students has, until comparatively recently, been done largely in the US where these students are more likely not to complete their studies than those who live on campus. The literature, both in the US and UK, reveals multiple reasons for this, usually leading to what is often regarded as a lack of engagement with the university. Students who have to travel into university often do so from long distances so have less time to participate in anything outside taught classes. They do not live with other students so may find it harder to socialise with them and form friendships (Chow and Healy, 2008). They may have part-time work which further decreases their study time. There can be stigmas attached to commuting students who are seen as being less committed to university

or even 'disengaged', often because they are regarded as having external commitments and loyalties which inhibit them from spending long periods of time in the institution. Kuh et al (2008) for example suggest that those who commute have less contact with their tutors and less participation in enriching educational experiences such as study abroad and community service.

The negative narrative surrounding those who live at home is reinforced by literature which indicates that these students, particularly if they are studying at post-92 universities, report one of the lowest levels of satisfaction with their social life and involvement in institution-based activities (Holdsworth et al, 2006: 498). Neves and Hillman (2019:31) indicate that these students are less likely to believe that their experience has provided them with value for money and, in a very recent report, Blackman (2020:4) even claims that living at home '*is associated with higher dissatisfaction with life*'.

Some of the literature (Magolda, 2000; Holdsworth, 2009) asserts that, in their marketing and recruitment materials, UK universities focus a great deal on leaving home, suggesting that coming to university marks a significant rite of passage for young people transitioning into adulthood. Universities may therefore inadvertently alienate those who intend to live at home and fail to provide sufficient information to them so creating a gap between expectations and reality, a point that will be returned to in 4.2.1 where some of Central University's marketing material is explored. Holdsworth et al claim (2006:508) that living at home students,

*do not necessarily experience the same sense of discontinuity with home compared to those who move away and often tend to have a more functional relationship with the university,*

seeing it simply as a place to get a degree rather than a life changing environment, a view that distances them from other students. Living at home therefore acts as a kind of '*othering demarcation*' where '*mobility becomes a form of embodied cultural capital*' (ibid: 516). Students who live at home may retain local accents (ibid: 514) which again sets them apart from those who have moved to attend university and who may adopt a new kind of 'university language' to mark their rite of passage.

The normalisation of moving away is reinforced in a report by Unite Students (2017:21) stating that a major concern for potential students is, '*...where they will*

*live, who they will live with and how they will get along*'. The report may focus on this concern because its figures indicate that, in England and Wales, 75% of those who applied for university admission in 2017 planned to live in student accommodation. Conversely, only 15% of applicants intended to live at home and for these the main concern is that university life will be *'tiring, expensive and stressful'* because of long distances to travel and anticipated difficulties in fitting in. The report stresses the need for institutions to develop environments which encourage student presence for long periods, the premise being that this will promote a greater sense of engagement with and belonging to the institution. Again, this provides a deficit model of living at home students, perpetuating a notion that they are 'missing out' on something critical to their academic and personal development and assuming that learning is best done on campus. In this assumption the report reinforces Whyte's concerns (2019) that live at home students find it harder to engage with university life. The quoted figures, however, do not fully explore how post-92 institutions, particularly those in large urban environments, are more likely to have significant numbers of students who continue to live at home. Chapters 4 and 5 explore how Central University should examine critically what normative views it presents of students in relation to their accommodation and, in addition, reflect on how its academic practices impact on students' experiences of university, particularly those who live at home and who may be unintentionally excluded from some networks and learning communities.

In a recent study commissioned of live at home students by the then Higher Education Academy (HEA), Thomas and Jones (2017) claim that, whilst there is a lack of national data about the retention of these students in HE, there is evidence indicating that they are less likely to achieve a first or upper second degree and are also less likely to gain graduate-level employment than those who move away from home to study and these differences are more pronounced in younger students.

According to Neves and Hillman (2017:26),

*students who live at home are a lot less likely than average to report strong gains in learning.....These students are also more likely to wish they had chosen another course (and/or institution).*

However, there are other factors impacting on students who live at home. HEFCE's findings in 2009 demonstrate that living at home students are more likely to be female, of minority ethnic heritage (particularly Pakistani and Bangladeshi), from the

lowest socio-economic groups and with the lowest UCAS entry points. Some of these findings are supported more recently by Donnelly and Gamsu (2018:13) in their study of student mobility in which they assert that,

*The likelihood of moving out of the family home and far away for university study is clearly demarcated by social class origin.*

The discourse around commuting students is therefore complex, extending beyond their location and institution of HE and connected with a wide range of intersectional socio-economic and cultural factors. The next section considers how the literature approaches the support of such students in making their transition into HE.

## **2.6 Supporting a new kind of student to continue in HE**

The transition of students into HE has been the subject of a great deal of research over recent years, particularly in relation to student continuation and completion of their degrees. Much of the literature focuses on what is regarded as the normative experience of moving away from home to study, characterising it as a time of change in social, living environment as well as a shift to new ways of studying (Fisher, Cavanagh and Bowles, 2011; Brooman and Darwent, 2014; Palmer, O’Kane and Owens, 2009). Even when it is recognised that there may be specific differences in the ways that different groups of students experience university, the emphasis is often on moving away from home as being a common factor in that experience. Indeed, a recent report (NUS, 2015:7) indicates that the policies and practices of universities reflect the literature in that they do not consider the needs of those students who live at home, claiming that their experiences are, *‘largely hidden, obscured by the more obvious needs of those living away from home.’* Again this returns us to what I call in 2.5 a ‘struggle’ between notions of student-hood and to questions about how those notions may currently be dominated by outmoded views of HE - even in institutions like Central University where new majority students are indeed the majority.

Research about live at home students tends to form part of a wider debate about the transition made by students into HE, an area that has been the subject of a number of studies aimed at improving continuation rates. Such literature is founded on a belief that some students require more support in order to transition into undergraduate studies. Certain groups of students are regarded as being more



susceptible to non-completion, the contestable term 'non-traditional' often being used to describe them (Longden, 2006; Archer, 2007; Johnston, 2010; Meuleman et al, 2015; Southall et al, 2016). Here its use is highly pejorative because it associates certain groups with poorer HE outcomes thereby problematising those groups and diverting attention away from consideration of whether the academic practices and processes adopted within universities remain relevant for all students.

As the university sector has expanded to include students from a more diverse range of backgrounds, the development of transition strategies has become regarded as a key means of ensuring that those students are successful (HEA Retention Collaborative Project, 2017). Much of the literature on transition into HE is influenced by Tinto's retention model (1975) which establishes a link between students' social and academic integration into their institution and the likelihood of them continuing with their studies. As such, research tends to focus on two areas: the need to engender an early sense of belonging or identity with students' chosen institution and the need to enable them to study effectively in HE. However, the notion of 'belonging' is highly contentious, asking questions as to who 'owns' the identity of universities and who decides what creates that sense of belonging. As Thomas (2015:38) puts it, the dominant discourse about belonging '*is shaped by a narrow student profile*', a profile that I argue is increasingly outdated, particularly in universities such as Central.

Scholarly work on transition into university often emphasises the emotional side of university, with live at home students being regarded as failing to make the psychological leap required for success. For example, some literature suggests that these students are immediately at a disadvantage in terms of feeling a sense of belonging because they do not experience the 'rite of passage' of leaving home to begin new friendships with those of similar ambitions and interests and, as a result, their identities remain attached to their families and existing friendships (Holdsworth et al, 2006). Some studies (Southall et al, 2016:5) go further, suggesting that commuting students experience the challenges of transition on a daily basis as they move between two worlds which may have conflicting demands and values. Haussmann et al (2009) claim that those students who remain at home are very connected to their parents and existing friendships so do not feel a sense of belonging in university, therefore being more likely to withdraw early from it. For

Fisher, Cavanagh and Bowles (2011), transition to HE requires students to develop new identities as independent adults by disconnecting from previous friendships, something that is harder for those who remain living at home. Similarly, Brooman and Darwent (2014) indicate that existing friendships for those who remain living at home can impact negatively on their identification with their universities.

Arguably, these studies present live at home students as doubly deficient in their readiness for HE as, not only do they experience the anxieties of transition felt by others, but are unready to become independent adults. Integral to these studies is a contentious, even patronising, notion that students must abandon their pasts, including their families and communities if they are to make the transition into higher education. Such literature again problematises live at home students by devaluing their background experiences, doing nothing to encourage universities to re-conceptualise student-hood in ways that make it more recognisable to their students.

The literature indicates that a more diverse student cohort has brought with it more students who are unfamiliar with HE culture so can feel alienated and disconnected from it (Archer, 2007; Reay, Crozier and Clayton, 2010; O'Shea, 2014; McMillan, 2014). Transition to university is even seen as traumatic for students, a time of fear, uncertainty, loneliness and confusion that manifests itself particularly in students who are unfamiliar with the culture of HE (Leathwood and O'Connell, 2003; Wilcox et al, 2005; Askham, 2008). Indeed, Bolt and Graber (2010) go so far as to describe students experiencing transition as being 'in crisis'. McMillan (2014) argues that those students whose families have not gone to university are disadvantaged because they do not have the 'insider knowledge' about the system, how it works and what it requires of them. To compensate for this, the literature often identifies the importance of students becoming initiated into university life (Hoffman et al, 2002; Nelson et al, 2012; Thomas, 2012) so that they develop an early sense of confidence about their credibility as students, their ability to cope in HE and the suitability of their courses.

Some studies indicate that prospective students should engage in pre-enrolment activities that prepare them for their studies, communicate with other applicants and existing students and experience university-style teaching (Thomas, 2012).

Similarly, research focuses on what is often known as 'freshers' week' as a period

when new students forge friendships and identify with their institutions through joining societies that are typically organised by the Students' Union, Thomas and Jones (2017:41) asserting that during such weeks,

*activity is targeted at 18 year old living in halls of residence; ....Those who live at home are not only alienated by the lack of inclusion targeted messages but also struggle to travel and attend these events.*

Social relationships and friendships then are generally regarded as central to a sense of belonging, many studies focusing on the importance of moving away as a transition in itself to begin a new life with people of a similar age and interests (Walton and Cohen, 2007; Fisher, Cavanagh and Bowles, 2011; Palmer, O'Kane and Owens, 2009). Such literature tends to perpetuate the notion that moving away from home so that students can immerse themselves fully in university life is imperative, a view challenged in more recent research such as that of Henderson (2019); Malcolm (2014); Maguire and Morris (2018).

Researchers often explore the experiences of particular groups as they enter HE, some focusing on gender (O'Shea, 2014), others on class (Read et al, 2003; Reay et al, 2010) and ethnicity (Hausmann et al, 2009). Much of the literature exploring live at home students does so from the perspective of identity, claiming that these students occupy different worlds – that of home and that of university itself – and, as Patiniotis and Holdsworth (2005) argue, are disadvantaged as a result because they become distant from their home lives whilst at the same time marginalised from university life. Similarly, Pokorny, Holley and Kane (2016: 5) in their study of what they call 'stayed education students' claim that,

*there may be tensions as independence and new identities may be harder to forge for those remaining in the home environment.*

Some of the research explores transition from the theoretical perspective of cultural capital (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992) where class and family background impact not just on the choices students make about the universities they apply to and, indeed, the likelihood of them being accepted by 'high status' institutions, but in the ways that they become assimilated into HE, with students who are first in their families to go to university experiencing an 'alien' environment where they suffer low self-esteem and a sense of not belonging (Askham, 2008; Palmer, O'Kane and

Owens, 2009; Hughes and Smail, 2015). Bourdieu's theory of social reproduction is significant here, particularly the centrality of 'habitus' to it. Cultural capital is closely linked with this concept because we are likely to feel comfortable with those who share certain values, attitudes, dispositions and language. Universities can therefore be socially and academically exclusive to certain groups simply because of their culture, traditions, student demography and the way they present themselves through language and images, making some students feel '*like fish out of water*' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). What Bourdieu (1991:170) regards as,

*Symbolic power – as a power of constituting the given through utterances, of making people see and believe....*

is therefore exerted by institutions, potentially alienating those who live at home.

Abrahams and Ingram (2013) use Bourdieu's theoretical concepts of cultural capital and habitus to analyse experiences of live at home students, claiming that local students have to become chameleon-like in adapting to the new field of academia whilst remaining within their local environment. However, their study argues that,

*the chameleon habitus is a rearticulation that contests the terms of both fields to create a new space.*

Whilst that space creates its own challenges, they contend it should not be seen as inferior, less authentic than more familiar models of student-hood. The idea of there being a new space being constructed by some students, in particular those who live at home and in an institution in which they form the majority, resonates with the question asked throughout this chapter in relation to the 'struggle' between different notions of student-hood and which will be explored in more detail in Chapters 4 and 5.

Diversity and university expansion mean that students enter HE from a much wider range of qualifications than was previously the case. Some of the literature focuses on developing students' independent learning skills so that they are better able to manage the demands of undergraduate study (Groves et al, 2013; Haggis, 2006; Pokorny and Pokorny, 2005). Some research advocates a need to distinguish between induction which typically includes such activities as described above and lasts for a comparatively short period of time, and the transition process which lasts longer, focuses on supporting students to understand what is required of them

academically and identifies pedagogical strategies that enable students to adapt to undergraduate study (Pym and Kapp, 2013; Levett-Jones et al, 2008).

Some literature focuses on students coming to university with different educational backgrounds from previous generations, not merely because they have studied qualifications other than A Levels but because the nature of secondary school education has itself changed towards more structured pedagogic approaches which offer a great deal of support to learners, with fewer expectations of them being able to work autonomously (Greene, 2011; Haggis 2006). Some regard this as a development that impacts negatively on students' readiness to meet the demands of study in HE (Fisher, Cavanagh and Bowles, 2011; Christie, Barron and D'Annunzio-Green, 2013). Whilst exploration of teaching approaches in schools and colleges is helpful in enabling HE institutions to consider how they actively support students' transition into university through well-constructed pedagogy, studies focused on independent learning present a potentially deficit model of students being unready for HE, less well-prepared than students in the past. Indeed, some (Macdonald and Stratta, 2001; Rhodes and Nevill, 2004) believe that the model of the 'independent learner' merely reinforces existing practice in universities rather than encouraging consideration of how they might change their approaches to learning and the policies surrounding them. Some researchers are highly critical of the discourse around independent learning, seeing it as rhetoric connected with marketisation which justifies the expansion of HE without adequate funding and excludes certain groups of students,

*The notion of the 'independent learner' as the apex of learner development underpins much recent pedagogical and governmental discourse ... (is)...based on a specific white, western, masculinised model'... (Leathwood and O'Connell, 2003:610)*

More recent literature (Stuart, 2017; McNair et al, 2016) recognises that such approaches regard students as deficient and unready for HE thereby ignoring the need for universities to change their pedagogies and practices to accommodate students from a wider range of backgrounds, and to benefit from the richness of experience they bring. A similar issue is presented by studies which focus on the development of 'resilience' in students. Leary and deRosier (2012) suggest that building emotional resilience in students during transition is key to academic success

and therefore continuation. Academic resilience is often linked with social independence, those students who move away from home regarded as being more likely to develop it because they have to cope with such things as budgeting and undertaking domestic tasks (McMillan, 2014; Zajacova, Lynch and Epenshade, 2005). Again this is contentious, even patronising in its assumption that those who remain at home lack key character qualities and experiences which make them deficient in some way; nor does such a view consider that many of those who withdraw from university are likely to have already demonstrated high levels of resilience in overcoming barriers to enter HE in the first place.

Alternative views therefore resist approaches to transition which focus entirely on students and their backgrounds. Stuart (2017), for example, argues that HE needs to move away from models which regard students as deficient, claiming that she has heard,

*too many HE specialists and leaders focus on educational deficiencies which they do not regard as their responsibility to address.*

Instead she outlines a 'golden triangle of retention' focused on 'students in context'; 'institutional context' and 'a sense of place', arguing that individual universities have a key part to play in identifying and making explicit the cultural practices and behaviour of the institution and in ensuring that networks to support students are created outside the immediate confines of the university itself.

Many researchers emphasise 'engagement' as being key to continuation and academic success. This term is contestable not just because of its nebulosity, but because it has been appropriated by different groups so becoming,

*a 'fuzzword' that in its fashionability conceals the contradictory goals of different stakeholders (Vuori, 2014:51).*

Some claim that the term is used uncritically (Zepke, 2014) to the point that it has become almost meaningless whilst Trowler (2014) argues that its very vagueness has allowed it to be used to mask inequalities by distracting from more significant issues. Ashwin and McVitty (2015:343) assert that it is a word that has been appropriated quite cynically by policy makers,

*What is interesting about these criticisms is that 'student engagement' was initially a term used by researchers, which has later been adopted by policy makers as it appears to do useful work.*

The White Paper, on the one hand, claims confidently that '*retention rates are a good proxy for student engagement*' (2015:46) whilst academic literature typically uses the term to describe how students experience a sense of belonging through participation in a range of academic and emotional activities. Coates (2007:122) outlines these as those promoting active and collaborative learning which encourage communication with tutors and the development of learning communities.

Many universities have been influenced by such research, particularly those which recruit students from non-traditional backgrounds and have developed strategies designed to support 'student engagement'. In Central such strategies take a number of forms regarded as 'best practice' by AdvanceHE (Thomas et al, 2017) and which include opportunities for potential students to spend time in the university prior to enrolling, as well as resource to support involvement in extracurricular activities and educational trips and visits. These activities are largely positive actions which encourage early engagement on the basis that those students who participate are more likely to continue on their programmes. Alongside them are other means of 'measuring' engagement, including such things as monitoring attendance, submission of assessments, participation in on-line learning, library usage and the development of assessed work that requires presence and participation.

It is possible to see a tension between the first set of activities which are designed to encourage a sense of belonging and the second which are focused on monitoring students, making an assumption that they are 'performers' who should study in a particular way if they are to be successful. Mcfarlane (2014) regards such activities as a movement towards student performativity which he sees as a variant of what Ball (2012) calls institutional performativity where only that which can be measured is valued, thereby diminishing the complexity of both learning and teaching. All the activities above imply a negative view of students in the assumption that they need to be monitored and are therefore deficient, unready for HE. Indeed, as Christie et al (2005:6) assert, there is an assumption that,

*non-traditional students are the lesser – and problematic – partners in the mass HE system and that they must change to ‘fit in’ to university life.*

## **2.7 Summary**

My research is positioned within a discourse about the impact of marketisation on higher education. Specifically, it is located in a research field which focuses on the ways that ‘non-traditional’ students transition into higher education, their experiences within it and the discourse which surrounds how universities can adapt their practices to accommodate their perceived needs. The experiences of commuting – or live at home students – sit within this field because they are usually regarded by the literature as sharing the characteristics of a new kind of student to HE and seen as having specific experiences and identities which are not always recognised by institutions.

Within the field commuting students are generally seen as being a homogenous group. Only very recent literature seeks to explore how ‘commuting’ is an over-broad category that does not capture the wide-ranging experiences within it. As explored in more detail in 3.3 the marketisation of HE brings with it the measurement of outcomes, lending itself to the categorisation of students into groups on the basis that the performance of those groups can be used to identify ‘at risk’ students. Using a narrative enquiry approach that might be regarded as the antithesis of market-driven methodologies which focus on performance and measurement, my research seeks to explore the experiences of live at home students as a means of considering how, in an institution where they form the majority, their characterisation as a ‘problem’ group might be challenged. Whilst some of the most recent literature indicates that institutions must adapt to meet the needs of their students, this apparently sympathetic perspective continues to imply that some groups of students are somehow inadequate and unready for the challenge of university. The prevailing discourse is therefore one that contributes to a negative narrative where live at home students are viewed as deficient, rather than one where their positive attributes and commitment to their local institutions are celebrated. I argue that Central University’s position in reproducing this discourse as outlined in 1.2 is both troubling and problematic because, in viewing them through a



quantitative performance lens, it characterises the majority of its students as at risk - a position that is both irrational and paradoxical.

Instead, it may be that these students confound common conceptions of what it is to be a student, demonstrating multi-layered identities that require universities to re-imagine student-hood in ways that are more relevant to them. However, commuting students do not themselves form a homogenous group so it is important to identify different factors within that broad group. There appears to be a gap in exploring the experiences of young (18-21 year old) students who continue to live at home whilst living comparatively close to their university where they form a significantly large group. As such, in its focus on these students as being different from the majority, the extant literature may not yet fully explore their experiences, treating them instead as a marginal group within HE. In addition to there being a reliance on the generic term 'commuting students', it would appear too that, as yet, there is a lack of nuanced data in relation to this broad group of students' experiences in HE, a fact that is recognised in the most recent literature such as that of Donnelly and Gamsu (2017) and Maguire and Morris (2018).

Influenced by the work of Donnelly and Gamsu (2018), my research narrows the term 'commuting students' to those who live at home within 15 kilometres of the university therefore having comparatively short distances to travel to the institution, possibly of little difference from their previous travel times in school or college. My research is focused on a specific group of students whose experience of commuting is likely to be very different from those who travel much further. For this group, things associated with travel and transport are unlikely to impact significantly on their university experience and this means that practical ways of supporting commuting students as identified in some of the literature (Helsen, 2013; Thomas and Jones, 2017) may be less relevant to their experience.

Whilst the academic literature reveals that there is a great deal of knowledge about strategies to improve students' sense of belonging, there appears to be more to say in relation to institutional academic culture, policies and practice and how they impact on local live at home students, an issue noted by Malcolm (2014:67) who defines a central antimony,

*even in these universities, with some of the highest proportions of students living in the parental home, moving away is still the default and the lack of policy and practice reflects this.*

As universities focus on the continuation of students, seeing a correlation between engagement and success, many – including Central University – seek to identify groups which appear more susceptible to early withdrawal as a means of developing strategy to prevent this. In addition, learning analytic models are beginning to be adopted across the sector as a means of identifying those deemed at risk of non-continuation or failure through,

*The measurement, collection, analysis and reporting of data about learners and their contexts, for purposes of understanding and optimising learning and the environments in which it occurs (Ferguson, 2012) .*

There is no scope within this thesis to explore learning analytics in detail. However, it is worth considering how they reflect a marketised model of HE where students must be categorised into measurable groups, their performance analysed so that it can be ‘understood’. Not only does the model and its language treat students as commodities whose learning must be ‘*optimised*’, it risks conceptualising certain groups of students - including those who live at home - as problems, rather than challenging institutional policy and practice and, indeed, building on the strengths, achievements and knowledge of those groups.

Stuart (2017) places responsibility on universities for ensuring student success, claiming that institutional expectations, practice and behaviours are significant in creating a culture which is taken for granted by those who are familiar with it and which needs to be made explicit to students so that they can navigate their way through those practices. However, it is possible that Stuart’s claim is not radical enough in challenging the practices themselves and their relevance to all students, some of whom may be actively rejecting,

*normative ideals about student-hood....and forging new and distinctive pathways through HE (Christie et al, 2005:7).*

Similarly, whilst the literature supports the continued need for the development of strategies to enable students to feel an early sense of belonging to and identification with their institutions,

*....some of the accepted methods of overcoming the hurdles that transition creates can be seen to be less relevant to this group (live at home students) (Southall et al, 2016:10).*

Given that in Central University the majority of students remain at home, I consider it important to learn from their experiences to inform a re-conceptualisation of student-hood, a re-imagining that returns me to a recurring theme in this thesis: to whom does HE belong and who decides how it should be experienced? In doing so, my research seeks to contribute to our understanding of live at home students in institutions where they form the majority, our knowledge of how they are presented within them and, most importantly, how we can learn from them to reimagine our conceptions of student-hood in ways that more effectively value their identities and contributions.

### Chapter Three: Methodology

This chapter discusses the overall approach taken to the research by considering the theoretical framework in which it is situated, explaining the rationale for the research methodology together with the issues it raises and the specific methods used for collecting and analysing data. The chapter explores the reasons for adopting a methodology which is predominantly a narrative enquiry informed by a critical analysis of institutional quantitative data as a means of establishing the context for the main focus of the study which is to understand why students aged 18-21 who remain at home appear more likely to withdraw early from their studies than those who move away. This chapter explores the reasons for adopting an approach drawn from narrative enquiry in preference to alternative methodologies and the implications of this decision for the research design.

Through the data generated in focus groups and individual interviews, my research explores the experiences of students in their first year of university and considers how they can inform how Central meets their needs, as well as offering insights into reasons for what OfS term 'non-continuation'. To assess the potential value of such a study, I wanted to determine through a critical analysis of secondary data whether institutional evidence supported the view expressed by the University itself and by much of the literature as explored in Chapter 2 that students who live at home are more susceptible to non-continuation than those who move away. Non-continuation is a relatively new term, adopted by the institution in response to a metric used in the APP as a means by which the OfS claims to seek to '*eliminate equalities*' across different groups of students. Like any metric it is bounded by narrow definitions and limitations, in this case that of still being in higher education one year and 14 days after enrolment and does not consider those who, for example, withdraw from their studies to re-engage in HE later.

Following the analysis of institutional data, my research seeks to understand through the stories told by the participants the difference in the experiences between those who moved away and those who lived at home. In this respect my research questions adopt a social constructivist approach which recognises that research is reliant '*on the participants' views of the situation being studied*' (Creswell, 2013:8) and the questions being,

*broad and general so that the participants can construct the meaning of a situation, a meaning typically forged in discussions or interactions with other persons (ibid).*

My participants were all in their second year of study having successfully completed first year. I considered interviewing those who had not continued on their courses but had ethical concerns about contacting ex-students who might have had difficult or painful experiences that they did not wish to re-live. Nor did I consider it ethically appropriate to use University data as a means of making contact with ex-students (British Educational Research Association, 2018:10). I decided instead that inviting existing students to reflect on their first year was a safer means of generating valuable data that would allow comparisons to be made between those who lived at home and those who had moved away.

### **3.1 The pilot study**

During the early stages of the Professional Doctorate, I conducted a pilot study involving only one student over a period of six months. This study informed my research so is outlined briefly. The pilot's intention was to explore the tensions between the culture of performance metrics as a means of judging institutional success and the lived experiences of students within that culture. The pilot focused on Ben who described himself as a local student from a working class background and was at that time (2015) studying law at Central University, having joined it from a prestigious, highly selective university from which he had withdrawn through academic failure. As a purposive sample, Ben's story engaged my interest in the profound impact of failure on students' self-esteem and identity particularly if, like Ben, they do not believe they belong in the institution and '*have learner identities that are fragile and unconfident*' (Reay et al, 2010:111). Listening to Ben's story, rather than seeing him through the lens of performance data which identified him as at risk of failure, I was impressed by his perseverance and determination to complete his studies, demonstrating how '*qualities of resilience and coping with adversity become productive resources*' (Reay, Crozier and Clayton, 2010:1107) for students who are regarded as not conforming to institutional norms. However, the pilot study brought into focus some of the issues connected with my positionality, in particular how researching in an institution where I have influence and perceived power, could

impact on how participants regard my role as researcher and, potentially, affect their responses. As a student struggling to complete his degree, Ben needed support and quite probably hoped that I might be able to give him this, an ethical consideration that is explored in 3.7.

The pilot included a series of unstructured interviews through which Ben told his story as someone who continued to struggle with his studies, despite being highly articulate, eloquent and self-aware. In conducting the study I became cognisant of some of the challenges of narrative enquiry approaches, expressing them at the time as follows:

*I run the risk of influencing the study not just because I am empathetic to Ben and his situation but because I am reconstructing his story, albeit using his words to illustrate my account of our interview. .... There are also issues of power and hierarchy in that Ben may regard me as someone with the capacity to impact positively on his studies.....I am aware of what I call the 'Scheherazade effect' where Ben may seek to engage me by embellishing his story or presenting it in such a way that appeals to my emotions. (Pilot Study, 2015:9)*

Despite those early concerns which continue to challenge me to reflect on methodology and ethics, I was struck by the richness of Ben's language, the power of his imagery and the way in which individual stories act as vibrant counterpoints to institutional data. Ben's stories both engaged and empowered me as a researcher to 'use stories to think with' (Bateson, 1990:33).

The pilot study made me consider that, fascinating as individual stories are, they pose questions about validity, reliability and 'generalisability'. Narrative studies do not seek to determine whether an event actually took place but instead to explore how people express meanings and understandings through their telling of stories (Feldman et al, 2004) so are not always directly congruent with reliability. A methodological approach based on a number of student interviews rather than one individual offered an opportunity to explore the research questions in more detail to determine whether there were themes that were valid and generalisable, offering an antidote to the metric-driven narrative of the institution.

### 3.2 Justifying the methodology

It took considerable time to decide which research methodology would best suit my research intentions. Following the pilot, I considered that a case study approach would be an appropriate means of answering the research questions. However, further reading indicated that case studies tend to be,

*...bounded by time and activity and researchers collect detailed information....over a sustained period of time (Creswell, 2003:15).*

I rejected the notion of collecting data over a sustained period because the research intention was to enable participants to reflect on their first year university experience therefore it was not appropriate to design a longitudinal study; instead, one-off focus groups and interviews allowed those reflections to occur in an informal setting which I believed would encourage open conversation where my role was largely that of facilitator and listener. Discussion with my research supervisors and further consideration of methodology led me to believe that narrative enquiry would be well-suited to my research questions, offering a means of capturing what I anticipated would be richly nuanced data such as I had encountered in the pilot study through being '*attentive to the life worlds and voices of individuals*' (Atkinson, Coffey and Delamont, 2001:8).

My research therefore adopts a narrative enquiry methodology to explore and analyse the experiences of live at home students compared with those who move away. A critical analysis of Central University's secondary data is used to supplement the core project, its main purpose being to provide an institutional context rather than being presented as a complete study in itself. The analysis indicated higher withdrawal rates amongst 18-21 year old live at home students compared with those who move away, thus providing an illustrative and indicative context for the basis of my research questions. These were designed to explore possible reasons for this difference through listening to students' stories about their first year experiences and analysing them using a narrative enquiry approach. This section outlines the rationale for using such an approach, exploring why such stories offer an authentic means of, '*not only convey(ing) information but bring(ing) information to life*' (Cohen et al, 2018: 664), and justifying the inclusion of critical analysis of secondary data.

In considering the design of the research, I believed it important to analyse the institutional data in relation to live at home and living away students as a baseline from which to investigate the perceptions of students about their experiences. Gorard (2004:58) supports the preliminary analysis of secondary data as '*the best place to start any study*' because it establishes a context for more detailed study. My research is constructed in two stages which, in the first stage, defines the problem through an analysis of relevant numeric data and, in the second, examines the issue in more depth using qualitative methods. Gorard (2004:59) asserts,

*This method starts from a consideration of the importance of pattern rather than probability, ignores the usual complex statistical approach....and adds other appropriate methods of data collection and analysis in subsequent phases.*

I believe that this approach to my research is appropriate because there is a need to understand the story told by statistical data connected with the target group of students as well as to examine those students' experiences as expressed through their personal stories. Both the statistical and the narrative enquiry stages tell stories and make claims: the critical analysis of secondary data identifies what I call 'the story from above' or the institutional narrative around live at home students, whilst narrative enquiry allows the 'stories from below' or the voices of the students themselves to be heard. Whilst a marketised model of HE as presented in the institutional narrative is driven by quantitative data which purports to measure 'performance' against a narrow range of 'indicators', my methodology positions the participants' stories against those data to produce a different kind of knowledge which stems from lived experience.

There is much discussion around methodology, a debate sometimes explained as '*paradigm wars*' in an emotive phrase attributed to Gage (1989),

*to characterise the adversarial character of the methodological debates that were occurring ....during the final quarter of the twentieth century (Donmoyer, 2008:592).*

Those debates centred on what were regarded as irreconcilable differences, not just between quantitative and qualitative research methods but between the ontological positions of researchers. Ontologically, quantitative research starts from a position of believing that '*there is a reality out there to be studied, captured and understood*'



(Denzin and Lincoln, 2003:8) whilst, in contrast, qualitative research is rooted in a belief that '*mixed realities exist and that what is being researched is context-specific*' (Pring, 2015:65-6). Ontologies shape epistemology and research methods. Broadly, quantitative purist researchers use positivist epistemologies rooted in scientific methods which can be replicated and re-tested, while qualitative researchers tend to adopt interpretivist approaches,

*using methods of data generation which are flexible and sensitive to the social context in which the data are produced (Grix, 2004:20).*

More recent approaches to methodologies recognise that it is possible to embrace mixed paradigms and, indeed, to regard them as '*different but potentially complementary forms of empirical enquiry*' (Punch, 2009:290). Creswell (2003:4), for example, suggests that,

*the situation today is less quantitative versus qualitative and more how research practices lie somewhere on a continuum between the two.*

Some purists, however, argue that qualitative and quantitative methods (Burke and Onwuegbuzie, 2004:14) are epistemologically incompatible. By this they mean that, whilst quantitative researchers often claim to approach their work from a value-free perspective, attempting to eliminate their own personal bias from the research process, qualitative researchers believe that value-free investigations are not possible because reality is socially constructed and the researcher irrevocably linked with what is studied (Denzin and Lincoln, 2003:9). Instead,

*the researcher's aim is to explore perspectives and shared meanings and to develop insights into the situation (Wellington, 2000:16).*

Gorard and Taylor (2004:24) argue that such a polarised view of research paradigms is flawed because all data, whether it be qualitative or quantitative, is subject to interpretation, the responsibility of the researcher being to choose methods '*determined by the needs of the investigation*' (ibid:4) and to make judgements about the value of the results of the data. In deciding to investigate continuation rates from the perspective of student experiences I considered it important to underpin their stories with a critical analysis of secondary data as a means of establishing whether there was an issue which warranted further investigation. My initial view that this was an area worthy of research was drawn from information provided by Central

University's Planning and Performance Department (PPD) as discussed in 1.2 which highlighted commuting to university as a risk factor in relation to student continuation, a position supported by much of the academic literature discussed earlier. Other 'risk groups' were identified at that same point, including mature students and those from BAME backgrounds so, given the demography of the University, many of its students were deemed to be at risk of early withdrawal from their studies – a position that questions the validity of organising students into groups, the nature of those groupings and the reasons for creating them, particularly since there was no institutional data available at that time about the social and economic backgrounds of students, arguably likely to be a significant factor in non-continuation.

The role of PPD is to produce data connected with student outcomes, currently those defined by the OfS, and to present that data to different audiences for different purposes. Within the institution, the data are presented to academic staff as a means of 'driving improvement' through knowledge about the performance of groups of students; externally those data are used as marketing tools to present the University favourably to prospective students. PPD plays a significant part in producing the APP which seeks to demonstrate to the OfS how the University achieves successful outcomes for all its students. As such it holds a powerful – but far from impartial – position within the institution, influencing its strategies, policies and priorities and, prior to the inception of the OfS, having some control over the way that students are grouped for data collection and analysis.

To establish if it was the case that students who remained at home were more likely not to continue on their courses than those who had moved away I analysed quantitative data connected with the withdrawal from their courses of first year students in the Faculty of Business, Legal and Social Studies over a three year period. Having determined from this that there was a significant difference in withdrawal rates between the two groups, the research intention was to explore possible reasons for these and, for this, I regarded it important to hear the voices of students through the stories they told about their first year at university. An interpretive approach influenced by narrative enquiry using focus groups and individual interviews was adopted as I believed that this would be the most effective

means of '*generating meaning from the data collected in the field*' (Creswell, 2003:9) and of capturing the lived experiences of participants. Narrative enquiry is closely allied to social constructivism in that the latter epistemology recognises that,

*Meaning is constructed not discovered, so subjects construct their own meaning in different ways, even in relation to the same phenomenon* (Gray, 2009:18)

and that narrative,

*involves telling stories, recounting – accounting for – how individuals make sense of events and actions in their lives with themselves as the agents of their lives* (McAlpine, 2016:34).

Not only did narrative enquiry offer what seemed the most appropriate way of listening to the participants' stories, it resonated with my own experience explored in 1.3 that, '*we come to understand and give meaning to our lives through story*' (Trahar, 2009:3). The narratives produced by PPD through quantitative data are highly influential in their contribution towards Central University's strategy and priorities; I considered it valuable to give voice to the stories told by students as a means of investigating whether there might be alternative narratives.

As stated above, there are two aspects to the methodology used to investigate my research questions. The first focuses on the relevance of the research itself which I argue is most effectively established through a critical analysis of the secondary data held by the University. This part supplements and contextualises the core section of my study which centres on participants' storied experiences and perceptions. These I considered were best explored through interpretive methods which therefore dominate the research design.

### **3.3. The rationale for narrative enquiry**

In using narrative enquiry, I adopt a position by Cohen et al (2018:664) who explain how narrative approaches are '*powerful ways of analysing and presenting qualitative data*' because, as Bruner (1996:14) asserts, human beings make meaning in terms of,

*storied texts which catch the human condition, human intentionality and the vividness of human experience.*

As well as collecting data through participants' narratives, I employ a narrative approach to present my findings. By this I mean that some of the anecdotes told by the students within their stories are particularly powerful in '*carrying a nugget of meaning*' (Clandinin, 2007:584) and I have constructed these into what Geertz (1983) calls a '*grand narrative*' as a means of generalising from the particular to answer my research questions. Koelsch (2012:27) describes such a technique as,

*constructing theory out of disparate information.... (in) a quest for knowledge of the deep underlying causes of events.*

My research is situated within an interpretive narrative paradigm because its intention is to listen to the subjective experiences of participants as a way of understanding those experiences and their impact on educational outcomes. Interpretive approaches attempt to understand how '*reality is apprehended, organised and conveyed*' (Gubrium and Holstein, 2000:488). By their nature, such approaches acknowledge that reality is constructed of a multiplicity of perspectives. Willis (2007:110) claims that the aim of interpretivism is to value subjectivity, and that,

*interpretivists eschew the idea that objective research on human behaviour is possible.*

Epistemologically, therefore, interpretivism is located in a qualitative research paradigm very different from the position taken by positivist researchers who believe '*in an external reality separate from our descriptions of it*' (Flick, 2018:35), seeking value-free, objective means of capturing that 'reality' through quantitative data.

Many contemporary storytellers experiment with the idea of narrative, often using different narratorial voices and perspectives to demonstrate the mutable nature of 'truth' or what Pinnegar and Daynes (2007:25) call, '*the tentative and variable nature of knowledge*', thereby supporting Lather's challenge to epistemological positions that see the world from a binary perspective either as 'real' or as drawn from our perceptions,

*the dualisms which continue to dominate Western thought are inadequate for understanding a world of mixed causes and effects(1991:21).*

Foucault (1970) uses the powerful word '*fabulation*' to capture the multi-layered, multi-perspective nature of the world or '*the wild profusion of existing things*' (p xv) which I argue are more effectively explained through qualitative research methods such as interpretivism. I share Gorard's (2004:13) view that, '*recognising the existence of genuine mixed perspectives does not mean the end of truth as an idea*' and that multiplicity is representative of truth.

The current marketised culture of HE is, however, influenced greatly by positivist statistical data or performance metrics used to create narratives about institutions based on the measurement and comparison of outcomes,

*the narratives, or stories, scientists tell are accounts couched and framed within specific story telling traditions* (Denzin and Lincoln, 2003: 9).

Marketisation demands that statistical data are produced, often using 'consumer choice' as a justification for the 'measuring' of outcomes, however crude or incomplete those data might be. As mentioned in 2.7 some institutions use statistical data to identify students who might be at risk of failing or non-continuation. Data such as these have merit in that they provide a means of supporting students, but are limited because they do not offer nuanced understanding of the individual experiences of students which, by their very nature, are diverse, contradictory and highly subjective. Instead, they construct and produce groups that can be measured. Such models risk creating deficit groups of students, often those who do not conform to a traditional and sometimes obsolete norm which '*excludes those who do not live up to or are unable to live up this norm*' (Biesta, 2010:79). Indeed, the very process of labelling students as a discrete group is contestable as it implies that the label defines them, thereby marginalising intersectional factors and lending itself to making crude generalisations. Narrative enquiry offsets such models, offering an opportunity to challenge strategies which are based on them and, instead, providing a means of studying individuals' experiences,

*seek(ing) ways of enriching and transforming that experience for themselves and others* (Clandinin, 2007:42).

Far from reinforcing a deficit model, therefore, narrative enquiry recognises the multiplicity of experience, using '*the complexity of the individual, local and particular*' (Pinnegar and Daynes, 2007:30) to understand social behaviour and actions.

Lincoln and Cannella (2004:7) claim that positivist research methods are,

*ill-suited to examining education where differences in class, gender, race impact on perceptions.*

Despite this, many of the tools used within and outside universities to measure various aspects of HE deploy such methods. Popkevitz (2004:62) offers an explanation for this apparent contradiction in his explanation that there is ‘*a nostalgia for a simple and ordered universe of science that never was...*’, a yearning which, of course, plays into a positivist epistemological narrative which Lather (2006:35) asserts is driven by political ideology and therefore connected with,

*a resurgent positivism and governmental imposition of experimental design as the gold standard in research methods.*

Such methods seem attractive in a HE culture which is increasingly dominated by performance metrics because they appear to offer simple solutions to highly complex issues, reflecting a wish for certainty which accords with the desire of universities to find the formula or ‘best practice’ that will lead to the outstanding positions in league tables that are considered necessary for market success. The problem is that not only are formulaic approaches likely to be reductive, they fail to recognise that universities have individual characteristics, identities and demographics which confound simple ‘solutions’. Foucault (1977:148) is again resonant here, postulating how discipline seeks to,

*transform the confused, useless or dangerous multitudes into ordered multiplicities.*

Positivist methods in the multi-layered, complicated world of education are therefore likely to produce superficial accounts of complex matters. Personal narratives, unlike performativity metrics, are more confused, more difficult to order, to be measured and to offer formulaic solutions; instead, they remind us that the world is, as Macneice (1967) rejoices, ‘*crazier than we think*’. My chosen methodology is narrative enquiry because, like Macneice’s poetry, it recognises the complex, sometimes messy nature of experience and gives voice to stories that are not easily captured in institutional narratives. Narrative enquiry is often used in educational research studies perhaps because as Connelly and Clandinin (1990:20) claim,

*education and educational research is the construction and reconstruction of personal and social stories.*

Narrative enquiry acknowledges the relationship between researcher and participant but privileges the voices of individual participants, allowing them to tell their story first, thereby giving them authority and valuing their experience. It does not mean that the researcher is silenced – indeed, narrative enquiry acknowledges the voice of the researcher, seeing it as contributing to the study – but seeks to give a high status to the participants' narratives therefore providing a useful approach in researching the views of those neglected or, here, 'othered'.

However, researcher status in relation to participants is not unproblematic and can be contested because, in any production of findings, choices are made by the researcher in relation to how participants' contributions are presented and constructed to produce an overall narrative. Ultimately, that overarching narrative is co-constructed by the researcher and participants, placing a significant ethical responsibility on the former to use interpretive authority with integrity and fidelity to the stories told. As Josselson (2007:549) explains, it is naïve to think that narrative enquiry merely 'gives voice' to participants and there is inevitably,

*a division between the personal narrative told by the participant and the 'typal' narrative, a narrative that exemplifies something of theoretical interest, created by the researcher.*

The same, however, is true of any research regardless of its methodology so it is important for the researcher to be candid about their position in relation to their work. A marketised culture of HE which is dominated by quantitative research methods has produced a certain kind of knowledge often created by institutions themselves to position them favourably in the market place. In constructing my '*grand narrative*' (Geertz, 1983), I am aware that I make choices as to what is of greatest significance within the personal stories told by the individual students and that, in doing so, '*the researcher's interpretation is omnipresent*' (Josselson, *ibid*) though not, of course, omniscient. My position is affected by my personal experience as a local live at home student and as a teacher in colleges local to the University. As will be discussed in 3.7, some of the comments made by live at home students were particularly powerful because they resonated closely with my own experiences. Similarly, I recognise that I am disposed to be sympathetic to their points about

feeling like outsiders to the 'normal' experience of student-hood, potentially influencing my interpretation and the weight I give to those points.

### **3.4 The theoretical framework: a rationale for using Bourdieusian theory**

My research is situated in a theoretical framework modelled on Bourdieu because of the relevance of his concepts of the doxa, social field, habitus, capital and social reproduction. Data can be explored in a variety of ways employing different theoretical frameworks. I chose to use Bourdieu because, in an institution dominated by live at home students, it is of interest to reflect on how the heterodoxy of moving away continues to be reproduced by the University, despite it being irrelevant to its majority students. Bourdieu's concept of 'misrecognition' offers insight into how Central perpetuates a view of student-hood that is founded on moving away, even whilst seeking to demonstrate its commitment to its local community. In doing so it is therefore complicit in producing an '*institutionalised circle of collective misrecognition*' (Bourdieu, 1991:153) which fails fully to acknowledge its majority students. This is explored in more detail in 4.2.1 and 4.2.4.

Bourdieu's theories of habitus and dispositions also provide an insightful means of exploring how that majority consider themselves as 'different' from the norm, as well as offering an understanding of how symbolic capital is accumulated by those who, by investing in the game of moving away, conform to the doxa, as explained in Chapter 4. Bourdieu's exploration of how the game can change is of particular relevance to my thesis because it offers a means of interpreting the data to demonstrate that that game may be changing.

My research draws on Bourdieu's theory of social reproduction as part of its theoretical framework because of his influential work in identifying how social class in industrialised societies is reproduced through an education system which rewards certain kinds of knowledge, attitudes and values whilst devaluing others. Briefly, Bourdieu (1986:243) argues that those born into lower social classes are at a disadvantage in the education system because they do not possess the economic and cultural capital which are valued by that system and which explain,

*the unequal scholastic achievement of children originating from different social classes by relating academic success.....to the distribution of cultural capital between the classes and class fractions.*



Education systems are complicit in social reproduction because, whilst often claiming to offer equal opportunities to all, they advantage those who bring to it social, linguistic and economic capital thereby legitimating injustice by,

*perpetuating the existing social pattern, as it both provides an apparent justification for social inequalities and gives recognition to the cultural heritage, that is, to a social gift treated as a natural one (Bourdieu, 1974:32).*

The production of institutional data contributes to social reproduction because the choices made about how data are generated and presented can themselves problematise certain groups of students and privilege others, thereby demonstrating a 'failure to understand the complexity of the field' (Berliner, 2002:18). The production of such data has, as Pring (2015:87) asserts,

*little room for the struggle to understand, the exploration of ideas.....or the exploration of meaning in life's experiences.*

In a marketised and regulated HE sector where the 'performance' of universities is publicised, the production of institutional data is inevitably a contested field. Not only do such data serve a range of purposes and audiences, their interpretation is subject to change as central government's priorities shift. For example and as mentioned in 1.1, the establishment of the OfS in January 2018 as a regulatory body for HE in England, influences the way in which data are presented and used to develop strategy in Central University. Where once the University focused on the progression of students from one level of study to the next, the OfS's interest in continuation as a measure of performance has impacted on that focus thereby changing how universities produce and represent data, influencing policy so that it improves student continuation and changing the lexicon from retention to continuation. Institutional data is therefore a site of production which has,

*the power to impose (or even to inculcate) the arbitrary instruments of knowledge and expression (taxonomies) of social reality – but instruments whose arbitrary nature is not realised as such (Bourdieu, 1991:168).*

Central to Bourdieu's theory of social reproduction is that of habitus, the way in which individuals feel comfortable within social settings and institutions. Cultural capital is linked with this concept because people are likely to feel comfortable with

those with whom they share values, attitudes, dispositions and language. Universities can therefore be exclusive to certain groups simply because of their culture, traditions, dispositions and the way they present themselves through their practices, including their use of language and images. The pilot study outlined in 3.1 provided me with an early awareness of habitus, expressed eloquently by Ben who claimed bitterly that the prestigious university he once attended failed to support him during his mother's illness,

*they were passionate only about certain kinds of students, those who do not cause problems.*

Chapter 2.2 explored data which demonstrate not only that social class determines which type of university students are likely to attend but also the likelihood of them completing their degree. Bourdieu's theory of social reproduction is therefore a useful means of studying live at home students, particularly in an HE culture which requires students to pay fees, its purpose measured increasingly through the success of its graduates in finding highly paid employment.

Bourdieu can, however, be accused of creating a deficit group in his use of pejorative language to claim that working class people have a '*negative disposition to school*' and a '*resigned attitude to failure*'. (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977:9). Broad generalisations such as these do little to help us understand the nuanced nature of class or, indeed, as Reay (2004) asserts, explain working class educational success. Regarding live at home students as part of the 'new majority' helps avoid such criticism as that levelled at Bourdieu because, in using this term, they are no longer presented as an alien other but as the main participants in the university offering richly diverse experiences to HE, rather than as a deficit group.

Foucault has also influenced my theoretical framework, his thoughts on power and control offering a lens through which to view models of student-hood. Foucault's (1977:184) use of metaphors connected with vision and observation are particularly effective in explaining how control can be exerted through a,

*normalising gaze' which imposes homogeneity; but it individualises by making it possible to measure gaps, to determine levels, to fix specialities and to render the differences useful by fitting them one to another.*

Ball (2013:104) has written extensively of this phenomenon in compulsory education describing how, '*Schooling as a process is rendered into an input-output calculation*' where children are assessed and regarded as resources or commodities. It can be argued that a similar model is being adopted in HE, not just by the impact of the TEF and APP with their emphasis on key sets of metrics but by a culture influenced by economic values where, in what seems like a paradox, students are viewed as both customers and commodities who pay to be created into,

*players capable of acceptably fulfilling their roles at the pragmatic posts required by (its) institutions'* (Lyotard,1984:45)

and, as such, must be trained into compliant behaviour.

Students who live at home do not comply with normative behaviour, not just because they do not move away to university but may also remain within their local communities after graduation, thus potentially limiting their employment opportunities and salaries. However within Central University, far from being non-compliant, those who remain at home are in reality the dominant group as demonstrated by institutional data asserting that, in 2018/19, they comprise over 60% of Central's students. Despite this, they are presented as a problematic group, at risk of low achievement, early withdrawal and failure. My research approaches their experience from a perspective offered by Bourdieu to view the impact of institutional culture and practice on those students, to consider the values that are important to those who remain at home and, ultimately, to argue that their narratives should be more influential in determining University policy.

### **3.5 Methods and challenges in analysing the secondary data**

This section focuses on methods used to critically analyse secondary quantitative data connected with undergraduate students' living arrangements as expressed through information recorded about them. Conducting that analysis was illuminating in indicating the flawed nature of institutional data, an area explored in more detail in 4.2.1. This section explores some of the limitations of such data and the questions raised by them.

As discussed previously, the term 'commuting students' is generic and over-broad, covering a wide range of student experiences. My study focuses on local live at home students aged 18-21 on entry to Central University. Even this narrower

definition is contestable because the word 'local' is nebulous and the University does not require students to indicate whether or not they live at home. The University defines commuting students within the institution as those UK-only students under 21 years of age whose term-time address matches their permanent home address. I narrowed this field to local students within the Faculty of Business through their postcodes, limiting these to within a 15 mile radius of the University. In line with the University definition, in order to identify those who live at home I matched home and term time addresses and assumed that those students whose addresses are the same lived at home; however, I recognise that whilst this is likely to be the case it is not certain. As a result, I am aware of variables in the way that data have been categorised but believe that these are likely to be of little significance given the numbers involved overall. The focus groups and interviews took place with students whose living arrangements were clearly defined: either they had moved away to live in student accommodation or they remained at home with their families. My reason for limiting live at home students to a particular age group and location is because there appears to be little current research in the area of local students who continue to live at home and who form a significant part of the university's population.

Using the raw data available at Faculty level, any student who was not classed as a home student for funding purposes was excluded, meaning that my research does not cover overseas or European students who have travelled into the UK to study. This decision was made because the circumstances of these students are different from those who already lived in the UK, the latter being eligible to apply for tuition fee and maintenance loans therefore unlikely to be self-funding in the way that non-home students are.

I coded students over three years of entry to their courses, covering the period from 2015 – 2018 in relation to the information they had provided about their term time and home addresses. This enabled identification of students whose addresses indicated that they lived at the same address during both term and vacation times and those who lived at different addresses during those periods. Initially I coded them using five different descriptors:

Group A – students who live at their home addresses during both term and vacation time and commute no more than from a 15 mile radius of the Faculty's campus.

Group B – students who live at their home addresses during both term and vacation time and commute from outside a 15 mile radius of the Faculty’s campus.

Group C – students who live away from their home addresses during term time in accommodation which has been purpose-built for students.

Group D – students who live away from their home addresses during term time in accommodation other than that which has been purpose-built for students, and which is situated within a 15 mile radius of the Faculty’s campus.

Group E – students who live away from home in accommodation other than that which is purpose-built for students, and which is situated outside a 15 mile radius of the Faculty’s campus.

Students within these groups were then separated into those who were between 18-21 years of age and those who were 22 or older on entry to their courses. It is possible that some of those students had transferred to the Faculty from another course within the University or from an external institution but data regarding this is unreliable so not taken into account. Students were initially coded in this way to identify whether differences in withdrawal rates were different according to the following:

1. Age at entry to courses.
2. Distance of travel from home address to the Faculty’s campus.
3. Accommodation mode ie living at home or in some kind of student accommodation.

The coding system described above was then used to analyse outcomes in relation to the different student groups across three consecutive cohorts from entry in 2015, 2016 and 2017. For reasons related to some of the challenges outlined below, the differences between student withdrawals were then considered in less nuanced terms ie simply through whether they live in what is likely to be the family home or in accommodation away from it.

A number of challenges emerged during the coding process. These challenges exist in a context in which decisions have been made about what has been included and what has been analysed. Indeed, the very act of coding and categorising is problematic because it presupposes similarities and differences across groups that

may be neglectful of others. For example, because the focus of my research is that of local live at home students, I have not segregated the data by any factor other than accommodation mode, age and 'home' (as opposed to overseas or European) status. This limitation in the research means that although ethnicity, gender and socio-economic background are alluded to, they do not feature explicitly in the findings. As discussed in Chapter 5, there is certainly scope to explore some of these factors particularly in relation to some of the stories told by female students from ethnic minority backgrounds who were more likely in my research than other groups to express frustrations about having to live at home and this being a decision made by their families rather than one they had made themselves. Similarly, within the small-scale nature of my research, they were more likely to have domestic responsibilities within their families that impacted on their ability to spend time in university outside timetabled sessions (Anjelica p106,130; Amna p130; Diya p130).

Whilst most students were easily categorised into one of the identified groups, some were more difficult. The addresses used to categorise students were taken from information given at the point of enrolment so may not be accurate because students have not yet have found local accommodation. This means that a few students in each cohort appear not to have given their term time addresses so are categorised as being in category B (living at home outside a 15 mile radius), despite those addresses being so far away from campus (in such places as London, Manchester, Sheffield) that it seems more likely that they have a different term time address.

To address this, I initially sought to re-categorise this group with these students omitted. However, with this omission came another question: how is it possible to determine what kind of distance makes commuting from home so unlikely as to justify omission? I made the decision on the basis that over 60 miles in distance from the Faculty campus was likely to make regular commuting unlikely. This meant that students who appeared to be travelling from, for example, Derby, Leicester and Northampton would be regarded as being live at home students in category B whilst those from further afield would be omitted. However, I came to recognise that other factors are likely to impact on decisions regarding living at home and moving away, these being such things as regularity, accessibility and costs of transport as well as personal circumstances so any kind of defining boundary such as 60 miles was arbitrary. This was reinforced through meeting two students within the institution

who commuted regularly from London and through research undertaken by Donnelly and Gamsu (2018) who acknowledge that, whilst long distance commuters are rare (0.3% of their study), they nonetheless exist. For these reasons I have not separated this group into those who are likely to commute and those who are not, relying instead on the information provided by the students.

The nature of 'purpose-built student accommodation' is difficult to define. Until recently, it was usual for universities to provide halls of residence for students, often located closely to the institution and exclusive to its students. It was common practice to prioritise such accommodation for first years. This is no longer the case and, although Central University continues to own some accommodation which is offered exclusively to its students, this is increasingly limited, supplemented by accommodation provided by private companies. These companies might be recommended by the University to students but the accommodation is not managed by it. Such companies typically build accommodation in areas which allow easy travel to a number of local universities, facilitating access to students from different institutions. Whilst some companies market their properties exclusively to students, other private providers do not, making it difficult to define exactly the type of property used by individual students.

It is not necessarily easy to define what constitutes a 'local student'. The decision to distinguish between those traveling from within and those outside a 15 mile radius was made because it was likely that the former were within easy access to the campus, able normally to travel on public transport or car within a short period of time unlikely to be more than an hour in total. Students in category A were likely to be those who had studied at colleges and schools known to Central University through its local outreach work and therefore relevant to its stated ambition to serve its local communities. Some of them were likely also to have travelled similar distances to their places of education prior to university, particularly if they attended one of the large FE colleges which dominate post-16 education in the city.

More significant challenges are connected with the impact of internal and external factors which are inconsistent across different year cohorts. The first cohort of 2015 coincided with a move in the Faculty's location from a city suburb to a new purpose-built city centre campus. Allied to that move was the building of flats by the

University mainly for its first year students. For a variety of reasons, there were delays in the opening of the accommodation which resulted in students spending their first weeks in hotels provided by the institution. Many students and parents voiced their frustration about this, making it possible that early dissatisfaction amongst this cohort led some to withdraw.

A further difference was experienced by students in the 2017 cohort. Towards the end of these students' first year, the University's Academic Regulations underwent a review that led to significant changes designed specifically to improve continuation. Those changes were implemented at the end of the academic year 2017/18 therefore affecting decisions about students' progression into their next level of study. One specific change meant that all students failing their first year (including those who had already withdrawn from study) were offered the automatic right to repeat that year without academic penalty but with a requirement to pay fees. In previous years, these students would have failed and been withdrawn from study. For the purposes of this research and to ensure comparability with other cohorts, I have regarded any student eligible for this opportunity as having been withdrawn and this is how they are shown in the findings. However, despite this step being taken to minimise differences across cohorts, a further issue remains because the new Regulations enable students to be condoned for failing up to 40 credits, thus allowing students who in previous years would have been withdrawn to continue. I have not found it possible to identify those students who have been affected by this regulatory change and accept therefore that there is the likelihood of there being some inconsistency between the findings for the 2017/18 cohort and those of previous years. Despite this, I believe that patterns and trends in differences between those who remain at home and those who move away to study are still discernible as outlined in 4.1.

### **3.6 Focus groups and interviews: approach, design and challenges**

In Chapter 1 I draw attention to what I call a position of being a kind of 'double insider' in relation to my research, a position which presents challenges as well as benefits. As an institutional 'insider' it was relatively easy for me to gain access to the student participants; however, as Drever (1995:31) asserts,



*people's willingness to talk to you, and what people say to you, is influenced by who they think you are.*

As will be discussed in 3.7 the pilot study made me acutely aware that I had the capacity to influence Ben's student experiences so, in designing my research methods, there were a number of considerations in relation to positionality. It is important to note here that I had had no previous interaction with the participants before the research began and nor have I maintained contact with them since. I was careful to ensure that I introduced myself to the participants as a researcher rather than as my senior professional role within the institution and, as discussed below, considered at length whether my presence in the focus groups and interviews was necessary and, if so, how it might impact on the data.

Initially, I decided to use only focus groups believing such a method was suited to my research questions as they would '*elicit responses that better reflected the social reality of the interviewee*' (Madriz, 2003:837), therefore an effective means of collecting information about participants' perceptions. Discussion amongst participants would enable me as a researcher to remain slightly distant from the group thereby creating space where students could tell their own stories with minimum intervention from me. The question of distance, historically often used synonymously with 'objectivity' (Simnel, 1950; Merton, 1972; Burgess, 1984) caused me to consider whether my being physically present in the focus groups was likely to affect the validity or authenticity of the participants' stories, particularly if they believed my research could be used to impact on institutional policy and practice. It would have been possible to design the research in such a way that an intermediary such as a Student Success Adviser conducted and recorded the discussions so that, as a researcher, I would analyse the data from a position of anonymity as someone who could '*stand back and abstract material from the research experience*' (Burgess, 1984: 23). This, however, seemed artificial, unsuited to a narrative enquiry approach which actively values the relationship between the researcher and the participants and the role of the researcher in '*restorying*' (Creswell, 2008: 519) the stories told as these involve more than words and include tone and body language. As discussed in 3.6.1, I do however recognise that participants can '*fake the data*' (Connelly and Clandinin, 1990:10) and that this could be regarded as being more likely if the researcher is regarded as having influence over them. Deeper consideration of

research methods and discussion with supervisors about the collection of data led me to regard triangulation with more in-depth individual interviews necessary as a means of mitigating the potential for 'groupthink' and the domination of views by particularly vocal participants. I considered that, by using a combination of individual interviews with focus groups and conducting them in an unstructured, open-ended way, it was more likely that participants would tell their stories authentically without having any sense of any 'desirable' answer.

Focus groups were designed to be largely unstructured using prompt questions to elicit responses. I used what might be called a number of 'provocations' to collect data, the rationale being that these would allow individual voices to be heard without the direct imposition of a set series of questions that could lead to standard responses (see Appendix 2). Participants studied a range of different subjects, all of them situated within Central University's Faculty of Business, Legal and Social Studies.

Second year undergraduate students were invited to participate through the Faculty newsletter circulated weekly through email by Student Success Advisers – recent graduates of the Faculty who are employed to support the student experience. Students appear to relate more closely to these Advisers than to academic staff, perhaps because they are nearer in age and experiences to themselves, so were more likely to respond to their invitation than any I sent. It was important also that participants saw me from my position as researcher rather than as a senior member of staff because this might affect their desire to participate, especially if they regarded the interviews/focus groups as opportunities to influence institutional policies and practices through their presentation of their stories to me. For this reason the invitations to participate did not include information about who would be conducting the research.

Second year students were identified because they remained close enough to their first year experience to remember it whilst at the same time able to reflect on it from a distance. Those who were interviewed corresponded with 2017/18 entry so were in a position to have benefited from the changes in Academic Regulations explained in 3.5. As second year students, all the participants had successfully completed

their first year of undergraduate study and none, as far as I am aware, have subsequently withdrawn from the institution.

Attendance was voluntary making it likely that participants were already well-integrated into the University with some commitment towards it, enough to read the newsletter and volunteer to participate in the research. For example and as discussed in Chapters 4 and 5, several participants regularly took part in a number of extra-curricular activities, including acting as ambassadors for the university or as course representatives. This was particularly noticeable in the group of students who remained at home during their studies and may be a relevant feature in supporting them to make the transition into HE – something that will be considered later in Chapter 5.

Three focus groups were held, the first comprising mainly students who lived in student accommodation during their first year of study, the second mainly of students who had at home and the third a mixture of both (Appendix 3). All students were informed about the nature of the research (Appendix 4) and all gave permission for their comments to be used (Appendix 5). The composition of the first group was accidental in that most participants came from student accommodation so, in inviting participation in the second, I indicated that I was particularly keen to hear from those who lived at home. An unintended impact of the general invitation to participate is that three participants in the first focus group were friends who met during their first year having lived close to one another in student accommodation. Cohen et al (2018:533) believe '*focus groups operate more successfully if they are composed of relative strangers rather than friends*' because friendship groups can influence and dominate the discussion.

Focus group meetings were held with refreshments provided to encourage attendance and create an informal ambience in which conversation would take place naturally. As explored above, focus groups were unstructured but with prompt questions to encourage discussion and elicit responses (see Appendix 4). The intention was to empower participants to talk freely, without being constrained by over-structured questions which might limit responses and place me in an overt position of power. Morgan (1998:9) claims that focus groups are '*a way of listening to people and learning from them*' so the position of the researcher is one primarily of

creating opportunities for participants to talk in an environment where the *'multivocality of the participants limits the control of the researcher over the interview process'* (Denzin and Lincoln, 2003:641). Further, in their emphasis on collective experience, focus groups may, *'foster free expression of ideas, encouraging the members of the group to speak up.'* (Frey and Fontana, 1993:650).

It was my experience from both focus groups that this was indeed the case; students' comments stimulated others to join the discussion because they appeared to recognise and wish to contribute towards a shared experience. However, whilst focus groups may be more likely to elicit spontaneous responses, it is also the case that the presence of a researcher makes it *'difficult to discern how "authentic" the social interaction of (the group) really is'*. (Madriz, 2003:836). Since the focus groups and interviews were recorded, there is a risk that students were 'performing', knowing that their conversations were being captured and would be listened to again. As I will discuss in Chapter 4, there is occasionally a sense of performance in students' views about what they universally call 'uni-life'. However, the same might be said for any kind of interview where a recording is made or notes taken. As Maclure (2006:15) asserts, there is inevitably a,

*compromised access to truth, reality or other people' in qualitative research because it is 'tinged with the theatricality of performance and tainted by the guilty pleasures of the spectator.*

Arguably, however, the more informal nature of focus groups creates an environment where conversation is natural and the recording of it incidental, perhaps even forgotten by participants thereby offering opportunities for *'flexibility, spontaneity and responsiveness'* (Patton, 2002:343). My experience during the focus groups in particular and also the individual interviews, was that my role within them was largely that of facilitating discussion through open questions that generated authentic responses as can be seen in the power of some of the language used by participants, the overlapping themes that developed and, conversely, the different perspectives that are presented. In transcribing the words spoken and using them verbatim in my findings, I sought to remain faithful to those who privileged me by taking part in my research.

It is not the case, however, that focus groups are simply open forums where the role of the researcher is insignificant. Like institutional data, they are a site of production

where ideas are formed, shaped and reinforced by the participants and by the researcher. Cohen et al (2018:527) note how focus groups can lead to a 'party line' being offered where '*participants may collude in withholding information*'. Chapter 4. explores how the notion of 'uni-life' was produced and reinforced by students, particularly those who took part in focus group 1, a group dominated by those who had moved away to study and where three of them were friends.

There are challenges in holding focus groups in that the dynamics of the group are unpredictable, sometimes requiring intervention on the part of the researcher to enable all the participants to contribute because, as Fontana and Frey (1993:652) note, '*the group may be dominated by one person; and "groupthink" is a possible outcome*'. The first group was initially led by two particularly vocal participants whose views began to dominate those of others, some of whom appeared reluctant to contribute. As a researcher/interviewer, I chose to intervene in order to bring those others into the discussion and to moderate the influence of the two dominant participants. One of the strengths of the groups is that they generated a great deal of data because the participants appeared to find the subject interesting, perhaps because it enabled them to focus and reflect on personal experiences. As Cohen et al explain, (2018:32) focus groups stimulate discussion and, if facilitated appropriately, are an efficient means of gathering data on attitudes, perceptions and experiences.

I acknowledge that my position within the Faculty may have influenced the way that the students presented their attitudes: they may have wished to shock by stories of the 'decadence' of student life whilst at the same time assure me that they are successful students, keen to succeed at university. Similarly, they may have wished to impress one another by their ability to navigate the demands of both 'uni-life' and degree level work. Orne (1962:779) identified this effect using the term '*demand characteristics*' which he defines as,

*the totality of cues and mutual expectations which inhere in a social context...which serve to influence the behaviour and/or self-reported experience of the research receiver.*

Following the focus groups, individual interviews (Appendix 3) were recorded with four additional students, all of whom lived at home, as a means of comparing with the data that emerged from the focus groups. The individual interviews used the

same prompts as in the focus groups and might be better described as ‘talking heads’ rather than interviews because those prompts encouraged participants to talk with minimal intervention. These interviews provided depth, sometimes echoing the data that had emerged from the focus groups and sometimes offering contrast. By using individual interviews in addition to focus groups I sought to mitigate the performance element of the narratives because those interviews have no audience other than the researcher. Whilst, as Hammersley and Atkinson (1995:199) assert,

*one should not adopt a naively “optimistic” view that the aggregation of data from different sources will unproblematically add up to produce a more complete picture.*

the use of individual interviews provides a means of collecting data that are deeper, less likely to have been influenced by group dynamics and, perhaps, richer and more complex.

A challenge related to the issue of the position of the researcher in relation to crafting and structuring qualitative data is that of marginalisation. By its very nature the focus group or interview focuses on those who participate, thereby privileging their voices. My groups comprise those who continued with their studies at Central University. Those who did not are therefore marginalised and left voiceless. However, exploring the stories of those who have continued provides some insight into those who have not done so: all except one of the students involved in the research had considered leaving their courses at some point and articulated their reasons for rejecting this. Those narratives help inform the University as to how it might realign its practice to support those who did not continue.

### **3.6.1 Analysing the data from focus groups and interviews: reliability, validity and generalisability**

Hollingsworth and Dybdahl (2007:161) assert that ‘*Capturing and making sense of conversation is a slippery thing*’, a perspective which became increasingly relevant as I analysed the data. It became clear that the stories told in the focus groups in particular were at times repetitive, sometimes slightly rambling and disconnected. Hardin (2003:537) claims that compressing narrative data into themes can reduce the complexity of analysis; it was therefore important to ensure reliability through the systematic transcription and analysis of the narratives. Multiple readings of the

transcriptions revealed 'hot spots', or data that glow or cause a kind of 'wonder' when a comment or word '*exert a kind of fascination, and have a capacity to animate further thought.*' (Maclure, 2013:228). In an earlier text, Maclure (2006:9) identifies herself as using a 'baroque' style of analysing data which she describes as,

*an analytics of entanglement and displacement [which] resists building hierarchies, frameworks and abstractions.*

However, such an approach is contestable because it can lack structure and opens up questions about reliability and validity, particularly as what resonates with the researcher as a 'hotspot' may be entirely subjective. Ontologies such as those adopted by Maclure challenge not just the reliability of the research but question its purpose if it does not seek to answer the research questions through some kind of framework which engenders abstractions. Whilst as a researcher I have found myself to be both a writer and reader of text, the central tenets of research validity have to remain inviolable. Lincoln and Guba (1986) assert that validity is achieved through meticulous auditing of evidence, ensuring that participants confirm what they have said is accurate. This rigour ensures that the research validity is credible, transferable or generalisable, dependable and confirmable. I have sought to achieve this through the careful transcription and repeated reading of participants' stories, the faithful use of their language and the inclusion of data that is contradictory or inconclusive. Above all, I was guided by respect for the participants and the privilege they gave me by telling their stories.

Having transcribed verbatim the recordings of the focus groups and interviews verbatim I began to examine the data and identify themes within them. A key part of narrative research design is in the organisation of those identified themes so that they can be 're-storied' (Creswell, 2008:525) in a way that makes them better understood. Bourdieu's theories provided a means of analysing the data and organising them into themes which, although they overlap in places, are presented in seven sections, all with titles drawn from those theories. The first focuses on the doxa or game of 'uni-life' and is followed by sections that analyse the data using Bourdieu's theories of the consecration of identity; the effects of ritual on consecration; misrecognition; habitus and dispositions. The final section develops Bourdieu's concept of the game and how the orthodoxy can be overturned.

I recognise that my methods can be challenged. In listening to the stories told by the participants and re-storying them I have acted as an empathetic reader who finds their stories resonant and – crucially – as a writer who creates text from those stories. This is not an easy position because, on the one hand I seek authenticity whilst, on the other, I am in the privileged position of interpreting meaning from the stories of others. It is disingenuous to believe that the researcher acts simply as a conduit for others because any decision about the presentation is made by the writer/researcher who is irretrievably bound into the text. As Tierney (2000:543) explains,

*From a post-modern perspective, all authors, all narrators, are situated; the challenge is to come to terms with the positions in which they locate themselves.*

Similarly and as mentioned above, all narratives are told from particular perspectives and with a sense of audience – there would be no point to them otherwise. Participants in research are therefore not always reliable, a phenomenon explored by Watson (2006) who claims that narratives,

*serve to construct the relational process of ‘identification with’ that links individuals to discourse*

and can lead to exaggeration and a desire, particularly in group interviews, to voice similar perspectives. The students’ perceptions of ‘uni-life’ are perhaps, in places at least, an example of unreliable or, more correctly, exaggerated narration, particularly in the focus group comprising mainly participants who had moved away. My use of individual interviews as well as focus groups seeks to mitigate potential unreliability and establish dependability because there is less likelihood of participants becoming influenced by others or reinforcing others’ views by corroborating their stories. The careful analysis of the narratives to find themes that are generalisable is an important factor in ensuring reliability as is locating my findings within the standard materials in the field.

Margaret Atwood’s ‘Alias Grace’ (1996) offers inspiration for the structure of my research. In her novel which uses historical documentary evidence to recreate the story of the Irish heritage Canadian servant woman accused of murdering her master, Atwood structures different narratorial voices around the overarching framework of a quilt creating an overall picture which, although coherent, comprises



different themes and voices. By using the metaphor of quilting to shape her story, each chapter being prefaced by a reference to a particular style of quilt, Atwood is very conscious of her role as a 'crafter' of material into meaning. The text has been carefully constructed by the author who, although not overtly present in the book, is nonetheless responsible for its form, style and structure. Hutcheon (1988:5) describes this as '*historiographic metafiction*', a form of writing which demonstrates a '*theoretical self-awareness of history and fiction as human constructs*' in which the audience is presented with an overall picture, pieced together and crafted by the imaginative creativity of the author from a range of narratorial voices and source materials. Atwood consciously constructs a story 'quilt' not from fabric but from different voices and perspectives, creating a unified object or story from the threading together of fragments into blocks of meaning; in this there are synergies with what Yardley (2008) calls a 'bricolage' approach to research. Koelsch (2012: 823) uses the quilting metaphor to explain her research methodology,

*a social scientist can be seen as constructing theory out of disparate information including participant data, pre-existing theory and self-reflexivity ..... Similarly, the uniqueness of a patchwork quilt is in its construction; the quilter's skill level, the available materials, and the assumed purpose of the quilt limit it.*

In a sense, I see myself as similar to a 'quilter' – someone who crafts data together to construct a narrative just as, in her study of American quilters, Stalp (2007:36) describes quilts as '*meaningful-laden objects*' which weave together themes to form patterns that create a coherent whole. Just as a quilt is constructed into a unified object from fragments of materials, threads and blocks, I present my findings in themes, linked together from the voices of the participants to form an overall thesis. What I attempt to do in the presentation of the data is to create an overall picture made up of the themes which have emerged from my analysis of the focus groups and interviews. Those themes overlap and iterate and, to extend the metaphor, are threaded together with one another in places. In homage to Lyotard (1992:105) who suggests that we should '*give up any hope of incarnating the totality, or even of controlling it*' I have curated these into thematic findings presented as a '*collective assemblage of enunciation*' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987:24) that give voice to the participants but which are analysed and explored by me as researcher. That 'assemblage' has been grouped together in themes to which I have given names,

again in line with the practice of the craft. The data from these ‘stories from below’ are crafted together as a means of considering how the concept of student-hood might be re-imagined in ways that authentically represent the experiences of the majority of the University’s students: those who live at home. I recognise that there are potential pitfalls in presenting personal narratives as exemplars that illustrate a conceptual or theoretical point but believe that, in choosing to present data as short vignettes rather than as lengthy detailed case material, this is as Josselson, (2007:550) asserts,

*less problematic than when we use long case examples with extensive interpretation.*

### **3.7 Ethical considerations**

Narrative enquiry depends to a great extent on trust established between the researcher and the participant because such an approach requires the researcher to,

*obtain “data” from a deeply human, empathetic, and respectful relationship to the participant about significant and meaningful aspects of the participant’s life (Josselson, 2007: 539).*

As with any research it was important to ensure a contract with the participants which made explicit the purpose of the research, how it would be used and the freedom of participants at any time to withdraw from the study. (See Appendices 4 and 5). There is also, however, an implicit contract which establishes rapport that enables participants to share their stories in ‘*rich, emotional detail*’ (ibid) and which places great responsibility on the researcher to treat those stories with respect, fidelity and sensitivity.

In conducting this research, I sought to act in ways that were ethical and morally defensible by ‘*act(ing) in integrity and demonstrat(ing) trustworthiness and rigour*’ (Bullough and Pinnegar, 2001) and in accordance with the British Educational Research Association Guidelines (BERA, 2018). I am aware that my institutional position inevitably impacts on the responses of others towards me and the questions I ask. I attempted to mitigate this by inviting participation through the medium of the Faculty’s Student Success Advisory Team. At least one of those Advisers was present during the focus groups as I believed this would help participants feel more

comfortable and – perhaps – more confident to talk openly. There were points during the focus groups and interviews when sensitive information was disclosed and, on occasions, quite emotional responses elicited. For example, in one focus group two students express sadness or more correctly perhaps, a kind of wistfulness, because of their inability to participate as fully as they would like in university social and extra-curricular activities. Their narratives made me consider the position of the researcher in relation to the participants in two key ways, the first being the ethics of research which invites participants to share personal experiences thereby allowing sensitive and emotional issues to surface and the second connected with the position of the researcher to influence their experience within the institution. It is of great importance in any research to ensure that no harm, distress or anxiety is caused to participants who must be aware that they can withdraw at any point. Whilst I am confident that the discussion which took place within my research caused no harm, it became clear that ethical issues are much more complex than merely a '*matter of courtesy and commonsense*' (Gray, 2009: 68).

The pilot study discussed in 3.1 was useful from an ethical perspective in that the participant felt dissatisfied with his university experience, at times aggrieved by what he regarded as unfair treatment in the way that his exceptional circumstances claims were handled. Because it was a pilot study, I was able to intervene on his behalf at its end so he could complete his degree. I do not mean that I intervened to advantage him over others (BERA, 2018:20), but to arrange a meeting with his personal tutor to offer support specific to his circumstances. The personal tutor would have done so to any student in a similar position so my role was purely facilitatory. However, this made me highly aware of the possible conflicts and tensions involved in research that is located in one's workplace, particularly if the researcher has a position of influence or perceived power within it. It was important, therefore, to establish at the start of each focus group/interview that my role was solely that of researcher, but that raises further questions about the multiplicity of identities and the research implications of this. Not only do I research professional practice but I too share some of the characteristics of the 'new majority', being the first in my family to experience HE and a student who lived at home. Some of the feelings expressed by the participants resonated powerfully with me. Whilst from an academic position I was very aware that qualitative research is co-produced in that

that the researcher learns alongside the participants, I did not expect to feel so emotionally connected with those who lived at home, particularly with their views on feeling as outsiders and their need for the validation of their tutors. Whilst the very nature of narrative enquiry is that, in listening to the stories of others, the researcher '*understands one's own story*' (Beattie, 2001:vi) it remains important that positionality does not distort the stories of the participants. In analysing the data and constructing the 'grand narrative' that has emerged from the participants' stories, I made extensive use of their own words and precise language, a means by which their voices take precedence in Chapter 4.

I discuss in my conclusions the personal impact of my research but, in the meantime, raise it here as an ethical matter because of the power of emotion to influence judgement. Nor do I believe it possible to separate research from action and influence. Whilst ethically it would be wrong of me to intervene directly in individual situations which emerged during focus groups and interviews, educational research cannot be purely 'academic' and must have impact or influence in changing practice. My position privileges me to influence institutional strategy through membership of strategic committees and groups: I have certainly made use of my position to discuss some of the findings of this research and would want those findings to help shape the direction of the institution. Whilst not unethical, it raises questions regarding the position of the researcher in relation to power within the institution.

### **3.8 Summary**

This chapter has explored the research design, its validity and the rationale underpinning the methodology. It has evaluated the chosen approach, discussed the alternative methodologies that were considered and explored some of the ethical issues raised by the methods used. In addition it has identified some of the challenges and perils of narrative enquiry, seeking to justify it as an appropriate method with which to approach the research questions. The following chapter analyses the findings of the study and aligns them to the evidence from the literature review.

## **Chapter Four: Analysis of the Findings**

This chapter explores and critically analyses the data found through institutional secondary data and a series of focus groups and individual interviews. The intention of 4.1 is to analyse the secondary data to ascertain whether there are discernible differences in continuation rates between students who remain at home and those who move away to study. This section is followed by a short exploration of the model of student-hood that might be seen to be presented to potential students on Central University's website. The exploration is included to provide an illustrative context for the analysis of findings from the focus groups and interviews which are presented in response to research questions 2 and 3:

- What notions of 'student-hood' or 'uni-life' prevail in the institution and how do these impact on students' experiences and perceptions?
- How can the institution reimagine and reconceptualise 'student-hood' in ways that can be identified by those who form the majority of its students: those who live locally and at home during their first year of study?

### **4.1 Analysis of the secondary data: errors, omissions, distractions, distortions and limitations**

Whilst the term 'commuting students' is widely used within Central University with some data collected in relation to this generic group, such data does not yet differentiate between young and mature students and nor does it distinguish between those who travel lengthy distances and those who live much closer to the institution. As explored in 3.5, in using a broad generic term the institution groups together students whose experiences are likely to be very different from one another because commuting from a considerable distance is likely to present different issues from living close to the university. The term 'commuting students' therefore becomes a distraction in the secondary data because it omits narrower definitions that may be more accurate, thereby creating a distorted narrative about how the interests of such students might best be served. The impact of this distortion can be seen in some of Central University's solutions to support 'commuting students', for example in providing lockers and changing rooms, measures which are unlikely to make a significant difference to the experience of most of the students in this group who live local to the university.

I used raw data available from the student record system within the Faculty of Business, Legal and Social Studies. These data were taken from the admissions information recorded as the point of entry to the Faculty. The record system stores personal information collected during recruitment and at the point of admission about all the University's students, including their dates of birth, their entry qualifications and their home and term time addresses. This information is made accessible to relevant staff through the internal record system where students can also see their own data. Access to student records is controlled by the institution in compliance with the requirements of the 2016 General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).

In addition, the system records whether or not students have withdrawn from or progressed within their courses and includes the marks awarded for assessed work. The main purpose of Faculty-level information is to ensure that correct details of individual students are maintained so that degrees are calculated and awarded accurately. Its purpose inevitably determines what is collected and made available thereby making the data problematic in relation to its omissions, errors, distortions and distractions. As Taylor (2014:21) warns,

*It is important to look beneath a superficial message to understand how source data have been compiled; in particular, it is important to appreciate how such data can be manipulated.*

Some of the information about students relates to their academic qualifications, age, gender and ethnicity and is gathered by administrative staff through evidence such as that provided by UCAS. Other data, particularly those connected with addresses, are prone to error because they rely on the accuracy of information at a specific point in time, making assumptions that students have both a home and term time address. Although the data are used by the University to report on which students commute, it would appear that, at the point of collection, students are asked to provide both home and term-time addresses without checks as to their accuracy. As discussed in 3.5, the point of collection influences such data because some students may not have a term time address when they enrol, remaining at home until they have found suitable accommodation. Other students move into student accommodation initially but, for various reasons, return to the family home early in their studies and this is not captured in the data. An additional issue is that the University requires its students to make changes to their addresses via an online portal. This system leads

to inaccuracies as students change their accommodation but do not always update their records. Since most communication within the University is conducted via email rather than letter, including the publication of marks and degree classifications, there is little incentive to ensure accuracy.

There are purposes to the student records data other than the maintenance of records to ensure the accuracy of academic awards. Data held within the student record system are used by Central University's Planning Department to report to external regulatory bodies such as the OfS. As the requirements of these bodies change so too do institutional priorities. For example, the data I used did not at that time indicate what the OfS now reports as Indices of Multiple Deprivation using the following seven indicators of social and economic deprivation defined by The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (2019:4): income; employment; education, skills and training; crime; housing; living environment. These data are significant because they inform metrics used to compile the TEF and APP, thereby directly impacting on the reputation of the institution. Taylor (2014:21) warns it is therefore in the institution's interest to '*optimise its position*' through the judicious use of data. The data I used omitted these factors because they were not at the time made available or, as far as I know, collected in a form that made them reportable.

Internally the University uses data taken from the student record system to support its strategic aims and meet key performance indicators. For example, it routinely makes available to Faculty staff information about student performance in relation to admissions, continuation, progression and employment. As part of that information, students are grouped typically in accordance with gender, ethnicity and age, the purpose being to identify groups of students who perform less well so as to improve their outcomes. These performance data form the basis of regular course 'health checks' with a requirement that strategies are implemented to improve outcomes for 'under-performing' groups. However, the variables used to group students change in relation to shifts in external priorities and agendas. As mentioned above, the OfS now reports on IMD, impacting on the University's data collection and presentation, as well as on its strategic priorities. The process by which hardship funding is distributed, for example, has recently been adjusted so that it is more effectively targeted at those from specific IMD backgrounds and IMD is now used as a variable in the data considered in relation to student continuation, attainment and progression

into employment. A similar shift can be seen in the more nuanced approach recently adopted towards BAME students. Until recently, all non-white students were reported as one group but the APP now requires institutions to identify its students using a more detailed range of ethnic backgrounds and this is leading to more specific information about the performance of those groups in relation to one another.

For the purposes of the research, I focused on students aged 18-21 using the addresses stored on the student record system at the point of analysis to identify those who live within 15 miles of the institution, reporting their home and term time addresses as being the same. I have therefore omitted data related to gender, ethnicity or any other variable because the focus of my research is the impact of living at home or away on the students' experiences in their first year of study. I am aware, however, that the experiences of students who live locally can be seen from an intersectional perspective. By this I mean that living at home is only one feature of a number of overlapping issues, such as ethnicity, gender, social class, economic status that impact on students' experiences, making those experiences complex and complicated. Appendix 3 identifies the gender and broad ethnic identity of the participants; however, I have not foregrounded either these, social class or economic status in this research because my prime focus is on living at home as the central factor of the participants' experiences and how these might influence future institutional practice. However, it is important to acknowledge that, in exploring the data through a single lens, there are variables that are not controlled for in the research design and which are alluded to but not considered fully or in detail in the findings. As with any research, there are therefore limitations to the findings and, as noted in Chapter 5, much scope to explore the data from different intersectional perspectives. Whilst I recognise that intersectionality can help to identify, as Hill, Collins and Bilge (2016:63) explain, "*the many axes that work together and influence each other*" I have not adopted such an approach in my analysis of quantitative data, opting instead to explore these through the single lens of accommodation status as a means of identifying if such a status is worthy of investigation. My interest is in the 'singularity of experience' as told through narratives as a means of '*offer(ing) one of the possible ways of to confront the universal*' (Apfelbaum, 2001:173). In exploring some of the 'singularities' of the experiences of living at



home, I argue that a narrative emerges that, whilst it does not transcend the intersectionalities of class, gender and ethnicity, provides powerful insights into how a majority group of students can be marginalised, even in an institution which seeks to serve it.

There are limitations in using secondary data, defined by Sobal, (1981:149) as,

*a collection of data obtained by another researcher which is available for re-analysis.*

University data are collected for a variety of purposes and audiences therefore, like any kind of information, selected to present a particular narrative or 'story'. The data are collected not for research purposes but for administrative and reporting reasons. Similarly, the gathering and use of data are influenced by the University's priorities, often themselves defined by the requirements and priorities of external government. This means the collected data are flawed because they were not gathered initially as a means of studying commuting students but primarily for other purposes. In addition, numerical data such as that collected by the University are not neutral but socially constructed, collected, presented and analysed for specific purposes and audiences so it is important to recognise these and the context in which data are situated. Much of the data collected by the institution are quantitative, used to measure performance, improve it and position the University favourably in relation to others with choices being made about what are prioritised and what are marginalised. Smith (2008:328) warns of the pitfalls in the use of secondary data,

*it is full of errors, and also that because of the socially constructed nature of social data, the act of reducing it to a simple numeric form cannot fully encapsulate its complexity.*

The fact that I have not had control over the generation and collation of the secondary data inevitably means that there are limitations to the information it yields and how it can be used. As discussed in 3.5, the timing of some data collection impacts on the addresses given by some students. This is likely if they have enrolled comparatively late in the application process, possibly during the period known as 'clearing' when students typically apply to institutions they had not previously considered. If this is indeed true then it is possible that these students are less likely to continue with their studies because they were not fully committed when enrolling. A similar problem emerges regarding the dates of student withdrawals.

The data available do not include the precise date of withdrawal so it is not possible to draw from it those students who enrolled but withdrew without fully having started their courses. It is wise then to adopt a level of '*appropriate scepticism*' (Smith, 2010:336) in using secondary data and, indeed, to triangulate it with other sources of information, a methodology supported by Gorard (2002:351) who calls for a model which defines a problem '*by a relative-large scale analysis of numeric data*' followed by an examination of the problem using qualitative techniques.

#### **4.1.1 Findings from the analysis of secondary data**

The data presented in Table 3 demonstrates that Central University's proportion of live at home students is significantly higher than the sector average. The Faculty of Business, Legal and Social Studies has an even higher proportion than that of the institution.

Table 4 shows the proportion of Faculty students coded by accommodation type as outlined on p73 who withdrew during their first year. Analysis of the raw data demonstrates that, across all three years of entry from 2015-2017, the highest number of withdrawals comes from students in category A: those who live in the family home within 15 miles radius of the Faculty. Table 3 demonstrates that the difference in comparison with other coded groups is significant and that numbers and percentages of withdrawals from this group have increased over three years, with little improvement in 2017/18 despite the change in academic regulations which took place that year. Conversely, there has been a year on year improvement in the proportion of withdrawals from students living in purpose-built student accommodation. The figures pertaining to 2015/16 need to be read with some caution given that this is the year where university-built accommodation was late in being available to students, many of whom experienced a very disruptive time in their first three or four weeks having had to be temporarily relocated to hotels. It is possible that this disruption may have led to increased numbers of withdrawals as students are more likely to experience homesickness, uncertainty and isolation in these circumstances.

**Table 3: Live at home students as a percentage of the undergraduate cohort at national, institutional and Faculty level**

2016/17 entry (all UG students)	Sector	Central Uni	Faculty	Business	Legal studies	Social studies
Commuting students	25%	63%	68.4%	73.9%	75.9%	57.3%

**Table 4: Business, Legal and Social Studies students withdrawing during first year of study (as % of intake)**

	All students	A <sup>5</sup>	B <sup>6</sup>	C <sup>7</sup>	D <sup>8</sup>	E <sup>9</sup>
2015/16 entry	17.6% 282/1606	8.9% 143/1606	3.4% 54/1606	4.7% 76/1606	0.6% 9/1606	0% 0/1606
2016/17 entry	18.5% (292/1579)	10.3% 162/1579	4.3% 68/1579	3.5% 55/1579	0.4% 6/1579	0.1% 1/1579
2017/18	18% 321/1784	10.2% 182/1784	4.2% 75/1784	2.9% 51/1784	0.7% 12/1784	0.1% 1/1784

Table 5 conflates the groups of students to demonstrate that, in terms of raw numbers and percentages, the highest proportion of withdrawals across the Faculty is from students who live at home. Whilst there have been year on year improvements for those who live away, this is not the case for live at home students, the proportion of whom increased in 2016/17 with only marginal improvement in the following year.

**Table 5: Business, Legal and Social Studies students withdrawing during first year of study (as % of intake) – live at home v live away from home**

	Living at home (A + B)	Living away from home (C+D+E)
2015/16 entry	12.3% 197/1606	5.3% 85/1606
2016/17 entry	14.6% 230/1579	4% 62/1579
2017/18	14.4% 257/1784	3.7% 64/1784

<sup>5</sup> Students who live at their home addresses during both term and vacation time and commute no more than from a 15 mile radius of the Faculty's campus.

<sup>6</sup> Students who live at their home addresses during both term and vacation time and commute from outside a 15 mile radius of the Faculty's campus.

<sup>7</sup> Students who live away from their home addresses during term time in accommodation which has been purpose-built for students.

<sup>8</sup> Students who live away from their home addresses during term time in accommodation other than that which has been purpose-built for students, and which is situated within a 15 mile radius of the Faculty's campus.

<sup>9</sup> Students who live away from home in accommodation other than that which is purpose-built for students, and which is situated outside a 15 mile radius of the Faculty's campus.

Tables 6 and 7 show the data in relation to 18-21 year olds at the point of entry to their courses, demonstrating that there is little difference between these students and those who are older than 21 at point of entry. Again, whilst the proportion of those withdrawing who live away from home has reduced over three years, there was an overall increase in 2016/17 of those who live at home and a very limited improvement in the following year.

**Table 6: Business, Legal and Social Studies students aged 18-21 withdrawing during first year of study (as % of intake)**

	All 18-21 year olds	A	B	C	D	E
<b>2015/16 entry</b>	17.3% 254/1466	8.7% 128/1466	3.1% 45/1466	4.9% 72/1466	0.6% 9/1466	0% 0/1466
<b>2016/17 entry</b>	18.1% (267/1474)	9.9% 146/1474	4.3% 63/1474	3.5% 51/1474	0.4% 6/1474	0.1% 1/1474
<b>2017/18 entry</b>	18% 297/1652	10% 166/1652	4.2% 69/1652	3% 49/1652	0.7% 12/1652	0.1% 1/1652

**Table 7: Business, Legal and Social Studies students aged 18-21 withdrawing during first year of study (as % of intake) – live at home v live away from home**

	Living at home (A + B)	Living away from home (C+D+E)
<b>2015/16 entry</b>	11.8% 173/1466	5.5% 81/1466
<b>2016/17 entry</b>	14.2% (209/1474)	3.9% 58/1474
<b>2017/18 entry</b>	14.2% 297/1652	3.8% 62/1652

The data presented in Tables 3-6 can initially be interpreted as demonstrating that those students who live at home appear to be more susceptible to early withdrawal than others; however, these tables show the withdrawals as a percentage of the whole cohort and do not account for the fact that the Faculty has high numbers of live at home students therefore likely to have proportionately high numbers of withdrawals from this group.

A more nuanced approach is taken in Table 7 which explores percentages of withdrawals from each category and provides some different narratives. Here the likelihood of disruptions in university purpose-built accommodation appears possibly to be relevant but of more interest are the disparities between the year on year improvements in withdrawal outcomes for those who live in purpose-built student accommodation and those who live at home where those outcomes have

deteriorated on a yearly basis from 2015. Given that the rationale behind the recent changes to Academic Regulations is to improve continuation, it would appear from early data that such changes are impacting most significantly on those who live away, making little difference to those who remain at home. The differences are particularly noticeable for students who remain living at home, commuting more than 15 miles to university. Whilst it can be seen that there are variations across withdrawals in category D, numbers here are much lower so more likely to be skewed by very few students.

Tables 8 and 9 show the differences in outcomes more starkly, indicating that whilst there are year on year reductions in the percentages of students living away from home withdrawing, there are converse increases in those who live at home. Of particular note is the considerably higher percentage of withdrawals for the Group C 2015/16 entry. As discussed previously (3.5; 4.1.1), it is possible that this results from problems with student accommodation at the start of this year.

Again, the findings may indicate that amendments to the academic regulations do not yet appear to have benefited live at home students whilst the reverse is true for those who live away, thereby possibly contributing to an increased gap in outcomes between the two groups. It is possible only to be tentative at this point because it is not clear if the correspondence between the application of the new regulations and the outcomes above is anything other than coincidental.

**Table 8: BLSS students withdrawing during first year of study (types of accommodation)**

	<b>All students</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>B</b>	<b>C</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>E</b>
<b>2015/16 entry</b>	17.6% 282/1606	16.7% 143/858	18.8% 54/287	26.6% 76/286	5.2%% 9/172	0% 0/3
<b>2016/17 entry</b>	18.5% (292/1579)	19% 161/849	27% 69/256	19.3% (55/285)	3.2% (6/186)	33.3% 1/3
<b>2017/18 entry</b>	18% 321/1784	19.3% 182/942	27.9% 75/269	14.4%% 51/355	5.6%% 12/216	50% 1/2

**Table 9: BLSS students withdrawing during first year of study (types of accommodation) – live at home v live away from home**

	Living at home (A + B)	Living away from home (C+D+E)
<b>2015/16 entry</b>	17.2% 197/1145	18.4% 85/461
<b>2016/17 entry</b>	20.8% 230/1105	13.1% 62/474
<b>2017/18 entry</b>	21.2% 257/1211	11.2% 64/573

Tables 10 and 11 show withdrawal outcomes for those aged 18-21 at the point of entry. These figures show similar patterns to those for all students regardless of age, again indicating that improvements in year on year withdrawal outcomes are significant for those who live in student purpose-built accommodation whilst there is a year on year deterioration in these figures for those who remain at home.

**Table 10: Business, Legal and Social Studies students aged 18-21 withdrawing during first year of study (as % of intake)**

	All 18-21 year olds	A	B	C	D	E
<b>2015/16 entry</b>	17.3% 254/1466	17.3% 128/766	17.8% 45/253	26% 72/277	5.4% 9/167	0/3
<b>2016/17 entry</b>	18.1% (267/1474)	18.9% 146/771	26.4% 63/239	18.3% 51/279	3.3% 6/182	33.3% 1/3
<b>2017/18 entry</b>	18% 297/1652	19.6% 166/848	28.3% 69/244	14.2% 49/345	5.6% 12/213	50% 1/2

**Table 11: Business, Legal and Social Studies students aged 18-21 withdrawing during first year of study (as % of intake)- live at home v live away from home students**

	Living at home (A + B)	Living away from home (C+D+E)
<b>2015/16 entry</b>	17% 173/1019	18.1% 81/447
<b>2016/17 entry</b>	20.7% 209/1010	12.5% 58/464
<b>2017/18 entry</b>	21.5% 235/1092	11.1% 62/560

#### 4.1.2 Questions arising from the analysis

The data above are of interest for a number of reasons, presenting a range of areas for further exploration through narrative enquiry. It may be that students who live at home face different challenges from those who move away, making them less likely to continue with their studies. It is possible that such students live at home for economic reasons or because of domestic commitments that add to the challenge of

transitioning into HE. If this is the case, living at home is not necessarily a defining feature of these students. Conversely, those who move away from home may be from more affluent backgrounds which enable them to pay the costs of student accommodation, making them less dependent on part-time jobs to manage their finances at university. It is possible also that they are more likely to continue because they have committed themselves to private accommodation which can be difficult to leave without incurring financial penalty. However, it is unlikely that this is a factor influencing outcomes because the data used are taken from the end of year figures when students would have withdrawn even had they waited until their accommodation contracts had expired. Since the lowest percentage of withdrawals and the greatest improvements in continuation come from those students living in purpose-built student accommodation, it is possible that students living together with other students form relationships and identities that support them academically, socially and emotionally. Typically, those living in purpose-built student accommodation in first year move out to live in private housing shared with other students during the remainder of their studies. One interpretation is that these students are motivated to continue by their early commitment to private accommodation in second year. However, there is as yet no institutional narrative around these improvements which do not appear at this point to have been identified by the University, possibly because the OfS now determines how students are grouped together for analysis of performance both within individual institutions and across the sector. The OfS's influence is such that it shapes institutional narratives through the creation of priority groups, thereby having the potential to distract attention away from data that may be irrelevant to those groups as appears to be the case here.

It is not clear why the percentage of live home students recruited to the School of Social Studies is much lower. Possibly this is because access to law and business courses is more clearly signposted through the qualifications that students have studied locally prior to entry. It is possible that courses explicitly linked with an employment pathway such as law or business are more attractive to local students who appear to be more concerned about the financial implications of university than others and may therefore be more inclined towards degrees that appear to lead directly into employment. I have not pursued this in my data collection because my

main research focus is on continuation across the Faculty rather than admission patterns across Schools.

Of great interest is the early evidence that institutional changes to academic regulations do not appear at this stage to have impacted positively on overall continuation rates. Instead, they correspond with deteriorating outcomes for students who remain at home, and improvements for those who move away and who live in purpose-built student accommodation. If those who move away are indeed more affluent, less worried by costs than those who live at home, then the regulatory changes which allow a resit year at the cost of full tuition fees may exert the unintended effect of benefiting those who are economically privileged whilst making little difference to those who come from less advantaged backgrounds or, indeed, to overall outcomes.

## **4.2 Analysis of the findings from focus groups and interviews**

I argue that statistical data are used to tell stories, often by those who determine institutional priorities, policies and strategies. Such official narratives might be regarded as ‘the stories from above’. Whilst the findings from the data explored in 4.1.1 and 4.1.2 appear to indicate that live home students are more susceptible to early withdrawal, they do not explain why this may be the case. It is my belief that, through listening to the narratives of students – ‘the stories from below’ – there is opportunity to develop greater understanding of students’ early experiences in Central University and how these may impact on continuation.

The next sections analyse and reflect on the key findings from the focus groups and interviews held with 20 students, all of them in their second year in the Faculty of Business, Legal and Social Studies (Appendix 3)<sup>10</sup>. All participants began their undergraduate studies in 2017/18 so are from the cohort which demonstrated the most significant withdrawal gap between those students who lived at home and those who moved away to study.

### **4.2.1 The doxa of ‘Uni-life’ – a model of student-hood?**

Bourdieu’s theory of how the doxa - a set of values and beliefs - establishes a status quo which goes unchallenged offers a framework with which to interpret how the

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<sup>10</sup> All students have been given pseudonyms to protect their identities.



participants themselves appear to contribute towards the production of a view of student-hood that is founded on living away from home. A fascinating feature of the student narratives is the way in which they all, regardless of living arrangements, concurred with a view that early university life is focused almost exclusively on socialising. Indeed, it might be said the participants themselves reinforced a narrative that 'uni-life' - a phrase they used frequently often accompanied by the physical gesture of 'air quotation marks' - is entirely separate from study and that being a student is a kind of lifestyle dominated by social activities. Moreover, there appears to be an implication that only those who move away from home can fully experience it. The data used in the next sections are taken directly from the focus groups and interviews and used to reflect on the orthodox model of 'uni-life', in particular the central antimony of how students adhered to the concept of student-hood that permeate it, even when they did not themselves conform with the behaviour identified with that concept.

In a powerful moment in the first focus group comprising mainly move away students Natasha, one of only two live home participants in that group, explained her frustration during her first weeks at university with those who lived in student accommodation and whom she regarded as prioritising social life over studying. Despite her irritation, she regarded them tolerantly because, '*That's just 'uni-life'.*' Her view of 'uni-life' recurred frequently throughout the focus groups and interviews, becoming a motif that echoed across the findings. Interestingly, though shared by most participants as the normative view of becoming a student, the term was often used to indicate a point of difference between those who lived at home and those who moved away. For the latter it was an important part of separation from their previous lives,

*Uni-life helped me break away from home routines. Went to loads of parties.*  
(Shantelle)

*I know loads of people who have come just for 'uni-life'. It's the most important thing at first.* (Sally)

The former group tended to be more disparaging; in a particularly strong rejection of 'uni-life', Yusuf said,

*I already have a life. I don't need it ('uni-life'),*

a point echoed by Aisha who asserted,

*I don't want that full 'uni-life' experience. I'm here to get a degree and that's it. I'm happy with that.*

However, this was not universally the case. Poignantly, a few live at home students expressed sadness that they were excluded from 'uni-life', Anjelica explaining that she was prevented from participation because,

*My parents said no. I can't do 'uni-life'. I can go to tutor-y things but not anything extracurricular.*

In exploring how communities of practice are developed, Wenger (1998:59) describes how they,

*produce abstractions, tools, symbols, stories, terms and concepts that reify something of that practice in a congealed form.*

Wenger's theory is relevant to the students' concept of 'uni-life', a term which is nebulous, malleable, used to encompass a range of meanings both positive and negative, thereby reifying the concept whilst maintaining its fluidity and its universality. Using a theoretical framework drawn largely from Bourdieu but with some reference to Foucault, this section explores how students' conceptions of 'uni-life' may be reinforced by Central University itself, thereby creating a '*regime of truth*' that marginalises those who do not conform to those conceptions.

Foucault (1977:201) believes that institutions create their own normalising gaze causing,

*a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power.*

A brief overview of Central's website illustrates how the University may unintentionally reproduce a powerful view that student-hood is essentially about having fun and is best experienced by moving away from home. In it a student, Hannah, is deployed to offer advice to prospective students,

*Living in student accommodation is the best way to gain independence, make friends that will last a lifetime.....*

Hannah's confident assertions are accompanied by photographs of students embodying what might be described as 'uni-life'. Wearing party hats and identical tee-shirts which unite them as a group, they look confidently into the camera,

implicitly telling their audience that this is how students behave. The tee shirts celebrate their shared participation in a freshers' event known as 'Carnage', sending what seems to be the message that they have been initiated into 'uni-life'. Ironically, far from the anarchy or havoc associated with carnage, they are in fact merely complying with the dominant discourse, adopting the physical attitudes and dispositions associated with 'uni-life' through what Bourdieu would call their '*bodily hexis*'. (1992:69-70). In using these materials, the University markets what is essentially a hedonistic image of student life that may not be relevant to many of its students nor, indeed, conducive to the creation of a learning environment which improves continuation rates. The marketisation of HE has led here to an interesting institutional tension between the University's commodification of a fun-filled student 'lifestyle', presumably because this is seen as being attractive to potential students, and its commitment to high quality teaching which improves continuation and attainment rates. Whilst that tension is not irreconcilable, my findings indicate that it can create conflicting messages about the purpose of HE that are particularly confusing for those students who live at home and, for a variety of reasons, do not take part in events such as 'Carnage'.

In a sense, Hannah and friends are 'obeying the rules' of a stereotypical version student-hood and, whilst those rules may not apply to the majority of students at Central, they contribute towards the University's institutional habitus which,

*is a practical sense which reactivates the sense objectified in institutions* (Bourdieu, 1977:67).

Hannah and her friends, supported by the university's website, might be said to experience a '*powerful synergy*' (Reay et al, 2009:1129) between habitus and field which reinforces their confidence, empowering them as students because,

*when habitus encounters a social world of which it is the product, it is like a 'fish in water': it does not feel the weight of the water and it takes the world about itself for granted* (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 127).

The same website does however recognise that not all students move away to study, counteracting Hannah's view of 'uni-life' with one that is more relevant to the majority of the University's students, telling them that it is '*okay*' to live at home. The anonymous speaker offers some well-intended advice,

*You may have to invest a little more effort into building new friendships if you aren't living in student accommodation, but you'll soon realise there's lots of other students in the same position as you. If you take the time to really talk to people and actively socialise you will build great friendships.*

However, the language presents a view that those who live at home act against the norm, the onus being on them to '*invest*' more effort, '*take the time to really talk to people*' and '*actively socialise*' if they wish to make friends. Studying is not mentioned. The disembodied voice may serve to reinforce the message that there is no live at home equivalent of Hannah, despite the assurance that there are lots of others 'like you', and to perpetuate a common view that remaining at home represents '*an inferior model of participation in HE*' (Holdsworth, 2006:495).

In his work on cultural capital Bourdieu (1987:4) explains the correlation between,

*social capital, which consists of resources based on connections and group membership, and symbolic capital, which is the form the different types of capital take once they are perceived and recognised as legitimate.*

The University website appears to sustain a view that the symbolic capital of the university is one where the legitimacy of student-hood corresponds with moving away from home to study, a position which is alien to the majority of its students but which appears to remain its institutional habitus. Despite its attempts to reassure students that remaining at home is a legitimate choice, the University reproduces the traditional model of student-hood perhaps because it does not recognise its own,

*set of dispositions which incline agents to act and react in certain ways. The dispositions generate practices, perceptions and attitudes which are 'regular' without being consciously co-ordinated or governed* (Thompson, 1991:12).

When those dominant dispositions cannot be acknowledged because they are misrecognised by the institution, a kind of symbolic violence '*which only acts on social agents with their complicity*' (Poupeau, 2000:70) might be said to be enacted on live at home students who do not see themselves in those dispositions but do not yet challenge them because they themselves regard them as normal practice.

Bourdieu argues that individuals within society '*produce structures they need to safeguard the originating social condition*' (Robbins, 2000:61) so creating a habitus

in which values are embodied and perpetuated even when those structures are obsolete or no longer relevant. He develops the concept of 'misrecognition' to explain how individuals who feel comfortable within their habitus accept certain ideas, values and beliefs as 'second nature' or 'common-sense, failing to recognise that these notions are produced by social agents and that they themselves are caught up in their production. Ironically, in seeking to communicate in a warm, reassuring way to the majority of its students who live at home to study, Central may misrecognise its own position as 'the University **for** its city' by validating the orthodoxy that university life is best experienced by living in student accommodation and that those who do otherwise are rejecting what Bourdieu calls 'the doxic attitude',

*a self-evident and natural order which goes without saying and therefore goes unquestioned (Bourdieu, 1977:165).*

Seen through a Bourdieusian lens, the field is about legitimacy and authentic membership of that legitimacy: those who live at home must therefore work harder in order to try to fit in because, as inauthentic students, they do not truly belong to the group. As discussed in Chapter 2, much of the literature emphasises the importance of students fitting in and feeling a sense belonging in the early stages of their transition to higher education. Central University's marketing material demonstrates awareness of this but promotes the 'game' of settling into the institution as participation in social activities outside of teaching, rather than through a learning community where sustained relationships are likely to be made. As will be discussed later in this chapter, my findings indicate that those who live at home feel, for a number of different reasons, outsiders to that game. However, as Wacquant (2007:268) points out, fields are dynamic and can be likened to,

*historical constellations that arise, grow, change shape and sometimes wane or perish over time.*

My findings indicate that the game may well be beginning to change, an important point that will be returned to in 4.2.7.

#### **4.2.2 Identity, validation and the consecration of difference**

In his exploration of how arbitrary rites are legitimated or consecrated, Bourdieu (1991:11-9) provides a means of understanding how the orthodoxy of moving away

and creating a new identity remains pervasive in reproducing a sense of 'difference' between those who move away to study and those who live at home. As outlined in 4.2.1 all the participants shared a view that early 'uni-life' is essentially about socialising and making friends. On occasions a sense of inferiority can be seen in the comments of some participants who believed that they had missed out on an 'authentic' student experience because they had not moved away from home. In one particularly painful statement, Anjelica echoed the orthodoxy spoken by Hannah who claimed that friends for life were made at university but this time from the perspective of being an 'outsider',

*You're told that your best friend is found in university. Well, I haven't found mine so living at home means I am missing out.....*

Similarly, Amna explained starkly that,

*I wanted to. (Move away from home) But I can't because they (parents) won't let me so I just have to put up with it.*

However, those views were not universal amongst live at home participants; on the contrary, my research indicates that many were comfortable with their position and had consciously chosen it having considered alternatives. Kevin said,

*I know people here (at the University). Some of my family came here so made sense for me to come.*

For Naseem, family was also important,

*I wanted to live at home. You have people to help you especially at home.*

Lily pointed out,

*I don't really like the idea of living with lots of others. Feel like I am independent at home and didn't need that experience (of living in university). Having to get on with people I didn't know. I only applied to local universities and didn't look at any outside commuting distance.*

Mike said,

*It was a no-brainer. My parents didn't want me to get into debt and staying at home allows me to save money.*

Naseem, Mike, Lily and Kevin are representative of students who have consciously chosen to live at home rather than because they have no alternative options.

However, despite asserting choice, participants who remained at home were almost

unanimous in expressing feelings of being different from those who lived in student accommodation, often being surprised to learn that they were in the majority within the University,

*I felt odd.....I only got to know people in my course groups and I only saw a few of them because the others didn't come into lessons.*  
(Natasha)

*I didn't feel like a normal university student.* (Lily)

*Really?* (on being informed that live at home students form the majority in the University). *I find that really hard to believe as I always think I am the odd one out.* (Warren)

Their surprise at learning that most students living at home share an experience of 'uni-life' that may be closer to their own appears to support the view that, despite its demographic being composed mainly of such students, the University continues to reproduce an institutional habitus that contributes towards them feeling different from the norm. Whilst not themselves fully participating in 'uni-life', live at home students nonetheless reinforced the dominant discourse, albeit with reservations about it and seemingly without a fully developed recognisable model of student life in which to position themselves. There is an irony here in that live at home students are themselves the model of student-hood – the new majority as defined by Ross (2016) - in their university but, because '*normalisation (is) one of the great instruments of power*' (Foucault, 1977:184), regard themselves as outsiders.

The findings demonstrate this sense of 'difference' when live at home participants conveyed frustration about what they perceived to be the more casual attitudes of those who have moved away, particularly in the early stages of their courses when the former group appear were very focused on studying :

*I knew I was different from the start.....I wanted to work, not play around.* (Grace)

*I and about two others were the only ones attending at first...it was really annoying as they got away with it.* (Aisha)

*I'm the opposite of that. I was the only one that turned up (at teaching sessions) because I wasn't out at parties every night.* (Natasha)

It would appear that the orthodox model of early student-hood as a time almost exclusively for socialising can be disorienting and alienating, challenging their

identities as students who wish to, as Grace put it, '*work, not play around*'. Her later comments and those of Warren indicate that this disorientation becomes more profound if academic staff appear not to recognise how seriously they take their work from the start of their courses:

*It really pissed me off that I went to everything but it didn't matter. No one said well done or anything.* (Warren)

*There was nowhere to go (for support when the course team did not provide consistency of advice and guidance). I don't want to rely on family, feel a failure, don't want to say this to anyone.* (Grace)

Warren's comment is fascinating because it draws attention to a tension between his desire to be a conscientious student and a failure of the University in the shape of his tutors to recognise and value his commitment. The commodification of HE as a kind of lifestyle lends itself to this tension: if 'uni-life' is marketed mainly about making friends and socialising, where does such a perception position those like Warren who wish to be recognised for their attitude to their studies? It is true that his frustration and Grace's sense of isolation do not necessarily stem from living at home and could be experienced by any student. However, their words capture something about the early experiences of live at home students that resonates with a recurring theme: the importance of tutors in providing them with validation that they are coping with the transition to university,

*I felt so disillusioned when I failed one piece of work. I really wanted to do well and was trying so hard but no one seemed to think it mattered (that he had failed). It made me feel more and more worried and confused.* (Kevin)

*The assessment wasn't clear and lecturers were telling us different things so not sure who to believe. I thought I was going to fail.* (Patrick)

I contend that, whilst many students regardless of their living arrangements may feel as Grace, Kevin and Patrick at some point during their studies, those who live at home may be particularly sensitive to feelings of disillusion and failure because, unlike those who live closely with peers who validate them and their behaviour, they are more likely to feel 'different'. If, as I argue, 'uni-life' champions a concept of student-hood or 'lifestyle' linked with moving away, that sense of isolation is likely to become more profound if academic members of staff are perceived not to offer the



encouragement, guidance and validation they seek. If live at home students do not see themselves as 'authentic' in terms of their social interactions, they may begin to regard themselves as inauthentic in terms of their academic identities, making them more likely to discontinue their courses.

Conversely, it can be conjectured that students who live away gain self-esteem from being accepted by their peers in student accommodation and by conforming to their normalising gaze. By perpetuating notions of 'uni-life' they are more likely to feel an early sense of belonging within Central University as a result because the norm they embody is recognised, shared and implicitly condoned by the institution. It is possible then that, in the absence of a clear sense of student identity and the shared language with which to articulate it, those who remain at home are more reliant on academic staff than their peers to give them confidence in their identities as students, making them more susceptible to non-continuation if this does not happen. As discussed in 2.3, a marketised model of HE which measures 'performance', partly through the regulation of lecturers' time and 'outsourcing' of support to central services is likely to diminish the emotional dimensions of learning that Kevin, Patrick, Warren and Grace seek.

#### **4.2.3 Routine, rituals and temporality: rites of institution**

In a study of how universities were shaped by the monasteries of the Middle Ages, Fadeeva (2014) claims that students embark on a period comparable to a pilgrimage where they separate from past lives, entering a liminal state shared with their fellow 'travellers'. The detachment by pilgrims from their earlier position in the social structure holds symbolic significance, allowing them to begin a rite of transition or passage,

*associated with a certain mystical quality, its ability to transfer from one state to another* (Turner and Turner, 2011:24).

Not only was this rite enacted through physical separation from secular life, but through the adoption of rituals taking place when those outside the institution were likely to be sleeping or working thereby further separating initiates from 'normal life'.

The universities developed from this model of separation with students entering colleges where communal life, punctuated with periods of individual study, was followed. Whilst post-92 HE institutions are far removed from mediaeval monasteries

and universities, they retain some of their rites, rituals and language, for example: the wearing of academic gowns at graduation; the organisation of time into periods aligned with the liturgical calendar; the language associated with degree awards. In doing so, they reproduce a constructed model of student-hood rooted in exclusivity, separation and difference which may therefore alienate students such as those who live at home because they do not comply absolutely with all aspects of that difference.

Narrative enquiry seeks to understand human experience through the way in which meaning is interpreted from participants' stories. Polkinghorne (1988:7-8) argues,

*the realm of meaning appears in different modes of presentation, such as perception, remembrance and imagination.*

Whilst novelists are not researchers, they present meanings about human experience from their observations, memories and imagination which correspond sympathetically with narrative enquiry methodologies and which I draw upon here. In his novel, 'Nice Work' (1988: 29) David Lodge exemplifies the separation between 'town and gown' in describing the fictional University of Rummigen from the perspective of self-made industrialist, Vic Wilcox, for whom it is,

*an academic Vatican from which he keeps his distance, both intimidated by and disapproving of its air of privileged detachment from the vulgar, bustling industrial city.*

Whilst Vic is governed by the demands of 'industry time', his alarm waking him at the same time each day, Dr Robyn Penrose, working for him as part of her university's staff work experience scheme, occupies a different time zone where she has been researching the industrial novel '*for something like ten years*' (ibid:60). Like Vic, some of the live at home participants implied not only that they felt excluded by their peers who lived in student accommodation but that they disapproved of what they regarded as their full immersion or initiation into the social life of university because it impacted on attendance at taught sessions. Not only are they separated by location but, like Vic and Robyn, by time.

*If they live in halls they say 'I'm tired – I'm going home for a nap' so you end up alone in university.'*(Natasha)

*It was hard to get to know people because most people were too tired to come in to classes. They'd been up all night with their friends in hall (student accommodation. (Mariam)*

The students participating in my study shared a common view that 'uni-life' was somehow separate from the lives they had experienced before but, as might be expected, this was expressed more profoundly by those who had moved away from home. This may be because, as suggested in 4.2.1 participants regarded 'uni-life' as almost entirely disconnected from study, associated largely with a new social world that was shared predominantly with those with whom they now lived. For them, entering 'uni-life' brought with it initiation into a new habitus of communal relationships and relationships where even a different timeframe was followed. My findings demonstrate that, whilst students make individual choices depending on their own preferences and interests which are not determined necessarily by their living arrangements, those participants in my research who lived at home indicated that they were less likely to participate in university-led social events because they did not regard them as being part of their student habitus.

Bourdieu (1991:118) explains the importance of such institutional rites in creating division and separation. My research indicates that the way in which time is experienced by those who live at home differs from those who move away. All of those who had moved away to study alluded to a kind of time pattern to the first year where the first few weeks and months were seen as being mainly for fun and partying. Even if they did not fully embrace this lifestyle themselves, they promoted the view that this was what 'everyone' was doing. In Foucauldian terms, the participants accepted the dominant discourse about students, even if that discourse did not fully reflect their own experience of being a student. In explaining symbolic power, Bourdieu (1991:23) explains how it,

*requires as a condition of its success, that those subjected to it believe in the legitimacy of power and the legitimacy of those who wield it .*

Again, the University's website reinforces a view that students embark on a new life away from home,

*So to help you prepare for your new life at uni we've got a five-step guide that will help you feel at home before you know it.*

The initiation message is captured in a photograph of partying students which promotes both the separation of 'uni-life' from study and the notion of a shared, communal experience centred not on worship, prayer or even a subject discipline but on socialising. It is ironic that the University, most of whose students live at home during their studies, appears to produce a concept of 'uni-life' that is removed from their experience, thereby exercising a kind of symbolic power that may alienate the majority of its audience who nonetheless subscribe to its legitimacy, even if, as will be explored later, it *'isn't for them'*. As one said bluntly,

*Why would I go to welcome week? I know (the city) anyway.* (Yusuf)

Using a powerful metaphor connected with physical escape, another student expressed her sadness at being excluded from welcome week,

*I wanted one night to go out and kick out of my box but mum and dad wouldn't let me. Uni needs to do things in the evening on timetable.*  
(Anjelica)

The separation between those who live at home and those who lived in student accommodation was reinforced in a kind of exaggerated, somewhat exclusive language used by the latter to describe the ritualistic period of initiation into 'uni-life' that Bourdieu explains as a rite of institution. One student for example described himself as *'constantly sleep-deprived'* (Sean), another explaining that this was because there *'were parties every single night and no one ever slept.'* (Sally) Another suggested that she was *'constantly'* being asked *'let's go clubbing'* with a description of a routine in student accommodation where,

*You're just getting up and they've only just come back through the front door from being out.* (Kate)

As already discussed, the term 'uni-life' was used synonymously with partying and socialising, one participant (Sean) describing *'work (study) as 'extra'* or outside 'uni-life'. Some of those who lived in student accommodation appeared consciously to have embraced a new life which was markedly different from their previous experience, one where routine changed completely thereby transforming the identity of the student herself,

*When I came to hall, I decided I didn't want routine anymore. I don't want to be predictable. I used to be the kind of person who got upset if I missed a bus but now I think just let me live my life (Shantelle)*

Bourdieu's exploration of institutional ritual is relevant to the students' sense that they had adopted a new identity through the act of moving into student accommodation, an act which symbolises a new independence, the beginning of a new life, a shared experience with peers of a similar age. Whilst all students experience the change of moving into an unfamiliar environment, those who live in student accommodation may experience a more profound sense of change that is reinforced by the discourse around 'uni-life' – a discourse that is shared by all those who participate in it, however marginally they may do so. As discussed in the exploration of the University's website and the comments above, the prevailing discourse is one where students are expected to be reckless, uninhibited, carefree and hedonistic, a view which may provide symbolic capital for those who feel comfortable in aligning themselves to it. Lily, a live at home student, voiced it perceptively,

*People think uni is about clubbing, staying out late, not eating, not having any money. That's not me at all. There's a stereotype of a student.*

Paradoxically, she believed in the 'normal' idea of being a student whilst also being aware that this normality was a 'stereotype' to which she did not subscribe. The stereotype may be an exaggeration but it nonetheless carries weight as the dominant discourse, influencing students' perceptions of their own personal experiences of university and reinforcing difference. By subscribing to the notion that no one in student accommodation ever sleeps, the students – even those who live at home - appeared to reproduce and make legitimate the rituals associated with 'uni-life'. Those rituals are embodied in the uniform tee-shirts, the party hats, the 'clubbing' all of which signify that the students now belong to a different 'order', a position 'consecrated' by the University in its publication of the photographs and creating what Bourdieu calls '*an act of social magic that can create difference*' (1991:119) For Anjelica in particular, that 'difference' was almost painful in her stark and unequivocal, '*My parents said no*'.

The fact that so many of the University initiation activities take place at night acted as a barrier to participation for many of those students who live at home, reinforcing difference and otherness. In his fieldwork study of life in Kabyle, Bourdieu (1977: 163) explores how respect for collective rhythms forms a significant feature of habitus and field,

*The reason why submission to the collective rhythms is so rigorously demanded is that the temporal forms or the spatial structures structure not only the group's representation of the world but the group itself, which orders itself in accordance with this representation.*

By appropriating the night in the early stages of their initiation to HE, the students consolidated their group identity in a way that separated them from those who lived at home. That separation became more acute because, whilst initially at least, those who had moved away appeared to reject the rhythms of work production in favour of those of 'social time', those who remained at home seemed to prioritise settling into the routines of institutional time where taught sessions were very important.

By repeatedly referring to what might be regarded as the rites of 'uni-life' (sleepless nights, coming home in the early hours of the morning, frequenting nightclubs) the students implied that those who have moved away inhabited a nocturnal world where previous time limits and restrictions no longer applied, thereby excluding those who live at home and for whom time remained unchanged. In doing so they ritualised the practice associated with being a student,

*conforming to the social order (by) respecting rhythms, keeping pace not falling out of line' (Bourdieu, 1991:161)*

and, by undertaking their social activities at night,

*assign(ing) them a time – ie a moment, a tempo, and a duration – which is relatively independent of external necessities....thereby conferring on them the sort of arbitrary necessity which specifically defines cultural arbitrariness (ibid:163).*

This informal world of socialising appears to create a kind of social cohesion which, despite its apparent separation from studying, creates a sense of belonging to a group that is likely to impact positively on continuation for those who are part of it. For those live at home students who do not or cannot participate, there is no similar 'rite' of initiation to confer status or group

identity, making Warren's implication (p112) that he went unnoticed even more poignant.

Participants who had moved away to study frequently alluded to the first few weeks as passing really quickly, implying not just that they occupied different hours but that their lives were changing rapidly.

*We all suddenly thought time has gone too quickly, we need to start working now. The parties suddenly stopped. (Sean)*

This was in sharp contrast to those who lived at home, many of whom stressed that they did not want to experience such rapid change, indicating a preference for stability and continuity,

*I have the same room, the same bed. I really like a routine. (Natasha)*

*I am comfortable at home. (Patrick)*

*I am family-oriented. Don't like too many changes. (Amna)*

It is interesting that Sean used the collective 'we' to describe the experience of realising that a new time had begun in which he and his peers living in student accommodation discarded the patterns of time adopted in their first few months and settled into a different kind of university life where attendance at taught sessions and studying were more likely. Implicit is the idea that all the 'novices' reached a new state of student-hood when they made a mutual decision that enabled them to begin the next stage of what Bourdieu calls their '*rite of institution*' (1990:117), presumably in a way that was collectively supportive through a shared sense of purpose. This rite was not shared by those who live at home, most of whom indicated in their discussions that they attended taught sessions throughout their first semester, the only part they were likely to miss being welcome week. It would appear that there is a higher symbolic value in 'cramming' towards the end of the academic year following a period of partying than in the less intensive, more stable introduction to HE experienced by those who remain at home, staying connected with the habitual routines associated with their family and friends from outside university. There is relevance here in Bourdieu's (1991:116) theory that 'temporal transition' can separate those who undergo the rite from those will never do so,

*thereby instituting a lasting difference between those to whom the right pertains and those to whom it does not..*

The power of the rite is in its creation of a collective identity which, in addition to providing students with a sense of belonging, goes on to produce a supportive study network. My data indicate that, with no equivalent rite of institution, with different priorities and experiencing a different kind of timeframe, those who live at home are separated from those who live in student accommodation. In their focus on studying from the start of their courses and expressing the importance of the financial considerations of studying, (4.2.7) it seems that students who remain at home do indeed experience '*lasting difference*' from those who move away, as indicated in the assertions of a number of participants that, even in the second year of their courses, they did not mix,

*I can tell who lives at home and (in) accommodation. Accommodation and home students don't really mix.'*(Natasha)

*I made my friends in hall not on my course* (Kate)

*I don't feel the need to make friends as I have good friends already.*  
(Warren)

*I don't need to make friends either* (referring to previous speaker). *I work from home and just come in for my classes.* (Yusuf)

My data indicate that, whilst those who live in student accommodation appear to develop informal social networks which go onto become supportive to their studies, those who remain at home are more reliant on their tutors and classes to create a sense of group identity and belonging. The separation between those who live at home and those who move away may be felt more profoundly when it is reinforced by the institution itself. Like Grace, Kevin and Patrick (p112), Lily and Mariam appeared to seek validation from academic staff, expressing what Reay et al (2009:1105) call '*disquiet and insecurity*' when those staff reinforced the view that the first year was not important or did not understand their situations,

*I think a big reason (people drop out) is because they feel the first year doesn't count – it's used to socialise. But I do remember some of my lecturers would say 'it doesn't really count – only 40%'. But I don't think it needs to be said – the lecturers' culture needs to change as well.* (Lily)



*I found the first few weeks really confusing. They (tutors) need to do more to help us make friends. (Mariam)*

In her critical evaluation of 'lecturers' culture' Lily articulated not only what she regarded as a need for change but a frustration with a model of student-hood which she believed to be perpetuated by those who might be expected to challenge it: the lecturers themselves. The narrative of 'uni-life' is therefore implicitly reproduced by some University staff who do not necessarily regard teaching as a social practice which includes the fostering of effective study habits and developing friendship groups. Not only was Lily's student identity marginalised by her peers but by those who taught her. If as Reay (2004: 435) claims,

*Dispositions are inevitably reflective of the social context in which they were acquired.*

it is possible that some lecturers reproduce a model of student-hood which they themselves experienced, one which is at odds with the experience of live at home students and, indeed, the best learning interests of all students. In seeking to reassure students that the first year is a time when mistakes can be made and academic risks taken, some tutors may reproduce a narrative that the first year is primarily about things other than studying, inadvertently disheartening and confusing those for whom that year is very important. More profoundly, that narrative may also imply a kind of '*doxic submission*' (Bourdieu, 1997:177) to a view that the first year is a time for reinvention of self, taking place in a liminal space where time itself 'does not count' therefore experimentation is not just possible but desirable. Similarly, for Aisha there was a noticeable dissonance between her views about why she has enrolled at university and a belief that higher education is a time for 'finding herself',

*I came to university to get a degree and that's it. It's not about the uni experience.....social life takes place around university and not the other way around. (Aisha).*

Aisha's investment in the academic field indicates that, like Lily, she had already developed,

*self-awareness and a propensity for self-improvement that has become incorporated into the habitus (Reay et al, 2009: 1105).*

and was very clear about university helping her to achieve her goals. The findings that some academic staff, through reinforcing an idea that students in

their early stages of university do not need to invest strongly in their studies, are surprising and unexpected. Such a narrative has the potential to be disheartening for those who, like Natasha, Patrick and Amna (p113), do not subscribe to a view that university is a time for reinvention, preferring instead the stability of home. It implies also a lack of ambition for their students that may be more damaging to those who live at home and who have not fully engaged in the game of 'uni-life'. Bourdieu's theories of field and habitus are normally applied to explain how some students experience a sense of disjuncture between their '*fragile and unconfident*' (Reay et al, 2009: 9) learner identities and an academic field in which they feel inadequate: here it is fascinating that the disjuncture stems from a student habitus centred on hard work in contrast with one that implies that this is not relevant, at least in the early stages of university.

#### **4.2.4 Misrecognition**

Bourdieu's concept of misrecognition is powerful in its explanation of how institutions continue to reproduce a set of dispositions, even when those institutions believe they are challenging those dispositions. As James (2015:97) explains,

*...misrecognition refers to an everyday and dynamic social process where one thing ..... is not recognised for what it is because it was not previously 'cognised' within the range of dispositions and propensities of the habitus of the person(s) confronting it. Instead the thing is attributed to another available realm of meaning, and, in the process, interests, inequities or other effects may be maintained whilst they remain concealed.*

As discussed in 4.2.1, the website material exemplifies how, in seeking to present living at home as 'okay', the University implicitly reproduces a model of student-hood which endorses moving away as the more authentic way to experience 'uni-life'. Such a disposition might be said to be arbitrary in that, whilst students themselves make accommodation decisions according to their own personal circumstances, there is no reason for one model being intrinsically preferred by the institution over the other. Misrecognition means that, not only does the institution fail to understand that it is reproducing an arbitrary model that being a student is best experienced through living away from home, it appears also to believe that, in giving advice to those who live at home, it is actively challenging the very model it is in reality

fetishising. In doing so it reveals its own institutional habitus, one that might be said to conflict with the experiences of most of its students and reproduces a genealogy constructed from a tradition that is not relevant to them.

Most of the participants – regardless of their accommodation mode – subscribed to the orthodoxy that moving away from home was an important part of ‘uni-life’, accepting it as the natural order of things and thereby demonstrating Bourdieu’s theory that misrecognition creates the function of,

*symbolic violence....which is exercised upon an agent with his or her complicity (1992:167).*

This complicity can be seen in what I would describe as an element of performance in the way the students expressed their views about ‘uni-life’ and its separation from their previous lives. It is as if they were aware that what they were exploring is a stereotype rather than a completely authentic representation of the student experience, their language serving to reinforce the dominant discourse thereby reflecting Ball’s (2013:20) view that, ‘*Discourses produce the object of which they speak*’. They were therefore conscious of the ‘game’ they were in and might be said to be the key players in reproducing it. As Bourdieu (1991:121) explains,

*it is through the effect of statutory assignation (noblesse oblige) that the ritual of institution produces its most ‘real effects’: the person instituted feels obliged to conform with his definition, with the status of his function.*

The doxa of ‘uni-life’ therefore appears to provide those who comply with it – in this instance those who move away – with status and identity which become self-fulfilling and, more importantly, make them confident in their role as students. Conversely, those who do not comply are marginalised, not yet with a clear language with which to describe themselves and therefore no clear identity as a group, adding to their disquiet,

*I felt like I was missing out because there was no way I would be able to go to things like that (social events outside timetabled activities)  
(Naseem)*

As mentioned in 4.2.3 there appeared to be a point during the year when those in student accommodation began to adopt a timeframe more conducive to studying,

*My friends wanted to go to bed at six in the morning but I would be like – have some breakfast – I'm going to uni' (Kate)*

*Yeah – I started to say come on guys. I need to block you out now, I need to go to the library. (Shantelle)*

Sean who described himself as '*constantly sleep deprived*' in the early stages of university because he was attending parties '*all the time which was to be expected*' also reached a point where he began to focus on academic work,

*Oh for God's sake, I need to get into uni for 9 o'clock.*

One interpretation of this change of perspective is that, having gained social capital through the initiation rites of 'uni-life', the participants were now confident in their identities as students and in their new friendship groups, ready to move on as consecrated students. Bourdieu (1991:124-5) explains how dominant groups can demonstrate the ultimate privilege by '*taking liberties*' with it. One of the privileges of consecration is that those who are consecrated do not always have to conform. In other words, those who live in student accommodation can afford to acknowledge that they are not always fully engaged in 'uni-life' without loss of status because,

*The person who is sure of his cultural identity can play with the rules of the cultural game.*

For most of those who have moved into student accommodation, the 'uni-life' game is transitory but it is none the less very powerful, perhaps even more so for those who have lived at home and have little experience of that game. Bourdieu's concept of 'illusio' is relevant here in that all the students appeared to be 'caught up and in the game' by subscribing to an idea of student-hood that may be transitory in nature but which they regarded as worth perpetuating, perhaps because it is engrained as the doxa. It is possible too that those who live at home believed the illusion more wholeheartedly than those who lived in student accommodation and who reproduced the stereotypical picture of 'uni-life' whilst also acknowledging that it is ephemeral and, for most participants in my research, limited to the first semester. The stereotype may not be long-lasting but it is influential, marginalising those who cannot challenge its validity because they have not themselves experienced it and exacerbating a feeling that they themselves are not 'authentic students' as evidenced in their frequent assertions of feeling 'different'. Students who

live at home might be said to experience a kind of two-fold symbolic violence, not only through institutional misrecognition which privileges the status of those who move away to study, but also through the narratives of those who have experienced life in student accommodation and are therefore in a dominant position in which to reify it. The fact that those narratives are confined to a relatively short period of time is of little significance because they cannot legitimately be challenged by those who have not participated in them, and they have had the effect of separating those who live at home from those who live in student accommodation in a way that my findings indicate create feelings of otherness that are sustained for a considerable length of time as explored in 4.2.7.

One interpretation is that those who live away from home have a shared narrative which creates symbolic capital, bringing status to those who have experienced it. In focus group one for example, some of the students began to reminisce about their first year. Their story was told collectively rather than as an individual narrative. During it, it was noticeable that the two participants in that group who lived at home said nothing. The story revolved around the location of their accommodation which they regarded as '*rough*', '*not the best*', '*always something happening on the streets*', '*a bit scary*'. At one stage, they described an incident involving an armed weapon which led to staff forbidding them from going outside as it was too dangerous. They were now hugely amused by this, regarding it as a kind of rite of passage, an exciting experience which united them in a shared history and narrative about their initiation into student-hood. Rather than an ordeal, it had become a collective adventure which excluded those who had not taken part,

*Because – you know – it was the people we experienced it with...*  
(Kate)

Not only had they survived it, but grown in stature and confidence as a result. The story had taken on the status of a myth, symbolising the shared experience of overcoming adversity and bringing the group closer together. If habitus is '*embodied history, internalised as a second nature*' (Bourdieu, 1991:56), shared narratives such as this are extremely powerful in both creating and articulating the connections and membership which provide social capital to those who are part of the group. In a

study which considers the notion of 'narrative habitus' Fleetwood (2016:183) argues that,

*Storytelling is a form of social action generated by the habitus. Just like other forms of social action, it reproduces the field.*

Here the story of potential danger – real or imagined – reproduces the concept that moving away facilitates participation in a rite of institution which strengthens the identity of participants as members of the group and '*consecrates the difference, institutes it*' (Bourdieu, 1991:118) between them and those who have not experienced it.

That difference was sometimes alluded to with great poignancy by some of those who believed in the *illusio* connected with 'uni-life' more profoundly precisely because they had not experienced it themselves. This can be seen in the way that those who lived at home talked about friendships at university and the difficulties in penetrating the strong relationships which they believed those who had moved away had formed,

*Being a commuting student is definitely a barrier to friendship. (Nazia)*

*One thing in common is 'uni-life'. So they (move away students) make friends with the ones they live with. It's hard to break into this if you live at home. (Mariam)*

*Don't talk to many people because it is hard to mix. (Amna)*

*My friends are from my classes. (Yusuf)*

*All my friends live at home. (Warren)*

*The people I study with, I don't know about them outside university. (Amna)*

As discussed in Chapter 5, this is one of my most powerful and potentially impactful findings because it indicates that Central University needs to develop its academic practices and pedagogies to encourage the forming of friendship groups/communities within students teaching sessions. Such groups will support all students but particularly those who may, for a variety of reasons, be excluded from social activities.

It was surprising and amusing to find that, whilst the participants above suggested that they were excluded by those who move away, the latter group separated

themselves from another perceived set of students who, like them, lived in student accommodation. Despite being keen to demonstrate that they participated in fast-paced, hard-partying 'uni-life', many of the participants who lived in student accommodation adopted a kind of moral double standard or self-righteous indignation towards those whom they viewed as conforming too absolutely to the stereotype. For example, the first focus group shared a view that, although they were themselves sometimes '*distracted*' from their studies by 'uni-life' they avoided those who,

*had only come to uni for 'uni-life'.....they didn't attend their lessons hardly at all (sic) and they didn't come back after first year' (laughter and nods of agreement from the group) (Shantelle).*

It would appear then that, whilst they themselves appeared to want to be seen as participating in 'uni-life', they also wished to separate themselves from those whom they judged as being too involved in such a life and who failed to 'knuckle down' after an 'acceptable' period of partying. In a sense, they embody Foucault's (1977:183) belief that the disciplined institution,

*measures in quantitative terms and hierarchises in terms of value the abilities, the level, the 'nature' of the individuals.*

At one point, having spent considerable time regaling the group with her wholehearted embracement of 'uni-life', Shantelle began to normalise her experience by defining her difference from '*the external frontier of the abnormal*' (Foucault, 1977:183),

*...by the way, I did pass first year really well.....(everyone laughs).*

The conversation above is significant in demonstrating the rituals attached to the experience of becoming an 'authentic' student: whilst participation in the rites of initiation is very important, there are certain limits to those rites which, if transgressed, create risk not just to the individuals concerned but to the very concept of being a student. As one of Shantelle's peers (Sean) put it,

*Come on guys, in the end, we're here to get good degrees.*

Bourdieu (1991:109) explores how ritual is a very important part of organised religion because it consecrates authority, separating those who are legitimately allowed to perform rites from those who are merely '*masqueraders*'. Here, Shantelle and Sean

confidently asserted themselves as authentic students who have established their legitimacy through their deft balancing of the demands of study with the requirements to party. In doing so, they celebrated their superiority over those whom they believe were unable to manage that balance – the masquerading students who are perceived to have come to university only to party and, more implicitly, over those who live at home and are therefore excluded from what they regard as the full experience of ‘uni-life’. Shantelle and Sean might therefore be said to be doubly privileged in that they have immersed themselves in two sections of student life – academic study and socialising – emerging with confidence and power from the rites of institution as a kind of ‘distinguished class’ who contribute towards ‘*the slide of the complementary class into Nothingness...*’ (Bourdieu, 1991:126) Without a comparable rite of institution, it is possible that those who live at home are more likely to doubt their authenticity as students and therefore be more likely to withdraw from their courses.

#### **4.2.5 Habitus**

Using his concept of habitus, Bourdieu argues that individuals feel comfortable or otherwise within social settings and institutions through,

*...a system of lasting, transposable dispositions which, integrating past experiences, functions at every moment as a matrix of perceptions and actions (1977:82).*

Habitus is useful framework with which to interpret how participants who had moved away to study became comfortable in their new environment whilst, for some of those who lived at home, their living arrangements began to feel oppressive in comparison, a feeling which for some created discord. For all participants regardless of their living arrangements, family remained a central part of their experience at university. All those in focus group one expressed how family relationships continued to play a significant part of their support networks, despite them living away from home,

*I talk to my mum every day, sometimes for an hour at a time.’(Shantelle)*

*If I am struggling with something at uni, I ring home. (Kate)*

Natasha, the only student in that group who lived at home, also commented on how her parents knew her timetable better than she did, making her feel that her



experience at university was a kind of family matter. Another live at home student in focus group 2 described how, if she was struggling with something, members of her extended family were extremely supportive. Some of that family had been to university themselves so she felt they understood her problems and were able to help her overcome them,

*I don't want to be the only one who doesn't do it. (Mariam)*

However, for some students all of whom lived at home, those family relationships could be oppressive,

*My mum sees university as her business, she looks at my timetable and 'keeps tabs on me. I try not to show her my timetable but she finds it out'. (Amna)*

*I had to have a conversation (with parents) about balancing (studies with home life). At the start I just thought, I cannot do it anymore, they are always in my face asking questions. (Aisha)*

One student made the rest of his focus group laugh when he described in an amused but slightly exasperated way how his mother made his sandwiches every day,

*I thought she would give it up when I came to uni but, on the first day she said, 'There's your lunch.' I think it is a hobby for her.....  
(Mike)*

For some participants all from Asian or Eastern European heritage backgrounds, the decision to live at home had been made by their parents who themselves subscribed to the dominant model of student-hood but did not want their son or daughter to comply with it,

*When people move out of university they are more independent. I am obedient to my parents and they didn't want me to go. I have my freedom but I am to abide by their rules because to them I haven't showed them I am an adult. (Nazia)*

*My parents make sure I am not up to no good....going out at night. They keep an eye on me and make me do my work. (Yusuf)*

Unlike the students quoted above who indicated that they lived at home because of parental views and appeared happy to do so, two participants, Anjelica and Amna, felt a loss of agency and autonomy in living at home,

*Both (parents) work so I didn't get the chance. I tried to say "I am going" (to move away)...but they need me at home and I live because of that. (Anjelica)*

Amna's comments are particularly interesting because they indicate what might be described as a cultural frame of reference that appears to play its part in the decision-making process of some live at home students' experiences,

*Mum made me live (at home). She kept texting me stories about girls being raped in student halls.*

Similarly, Diya explained how her parents' fears influenced her decision to live at home,

*University accommodation isn't safe because my parents believe the people there are irresponsible.*

Amna alluded to the fears her mother had about her leaving home but demonstrated a willingness to challenge them,

*Mum was always keeping an eye on me and the house was chaotic. She is always in my business. It was like a cage until I gave her an ultimatum – I either quit uni or I move out. (Amna)*

Interestingly, Amna did neither, appearing instead to reach a compromise with her mother which allowed her to devote more time to her studies. Her perception of home being both a 'cage' and 'chaotic' is powerful (like Anjelica's 'box' in 4.2 ), resonating ironically with the apparent 'chaos' of student accommodation as presented in the first focus group – but in Amna's narrative with a poignant sense of having limited choice or personal autonomy and perhaps a yearning to escape. Sadly, Amna's 'cage' appeared in reality to be an emotional one where she was conflicted between regarding her mother as 'very controlling' yet sympathising with her need for companionship.

*...she loves my company and regards me as her friend because we watch tv together. I told her to go out and make friends but she hasn't.*

Both Amna and Anjelica attempted to regain some autonomy by neglecting to provide their parents with access to their timetables, Amna without a great deal of success, as indicated in her comment above about her mother being 'in her business'.

The significance of the timetables is that some students who live at home were expected to attend university only for taught sessions,

*They say why are you at uni if you don't need to be? (Diya)*

*Being at home is like being like a child. They (parents) keep asking me why am I late? Why am I at university when I am on a day off? (Naseem)*

Some were required to contribute to domestic responsibilities and duties such as collecting younger siblings from school, taking parents to medical and other appointments and acting as translators for them,

*They need me at home. I drive so I have to take my brothers and sisters places and they (parents) can't be in three places at one time. (Anjelica)*

*My parents aren't comfortable speaking English and my dad passed away. So I have a lot to do at home....to make phone calls and read letters. (Nazia)*

For students like Amna, Nazia and Anjelica, university and home life are very different from one another. It might be said that they oscillate between two habitus, negotiating the demands of degree level studies with the expectations of their families that they make a significant contribution towards domestic life. Bourdieu (1999:511) explains this as causing inner friction, tension and conflict because the habitus is,

*divided against itself, in constant negotiation with itself and its ambivalences, and therefore doomed to a kind of duplication, to a double perception of self, to successive allegiances and multiple identities.*

Whilst such a state might cause discomfort, even pain, it also indicates the strength and commitment of students who continue with their studies regardless. Reay (2004:438) asserts that Bourdieu's identification of this conflict is not deterministic because,

*It also provides the potential for a broader conceptualisation of habitus that makes space for cares, concerns and commitments.....*

I argue that the participants in my research offer the opportunity for the University to consider a '*broader conceptualisation of habitus*', one that builds on the resilience

such students, values their commitment to family and more authentically celebrates their contributions.

The 'sticky campus' narrative outlined in 2.5 is connected with timetabling because it supposes that students who live at home are likely to come into university only for taught sessions so need to be encouraged to remain in the institution for longer periods of time, a view that is not sustained by my research. On the contrary, many of the live at home participants pointed out that they found university to be an effective base for independent and small group study,

*I can't study at home because of pressures at home and responsibilities. (Diya)*

*If I finish early I live at uni to work. (Mike)*

*I prefer to come in (to University) to study and am more motivated to come in because I see others studying there. (Kevin)*

It cannot be assumed therefore that live at home students universally need encouragement to remain in the institution or indeed that they fail to engage with extra-curricular activities. Not only did many of them remain on campus to study, most had taken on roles outside their studies, valuing in particular acting as student ambassadors, a role which pays current students to take part in activities for potential and new students by representing the University. Such a role might offer a rite of initiation different from that experienced by those who have moved away but equally powerful in the development of a sense of belonging.

#### **4.2.6 Fish in water**

It is not surprising that friendships and relationships with others emerged as a central part of the experiences of students when they begin university. Zhao and Kuh (2004:116) argue that the creation of a learning community is central to students' engagement as it can,

*strengthen the social and intellectual connection between students which, in turn, help to build a sense of community.*

Some studies suggest that live at home students do not develop new friendships at university because they remain attached to their families and existing friendships (Holdsworth, 2006; Haussman et al, 2009). Fisher, Cavanagh and Bowles (2011) go further and assert that the successful transition to HE requires students to develop

new identities as independent adults, demanding that they disconnect from previous friendships, something that is more challenging for those who remain living in the parental home. In their study of transition, Brooman and Darwent, however, (2014: 15) challenge the view that students integrate more successfully into HE if they leave their old friendships behind,

*Those students who maintained old relationships were most likely to feel a sense of belonging and supported by staff.*

As discussed in 2.6 and 4.2.1, Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) offer a powerful framework with which to understand the importance of fitting in or feeling like a 'fish in water'. My findings indicate that friendship groups made early in the year are influential in enabling students to fit in and to overcome other difficulties, indicating that identity with others is an important factor in the transition to HE. This was a particularly strong theme in the narratives of those who had moved into student accommodation where friendships appear to be made very quickly, Shantelle explaining how '*being with the right people*' was a key part of surviving the first year. She described how the allocation of rooms in student accommodation was random so students from all kinds of backgrounds were brought together in an intimate way so they '*see the insides*' of one another becoming '*like family*'. She found the experience of being forced to make friends with unfamiliar people a positive one, explaining how she had '*surprised*' herself with her new friendship groups.

Sharing food and cooking for others were important factors in making friendships in university accommodation, some students taking on a caring role for others and perhaps finding an identity in such a role. Kate explained,

*I didn't know there were people who couldn't cook until I came to university.*

At first she thought one of her flatmates was '*weird*' because she did not join in then realised she could not cook so decided,

*Let's help her – we've all been raised differently.*

Another described supporting a flatmate who could not cook,

*You're not going to eat pot noodles again – here's a lasagne. (Esther)*

Whilst cooking may seem a fairly trivial activity, it appears to act as a kind of *'ritual of institution'* (Bourdieu, 1991:119) associated with being independent and beginning a new life as an adult, and separating those who live together from those who do not. Mike's rueful comment about his mother continuing to make a packed lunch (p122) takes on a new relevance when seen in these terms, symbolising that, despite the move to university, life remained much the same for him.

Some students were explicit in explaining that they were very aware of taking on a new identity when they moved away from home. Shantelle talked about deciding to make the most of coming to a new city by adopting new routines and life patterns. As mentioned in 4.2.3 she discussed how she adopted a routine that was very different from that of life at home and to become a different person,

*I used to be the kind of person.....but now I think.....*

For her the city had become what she called her *'second home'*, again using language that might be seen to be resonant of family identity and belonging. The idea of the friends made in student accommodation being like *'family'* recurred at several points in the narratives of those who moved away. For one student settling into university was initially difficult but then, following a weekend at home,

*I missed my friends from hall. .... They see you first thing in the morning without your make up. You see them and they see you so you become one big family. (Esther)*

One live at home student spoke wistfully, even yearningly, about what she saw as a gap in her experience of friendship,

*The people I study with I don't know them outside university. I don't have friends and you miss out. I am missing out because friends at uni are lifelong friends and I haven't found mine. The one thing that you have in common is 'uni-life' so friends should come from there as friends are formed through shared troubles and anxiety. (Anjelica)*

Like many of the other live at home students, Anjelica believed in a model of studenthood from which she feels marginalised. Anjelica might feel particularly excluded because it was not her choice to live at home but that of her parents who,

*both work so I didn't get the chance. I tried to say, 'I am going' (to move away)...but they need me at home and I live because of that.*

Despite Anjelica being in the majority within the university, she believed herself to be 'missing out' of something, a term she used twice in quick succession. Her language asserts the 'norm' in that *'friends should come' from 'uni-life', 'friends at uni are lifelong friends'* and her belief that others were experiencing something better, perhaps more 'authentic' than she was.

It was noticeable that live at home students tended to have friendship groups drawn from their courses and small teaching session groups because it was *'too difficult'* to make friends in lectures. Most did not make friends outside their courses, probably because they were less likely than those who move away to have the opportunity to do so. For them, the initial interaction in class groupings was critical, one student describing how she made friends in her first seminar,

*sort of by luck.....we sat at the same table and got on really well so now I'm stuck with them (Natasha).*

For several, the activities organised by their tutors were very important,

*Staff helped with ice breakers (Mike)*

*Our tutors put us in groups to do some activities so we got to know one another. (Lily)*

Seminars and other small group settings appeared – unsurprisingly – to be very important for those who remained at home. In line with Robertson (2018) who believes that pedagogy needs to become more collaborative and interactive to support identity and community, live at home students talked of 'gelling' with others and remaining with those initial friends,

*All my friends at university were met on the course. We made friends in year one and they are still my friends. In first year you do all the same modules and this helps you make friends because you see them every time you go in. I think group work helped too because you can find out soon who isn't going to bother coming in, who isn't going to make much effort. You can tell them straight away.....(laughs). (Lily)*

In contrast to Anjelica, Aisha explained that she didn't see university as a place for friendships,

*I don't feel the need to (make friends) because I have good friends already.*

For most of the live at home students, however, the relationship with the university itself and with academic staff was central in forging friendship groups. Warren articulated the importance of participation in activities that reinforced his commitment to university and his engagement with his studies. For him what he described as his 100% commitment to a course that fascinated him was central, encouraging him to take part in activities outside his course and to become a student representative.

Most of the live at home participants found friendships on the course rather than in other parts of their lives at university. However, one described how she felt '*more grounded*' by living at home and that this was a key factor in enabling her to focus on her studies. Indeed, that student was one of the few live at home participants who had made friendships with those who lived away from home, something she attributed to being more studious therefore able to help those whom she regarded as having been distracted from the early stages of their work by the social world of student accommodation. It would appear that students remain close to those with whom they have a shared experience and that for those who moved away that sense of shared experience was more profound, perhaps because, like initiates, they were going through the shared rituals of living and socialising together, unlike those whose lives at home carried on much as they had done previously. This is important because it demonstrates again the '*symbolic efficacy of rites of institution*' which provide their participants with credibility (Bourdieu, 1991:119), in this case forging their identities as 'authentic' students. Those who remain at home remain separate from those rites and from those who experience them, a difference that is '*sanctified*' by the lack of any similar '*magical consecration*' (Bourdieu, *ibid*) in which they can participate.

#### **4.2.7 Changing the game?**

When the participants boasted about how little sleep they had because of their 'constant' partying, they can be seen to be undertaking the rites that they believed made them authentic students, thereby conforming to the doxa of what it is to be at university. Those rites provided them with a kind of credibility or authority that creates 'difference'. That difference is both powerful and potentially destructive because, whilst signifying to those who have participated in them their identity as students, it may contribute towards negating the experiences of students who have



not participated fully in those rites, thereby questioning their authenticity as students. My findings suggest that the rite of partying, which may be transitory and limited to semester one, nonetheless has more power than the equally social 'rites' attached to participation in activities linked with study.

Bourdieu (1991:237) explains how,

*The social space and the differences that 'spontaneously' emerge within it, tend to function symbolically as a pace of lifestyles....of groups characterised by different lifestyles.*

The dominant group with a clear identity and an established language with which to articulate it comprises those who have moved away from home.

Crucially, however, Bourdieu (1991:128) explores how it is possible for there to be '*a heretical break with the established order*'. This requires a break with the orthodoxy to produce a '*new common sense and integrate within it the previously tacit or repressed practices and experiences of an entire group*' (ibid:129) My research findings outlined below indicate that this break may be beginning to emerge, demonstrating that it is patronising and inadequate to characterise those who live at home as being somehow 'out of the game' or deficient. On the contrary, attempts to articulate a student identity can be seen in the narratives of those who remained at home during their first year of study perhaps indicating that the game may be changing. Although they all felt different from those who live in student accommodation, for some this did not lead to a sense of separation, loss or otherness but one of the reasons they had chosen not to leave home,

*I didn't want to participate in all that....it's just not who I am. (Natasha)*

*That's not me. Some people feel pressurised to do it, to make friends and be the same as them. (Lily)*

Both Lily and Natasha appeared to link their identities with not moving away from home, asserting that they have made a conscious decision to reject 'uni-life',

*That's not me at all. (Natasha)*

*Not who I am – nightlife- so I don't miss out. (Lily)*

What I regard as a search for a student identity was articulated very succinctly by Grace who described how she overcame difficulties,

*My own sense of who I am helped me stabilise. Don't know how I would have done it without this.*

In their study of commuting students, Thomas and Jones (2017:7) identify them as being '*relatively defensive*' about any suggestion that they might be less engaged in university life as a result of having to travel. The findings from my study do not indicate defensiveness but what I characterise as a struggle to create their sense of belonging to a university 'community of practice' (Wenger, 1998). Despite being the dominant group in their institution, they are not yet quite powerful or confident enough as a group to challenge the orthodoxy of 'uni-life' and create what Bourdieu (1991:98) would describe as their own counter-culture. Such a position can only be achieved when,

*spaces that belong to the dominated classes (provide) haunts or refuges for excluded individuals from which dominant individuals are in fact excluded, at least symbolically.*

However, whilst they may feel like outsiders to 'uni-life' and have as yet no strong, compelling language with which to articulate their alternative experience, my research indicates that there are murmurs and the beginnings of language about a different imagining of student-hood, one that recognises 'who they are'. This can be seen in Aisha's assertion that she was at university to 'get a degree', Lily's view that the 'lecturers' culture needs to change' and the repeated statements from a number of participants that participating in 'uni-life' was 'not who I am'.

Using Bourdieusian theory, the narratives of these students can be interpreted as suggesting that a crisis in the orthodoxy is approaching that could change the field, providing the opportunity for the emergence of a heterodoxy. The analogy of the game supports the idea that the field is dynamic rather than static,

*a social space that involves negotiations between participants in process of positioning both the self and others. (Bathmaker, 2015)*

However, Bourdieu's theories appear to have limitations in relation to my research and do not adequately explain why some live at home students experienced a sense of difference that is sometimes painful, but were still successful in continuing with

their courses whilst others did not do so. Reay (2004:432) asserts that, whilst the concept of habitus is sometimes criticised for its '*latent determinism*', Bourdieu (1977:3) himself argues that,

*the same habitus can lead to very different practices and stances depending on the state of the field.*

Later, he explains that,

*Just as no two individual histories are identical so no two individual habituses are identical.* (Bourdieu, 1990:46)

Habitus may offer a theoretical perspective that explains the impact of difference and marginalisation but is less convincing as a means of understanding what factors help overcome these.

One interpretation of my findings is that the game is changing partly as a result of external narratives such as those outlined in Chapter 1 which position HE within the economic market place. The concept of university as a financial investment was one that was voiced particularly strongly by the participants who lived at home, all of whom and without exception saw saving money as a highly influential factor in their decision. In this they reflect the findings of several other recent studies of commuting students (Malcolm 2014; Thomas and Jones, 2017; Maguire and Morris, 2018; Donnelly and Gamsu, 2018), all of which link the importance of finance with evidence indicating that commuting students are far more likely to come from the poorest socio-economic backgrounds. The live at home students who attended my focus groups were not universally from such backgrounds but were nonetheless apparently more motivated by financial considerations than those who had moved away. Indeed, the issue of finance was mentioned only by those who live at home and did not occur in those who lived in student accommodation. Many cited financial considerations as having determined their decision to live at home and participants often mentioned the influence of their parents in considering the costs of moving away and therefore the financial benefits of living at home,

*My parents were sceptical (sic) about debt.....mum made me live (at home). (Naseem)*

Living at home allowed Yusuf to fund a car because,

*I don't have to work and I don't need to worry about rent.*

For some, the financial costs already incurred motivated them to continue when they felt challenged and had considered dropping out,

*The amount of money I have spent keeps me going – tuition fees and commuting fees. (Lily)*

*Fees kept us going – (laughs) the idea of losing £9250. (Patrick)*

Seen from a Bourdieusian perspective, my findings indicate that live at home students like Lily and Patrick invested in HE as a kind of economic transaction in contrast with those who live in student accommodation, all of whom indicated that their initial investment was in the social aspects of university,

*I thought – hey the first year doesn't count so I might as well enjoy it (Shantelle),*

As part of their transaction with the University, those who lived at home appeared to take a more serious approach to their first year,

*Focusing on work is important (Alisha)*

*I'm here to get a degree and that's it. It's not about experience. (Naseem)*

They often appeared proud of their attendance, believing it to be better than those who are in student accommodation,

*I was always there even if no one else was. (Lily)*

In this they reflect the views of Thomas and Jones (2017: 23) who found in their study of commuting students that,

*Not only did students prioritise academic engagement over other contexts, but they also tended to view it as synonymous with attendance.*

As outlined in 4.2, many live at home students placed a significant emphasis on their tutors' acknowledgment of their attendance and participation in taught sessions. A possible interpretation of this is that, with a desire to be successful academically and rejecting the stereotype of 'uni-life', they seek external validity from their tutors in what Rendon (1994:47) describes as '*a validating classroom*' which enables students to make a successful transition into HE through positive reassurance that they are credible students. Lily supported this eloquently when she expressed irritation that her presence in classes was unrecognised, an annoyance that was

exacerbated by the fact that she had only ever had one day's absence from university,

*So- I was travelling in every day and some of my attendance wasn't recorded. I want to show that I am dedicated and then I got an email from my personal tutor saying there were concerns about my attendance. This made me stand back a bit. Everyone wants to be recognised so they stand out a bit. I wanted that external recognition...*  
(laughs) Lily

Conversely, students who lived away from home gained confidence from being accepted by their peers in student accommodation and by conforming to their normalising gaze. By perpetuating notions of 'uni-life' they were '*caught up in a power situation of which they are themselves the bearers*' (Foucault, 1977:201) but which provided them with supportive and close relationships early in their courses that were helpful in creating networks which became more aligned to their studies as the academic year developed. Whilst my findings demonstrate that live at home participants regarded themselves as diligent in attending taught sessions and focusing on their studies, they also articulated a strong sense of feeling 'different' from those who have moved away, a difference that created barriers in forming friendships in the early stages of university and which continued in their second year.

My findings were surprising in demonstrating that all but one of the participants had considered leaving their courses in the first semester. It was noticeable that friendship groups were cited by many of those who lived in student accommodation as being central to their decision to remain,

*But, when I went home for Christmas, I missed my friends from hall. (Esther)*

*You're stuck with those people in hall. I didn't want not to see them again. They're not always people you'd pick.....but you get close to them. (Sean)*

*They see you first thing in the morning without your make up. You see them and they see you so you become one big family. I wouldn't want not to see them again. (Shantelle)*

Those who lived at home tended to refer to disappointment with their courses or tutors as causing them to consider leaving,

*The hardest part of first year is when we lost faith in the course. Some people dropped out. (Patrick)*

*We had loads of different teachers. They didn't know our names or anything. I'm not saying they didn't care but they didn't answer our emails. (Alisha)*

For these students, the role played by their personal tutors was of significant importance in their continuation,

*My wonderful, amazing personal tutor (Kate)*

*I wouldn't have carried on if it hadn't been for xxx. She even rang me when she knew I was worried (about her work) (Anjelica)*

In the Faculty of Business, Law and Social Studies tutors are required to publicise their 'office hours' when they are available to students outside teaching time, a system driven by market models which measure the use of academics' time. Though ostensibly designed to demonstrate visible commitment to student support, compartmentalising such support from teaching means that staff are less accessible to some students,

*I couldn't believe when my **personal** tutor (laughs and exaggerates 'personal') put up his office hours! They were at the same time every week – how am I supposed to get there if I am working? (Grace)*

However, it was also significant that many of those who live at home demonstrated a clarity of purpose and the '*propensity for self-improvement*' as noted by Reay (2009:1105) which enabled them to overcome difficulties,

*Came to university to get a degree so that's what I am here for (Amna)*

*I've made a commitment (to come to uni) and want it to work (Grace)*

*Focusing on work is the most important thing. Waste of time if not. (Yusuf)*

Whilst some studies regard such attitudes as revealing a one-dimensional, even mechanistic approach to study reflective of an unwillingness fully to engage (Bunce et al, 2016; Thomas and Jones, 2017), the participants demonstrated a desire to support others, even those whose enthusiastic embracement of 'uni-life' had caused them mild annoyance at the start of the year,

*I helped others in my groups to understand what they had missed and what they needed to do. (Natasha)*

*My friends are from the same classes – we share the same timetables so have the same anxiety about work so we help each other. (Nazia)*

*If I finish early I live at uni so I can talk about work stuff with my friends.*  
(Naseem)

*I'm a student ambassador and that lets me help others.* (Warren)

My findings suggest that, with a tendency to believe that they had come to university primarily to 'get a degree' rather than to experience 'uni-life', for those who lived at home, relationships with academic staff and other students on the same course, were very important in enabling them to feel a sense of belonging and in establishing their identities as students. Whilst those who live away gained credibility as students through participation in the rites of initiation provided by social activities, there were no similar rites for those who lived at home and whose lives were changing less quickly. The power of those rites is in creating friendship groups which support them to continue on their courses through the forging of strong social bonds which develop into networks that are conducive to study and the provision of a common narrative about 'uni-life' that consecrates them as 'authentic students'. My findings indicate that, for live at home students, the relationships they form with their tutors and course peers are very important in providing them with validation, identity and a sense of belonging. A marketised model of HE undermines those relationships because it devalues holistic, nurturing approaches to education, replacing them with what Alisha described as '*loads of different teachers*' and systems of 'care' which rely on students' individual responsibility to access appropriate services. Grace expressed it very eloquently,

*There were problems when my tutor was sick which impacted on the whole course. So – things like direct one to one tutor support wasn't there so that kind of pastoral care broke down. Everything was hard to manage, I didn't know where to go and I nearly left.*

### **4.3 Summary**

Starting with a critical analysis of institutional secondary data this chapter found that live at home students at Central University are more likely not to continue beyond the first year of their course than those who have moved away. A brief exploration of the University's website which gives advice to prospective students was used to argue that the institution contributes towards a discourse that presents moving away from home as the norm and that living at home is a less authentic way of experiencing 'uni-life'. Despite being in the majority, those live at home students who participated

in the focus groups and interviews, tended to conform to this norm. For some participants this led to a sense of feeling 'different' and it can be speculated that such a feeling could be a reason for poorer continuation rates amongst those who live at home. However, whilst for some this feeling was painful, it was not necessarily true that difference was experienced negatively and nor did it cause all students to leave. There was however a sense of an emerging desire on the part of live at home students for their experiences to be cognised, articulated and validated by the University and their tutors.



## **Chapter Five: Conclusion and recommendations**

My research used the stories told by participants to explore how remaining at home influences their early experiences at Central University and how these differ from those who live in student accommodation. The final section of the thesis considers the value and limitations of my findings, the narrative that emerges from them and their implications for the University and the sector as a whole.

### **5.1 Implications of the findings**

My research challenges perceptions of live at home students as problematic, focusing instead on what Central University can learn about its implicit, tacit attitudes towards them so that strategies can be developed to improve their continuation and fully recognise them as a significant group. This does not mean that all live at home students form a discrete group with a common identity; on the contrary, the grouping of students so that judgments about their performance can be made is, as discussed in 3.3 and 4.1, contestable. My findings demonstrate however that, whilst live at home participants have a wide range of experiences that are sometimes contradictory, they share some characteristics that enable recommendations to emerge. Whilst this is a small scale research project centred on students who were successful in continuing on their courses rather than those who withdrew from them, its findings are at odds with much of the literature outlined in Chapter 2 and, indeed, with Central University's characterisation of live at home students as having less interaction with staff and being reluctant to take advantage of extra-curricular activities. Instead, I found a highly-engaged ambitious group, keen to succeed in HE and demonstrating resilience through commitment to their studies and their families.

There is more to the findings than continuation rates of live at home students, important though these are. As discussed throughout the thesis, my research is positioned within a discourse about the marketisation of higher education and the impact of this both on institutions and their students. That discourse is of critical significance in a shifting political landscape where the Minister of State for Universities appears actively to be challenging what is normally understood by social justice and the place of higher education in bringing it about. What is at stake then is the 'ownership' of student-hood, its representation by HE in general and by Central University in particular, and the development of policy and practice in relation to that

ownership. My findings indicate that, despite being a post-92 institution which is highly successful in widening participation and with a stated commitment to serving its city, Central University has not yet developed a strong narrative about its local live at home students and is yet to fully understand how their habitus and dispositions impact on their identities as students. This contributes towards the perpetuation of an increasingly outdated notion that associates student-hood with living away from home and the abandonment of family and friends. This matters because it contributes towards the marginalisation of one of the institution's largest groups who believe they experience 'uni-life' in a way that is somehow 'different', even less authentic from those who move away. My research has value and significance because local students are the life-blood not just of the University but of the city and its communities, contributing significantly to regional health, education, business and economies as, indeed, they do in many post-92 universities with similar profiles. As discussed in Chapter 3, these students are often viewed in the literature as sharing the characteristics of a generic 'widening participation' group who are somehow unready for higher education and need additional support. My research challenges this characterisation, finding students with individual needs, stories and life histories who cannot be dealt with as a homogenous group, entitled only to what the Competition and Markets Authority calls '*a baseline level of quality*' (2015:4). Nor can they be reduced to 'performance data' but should instead shape the identity, policies and practices of the institution: I argue that they do not yet do so.

However, my findings indicate that live at home students are finding their voices. In doing so they are beginning to challenge the orthodoxy, change the game and to articulate how the experience of being a student is for them complex, multi-dimensional and, perhaps more significantly, largely absent from the representations of 'uni-life' that are dominated or 'owned' by those who have moved away from home to study. Interestingly, their voices challenge market-driven models of higher education through the value they place on their affective relationships with tutors and a desire to have more time for these to be fostered. Often described in the literature as being mechanistic and driven by market-led consumer attitudes towards education (Thomas and Jones, 2017; Neves and Hillman, 2019), the live at home students in my research offer a much more nuanced, multi-layered perspective. Whilst they are clearly aware of the financial implications of higher education, this

impacts positively on their commitment to learning as seen in the value they place on attendance, in their formation of study groups outside classes and in the expectations they have of tutors in supporting them. Far from being unwilling to engage, live at home participants like Grace, Aisha and Natasha (p110) demonstrate a greater propensity to be on campus than those who move away, at least in the early days of university when 'uni-life' or socialising appears to preoccupy the latter group.

Bruner (1996:133) reminds us of the importance of stories as a means of enabling us to reconceptualise how we see the world, drawing attention to,

*the capacity of narrative for imagining and constructing other worlds and for trying to make them a reality.*

I contend that the lived stories of local live at home students have a valuable contribution to make in informing the ways in which Central University can re-imagine the notion of student-hood. Such a re-imagining can help it better understand and thereby improve the learning experience of this important community of students. Through this a distinctive narrative about the institution and its students can emerge which might support improved continuation rates and develop a university experience that more authentically reflects the identities of those from the city and its communities. This is vitally important if universities such as Central are to challenge the implicit threat to them that is currently being made by central government,

*For decades we have been recruiting too many young people on to courses that do nothing to improve their life chances or help with their career goals.*  
(Donelan, 2020)

The core part of my research generated data from the stories told by those who lived at home, comparing them with those told by participants who moved away and exploring their notions of what it is to be a student and to experience 'uni-life'. Such an approach mitigates against 'othering' because it *'begins and ends with a respect for ordinary lived experience'* (Clandinin, 2013:18), honouring that experience as a means of learning from it and thereby having the potential to *'resist the orthodoxy of university residence'* (Henderson, 2009). Listening to students has become something of a mantra in HE but, in advocating the need to listen more carefully, I share the view promoted by Maguire and Morris (2018:36) that,

*universities with large numbers of students who continue to live at home may have a more heterogeneous and complex set of values to understand within their student bodies.*

As such, I contend that student narratives are significantly more valuable than one-size-fits-all generic quantitative surveys.

Rather than reinforcing a deficit model of live at home students as missing out on a critical part of HE or in need of additional support and guidance, I find my participants' narratives to be moving testimonies which pay tribute to their determination, resilience and commitment to their studies, their families and their wider communities. Their stories demonstrate their general desire to make a positive contribution to the university through their willingness to act as ambassadors, their compassion for their families and their generous tolerance of peers who live in student accommodation and form exclusive friendship groups that are hard to penetrate. Far removed from the literature which sees live at home students as struggling to understand what is required of them in higher education, my participants demonstrate commitment to their studies and an aptitude for hard work. Where they show bewilderment it is with those tutors and systems which fail to recognise and sometimes even devalue these qualities as seen in the comments of Aisha (p138), Grace (p143), Lily (p141) and Warren (p112). As such, these stories provide a rich source of learning for Central University which, although it celebrates its inclusive approach towards new majority students, may not yet fully understand the experiences of those who live at home and, indeed, may unintentionally continue to reinforce a traditional model of student-hood where moving away is the norm and the early stages of transition seen largely as a time of socialising with peers. In doing so, the University overlooks the importance of taught sessions as a means of creating the strong relationships with staff and peers that enable students to continue with their studies when they experience challenges or doubts. For those who live at home and who find it difficult or undesirable to integrate with the friendship groups that are formed by those who live in student accommodation, relationships with academic staff are particularly important in sustaining them through difficulties that may lead to non-continuation. I fully acknowledge, however, that those who participated in my research are successful students having navigated the challenges of transitioning to HE and continuing into

the next levels of their degree. Whilst they offer insights into potential reasons for non-continuation, particularly in relation to the significant part played by academic staff in supporting and motivating them, these do not necessarily capture the full experiences of those who have withdrawn. As discussed in Chapter 4, whilst Bourdieu's theories of habitus and field offer a very useful lens through which to view the participants' stories and use them to develop strategy to improve continuation rates, those theories have limitations in explaining why some students do not complete their courses in contrast to those who do.

I recognise that institutions, including Central, have recently become more aware that many of their students remain at home and, as explored in the literature, begun to try to accommodate what are perceived to be their needs. There is, however, a lack of consistency, sometimes confusion, in the way that Central University attempts to support such students, partly because there is not yet a clear, widely understood narrative surrounding them. By crudely labelling local live at home students as commuters, the University is distracted by the provision of such things as on-site lockers, access to microwaves so they can bring in food from home and timetables which group their taught sessions together to avoid blocks of 'free' time. My research indicates that such measures, if well-intentioned, do little to challenge the dominant orthodoxy about student-hood. Indeed, initiatives to organise timetables into consolidated blocks of teaching time, sometimes presented as being supportive to 'commuter students' in making their travel time and costs more 'worthwhile', pose problems for local students such as Anjelica and Amna for whom the conflict between studying in university and familial responsibilities already causes discord.

Alongside and in contradiction to the idea that timetables should be consolidated into blocks of time to enable students to manage their commitments outside university more effectively, the concept of the 'sticky campus' asserts that students develop a sense of belonging more quickly if they spend more time in university outside their studies and that this will prevent them withdrawing. My findings demonstrate, however, that live at home students do not necessarily leave the campus when they are not being taught, many participants describing the importance of their roles as ambassadors (p143) and their peer study groups (p136). A focus on the provision of 'social learning spaces' as used in the 'sticky campus' narrative, also misses a

significant point that emerges from my findings: live at home students tend to make friendships in their taught sessions therefore value pedagogic practices which enable those relationships to develop and flourish. It is not enough merely to provide 'space' in itself; academic staff are central to the creation of positive relationships through their nurturing of their students, their demonstrable interest in their development and their adoption of structured activities which enable students to work together. An audit culture which strictly allocates academic time, 'outsourcing' pastoral and even academic support to services which measure 'interactions and interventions' with students, does not lend itself to a holistic model of higher education which my findings suggest would be particularly supportive to those who live at home, enabling them to develop an earlier sense of belonging to the institution.

I contend that, despite significant changes in the demography of students, the dominant and most powerful view of student-hood is drawn from a paradigm which is increasingly outmoded but which continues to pervade and be reproduced by Central University's marketing materials. That model is constructed on the notion that students move away from their homes to study and that a significant part of the rite of passage of becoming a student involves the reinvention of themselves as independent adults, making new friends and distancing themselves from their previous lives. (Holdsworth et al, 2006; Fisher, Cavanagh and Bowles, 2011). My findings indicate that the institution has not yet fully engaged with the needs of its majority students, its disposition remaining towards a model that is of little relevance to them.

I argue that Central University therefore colludes tacitly with the dominant field, despite most of its students not conforming to it. In using the generic term 'commuter students' to demarcate its local students, an institutional culture has been created which, although on the one hand celebrates the University's unusual demography in admitting a great many local live at home students, on the other separates and potentially alienates them thereby in Bourdieusian terms, 'misrecognising' its position with regard to inclusivity as outlined by Fraser (2007:20)

*people can also be prevented from interacting on terms of parity by institutionalized hierarchies of cultural value that deny them the*

*requisite standing; in that case they suffer from status inequality or misrecognition.*

The orthodoxy that a fundamental part of entering HE is moving away from home is reproduced by Central's marketing materials, effectively consecrating differences between students. The various rites of initiation into university described in Chapter 4 sanction difference because they are likely to exclude those who live at home. In effect they are what Bourdieu (1991:119) explains as rites of institution which transform the individual experiencing them but also,

*transform(s) the representation that the invested person has of himself, and the behaviour he feels obliged to adopt in order to conform to that representation.*

Those who move away have symbolic capital in that they are living the life expected of them as students, a position which gives them status, reinforcing their confidence and enabling them very quickly to settle into HE because of it. Even when, as discussed in 4.2.3 and 4.2.4, that capital is to some extent mythologised it remains a powerful and exclusive force which contributes to the marginalisation of those who live at home and therefore do not share its social cachet. The University can be viewed as devaluing the experiences of live at home students by not yet supporting them to articulate any alternative rites of institution, making it harder for them to form social groups that create a sense of belonging and shared identity. In short, such students have a right to rites that are not yet fully conceptualised and made available by the University.

My findings demonstrate the agency of live at home students, their strong relationships with their communities and their ability to manage their studies alongside those relationships. I have explored the experiences of live at home students through a Bourdieusian lens which has been very useful but may also have its limitations; as Wacquant (1992: xiv) suggests,

*an invitation to think with Bourdieu is of necessity an invitation to think beyond Bourdieu, and against him whenever required.*

My research indicates that, whilst live at home students do indeed feel different from those who live in student accommodation and find difficulties in integrating with them, this does not mean that they are vulnerable, at risk students. On the contrary, those who participated are extremely determined to do well, keen to achieve and

often making an active contribution to their communities and their city. Whilst sometimes bemused by the behaviour and attitudes of those who embrace the orthodox view of 'uni-life', they do not unanimously feel they are missing out. Far from being a deficit group, my findings demonstrate the multiplicity of their relationships and commitments, their adeptness in managing their studies around these and, at times, their skill in navigating some of the conflicting demands between home and their studies. Above all they are students from whom universities can and I argue – must – learn if they are to be genuinely inclusive and responsive. However, there are missing voices in my research from whom the University must also learn because, whilst my findings indicate the importance of belonging, student identity and the value of academic staff in supporting these, they reflect the experiences of a successful group whose dispositions towards academic success may be key to their continuation. Their dispositions and experiences may not be shared by those who have withdrawn.

My findings indicate that live at home students are beginning to challenge orthodox models of student-hood which regard moving away to study as the norm, a shift that has implications for Central as it develops policy and practice post-Covid-19. The confidence of several participants who explained that the normative view of students '*was just not me*' suggests that the game is changing, influenced by those who are beginning to challenge the doxa by trying to articulate a new kind of student-hood. The University can support them by redefining notions of student-hood as a means of recognising explicitly that most students have multiple identities where they manage a range of commitments to their employers, their families and their communities. This may be particularly true of live at home students who are more likely to remain close to those commitments and for whom student-hood is experienced differently from those who move away. It is my view that the negotiation of different identities provides advantage as well as challenge and, as argued by Abrahams and Ingram, '*can be beneficial in terms of being in a third space*' (2013). It may be that the very word 'student' is no longer valid as it carries with it such a cultural weight of expectations and misdirected meaning. By embracing that third space through prioritising and foregrounding local students, Central University can articulate a clearer narrative about itself and its students. Above all, it provides the chance to reconceptualise what the well-worn phrase, 'a sense of belonging' means



in an institution where most students live at home and which seeks to connect itself with its city.

Whilst coming too late to inform my thesis in any profound way, Covid-19 is likely to have a significant impact on HE. Central University has already demonstrated its ability to respond quickly to the crisis, introducing remote learning, teaching and assessment in a matter of weeks. Like other institutions, it has adapted its academic regulations to remove barriers to students' continuation with their studies. Such moves indicate the capacity of the institution to bring about rapid change in ways that would previously have been unthinkable. Nationally, amidst calls for students' fees to be reduced (NUS, 2020) and the reintroduction of caps on student numbers (Adams, March 2020), there are early signs of a recognition that universities must adapt to meet the challenges of a post-Brexit, post Covid-19 world (Seldon, 2020; Day et al, 2020). Aligned to this is an incipient recognition from some universities, including Central, of the opportunity to assert their civic responsibility towards local communities who are likely to be adversely affected by the pandemic,

*should the crisis decimate some other institutions in local communities, the civic role of universities will become more vital than ever (Hillman, 2020).*

There has perhaps never been a better, more apt time for the University to re-imagine itself and the notion of student-hood in relation to its local students so that continuation rates improve. I believe that my research has the potential to contribute towards that re-imagining.

My findings indicate a number of complex reasons for non-continuation, some of which may be related to intersectional factors connected with economic disadvantage, ethnicity and culture. However, my research demonstrates that there are factors outside these which can be influenced positively by institutional actions or, indeed, negatively by inaction.

One of the most powerful themes which emerges is the different way in which live at home and move away students experience 'uni-life' particularly in the early stages of HE where student identities, friendships and credibility appear to be formed. Live at home students may not experience the rapid bonding with their peers that occurs amongst those who live together in a communal way. For the latter, the experience

of becoming a student is well-documented, creating common understanding of going to university through a model that is presented in a wide range of literature, information and anecdote. Such a model, reinforced by those experiencing it with them, reassures these students that their experiences are valid, as well as enabling them very quickly to forge strong, mutually supportive links with one another. Not only do those friendships appear to help them during difficult times such as the 'siege' described in 4.2.4, but also to develop shared strategies to manage their studies as demonstrated when they talk about putting social life aside to focus on work. There is therefore a shared rhythm to their transition to university which includes the rapid development of friendships and immersion in social life followed by a period around semester two when study becomes more important and 'cramming' begins. Again, this rhythm is well-documented in 'campus novels', in received wisdom and, sometimes, reinforced by parents and academic staff. Bourdieu's exploration of rites of initiation identifies the importance of such rhythms and rituals in the consecration of individuals which separates and sets them apart from others.

My research suggests that live at home students experience the transition to university differently, at a different pace and without the rites that give a shared identity to their peers in student accommodation. For various reasons, some do not attend welcome week and are more focused on 'getting down' to study, possibly because they are sensitive to the financial aspects of university and less concerned about making friendships immediately. Because of this they are more reliant not just on the early validation of their tutors, but on the structures of their courses as means of developing friendships, study networks and learning communities. Without access to the informal support and structures provided within student accommodation and lacking a recognised narrative in which their experiences are reflected, those who live at home may be more likely to become disillusioned with university, unable to see how they belong there and – perhaps – more likely therefore to withdraw. This does not mean that live at home students are in themselves a vulnerable group but that the University should make an earlier investment in them so that they see themselves as an authentic part of the institution with a significant role to play, and a 'cognised' identity within it. The University must adapt to meet the needs of this

majority group of students, finding ways to innovate new rites through which they can feel a sense of belonging and part of a collective identity of student-hood.

## **5.2 Recommendations**

My research leads to a number of areas for development for Central University to improve the experience and support the continuation of its local live at home students. These are outlined below in five thematic areas. In presenting these, I recognise the risk of reducing what are very complex issues to what could be perceived as a checklist to deal with a 'problem group'. As discussed throughout this thesis and revisited in this chapter there is more at stake here than a surface issue of continuation in relation to live at home students so, whilst I consider it important to use the findings of the research to influence University policy and practice, it is not my intention to present any kind of 'toolkit of good practice'. Not only would this be reductive, but would undermine my central thesis that we must learn from the richly varied experiences of our local students and work with them to co-create institutional strategy. Instead, the thematic areas seek to contribute to what I see as an emerging discourse that will influence strategy within the University with regard to its live at home demography and its ambitions to serve the city to which the majority of its students belong.

### **5.2.1 Acknowledgement and understanding**

As discussed throughout this thesis, there is a tendency to group students who do not live in student accommodation as 'commuters', a description that I contend is too imprecise, too wide and too amorphous to be helpful. In Central University a performance-driven model has produced the narrative of a 'problem' group of students but this is not supported by my findings which produce a very different narrative. My research indicates that live at home students are trying to assert their identities as part of a collective experience within the University's community of practice, sometimes feeling different and occasionally slightly apologetic that they do not conform to a notional norm of student-hood.

A stronger narrative therefore needs to be developed by the University around local students, one that explicitly presents them as assets to the institution, celebrating the

strengths they bring to it. By using the term 'local students' rather than subsuming them in a broad category of commuters, the University would explicitly recognise these students as an important demographic, providing the opportunity for a compelling narrative to be developed both by the institution and by the students themselves. A change in nomenclature may seem trivial but is a significant way of cognising such students, a means by which their various voices can be reflected authentically inside and outside the University, for example through the presentation of their stories to celebrate institutional success, the development of a local alumni group and their employment as 'City Ambassadors' to support and mentor other local students as they enter HE.

### **5.2.2 Developing a learning community**

The label of commuting students can lead to a narrative which focuses on practical actions to support those who travel into university. My research indicates, however, that such actions do not necessarily address the needs of local students in any fundamental way. Similarly, whilst it is widely acknowledged in Central University that students prefer blocks of taught time, this is not necessarily unique to those who travel and my research indicates varied views on this depending on individual circumstances. There is evidence that some students, particularly those who may have family commitments and/or parents who allow them only to attend taught sessions, do not want timetables that consolidate teaching into blocks as this could make it harder to attend university outside those times. Students such as Anjelica and Amna would have more autonomy over time if the institution were instead to reconsider the presentation of timetables to include notional time for independent study so that families could understand the time commitment of university study.

My research indicates that all participants valued the supportive friendships formed in the early stages of university and which sustained them in overcoming difficulties. Those who move away may find it easier to form such friendships in student accommodation where they bond with one another very quickly by participating in the social activities traditional to 'uni-life' which may be exclusive, even undesirable to those who live at home. Indeed, students who move away appear to form relationships even before they enrol because, as soon as they know where they will be living, they use social media to establish links with others with whom they will

share accommodation. Central University could consider how similar links could be encouraged across live at home students so that they too have an early sense of community and identity with others.

Whilst 'ice-breaking' activities are widely used by tutors during Welcome Week, these are not in themselves adequate as a means of developing long term communities of practice, one live home student describing them as '*awkward and embarrassing*'. Live at home students appear particularly to value undertaking group activities that are not necessarily linked with assessment during taught sessions as these provide a natural way of developing relationships which extend beyond the classroom. Such activities have the potential to become alternative rites of initiation or investiture which would provide students with lasting credibility that would support them to continue with their studies and,

*Exercise a symbolic efficacy that is quite real in that it really transforms the person consecrated (Bourdieu, 1990:119)*

They do, however, entail a significant shift towards pedagogies and structures that enable staff and students to come to know one another in ways that take time and are not immediately measurable.

### **5.2.3 Support and validation**

My research indicates that, although live at home students are beginning to challenge norms around student-hood and 'uni-life', they value validation from tutors about their academic progress, particularly in their early days at University. This is not necessarily unique to live at home students, but is a recurring theme shared by the participants in the research, perhaps because those in accommodation share experiences which reinforce traditional views of student-hood, strengthening and validating their identities as students. I contend that, during semester one at least, live at home and move away students have conflicting expectations of university, the former group tending to want to 'get down to work' and the latter being more likely to prioritise socialising. If, as indicated by some participants, academic staff promote a view that the first year lacks significance or value, this is disorienting for those who look to those staff for approval that they are adapting well to university.

My findings indicate that, in the early stages of their studies, live at home students are more likely to rely on their tutors for support and validation than on their peers.

They also suggest that live at home students take longer to form social networks or learning communities than those who live in shared student accommodation. Central University's systems for allocating students to personal tutors and seminar groups do not currently facilitate sophisticated models of allocation that allow course teams easily to reimagine ways of constructing groups. Live at home students might benefit from being grouped together, not in exclusive groups, but in ways that allow them more confidently to articulate their experiences, develop their student identities and to form early friendships that could encourage continuation.

In Central University in addition to the practical functions offered by service teams dealing with such things as finance and registration, some elements of student support are also centralised. This approach is consistent with marketised models of HE which value 'consistency' of support across a wide range of students and 'efficiency' in terms of time. However, Lily's story (p141) about being wrongly identified as missing sessions exemplifies how a well-intended system administered by a distant team can damage relationships between tutors and their students. More significantly, it creates a culture where students are expected to seek support outside their courses, so teaching is regarded primarily as the transmission of knowledge. 'Student care' is thereby 'delivered' by services remote from students, something that may alienate them from their tutors, creating more barriers and impacting negatively on self-esteem.

#### **5.2.4 Community, service and employment**

There is scope for Central to be more imaginative in conceptualising how it works collaboratively with its local students to develop its local alumni base in the interests of the region, (Day et al, 2020:46). My research indicates that many of its local students already make a contribution to the institution through their work as ambassadors and the like. Senior management changes over recent years has led to Central University's withdrawal of a scheme designed to engage students in paid employment within the University alongside their studies. Such employment fulfils a number of functions in addition to supporting students financially, including creating a sense of identity and belonging, developing opportunities to prepare for graduate-level work and enabling them to work alongside staff as professional colleagues. My research indicates that local live at home students might particularly value this kind of scheme as a means of forming relationships, being validated by the institution and

overcoming family barriers to remaining on campus. Similarly, many live at home participants remain close to the local area, knowing others who come to the institution (p105) so Central University could build on the strengths of these students' community links. Maguire and Morris (2018) identify the need for institutions to celebrate and deploy the 'civic roots' of these students, a point that is supported by my research and is of particular relevance to Central's positioning as the university **for** its city.

Central University could consider therefore how to capitalise more extensively on its employment of live at home students as ambassadors to local schools and colleges. Not only would this encourage such students to feel a sense of belonging with the University but create a 'virtuous circle' of support, enabling future local students to join the institutional learning community. Similarly, by developing an active local alumni group with its live at home graduates, the University could create a partnership with the power to exert influence on the city and its communities. Not only would these measures value live at home students by building on their local roots, but support the co-production of strategy, policy and practice. Such a development has the power to change the narrative from live at home students being a problem group towards one where they are positioned as central to the University's educational purpose and key to fulfilling its civic responsibilities. In a commodified culture, this requires a bold reorientation of institutional habitus so that students are viewed through a civic lens rather than a commercial one where higher education is marketed as a 'lifestyle' and students are simply 'fee-payers'.

### **5.2.5 Institutional policy and practice**

The critical analysis of secondary data undertaken as part of my research and discussed in 4.2.2, provides early evidence to indicate that, whilst the regulatory changes introduced by Central University have impacted positively on overall continuation rates, they are more advantageous to those who have moved away to study. This remains a puzzling feature of those changes, the reasons for which can only be speculated on from the evidence of my research. Whilst there are no longitudinal data in my research to demonstrate that this is a trend, it is an area that needs careful monitoring and further investigation. Whilst tinkering with regulations

may improve institutional metrics, it does not confront the complex reasons for non-continuation which my research indicates are connected with the relationships that are formed in the early days of university. For live at home students who value the validation of academic staff, regulatory changes may not have their intended impact because they are implemented only after failure, when it is too late to redeem their sense of self-worth. For those who live away from home and who feel part of a community of students whose priority, initially at least, lies in socialising, the failure of an assessment may be less profound, more easily explained to themselves and others as a failure merely to balance their social lives with their studies, therefore not a reason to consider leaving university. For those who move away and who have formed close friendships within student accommodation, probably also making plans to share private housing in their second year, being allowed to continue through condoned and compensated modules or repeat years is perhaps a more attractive offer than it is to those who remain at home and may not have formed strong university friendship groups.

My research indicates that Central University should investigate more systematically the reasons students leave their courses prematurely as there is as yet no rigorous system for contacting students who withdraw from their courses to find out why through listening to their stories. Although withdrawing students are encouraged to provide a reason that complies with the generic HESA categories, those categories are un-nuanced, produced primarily to measure and compare universities' performance rather than a means by which the institution can listen sensitively to what are likely to be painful stories that could make profound differences to student experiences.

### **5.3 Concluding thoughts**

Throughout this thesis I have discussed notions of 'value' and 'worth' in relation both to HE itself and the students who participate in it. The purpose of any research is to add value and impact on its field of study. I believe that my research extends knowledge about live at home students within Central University where they form the majority. As such it has the potential to contribute towards the development of institutional policy through a coherent approach towards local live at home students which acknowledges their strengths, values their views and responds to these in its



practices. Conceptually, this is a significant shift away from the characterisation of those who live at home as a challenging group who are hard to engage, reductive if not mechanistic in their attitudes to learning, and unlikely to participate in extra-curricular activities. I contend that such a conceptual shift is both overdue and necessary if the institution is to capitalise on its distinctive demographic position and, more importantly, make a more profound and sustained difference not just to their university experiences but to academic outcomes including continuation rates.

Moreover, I believe that my research has the capacity to influence an institutional re-conceptualisation of 'uni-life' and institutional habitus so that it is more inclusive, more cognisant of the multiplicity of students' lives and more attuned to the experiences of the majority. In its Strategic Plan, Central University states its mission as '*enabling personal transformation*'; on the basis of my research findings I contend that, if it is to make a difference to the lives of the majority of its students, it must also transform itself by positioning those students at the heart of its strategic policy and practice. Such a transformation requires a shift of institutional habitus so that students are seen not through the lens of performance data which produces 'problem' groups and not as 'fee-payers,' but as individuals who can be nurtured and supported by staff who know them, understand their needs and have time to care for them. This is of course a more expensive model of HE, one that is not easily measurable and which is in opposition to central government which continues to see universities through the lens of market forces so students can be described by the Universities Minister as,

*left with the debt of an investment that didn't pay off in any sense (July 1, 2020).*

Of personal significance is the realisation that undertaking the Professional Doctorate has had a profound impact on my practice. Having been in senior positions in both higher and further education for some considerable time, I am immersed in institutional data and key performance indicators. Initially, Ben's story caused me to reflect on how, if seen through the lens of such data, he was a failing student, at risk of non-continuation. However, I began instead to understand his story as a triumph of perseverance, tenacity and determination, one of intellectual and personal courage. This recognition made me more critically aware of institutional data as kinds of narratives presented in different ways for different

audiences and changing periodically in response to external priorities. Listening to the participants in my wider research provided me with further opportunity to reflect on my practice, to learn from other perspectives and to begin to consider how strategy might be influenced by the stories of those who, in what Bourdieu might regard as a kind of symbolic violence, are reduced to numbers in institutional data.

My research has empowered me to question how a performance culture both creates and problematises groups, including live at home students, seeing them as 'at risk' and in need of additional support. The participants' stories provide a positive antidote to the deficit model that has been produced by the University, foregrounding instead the wealth of experience that is brought to it by such students, many of whom continue to enrich the life of the city and its communities after graduation and who form the backbone of the institution. Undertaking this research has therefore developed my ability to be reflexive, a means by which '*researchers turn a critical gaze towards themselves*' (Finlay and Gough, 2003:3), making me more sensitive towards my students, more questioning of the institutional stories told through secondary data and more influenced by student narratives in developing strategy.

I recognise, however, that my research is limited in scale, focused on those who have been successful in continuing their studies and exploring the issues of identity, student-hood through a single lens. I am highly conscious too that there are missing narratives here: those who withdrew early and who remain voiceless. Their silences haunt this research. Further research into these missing narratives could be the next stage in my own research story.

Covid-19 is already regarded by educational policy influencers as a 'game-changer' which will create,

*a once-in-a-century opportunity to re-think the sector with a stronger focus on public good and social return and to reshape institutions to work effectively for all* (Husbands and Day, 2020).

How successfully the sector responds to this challenge is already providing researchers with fascinating opportunities to investigate how universities might re-imagine learning and the student experience. If, as O'Kelly and Fisher (2020) suggest, one possible impact of the virus is that students are more likely to study

locally, this would almost certainly reshape the nature of student-hood across all institutions.

Whilst acknowledging that there are likely to be intersectional factors to the student experience, my research focuses primarily on the dichotomy between living at home and moving away to study and is therefore limited in its scope, particularly in that it does not consider economic factors as one of the variables that in the research design and its findings. Although some of the participants allude to factors other than simply living at home as making an impact on their experience of university, my research does not investigate these further but indicates there is merit in doing so. For example, there is scope to learn from the experiences of young women from ethnic minority groups where parents may have high expectations of their ability to combine degree level studies with domestic commitments and support for their families. The impact of Covid-19 on these students would appear to have particular research value, as would its effects on those from low-income families.

Finally, my research has made me recognise more fully the complexity of students' lives, particularly those who live at home and who manage multiple roles in supporting their families, contributing to their communities and their University as well as studying. These are quiet stories, currently overpowered by the orthodoxy of student residence. However, just as I was jolted out of complacency by John's story outlined in 1.3, so too have these stories committed me to a belief that, if we are to enable more of our local students to complete their degrees, we should not diminish them through categorising them into a group to be measured for performance. Instead we must understand that their lives are far from one-dimensional and, above all, work with them to create sustainable versions of 'uni-life' and student-hood that more authentically represent their identities.

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## Appendix 1: Abbreviations

The abbreviations used are as follows:

Access and Participation Plan	APP
(Department for) Business, Innovation and Skills	BIS
Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic	BAME
Department for Education	DfE
General Data Policy Regulation	GDPR
Higher Education	HE
Higher Education Academy (since 2019 AdvanceHE)	HEA
Higher Education Funding Council	HEFC
Higher Education Policy Institute	HEPI
Higher Education Statistics Agency	HESA
Indices of Multiple Deprivation	IMD
Joint Information Systems Committee	JISC
National Student Survey	NSS
National Union of Students	NUS
Office for Students	OfS
Office for National Statistics	ONS
Participation of Local Areas	POLAR
Teaching Excellence Framework	TEF
Universities and Colleges Admissions Service	UCAS
Universities UK	UUK
Value for Money	VfM

## **Appendix 2: Prompt questions and structure of meetings**

### **Meeting outline**

#### **Organisation and structure of meeting**

1. Welcome and introductions.
2. Ground rules and confidentiality.
3. Obtainment of their details: ie gender, age, course, mode of accommodation.
4. Purpose of meeting ie to discuss the experiences they have as living at home/living in student accommodation.
5. Sharing of current literature and what it indicates about the experience of students who live at home.
6. Explanation of what I am trying to find out from my research.

#### **Topic areas/prompts**

- What factors influenced you in living at home? Moving away?
- What was it like to live at home/in student accommodation during your first year?
- How did you make friends? Did your friends have similar living arrangements to you?
- Do you think that living at home/away affected your coursework and/or progress on course?
- You are all successful students. Did you at any time experience problems/difficulties in your first year and, if so, what enabled you to overcome them?
- What advice would you give to students considering living at home? Moving away?
- Have your relationships with family/friends at home changed since you came to university? If so, how?

#### **Conclusion**

Thanks to the group/interviewee.

### Appendix 3: Composition of focus groups and individual interviews<sup>11</sup>

Type	Name	Gender	Accommodation	Ethnicity	Course
Individual interview	Lily	Female	Home	White	Business
Individual interview	Grace	Female	Home	BAME	SS
Individual interview	Patrick	Male	Home	White	Business
Individual interview	Warren	Male	Home	White	Business
Focus 1	Sean	Male	Away	White	SS
	Kate	Female	Away	White	SS
	Shantelle	Female	Away	BAME	Law
	Sally	Female	Away	White	SS
	Esther	Female	Away	White	Business
	Natasha	Female	Home	White	Business
Focus 2	Mike	Male	Home	BAME	Law
	Nazia	Female	Home	BAME	Business
	Mariam	Female	Home	BAME	Business
	Aisha	Female	Home	BAME	SS
	Amna	Female	Home	BAME	SS
	Kevin	Male	Home	White	Law
	Yusuf	Male	Home	BAME	Law
Focus 3	Anjelica	Female	Home	BAME	Law
	Naseem	Male	Home	BAME	Business
	Diya	Female	Home	BAME	Law

Group	Number of participants	Numbers living at home	Numbers living away from home	Male	Female	BAME	White
1	6	1	5	1	5	4	2
2	7	7	0	3	4	5	2
3	3	3	0	1	2	3	0

<sup>11</sup> Names have been changed to protect identities and ensure anonymity.

## Appendix 4: Participant Information Sheet

**Full title of Project:** The Students' Tales: listening to the experiences of live at home and live away students. <sup>12</sup>

My research takes place in the Faculty of Business, Legal and Social Studies in a West Midlands urban university where a high number of students live in the family home during their studies. The purpose of my research is to explore the experiences of first year students living in the family home and those who move away to study. The Faculty quantitative data and the literature connected with students and their living accommodation indicates that those who remain in the family home are more likely to withdraw from their studies than those who move away.

However, quantitative data is only one kind of 'story' about student outcomes and success. My research seeks to listen to the voices of students to explore their experiences of their first year in university as living at home or living away students aged under 21 at the point of entry to their degrees.

By agreeing to be part of this research you understand that you will take part in a focus group discussion for about 60-90 minutes. I will make notes that you will see and approve before I can use them in my research. I will also record the discussion. You will be able to read my finished research project which may include your words anonymised. You will not be identified in the research and will be described only as Participant A/B/C etc. You will have the right to withdraw from the research at any time.

Lynn Fulford

3 February 2019

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<sup>12</sup> The title of the thesis changed in the period between conducting the focus groups and interviews and completion.

## Appendix 5: Participant Consent Form

**Full title of Project:** The Students' Tales: listening to the experiences of live at home and live away students.

**Name, position and contact address of researcher:**

Lynn Fulford

Associate Dean

Curzon Room 358

Birmingham City University

0121 331 7320

[Lynn.fulford@bcu.ac.uk](mailto:Lynn.fulford@bcu.ac.uk)

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above project and have been given the opportunity to ask question.

Initials:

2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving reason.

Initials:

3. I understand that the focus group will be recorded for the purposes of the study.

Initials:

4. I agree to the use of anonymised quotations in any publications that may ensue from this study.

Initials:

5. I agree to participate in this focus group.



Initials:

Name of Participant:

Date:

Signature:

Name of Researcher: Lynn Fulford

Date:

Signature: