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Graduating from care: A narrative study of care  
leavers' journeys into and through university.

Lynette Harland SHOTTON

A thesis submitted for the Doctorate in Education

School of Education

Durham University

2018

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**Title: Graduating from care: A narrative study of care leavers' journeys into and through university.**

**Abstract**

The aim of this study was to explore care leavers' journeys into and through university.

Nine students were selected to take part from universities in the North East of England. Narrative interviews were used to capture individual experiences and were analysed through a Bourdieusian lens, using an experience centred, thematic approach.

Three themes were identified, which linked to aspiring to attend university: primary habitus; secondary habitus and aspirations sustained through experience. Four further themes were identified focusing on experience at university: fitting in; standing out; forms of capital and family ties and the stickiness of place.

The findings show that care leavers are characterised by complexity and diversity. Aspirations for going to university are grounded in the dominant trend of going to university, but are shaped by primary and secondary habitus, as well as personal agency. Experience in the university setting varied and linked to individual and institutional habitus and forms of capital. The challenges students faced related to the academic and financial aspects of being a student and were similar to those of other university students generally. However, for some, these did intersect with their care leaver status. Going to university did not lead to radical shifts in habitus, but did produce an overall benefit in terms of the accrual of social, cultural and economic capital.

Recommendations from this study are that care leavers must be recognised as complex and diverse in relation to their social backgrounds, reasons for attending university and support needs once there. More research is needed about how best to shape policy and practice in raising aspirations of those in care to attend university, but also to help universities to support care leavers effectively.

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## **Glossary of terms used in this study**

### **Bourdieuian**

This term means pertaining to Bourdieu and his work and in this study will be used in preference to the similar term, Bourdieuan.

### **Care experienced**

Those who are care experienced generally does include care leavers (defined below), but also a wider population of people who were in care at some point in their childhood, as well as those who were in care for only a short period of time or left care before the age of 16.

### **Care leaver**

Care leavers are those who have previously been in looked after care under the provision and/ or supervision of Local Authority Children's Services (Children's Commissioner, 2018) and are in care until the age of 16 or reach Key Stage 4 in the compulsory education system.

N.B University definitions of care leaver may differ from these – see appendix two, page 184.

### **Post-92 university / institution**

Universities that were previously polytechnics and were granted university status under the Further and Higher Education Act (1992). Hence the terms post-92 or new university, which are used interchangeably.

### **Russell Group**

The Russell Group represents 24 leading UK universities, largely comprising traditional or "red brick" universities that were awarded university status between 1900 and 1963. They have a shared focus on research and a reputation for academic achievement.

## List of abbreviations

A Level	Advanced Level
APPG	All party parliamentary group
BTEC	Business and Technology Education Council
CIPD	Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development
DfBIS	Department for Business Innovation and Skills
DfE	Department for Education
FE	Further education
GCSE	General Certificate of Secondary Education
HE	Higher education
HEFCE	Higher Education Funding Council
HEPI	Higher Education Policy Institute
LA	Local authority
LACYP	Looked after children and young people
NSPCC	National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children
NVQ	National Vocational Qualification
Ofsted	Office for Standards in Education
UCAS	Universities and Colleges Admissions Service
UK	United Kingdom
VSH	Virtual School Head

## **Declaration / statement of copyright**

*“The copyright of this thesis rests with the author. No quotation from it should be published without the author's prior written consent and information derived from it should be acknowledged.”*

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## **Chapter One: Introduction and overview of the thesis**

### **1:1 Defining care leavers**

Approximately 11,000 young people leave care in England each year (Social Finance, 2018). Often in the discourse concerning this group of young people, they are referred to as care leavers or as care experienced adults and young people and these terms are used inter-changeably. Care leavers are those who have previously been in looked after care under the provision and / or supervision of Local Authority (LA) Children's Services (Children's Commissioner, 2018) and are in care until the age of 16 or when they reach Key Stage 4 in the compulsory education system (Harrison, 2017b). The term care experienced does include care leavers, but also a wider population of people who were in care at some point in their childhood, as well as those who were in care for only a short period of time or left care before the age of 16 (Harrison, 2017b). For the purpose of this study, I have included students who identify themselves as care leavers. This encompassed students who had experienced some form of looked after care and so includes care leavers as well as those who are care experienced.

Looked after care is that which is provided or supervised via local authorities and provides a statutory safety net for children whose birth parents are unable to care for them and / or who are at risk of suffering, or may be suffering, serious neglect or abuse (Harrison, 2017b). Under the still current section 22 of the Children Act (1989) a child is legally defined as "looked after" (in care) if he or she is continuously provided with accommodation by a LA for a period of more than 24 hours or is subject to a care order or placement order. A care order is made by the court on the application of the LA and places the child in the care of, or under the supervision of a designated LA, whereas as a placement order gives the LA the legal authority to place a child for adoption (Children Act, 1989). Such orders are determined in court and are made only when the court is satisfied that the child is suffering or is likely to suffer from serious neglect or abuse (Children Act, 1989; Children's Commissioner, 2018).

Children and young people may be looked after with the agreement and co-operation of birth parent/s in the absence of a care or placement order and this care may take place in a range of settings, including with wider family members, friends, in foster care or in institutions, such as care homes, residential schools or secure units (Department for Education (DfE), 2013a; DfE, 2017a). Indeed, of the £1.66 billion spent, £88 million is spent by local authorities on children who are cared for by family and friends carers (TACT, 2018).

Looked after children cease to be legally looked after when they are adopted, return home or turn 18, at which point their status is considered by the local authority to be a young adult, eligible for help and assistance (DfE, 2014a; (National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC), 2018). Whilst they are legally able to stay in looked after care until the age of 18, many looked after children leave their placements between the ages of 16 and 18 years of age (Children's Commissioner, 2018) and as such, it is recognised that these young people often miss out on some of the supportive elements that parents and families generally provide (DfE, 2018a).

Care leavers are of particular interest in the policy landscape, because it is generally accepted that they fare worse than their peers who have never been in care (DfE, 2018a). This has led to greater emphasis being placed on LA's to monitor the progress of care leaves, but also to invest in supporting them and ensure that corporate parenting tries to emulate the quality and longevity of support provided by parents of non-looked after children (DfE, 2018a; DfE, 2018b). One such measure has been the extension of the availability of a personal advisor, appointed by the LA, to support care leavers up until the age of 25 years of age (DfE, 2018b). Such intervention must be tailored to the individual, but is to include specific help with housing, finances and education (DfE, 2018b). This supports previous legislation under Staying Put arrangements (DfE, 2013b; Children and Families Act, 2014) for those looked after children and young people in care to stay put until the age of 21 years. This should not be dependent on the young person being in education or training, but on personal circumstances and the arrangement being beneficial to the young person (Catch-22, 2014). The

introduction of such measures are undoubtedly positive however, the long-term impact is not yet known, and it is thought that service provision varies significantly between areas and under the direction of individual practitioners (Social Finance, 2018). Also, whilst some form of support is mandated via the LA personal adviser role until the age of 25, it is noted that for many young people LA support is withdrawn by the age of 21 (Become, 2018). Furthermore, as some of these support measures are recent, it is important to recognise the circumstances of current care leavers who may not have benefitted from such policy and legislative intervention.

Obtaining statistical data about this group is challenging, because some care leavers do not wish to keep in touch with LA's (DfE, 2017b). However, recent statistics indicate that in 2017, of the 90% of care leavers whose activity was known to LA's, 40% of 19-21-year-old care leavers were not in education, training or employment, compared to only 13% of all in that age group (DfE, 2017b). Furthermore, there are stark differences in life outcomes for care leavers: 20% of young homeless people have been in care; 24% of the adult prison population have been in care; 70% of sex workers have been in care and a common feature of this group is the lack of educational or vocational skills and qualifications (Centre for Social Justice, 2015). To add to this recent press coverage by Greenwood (2017), based on Freedom of Information figures, indicates that early deaths among care leavers are common and although care leavers make up 1% of the 19- 21-year-old population, they make up around 7% of deaths in this age group.

The definitions of care leaver noted at the beginning of this chapter are helpful in outlining the shared experience of being in the looked after care system, but what such definitions fail to convey is the varied and unique nature of individual experience. Indeed, using the term care leaver, positions individuals as belonging to a homogenous group (Konstantoni, Kustatscher and Emejulu, 2014). Whilst the reasons for entering care are largely attributed to the experience of parental neglect and / or abuse (DfE, 2017a), as will be explored further in the following chapter, the statistical data often fails to capture the complexity of pre care and care experience on the multiple identities and experiences of looked after children.

This study recognises the complexity of care leavers identities and backgrounds and aims to challenge and critique both discourse and policy that often minimises the importance of differences within and between groups (Konstantoni, Kustatscher and Emejulu, 2014). This is consistent with the theory of intersectionality introduced by Crenshaw in 1989, which sought to denote the various ways in which race and gender interacted to impact on the experiences of women of colour. Intersectionality helps to explore how experiences of discrimination and social inequality can be distorted by focusing on a single issue or category, in this case, being a care leaver, and instead suggests that emphasis must be placed on the analysis of multiple, fluid and dynamic social categories that combine to produce inequality (Pheonix, 2016).

Recent research by Harrison (2017a), which will be explored in more detail in Chapter Two, refers to some of the intersectional challenges faced by care leavers, which include belonging to a minority ethnic group and having a statement of special educational needs. Challenges also include the experience of poor mental health and entering higher education as a mature student (Harrison, 2017a). Intersectionality examines positions of privilege and discrimination, recognising the unequal distribution of these, but also, importantly that individuals may be privileged by one set of characteristics, but disadvantaged by others (Alper, Katz and Schofield Clark, 2016). This very much reflects the diverse experiences of the students who took part in this study, where the intersections of social background, ethnicity, age, poverty, emotional well-being and special educational needs combined to impact on their educational trajectories and identities. Therefore, whilst this study foregrounds the care leaver status of these students, it would not be possible to understand their unique experiences without also exploring and recognising the simultaneous intersectional plurality of their lives (Pheonix, 2016).

## **1:2 Research questions**

It is widely recognised in a growing body of literature that early life experiences impact on a number of outcomes, including health, education,



income and well-being across the life span (Berridge, 2012; Jackson and Cameron, 2012; Brady and Gilligan, 2018). Therefore, it is not surprising that many care leavers fare worse than their peers in the education system (Higher Education Policy Unit, 2017). In recent years there has been increasing emphasis on widening participation for all non-traditional students (Boeren and James, 2017) based on the premise that university education is helpful in improving life circumstances (Guild HE, 2016; Harman, 2017). This is reflected in the first research question:

- How do care leavers explain their journeys into university?

The first research question is important because care leavers are thought to be one of the least represented groups in Higher Education (HE) (Become, 2018), but are equally among those who are likely to most benefit from it, given their early life experience (Jackson and Cameron, 2012). The benefits include greater likelihood of successfully making the transition to independent living and a wider range of options in the jobs market (Her Majesty's (HM) Government, 2016). In relation to the practical application of this research, understanding more about care leavers who do get to university and their personal experiences and explanations for this will add to what we already know about this group, but will also help to identify ways to encourage other care experienced young people to aspire to university.

Because so few care leavers, between 1-6% (Jackson, Ajayi and Quigley, 2005; DfE, 2017a; DfE, 2017b) reach university, the second research question is also important.

- How do care leavers explain their journeys through university?

Considering how best to support care leavers at university has a social and moral dimension, linked to widening participation and social mobility. The aims of widening participation and improving social mobility are to promote access and outcomes (Guild HE, 2016) and therefore, ensuring students complete their studies and achieve their individual potential and the best academic outcomes possible for them is important. Furthermore, the increase in tuition fees and the increased amount of debt attached to entering HE produces social responsibility to monitor the long-term worth of

university education (Office for Students, 2018a). Here, emphasis is placed on universities to monitor student journeys through university in terms of academic performance, as well as other features of experience, including teaching experience, social experience, personal development and student support and to use this information to drive up competition, quality and innovation (Griffiths, Leaver and King, 2018; Office for Students, 2018a). Here, there is also a practical dimension to answering this research question in that, for universities, attrition and low success rates are costly, leading to reduced income revenue, but in a competitive market, attrition may also impact on the reputation of the organisation (Beer and Lawson, 2015; 2018). In relation to care leavers, this research question aims to help understand how best to support them in the university setting and determine whether current provision is appropriate.

### **1:3 Why is this study important to me?**

Having completed my compulsory education in what, at the time, would be considered an under-performing state comprehensive school, followed by attending a local further education (FE) college, both in areas of socio-economic disadvantage in County Durham, I won a place at Durham University in the early 1990's. This was an exciting time, given my background (I was the first in the family to attend university at the time) and the global esteem in which the university was and continues to be held. It was not until I arrived at Durham University that the stark differences between me, my life experience and my prior social and educational journey into university, became apparent. At the time, I blamed myself for being unable to fit in and make successful networks with other students and despite strong academic achievement, left after two terms. It is only with reflection on this chapter of my life story that I now view it through a different lens and consider the wider issues that may have led to my difficulty to fit in, namely the following theoretical consideration of widening participation and Bourdieu's (1984) theory of practice, which will be considered in Chapter's Two and Three of this thesis respectively.

After withdrawing from Durham University, I began a career in nursing and health visiting. It is through my health visiting practice and my subsequent journey into an academic role in HE that the other areas of my research interest emerged. In both roles I have been involved in safeguarding vulnerable children and teaching in this field. As a health visitor, work with children usually ends at around 5 years of age and I often wondered what happened in childrens' life stories beyond that, particularly given the, often difficult, early life experiences of many of the children I worked with.

The study also has relevance to my current role as a senior lecturer in a post-92 university, where I contribute to health-related programmes. Within my work in HE, I have encountered several students who are care experienced and this was shared with me through the rapport we developed, rather than via formal university mechanisms. This initially led me to wonder how students with care experience are identified and supported in the university setting. Also, reflecting on my own journey and the feeling of being other, I wanted to find out more about other non-traditional students, specifically those who have been exposed to the care system, in relation to how they got to university and about their experiences once there. In examining such experiences, I aim to improve my practise as a senior lecturer in offering academic and pastoral support, but also through sharing the results of this study with colleagues and hopefully through publication, it may also influence the practise of others.

The personal justification for this study is linked to the practical and social justification for this research, considered in 1:2, namely the need to widen participation and improve social mobility for students and improve student experience, particularly those who are less likely to go to university because of their background. This study is important because this is an under-researched area, where historically, the focus has been on secondary education, detailed further in Chapter Two.

What this study aims to do is to add to the body of knowledge about care leavers and help provide a broader range of perspectives and a greater understanding of the individual experiences of this group of university

students. It is hoped that by listening to, and through telling of, stories about educational experiences and practices, it may influence the practise of others and ultimately lead to a shift or developments in educational practice (Clandinin, Pushor and Orr, 2007).

#### **1:4 The rationale for a narrative methodological approach**

In this study narrative is both the methodology and the method and was used to guide the selection of participants, data collection, analysis and re-storying of the narratives (Clandinin, 2006). Narratives are a fundamental way of understanding the world around us and are present in every age, place and society (Barthes and Duisit, 1975); they are a universal form of expression (Labov and Waletzky, 1997). We use narratives to organise our everyday thoughts and experiences into story form (Bruner, 1990) and therefore, those stories we share are those that are personally or socially meaningful (Riessman and Speedy, 2007). The premise of this study is that it is important to capture, analyse and explain narratives in order to make sense of care leavers' experiences and to share this knowledge with others by re-storying their narratives within this thesis.

There is generally a paucity of research into care leavers in the university setting, but increasingly DfE mandate LA's to capture statistical data about this group (DfE, 2017, a). In recent years there has been increasing research, providing qualitative data, however, the narrative approach is not widely used. It is here, where this study can make a unique and additional contribution to our understanding of this group of university students.

This study was conducted in the North East of England and all 5 universities in this region were included in the process of selecting participants. The aim here was to capture a range of experiences both in traditional Russell Group universities and in modern / post-92 institutions granted university status following the Further and Higher Education Act (1992). In this region there are two Russell Group universities and three post-92 universities. In total 9

students from three of the universities were selected to take part in this study.

### **1:5 Organisation of the thesis**

This thesis is presented in six further chapters. Chapter Two will contain an overview of published literature relevant to this study. The first part of this chapter will focus on widening participation in the United Kingdom (UK) and the second part on literature concerning care experienced university students. Chapter Three will outline the theoretical framework, Bourdieu's (1984) theory of practice, which underpins this study and its findings. In Chapter Four a detailed overview of the narrative methodology and research procedures used in this study will be given. Chapters Five and Six will present and critically discuss the findings of this study. The final chapter will present the conclusions and recommendations of this research study.

## **Chapter Two: Literature review on widening participation and the journeys of care leavers into and through university**

### **2:1 Introduction to the chapter.**

This chapter will present a critical exploration of published literature relevant to the research focus. The chapter will begin by contextualising the key characteristics of looked after children and their educational outcomes in compulsory education. This will be followed by an overview of widening participation in the United Kingdom (UK) and the impact of this on care leavers. The following sections will consider what is known about the experiences of care leavers at university and this will be presented under the following themes: aspirations for going to university, placement factors, significant others and the quality of care, identity and the university experience. These themes relate to the aims of this study, but were also recurrent themes within the literature.

The literature review was commenced in 2015, but updated throughout the development of this thesis in order to include new publications. The literature included in this review focusses on the UK context and includes research papers, but is supported, where relevant, by wider professional, charitable organisation and government publications. The UK focus is justified by the geographic location of this study and a desire to review literature relevant to this.

### **2:2 Looked after children in England**

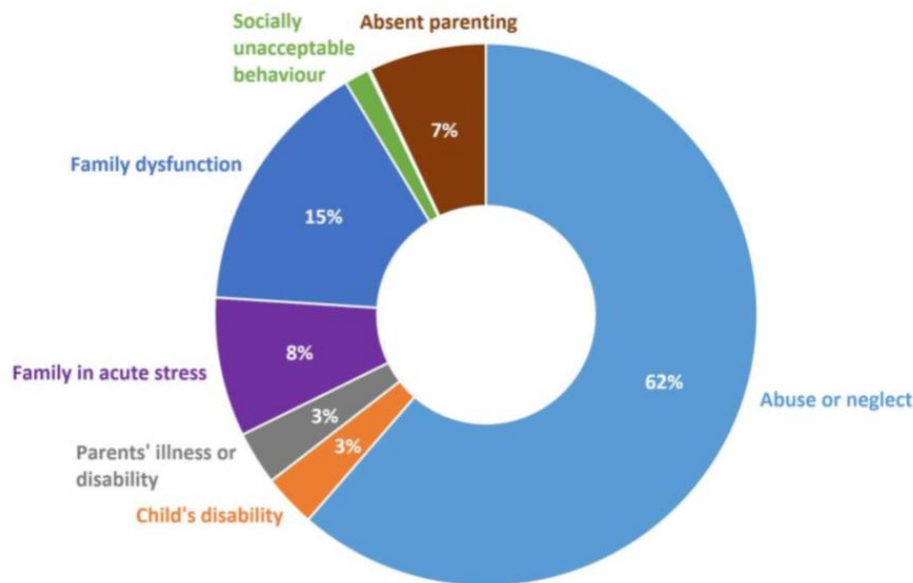
The most recent government statistics show that up to March 2017, there were 72,670 looked after children in England; the numbers continue to rise from a 1% increase in 2014-2015 (DfE, 2015a), to a 3% increase in 2016 – 2017, with more starting to be looked after than ceasing (DfE, 2017a). There are several possible reasons for this, including global concerns and conflict, with a 134% increase in the number of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children who are looked after in England since 2013 (DfE, 2017a). This amounts to 4,560 children and makes up 6% of the total number of looked

after children in England (DfE, 2017a). Other reasons cited are the increased pressures on family life imposed by the economic recession, the increasing financial and housing difficulties encountered by parents with disabilities and learning difficulties (Bywaters, 2017), and perhaps most significantly, the increased propensity of many social services to have a lower tolerance of “at risk” childcare in the aftermath of several major case reviews into abuse and neglect, including “Baby P”, “Child T”, and Daniel Pelka (NSPCC, 2014a; Haringey Local Safeguarding Children Board, 2009; Coventry Safeguarding Children Board, 2013; 2015). This is set against a backdrop of reduced local authority funding and the decline in supportive services directed at families and children (Bywaters, 2017).

### **2:3 The reasons children become looked after**

When a child enters the looked after care system the reason recorded is determined by a LA assessment and notes the child’s primary care need. Figure 1, presented on the following page, provides the most recent data showing the reasons children became looked after at 31 March 2017 by category of need.

**Figure 1: The reasons children became looked after at 31 March 2017 (DfE, 2017a).**



Source: SSSA 903

Whilst noting the primary care need is important, such categorisation does not reflect the complexity of the pre-care experience. Indeed, many of the children entering care do so from some of the most complex social circumstances, which incorporate not only the primary cause, but some or all of the others shown in Figure 1 (NSPCC, 2018). Statistics presented in the previous section show an increasing reason for children entering the care system is the absence of a responsible adult to care for them, for example, in the case of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (NSPCC, 2018). Here, whilst this might be categorised as absent parenting, which is the classification applied to 89% of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (DfE, 2017a), this does not show the complexity of the child's journey into the care system. Furthermore, the largest category, abuse or neglect, comprises a range of reasons for entering care including, but not exclusively or independently, domestic abuse, sexual abuse, physical abuse, emotional abuse and neglect (NSPCC, 2018). Whilst reducing the child's primary need to a category is helpful for statistics, it masks the complexity of individual



experience and the fact that abuse is rarely an isolated incident, but usually happens over a period of time (NSPCC, 2018). It is also important to acknowledge that any child entering the looked after care system does so because of the significant harm they have been exposed to and in recognition of the immediate and long-term harm this may cause (NSPCC, 2018).

As illustrated in Figure 1, 62% of children are in care because of abuse or neglect and 3 out of 4 of these children are of White British origin (DfE, 2017a). Whilst 31% of those children entering care remain there for a short time, over 13% are in care for five years or more (Royal College of Nursing (RCN) and Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health (RCPCH), 2015).

Whilst this study is not focusing specifically on social class, the issue of class is evident throughout this study. Social class refers to specific groups occupying particular social, cultural and economic positions in society. Often social class is linked to earnings, education and wealth and it is noted that there is unequal access to these, with those from more privileged social backgrounds having higher levels of attainment (Walthery, 1992). Figure 2 shows how social class is officially defined in the United Kingdom.

**Figure 2: The National Statistics Socio-economic Classification (Office for National Statistics (ONS), 2017)**

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- 1 Higher managerial, administrative and professional occupations
  - 1.1 Large employers and higher managerial and administrative occupations
  - 1.2 Higher professional occupations
  - 2 Lower managerial, administrative and professional occupations
  - 3 Intermediate occupations
  - 4 Small employers and own account workers
  - 5 Lower supervisory and technical occupations
  - 6 Semi-routine occupations
  - 7 Routine occupations
  - 8 Never worked and long-term unemployed
- 

Socio-economic deprivation and social class are intrinsically linked and aspects of social class including employment and occupation are used alongside other indicators such as household income, eligibility for free school meals and education to determine socio-economic status across

regions and the nation (Crawford and Greaves, 2013). Outlook on life is also important and this is relevant to this study in that this includes a person or community's views about education (Crawford and Greaves, 2013).

Information about postcodes and neighbourhood / social disadvantage is notably missing from the information given about the parents and family backgrounds of children in care (Bywaters, 2017). Indeed, the most recent statistics produced by the DfE do not indicate the location of looked after children in England and how this links to socio-economic deprivation or social class. A generally accepted comparator, children in need data, does show that vulnerability is often linked to social circumstances, especially poverty (Sebba et al., 2015). Whilst contemporary data could not be found, statistics produced in 2014 showed that the greatest numbers of children in care are in areas where there are higher levels of socio-economic deprivation and there is a clear North/South divide (DfE, 2014a). In the North of England, the highest rates, over 120 per 10,000 children are found in Newcastle upon Tyne, South Tyneside, Hartlepool, Middlesbrough, Kingston upon Hull and Manchester. More detail is given in the graph presented in appendix one.

According to Sebba et al. (2015) entering care is likely to reduce socio-economic deprivation, but in the absence of specific data, the extent to which this occurs is questionable. Consequently, whilst children enter care from some of the most deprived backgrounds (Sebba et al., 2015), their looked after care is also predominantly provided in areas of the country where there are higher levels of socio-economic disadvantage (DfE, 2014a). The reasons for this are not stated, but may link to section 22 of the Children Act (1989) where a LA should endeavour, where possible and appropriate, to accommodate children within that LA's area. What is clear in the literature is that those entering care are likely to be from lower social classes, but equally, they are less likely to attain high social class (Simkiss, 2012). This is partly attributed to educational outcomes, considered in the following section.

## **2:4 Educational outcomes for looked after children and young people**

Care experienced children and young people fare worse at every key academic stage than their peers (Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI), 2017). Therefore, it could be expected that the journey in to HE is influenced by secondary education. Indeed, both the Children's Act (2004) and the Children and Young Person's Act (2008) outline the importance of education for young people in the care system and the need for LA's to promote early intervention, stability and engender high expectations of and high aspirations within this group.

58% of children in care are aged 5 to 15 (DfE, 2017a) and as such will be in the compulsory education system. Educational attainment and long-term life chances are intrinsically linked and in the global literature it is noted that children who are or who have been in care are among the lowest performers in compulsory education (Sebba et al., 2015). Rates of exclusion from school for those in care are significantly higher (5 times more likely) and 10% have persistent absence, defined as pupils missing 10% or more of possible sessions (DfE, 2018c). The 2017 figures indicated that only 17.5% of looked after children achieved A-C in General Certificate of Education (GCSE)<sup>1</sup> Maths and English, compared to 58.8% generally (DfE, 2017b). Given the introduction of NEW GCSEs in 2018 and the introduction of other Key Stage 4 assessments, including the Level 2 Business and Technology Education Council (BTEC)<sup>2</sup>, it is difficult to make direct comparisons with previous data (DfE, 2018c). However, using the Average Attainment 8 score, which measures the average achievement of pupils in up to 8 qualifications, including English, a score of 19.3.% is given for looked after children, compared to 44.5% for non-looked after children (DfE, 2018c). Whilst the DfE reports to not indicate how many left school without any qualifications in

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<sup>1</sup> The GCSE is a qualification awarded in a specific subject, generally taken in a number of subjects by students aged 14-16 in secondary education in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. Introduced in 1986, GCSEs replaced the former General Certificate of Education GCE O Level / CSE qualifications (DfE, 2015).

<sup>2</sup> The BTEC, first introduced in 1984, refers to specialist work-related qualifications from level 2 to level 7 (equivalent to post-graduate study) (UCAS, 2018c). BTEC firsts are a similar standard to CGSE's and BTEC Nationals are a similar standard to A Levels (UCAS, 2018c).

2018 (DfE do not explain why this data is absent), earlier statistics produced by The Poverty Site indicated that as many as 25% of care leavers did not attain any GCSEs compared to only 1% of those who were not in care (The Poverty Site, 2014).

In 2017, 56.3% of looked after children, compared to 14.4% of all children, had a special educational need (DfE, 2018c; DfE, 2018d), but this does not account for the overall disparity in attainment (Sebba et al., 2015).

Furthermore, the gap in educational attainment persists and is widening, despite statutory guidance issued in 2010 and 2011 for local authorities to place emphasis on supporting children in care to attain educational outcomes on par with their peers (Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted), 2012). Indeed, Ward (2018) suggests that even when factors such as special educational needs are considered, looked after children at secondary school make less progress than non-looked-after children.

Often in the literature the educational outcomes of children in care are referred to as underachievement, however this term is problematic and not clearly defined, perhaps suggesting poorer achievement than expected or in relation to ability or in comparison to a wider group of peers (Berridge, 2007). Berridge (2007) offers the term low achievement in view of this. Regardless of the term used, there are marked differences in educational outcomes and the reasons for this are multi-faceted. Whilst some of the explanations suggest pre-care experience may be influential (Jacklin, Robinson and Torrance, 2006; Berridge, 2012), which would include factors associated with family breakdown and the reasons behind a child entering the care system, it is also thought that some of the factors are structural in origin (Berridge, 2007; 2012). Structural factors include interruptions to attendance caused by entering care, placement moves and suspensions from school, as well as the lack of specific and intensive support for difficulties experienced by individuals that may prevent them from engaging with the education system (O'Higgins, Sebba and Luke, 2015). These difficulties may stem from pre-care and care experience and result in individual behaviours such as delinquency and behavioural problems that impact on educational progress (O'Higgins et al., 2015). This is reflective of the nature versus nurture debate

and whilst genetics might be limiting factors, we must value the impact of the social and physical environment (Halvorsen, 2014) and shift the focus from whether or to what extent “within-child” or “within system” factors can explain poor performance, to how improving the system can improve performance (Jacklin, Robinson and Torrence, 2006).

It is of note that in 2014-2015, 5,055 children in care were recorded as being missing from, or having had a missing incident from their looked after care placement (Ofsted, 2015) and in the year ending March 2017, this had risen to 10,700 children (10% of those in care) (DfE, 2017a). 5% of those in care had changed school; 5% were in alternative educational provision (this was not defined); 2% were noted as not having an education provider; 10 % were persistently absent from school (Ofsted, 2015; DfE, 2018a; DfE, 2018c).

Based on 2017 data, poor life chances are a persistent feature of outcomes for care leavers with 40%, aged 19-21 years, reported to be not in education, employment or training, compared with about 13% of all young people (DfE, 2017b; DfE, 2017c).

Whilst the lower educational outcomes have been the subject of interest and research for some years, it is important to recognise that the reasons behind this are complex and not solely attributable to the care system (Walker, 2017). Indeed, Berridge (2012) suggests the statistical comparisons are akin to comparing apples against pears, if we focus purely on GCSE results and compare those in looked after care with those who are not. Instead, it is suggested that we think about achievement in a more holistic manner and include the progress made by looked after children, particularly, those who enter care from the most difficult circumstances and who start their educational journey from a lower base than their peers (Walker, 2017).

However, whilst the care system cannot be reasonably expected to compensate fully for the long-term impact of early pre-care experiences, care must also be taken here, not to reinforce the low expectations of looked after children in relation to their educational attainment (Walker, 2017).

Furthermore, research by Crawford (2014) and Harrison (2017a) cites GCSE attainment as being the greatest determinant of whether care leavers enter HE and whether they remain there. Consequently, it is important to consider

all aspects of the educational journey and how we widen participation for this group.

## **2:5 Widening participation and social mobility in the UK**

Widening participation focuses on the planned increase in diversity and representation of individuals of all experience within HE noted in UK policy (Guild HE, 2016). There is emphasis on working to ensure that all those with the potential to benefit from higher education have the opportunity to do so whatever their background and whenever they need it (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, DBIS, 2014). Widening participation and social mobility are intrinsically linked and based on the premise that education and employment are central to our long-term future social and economic well-being (Guild HE, 2016). Whilst widening participation is focused on improving access, social mobility is focused on outcomes and the success of students socially and economically once they leave (Guild HE, 2016). Both widening participation and improving social mobility link to the aims of this study in that to achieve both, it is essential that going to university is an aspiration for care leavers, but also to improve social mobility, they must not only reach university, but be supported in succeeding once there.

The 20<sup>th</sup> century saw radical changes to the education system, notably the increased focus on the role of further education (FE), HE and life-long learning, gaining momentum with the Education Act (1944). Prior to this around 80% of young people left school at 14, many of whom went on to gain semi or unskilled employment (Hammond, 2003). Whilst the initial intentions of developing technical schools highlighted in the Education Act (1944) did not materialise, the following decades saw significant growth in various types of vocational education for those planning to enter trades and professions and uptake of HE education for students beyond traditional under-graduates (West and Steedman, 2003).

Driven by wider social change and policies such as the Robbins Report of 1963, which called for rapid and immediate expansion of the sector, there was a commitment to increase representation of those from lower social classes in HE, as well as ensuring the workforce had the required skill set. According to Maton (2005) this led to educational discourse and political commentary referring to new students, defined as typically being the first in the family to enter university and usually having had a state funded education. These students were entering university for what it can provide in terms of social advancement, rather than for valuing knowledge for its own sake and were often portrayed as being at odds with the university system in terms of preparation and cultural background (Maton, 2005). What this led to in the policy response is the development of new universities with emphasis on providing pastoral and transitional support for the new students (Maton, 2005). The intention was for new universities to be viewed as different, but equal to traditional universities, however, this has not been achieved and Maton (2005) suggests the creation of these institutions was a response to the profane threatening the sacred and did little to erode the power of traditional universities. Leathwood and O'Connell (2003, p. 613) suggest this also furthered the social discourse, which positions working classes as "naturally practical, good with their hands" and more suited to vocational or lower status university courses.

The removal of the distinction between polytechnics and universities under the Further and Higher Education Act (1992) contributed to the six-fold increase in numbers entering HE between the 1960's and 1997 and the participation of students who would not traditionally have entered HE (Stevenson, Clegg and Lefever, 2010; Sellar and Storan, 2013). However, whilst the removal of this binary divide between polytechnics and traditional universities was partly motivated by a desire to reduce elitism (Ketley, 2007; Stevenson, Clegg and Lefever, 2010) and clearly demarcate FE and HE provision (Parry and Thompson, 2002), there was increasing recognition of deep-rooted tensions in HE. The re-badging of various institutions led to the introduction of terms such as new or post-92 universities, which preserved the elite position of traditional universities (Stevenson, Clegg and Lefever,

2010). This was evident in differences in the value given to professional and academic qualifications (Taylor, 1997) with academic courses and elite universities dominated by privileged and powerful social groups, with some, particularly the working class, being excluded (Burnell, 2015).

Identified in the Robbins Report (1963), social inequality in access to education widened during the 1980's and early 1990's (Chowdry et al., 2010) but the movement was given further momentum in the late 1990's under the New Labour Government. Here, social policies emphasising equity and politics of aspiration (Stevenson, Clegg and Lefever, 2010) focussed on the role of education in producing more democratic and socially just societies (Harman, 2017). Importance was placed on shaping educational practices to promote equality and challenge structures that perpetuate unequal educational opportunities and outcomes (Richardson, 2010). There was increasing recognition that there was a population who had the potential to achieve more from education than they currently were, often referred to as the participation gap (Campbell and McKendrick, 2017), underpinned by the belief that education provides a pathway to emancipation and enhanced social mobility (Harman, 2017).

During this time ambitious targets were set to achieve 50% of those between 18-30 in HE by 2010 (Public Accounts Committee, 2009). The UK Coalition Government elected in 2010 again focussed on social mobility forming an all-party parliamentary group (APPG, 2012) to address this issue. However, this approach was criticised for emphasising the need to identify potential stars to shine and then nurturing their talent to enable them to gain places at top universities, whatever their background (Bathmaker, 2015). Equally, for those not identified as potential stars, the approach was to tackle the poverty of aspirations and make sure all can reach their potential through accessing different forms of education, arguably reminiscent of the earlier tripartite system of education that sorted people for different types of education, depending on their disposition (Bathmaker, 2015). This is referred to as perverse access by Jary and Thomas (1999), where certain students are either warmed up or cooled down for HE, dependent on their abilities and aspirations.



The impact of policy reform has led to a significant rise in the overall numbers participating in HE in the UK, or massification (Langa Rosado and David, 2006), and by 10% in relation to non-traditional (widening participation) students (Social Market Foundation, 2016). This agenda challenges the construct of university students and rather than traditional views, whereby students were often constructed as young, white men from upper or middle-class backgrounds, the range of new possibilities reflect and create more uncertainty (Leathwood and O'Connell, 2003). The term non-traditional encompasses all students from backgrounds normally under-represented in universities, including those from minority communities, disabled groups, migrant populations (West, Fleming and Finnegan, 2013), although specifically in this study, including those who have experienced looked after care. However, we must concede that the term non-traditional itself, perhaps suggests the construct of a normal student persists. Indeed, whilst widening participation aimed to challenge this construct, the educational discourse continues to focus on a traditional view of being a student, in which an 18-year-old, gaining A-level qualifications and studying a three-year full-time undergraduate degree at a research-intensive university is normalised, with a funding model to support it (Guild HE, 2015). This does not fit with the profile of many care leavers in university, who are noted to take longer than other people to enter this field and have more complex and lengthier journeys through the system (Harrison, 2017a).

Widening participation in HE is positive, if we subscribe to the transformative power of education noted within the policy domain (Harman, 2017).

However, the evidence presents a more nuanced picture and the pervasive elitism within education has proven difficult to address, with the economic and social benefits of completing degree programmes varying in relation to the subject studied and the university attended (Harman, 2017). Indeed, it is suggested that education policy has shown a declining interest in equality of opportunity and outcomes and increased focus on promoting diversity and differentiation (Webb et al., 2017). The re-branding of polytechnics as universities in 1992 aimed to end such divides, but the elite Russell Group continue to be held in higher esteem (Langa Rosada and David, 1996) and

also, the demographics of those attending have been difficult to change, with non-traditional students being heavily concentrated in post-1992 or new universities, where they are more likely to undertake vocational courses, which do not carry the same status as academic counterparts (Leathwood and O'Connell, 2003). Further to this, there has been a trend for FE institutions to provide HE, often at lower cost and perceived status and also with differential outcomes in the labour market on completion, which further complicates the landscape (Bathmaker, 2015; 2016).

Non-traditional students remain radically under-represented in elite universities, who will often only accept students who have traditional academic routes into university, as opposed to the range of routes, including foundation degrees and vocational qualifications that are often held by non-traditional students (Moissidis et al., 2011; McLellan, Pettigrew and Sperlinger, 2016). This is changing, and some universities are providing foundation years as part of access to their degree programmes, but not all Russell Group universities are doing this (Russell Group, 2018). Furthermore, Bathmaker (2015) indicates that that such practices are often tolerated as long as they do not challenge the autonomy and overall culture of the institution.

Some of the blame for lack of representation in elite universities is placed on the individuals themselves. Here, students are accused of taking the wrong subjects, sometimes based on advice from school staff, failing to achieve the necessary entry grades and failing to apply to the right universities (McLellan, Pettigrew and Sperlinger, 2016). Blame also refers to individuals lacking aspiration and is termed the deficit model in the academic discourse around widening participation (McLellan, Pettigrew and Sperlinger, 2016). This positions the student as a neoliberal subject who is responsible for his/her own trajectory (Stevenson, Clegg and Lefever, 2010; Campbell and McKendrick, 2017). Referring to the politics of aspiration, which emerged as keywords in HE policy in the UK in the 1990's, Sellar and Storan (2013) assert that aspiration describes a disposition that provides a nexus between the individual consciousness and the social. This makes it possible to govern without governing by creating educated and responsabilised aspirations in

individuals, families and communities. This is helpful for the government as it positions them as enablers of social mobility, but also absolves them of fault should it not occur by blaming individuals who have not taken advantage of the opportunities available to them (Sellar and Storan, 2013).

The politics of aspiration reflected in policies, such as Aiming High (Her Majesty's Treasury, 2007), has been critiqued in the widening participation agenda. Whilst individual, familial and social patterns help explain the differential uptake of HE (Wiseman et al., 2017) and may influence if, what and where students wish to study (Bathmaker, 2016), it is important to recognise the evidence, which suggests many young people do aspire and attach great importance to the value of education, but often have fewer opportunities to benefit from it (Campbell and Mckendrick, 2017). This links to the capability approach, which notes that although students may have potential, this can be unrealised due to lack of resources, knowledge of how to use resources, confidence and motivation (Campbell and McKendrick, 2017). Young people are often not aware of where to find appropriate information or use it effectively (Wiseman et al., 2017). This is evidenced in a report undertaken by Parry et al. (2012) for the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (DfBIS, 2016), which found that 17% of students studying for a bachelor's degree in an FE college, actually thought they had applied to a university.

The double deficit model additionally blames HE institutions, and has led to activities such as outreach work, whereby institutions liaise with schools to publicise their courses to prospective students, being bolted on to the core work of universities to attract or support widening participation students (Stevenson, Clegg and Lefever, 2010). Whilst this is positive, it is arguably tokenistic in that it fails to tackle some of the issues that prevent widening participation students attending i.e. selection criteria, the right grades in the right subjects and the reputation elite universities have for being socially and culturally exclusive, creating another barrier for those from non-traditional backgrounds (Hoare and Johnston, 2011). For non-traditional students who do access HE they often face additional challenges, which include having external commitments such as family, jobs, housing, financial concerns that

impact on their ability to engage fully with academic life (Keane, 2010; Gilardi and Guglielmetti (2011)). As a result of this they may rely on only attending lectures and academic events and through no fault of their own not engage in the extra-curricular activities that promote and cement the social aspects of university life and, indeed, learning (Keane, 2010). Here, universities may have a role in trying to bridge these gaps. Roberts (2011) uses the analogy of trying to fit square pegs into round holes and suggests that rather than students changing, instead, the relatively unchanged structure of HE needs to be altered.

The introduction of quotas and reward systems for taking more widening participation students is also perhaps tokenistic; the fine detail about how this is done and whether these targets are met, has largely been left to the individual university. This is also true of specific policies for care leavers (Higher Education Policy Unit (HEPI), 2017) and whilst the Buttle UK Quality mark provided a framework to help institutions support care leavers and modelled good practice, the final awards for the scheme were made in 2015 (Buttle UK, 2018). Since then other services, such as Propel, a website operated by the Become Charity, which supports care leavers, has been established, but arguably a more coherent and equitable strategy is needed that does not rely on the interests of individuals within organisations (HEPI, 2017). Although implementing some policies around widening participation, such as provision of bursaries, these still favour those with traditional qualifications who are more likely to pursue studies that enable them to go into prestigious and highly paid careers (Hoare and Johnston, 2011). Equally, it is these students who are likely to apply, thus perpetuating the status quo (McLellan, Pettigrew and Sperlinger, 2016). The targets or quotas can be broadly interpreted i.e. many middle-class students would fulfil the state educated criterion and so fail to widen participation in the true sense (McLellan, Pettigrew and Sperlinger, 2016).

The recent policy framework further complicates this because each student now represents teaching income, given the reforms in the shift in funding initiated by the Education Act (2004). These reforms mean HE is increasingly funded by students through government support loans rather than directly

through the public purse, with the initial introduction of variable fees of up to £3000 (DfBIS, 2014). Since then, the fees cap increased to £9000 in 2012/13 and further changes in 2017/18 have seen the cap rise to link to inflation, with fees of up to £9,250 (Bolton, 2018). Whilst this creates competition for universities to attract students, it is also noted that one of the challenges here, is that those with the highest grades are likely to be favoured (DfBIS, 2014). Indeed, there is a perceived level of risk inherent with widening participation for universities, which generates concern for institutions about whether non-traditional students will succeed and will this impact on the ratings of the university in league tables, as well as the implications of admitting learners who may require greater levels of support to succeed academically (McLellan, et al., 2016). The impact of audit cultures and the growing emphasis on universities to provide data about students across the student life cycle i.e. admission, retention, attrition and progression data (DfBIS, 2014) also distorts the landscape of HE and creates more barriers, producing a system whereby universities select higher performing students based on likelihood to complete and be successful post university.

These concerns are reflected in the little utilised transformative discourse, which stresses the need for far-reaching change (Stevenson, Clegg and Lefever, 2010), which Harman (2017) states must move away from assimilation of students into mainstream academic culture and instead broaden current institutional values. The recent shift in funding and tuition fees of up to £9,250 further contradicts the widening participation agenda and influences whether, or not, students go to university, but also if they do, whether they choose a university, based on ranking, or the cost of fees and location of the university (Wilkins, Shams and Huisman, 2013).

A recent report on research commissioned by The Sutton Trust indicates that non-traditional students are least likely to attend universities outside a 55-mile radius of their home address and many continue to reside at home whilst studying, citing financial reasons for doing this (Donnelly and Gamsu, 2018). Furthermore, the report notes that there is a North/South divide in relation to how far students will travel with those in the North East being much less likely to move out of the local area and those in the South and

South East, more likely to (Donnelly and Gamsu, 2018). Those travelling shorter distances are heavily concentrated in post-1992 universities and even in localities where there are older, elite universities such as Durham, York and Bristol, fewer than 2 % are short distance commuters, with Oxford and Cambridge reporting no students of this sort (Donnelly and Gamsu, 2018).

The study notes that such spatial patterns of activity are difficult to explain, but there is perhaps a correlation between individual, social and geographic characteristics that lead to these differential trajectories (Donnelly and Gamsu, 2018). The traditional view of what it means to go to university i.e. move away from home and out of the local area is the preserve of middle class, white students, whilst there is also a growing phenomenon of commuter students, sometimes still living at home, but travelling significant distances to universities and their needs should be considered in the policy landscape (Donnelly and Gamsu, 2018). The report is useful in that it reveals a significant tension in the policy around social mobility. Here, encouraging the most able working class and non-traditional students to move away to elite universities, and often subsequently relocate for employment, entrenches regional divides by drawing able students away from deprived and marginalised areas and thus further reducing the skills sets of graduates in these areas.

Although it is perhaps too early to evaluate the full impact of the increase in tuition fees in the UK, studies in other countries, including the US, indicate a correlation between rising fees and reduction in numbers entering university, particularly in those from lower income backgrounds (Wilkins, Shams and Huisman, 2013). Recent UK data does indicate that whilst the average student will graduate with approximately £50,000 worth of debt, those from socially disadvantaged groups are likely to leave with debts of up to £57,000 (Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD), 2017).

Furthermore, there has been a 59% decrease in the uptake of part time undergraduate study in the UK since 2010/2011 (Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), 2016; Horrocks, 2018) and many of these students are thought to be from under-represented groups (Harman, 2016).

Indeed, there has been a dramatic drop (23% in over 25's) in the numbers of mature students participating in HE (McLellan et al., 2016; Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS), 2017), as well as a decline (of around 19%) in applications for professional degrees such as nursing (UCAS, 2018a), which are likely to attract students from poorer backgrounds, mature students and those who have experienced care (Cotton, Nash and Kneale, 2014).

The notable challenges for non-traditional students are compounded by difficulties accessing funding, reduced employer support for HE study, reduced provision of part time courses, particularly among the Russell Group, as well as the double impact on poorer students, who may choose part time provision whilst working (Butcher, 2015). This poses a challenge for widening participation, given that financial costs are repeatedly cited as a barrier for those from lower income backgrounds entering HE (Callendar and Jackson, 2008), as well as for care leavers (Jackson, Ajayi and Quigley, 2005). Policy changes such as the introduction of the Teaching Excellence Framework (DfE, 2017d), added to the existing Research Excellence Framework initially introduced in 2014 (REF, 2018) are cited in the policy discourse as being positively aimed at improving the quality of provision and student experience, however, in the media commentary, these moves are expected to enable universities to increase their fees further in accordance with their ranking (Bishop, 2016).

It is positive that the government have launched a review of HE education and funding, to consider how best to address some of the short term issues (noted above) resulting from changes to funding, but the results will not be published until 2019 and whilst there are references to improving flexibility of learning i.e. through distance courses, as well as greater support for students to choose between academic, vocational and technical routes post 18 (DfE, 2017d), this is unlikely to erode the divisions described earlier. Instead, it seems likely that the education system will sustain wider inequalities (Reed, King and Whiteford, 2015), and continue to provide different outcomes for those from socially disadvantaged groups (Moissides et al., 2011; Bathmaker, 2016). Indeed, recent coverage in the media suggests that within

a decade, elite universities will charge what they can afford to charge and for some this may mean fees of up to £40,000 per year (Griffiths, 2018), which would further complicate the widening participation agenda.

## **2:6 The implications of widening participation for care leavers**

Education is considered one of the best guarantees of social inclusion and therefore widening participation and improving the educational opportunities and outcomes for care leavers is important, given that they are over-represented in socially excluded groups (Jackson and Cameron, 2012). Whilst much of the UK literature has historically focussed on outcomes for those in care in compulsory education, there has been very little research about those who do reach university, which is surprising given that 24% of those in care are aged 16 or over (DfE, 2017a). Furthermore, the statistical data is not without flaws and tends to capture those in care at the time of entering HE, as well as covering all forms of HE provision and not that exclusively in university settings (Centre for Excellence for Looked After Children in Scotland, 2018). The statistics rely heavily on students self-reporting their status and as such, creates issues around accuracy (Harrison, 2017b). Indeed, figures of participation in university education vary in the literature from 1% (Jackson, Ajayi and Quigley, 2005) to 6% of care leavers, compared to around 43% of 19-year olds in England entering HE (DfE, 2017b), but importantly, care leavers are acknowledged as being one of the least represented groups in university settings (Become, 2018). Recent studies indicate this group are between 11- 15% less likely to progress into HE than other young people (Harrison, 2017a; 2017b). This reflects the secondary school educational attainment figures presented in the previous section. The lack of representation within HE of students who have experienced looked after care, suggests there is a disconnect between policy and reality. This is further underlined by the fact that the numbers in HE have not increased significantly since 2005, despite a raft of widening participation policy measures, which will be considered in the following section (Centre for Social Justice, 2014).



Lack of representation in HE is also true more generally of students from the most deprived areas, where there has been a minor increase in the numbers taking part in HE (Campbell and McKendrick, 2017). Indeed, some of the least affluent parts of the country, particularly the North East, have significantly lower participation rates in HE (Wiseman et al., 2017; Donnelly and Gamsu, 2018). A recent report commissioned by the Education Policy Institute, by Andrews, Robinson and Hutchinson (2017) identifies areas of socio-economic disadvantage and rurality, including South Cleveland, Darlington, South Tyneside, Northumberland, as additional barriers to educational opportunity and success, with those from disadvantaged areas being between 2.3 and 2.6 times less likely to apply to university (UCAS, 2018a; 2018b). It is probable this will add to the challenges for those in care, given that they are likely to come from areas of socio-economic disadvantage and are increasingly found in the North of England (DfE, 2014a; Sebba et al., 2015).

The policy agenda continues to focus on improving social mobility and the educational opportunities for students from disadvantaged backgrounds to attend HE, often using whether students were eligible for free school meals for 80% or more of their school years, as an indicator of progress (Andrews, Robinson and Hutchinson, 2017). However, it is noted that policy also needs to address opportunities for others, including those from minority ethnic backgrounds (particularly Black African), those whose first language is not English and those who have a statement of special educational needs or an Educational, Health and Care Plan following formal assessment (Andrews, Robinson and Hutchinson, 2017). The students who took part in this study would fit this criteria because of their care background, but also because of the intersection of care status with other challenges, including, but not exclusively, those mentioned by Andrews, Robinson and Hutchinson (2017).

The government have pledged commitment to double the numbers from disadvantaged backgrounds entering university by 2020 compared to 2009 figures (Department for Business Education and Skills, (DfBIS), 2016). Equally, they are demanding greater transparency about the application process and universities will be required to publish data about the

background of students, as well as capture information about progression (DfBIS, 2016). The non-governmental Office for Students established in 2017 by the Higher Education and Research Act (2017) is the independent regulator of HE in England and it is positive that part of the remit of this office is to promote student interests, fairness and participation and social mobility (DfBIS, 2016; Office for Students, 2018b). However, this relies heavily on capturing accurate data about disadvantaged students and groups who have specific vulnerabilities, such as care leavers, and more importantly commitment to ensuring the policy recommendations are reality rather than rhetoric.

Whilst data about compulsory education is mandated by DfE, this is not the case for care leavers and there are many gaps in what we know about this group, including attrition rates, changes of subjects, how many return to study beyond the age of 21 (Higher Education Policy Unit (HEPI), 2017). It appears that even within this group there are diverse characteristics and based on his study of 212 care leavers at university, Harrison (2017b) notes they are more diverse than the general student population. Having said this Harrison's participants were disproportionately female (56.3%), from minority ethnic backgrounds (38.7%) and without special educational needs (57.3%) (Harrison, 2017b).

Whilst young people usually leave care between the ages of 16-18, they are able to stay in their foster placement until the age of 21 if they are in full time education or training (National Audit Office, 2016). Furthermore, they are legally eligible for LA support until the age of 25 if they remain in full time education or training (Children and Families Act, 2014). However, whilst this is helpful for care leavers, there is inconsistency in the support offered by different universities, further compounded by lack of consensus about how this group are defined and eligibility for this support (HEPI, 2017). Indeed, this is reflected in the examples of English university definitions of care leaver presented in appendix two. Here, the first seven hits of a google search using the terms "university care leaver" are included. Whilst more examples could be provided, even with only seven, it is possible to see variation in terms of the definitions of care leaver, as well as the support

offered. Equally, of those shown in appendix two, Durham, Oxford and Bristol Universities do not provide a specific definition. Variation and inconsistency may create confusion for care leavers about the support they are entitled to, but what may also create a barrier is the requirement of evidence, as illustrated on the University of Cumbria's website. Furthermore, there is a strong focus on providing support in relation to funding and accommodation, particularly out of term time accommodation (UCAS, 2018b), but given the pre-care experiences and diversity of this group, other needs must not be ignored. Consequently, more research is needed focusing on the specific experiences of care leavers at university to add evidence and momentum and insight to this agenda.

## **2:7 Care leavers' journeys into and through university**

The By Degrees Study was cited as being one of the first studies to focus on care leavers in the university setting (Institute of Education, 2011). This longitudinal study, conducted over 5 years, included 129 care leavers from England and Wales. The study found that those who succeeded in gaining a place at university were more likely to have had encouragement from a positive role model, stable care placements and interestingly, the attrition rates for this study were lower at 10%, compared to the national average of 14% (Jackson, Ajayi and Quigley, 2005). The participants were attending 68 universities and colleges, including the most prestigious ones, but the study indicated that many had academic records that would have enabled them to apply to higher ranking institutions (Jackson, Ajayi and Quigley, 2005). The reasons cited for this are linked to lower expectations of this group, as well as lack of academic career advice (Jackson, Ajayi and Quigley, 2005). However, the study did not report directly on how the participants explained their choice of university. The report highlighted the challenges facing this group, which included lack of financial and wider support (Jackson, Ajayi and Quigley, 2005). It was pivotal in raising awareness and indeed, a driving force in legislation set out in the Children Act (2004), which placed a legal duty on local authorities to promote the educational attainment of children in

care (Institute of Education, 2011). The report was primarily funded by the Frank Buttle Trust, now Buttle UK (2015), which is a charitable organisation, focussing on children and young people and has been fundamental in driving the agenda of support for care leavers who are at university. Indeed, prior to its end in 2016, Buttle UK awarded HE institutions a quality mark for providing support and advice to care leavers that met minimum certification standards, and this was pivotal in establishing the designated care leaver contact identified by most universities today (Buttle UK, 2018).

Whilst the study was positive in providing information about this group of students, the cohort were principally from the South of England and although the report indicates they were from a range of universities, these were not stated in the report. Young people were nominated by local authority officers or care workers (Jackson, Ajayi and Quigley, 2005), which raises questions about why certain individuals were encouraged to take part. The young people were interviewed several times (Jackson, Ajayi and Quigley, 2005), but again, although some were guided by an interview schedule, explicit detail was not given about the nature of these, which makes it difficult to determine the methodological rigour of the study. Equally, although the aim of the study was to increase the numbers of care leavers going to university and successfully completing their studies, the theoretical conceptualisation of the study was not discussed in detail. The research report focussed primarily on the outcomes of the study, some of which are mentioned above, but again, these were not explored within a conceptual framework, although some links are made to the emerging political debate around the widening participation agenda.

Since the By Degrees Study, there has been increasing emphasis on outcomes for children who have experienced looked after care and how this fits with a political landscape where widening participation is a recurrent theme. This is reflected in growing interest in the experiences of care experienced students in HE. Key to developing our understanding in this area is the Moving on Up Report produced by Dr Neil Harrison (2017b) following the Higher Education: Researching Around Care Leavers' Entry and Success project. Here, 212 care experienced students across the UK

responded to an online questionnaire capturing quantitative and qualitative data about this group. This study is the largest and most significant study of its kind since the work of Jackson and colleagues and alongside other relevant research, the findings of this study will be considered in this review. The remainder of this review will be presented under the following themes: placement factors, significant others, identity, preparation for university and experience at university. These were recurrent themes in the literature, but are directly relevant to the aims of this study.

### **2:7:1 Placement Factors**

Looked after children often begin their lives in some of the most disadvantaged families from some of the most excluded social groups, experiencing the chaos of family breakdown, poverty, low parental support and maltreatment (Gaskell, 2010). Despite this, it is recognised that entering the care system can be traumatic and Gaskell's study (2010) found that some young people did not want their own, albeit dysfunctional, family to be replaced by a foster family or indeed to be considered an add on to an existing family; this meant some of the young people in this study were hostile to the placement providers. Gaskell (2010) also found that some had learned to expect being let down following a sequence of experiences within their own family network and by professionals. Consequently, they erected barriers as a means of self-protection, which had a negative effect in that it blocked the opportunity to engage in meaningful reciprocal relationships with care providers that may have promoted self-esteem and aspirations.

It was clear from this study that there were individual variations in where children and young people wished to be cared for, with some citing preferences for children's homes and others wanting to be part of a family unit (Gaskell, 2010). Equally, others indicated preferences in terms of not being with strict religious families, highlighting the need for recognition of individual care needs. In Jackson and Cameron's study (2012), which included 170 care experienced young people from England (32 young

people), Denmark (35 young people), Hungary (35 young people), Sweden (33 young people) and Spain (35 young people), it was noted that in many of the countries there was a political move away from institutional care. This was attributed to the desire to promote normalisation, emulating the family environment, as well as trying to choose the best placement for the individual (Jackson and Cameron, 2012). However, the study did note the positive features of institutional provision, which include fewer placement moves, resulting in greater stability as well as a more controlled environment for children and young people. Indeed, a systematic review by Steels and Simpson (2017) warns the growing view that family placements are better able to meet the needs of children and young people is problematic. Here, evidence is presented that placements should be identified alongside the views of the child or young person, but should also be suitable to their needs. Whilst family-based care is considered more desirable in terms of providing an informal and homely environment (Steels and Simpson, 2017), potential drivers may also link to cost, whereby residential care is several times more expensive (Berridge, Biehal and Henry, 2012). Furthermore, the political emphasis on family-based arrangements perpetuates stigma of residential care and the notion that it is for those who are “incapable of living in a family environment” (Steels and Simpson, 2017, p. 1707).

Children and young people were not always consulted or involved in the decision making around choice of care placement, which created a feeling of lack of control, nor were they given choices about separation from siblings or changes in placement (Gaskell, 2010). Failure to listen can be interpreted by young people as failure to care, which may lead to mistrust in professionals as well as disillusionment with the care system (Gaskell, 2010). Equally, failure to address the young person’s views about the care placement sometimes resulted in young people absconding from the placement, which can be upsetting and disruptive for all involved (Gaskell, 2010). Whilst placements are often governed by availability of services and are sometimes beyond the control of professionals involved in this process, what is important here, is that children are consulted and where possible involved in decision making (Gaskell (2010)). It is likely that when this is done, the

transition into the placement will be easier and children and young people in care will feel valued and respected and where choices for care are limited, being informed of this will help the young person to rationalise the situation (Gaskell, 2010).

Martin and Jackson (2002) refer to the instability of the care system itself, which links to issues in relation to service provision, including changes in placement and professionals providing care. The notion of constancy was a key theme in the literature, referring to the location where the child was looked after, typically a foster placement (Gaskell, 2010). School settings were noted as being potential sources of stability and therefore, moves in placement interfere with the development of meaningful relationships, not only with carers, but also other staff involved in the lives of children and young people in care, as well as disrupting school attendance (Martin and Jackson, 2002; Gaskell, 2010; Sebba et al., 2015).

What was well documented in the literature was that constancy and quality placements were beneficial and cited by those who had achieved academic success in HE as contributory factors in shaping their aspirations (Martin and Jackson, 2002; Jackson and Ajayi, 2007; Gaskell, 2010; Parker, 2018). Aspirations are akin to goals, dreams, hopes, wishes and ambitions and are frequently linked in UK policy discourse to educational attainment and employment (HEFCE, 2012). Aspirations tend to be future orientated, linked to our possible or imagined selves and are inherently individual, multi-faceted and dynamic and shaped by our experiences and those around us (Hart, 2016). Placement factors add to the complex interplay of experiences that impact on the long-term educational trajectories and aspirations of those in care, and as such, further investigation into the impact of these is warranted.

### **2:7:2 Significant others and quality of care**

Corporate parenting refers to the professionals within a local authority who work with a child or young person in the looked after care system (Bluff, King and McMahon, 2012). The failure of the corporate parent is underlined by the

statistics that show many care leavers have no or few qualifications and struggle to succeed in gaining employment (Centre for Social Justice, 2015). Indeed, recent statistics indicate that only 14% of those in care achieved 5 A-C GCSEs, including Maths and English in 2015 compared to 55% of young people nationally (Oakley, Miscampbell and Gregorian, 2018). Given the complex reasons behind children entering care and the impact of the early home environment this failure is not the care system alone (Mathers and Trac, 2018), but the system does fail to address and rectify the issues that create such disadvantage (Gaskell, 2010).

Bluff, King and McMahon (2012) used semi-structured interviews to explore the views of 9 university students. This was a small number of participants, but the study found that many of the young people in their study felt disadvantaged by their corporate parents. Normal parenting is often associated with unconditional love and a feeling of support and encouragement to develop, whereas the participants generally felt that corporate parents did not fulfil this role and that they were treated like a number or a case file (Bluff, King and McMahon, 2012). This was also evident in other studies, for example Jackson and Cameron (2012) noted that there was great variation in terms of care placements, but generally, across the 5 countries they reviewed, whilst foster care generally had a better record of promoting educational attainment than residential care, this relied heavily on the presence of well-educated carers. It is worth noting the term corporate parent itself is perhaps contradictory, with the term corporate often being associated with the field of business and parent with nurture and love (Bluff, King and McMahon, 2012). This questions developments such as the professionalisation of foster care, which on one hand suggests recognition of the importance of the role, but also perhaps adds that corporate dimension (Gaskell, 2010) and therefore contradicts notions that such care is better than residential provision for all young people in care (Berridge, Biehal and Henry, 2012).

It was clear in the study by Bluff, King and McMahon (2012) that there was an imbalance between what the young people felt was the role of a parent and the level of parenting they received. Indeed, one young person felt so



badly let down by her corporate parents, believing that the level of support she had received would, in a familial context, have resulted in her being removed from those circumstances and ironically, placed in care (Bluff, King and McMahon, 2012). It is important to recognise that the experiences of these young people, whilst both important and valid, may be influenced by their prior experience and the barriers these young people have erected to avoid experiencing further emotional distress; this may mean that even in the presence of positive parenting they are unable to acknowledge or engage with this (Gaskell, 2010). Further to this, the legacy of pre-care experience is likely to impact on children and young peoples' ability to form relationships with others and Berridge (2012) notes that those who have experienced neglect or abuse are likely to display more uncooperative behaviour, have a greater tendency for depression, anxiety and low self-esteem. These factors are likely to impact on the care experience, but also other aspects of life, including educational attainment (Berridge, 2012).

Corporate parenting takes place in various locations including foster homes and residential institutions and young people may have individual preferences about which is best for them (Gaskell, 2010; Jackson and Cameron, 2012). Indeed, some find commonality and inclusion through the shared experience of peers in care home settings (Gaskell, 2010). However, in Jackson and Ajayi's (2007) study of 129 young people, only one of the participants reported a positive experience in the care home setting.

Problems highlighted in the literature included lack of care and interest in the lives of young people, as well as poor emotional support in care home settings (Martin and Jackson, 2002; Jackson and Ajayi, 2007). Focusing on HE students who had been in care, the participants largely felt that long term stable foster placements were helpful and some of the students spoke fondly about foster families and the support and encouragement they had received (Jackson and Ajayi, 2007). The results from this study found that even when young people had a history of placement changes and instability, finding a positive foster family could have a remedial or turnaround effect. This was attributed to the sense of belonging and that someone cared for them and was interested in their future (Jackson and Ajayi, 2007).

A seminal study by Martin and Jackson (2002) cited the value of carers as significant others. In this study some of the 38 care leavers involved felt that the quality of carers both in care and foster homes could directly influence educational attainment and life outcomes for young people. A significant issue cited here was that many carers had low levels of educational attainment and therefore, lacked understanding of the importance or indeed the methods to help those in care achieve academically (Martin and Jackson, 2002). This was also a feature in the study by Jackson and Ajayi (2007), where some of the participants felt that foster carers did not always show concern for education or indeed provide anywhere for young people to study and worse, in some cases, actually ridiculed educational aspirations, perhaps having had negative experiences of the education system themselves. This is supported by more recent research, which suggests that foster carers are generally less involved in children and young peoples' education than the birth parents of non-fostered children (Jackson and Cameron, 2012; Mathers and Tracz, 2018) and raises questions about the motivation and motives of some foster carers for undertaking this role.

This adds weight to the argument for professionalisation of the role, where certain qualities should be assessed for those wishing to work in this area. However, professionalisation may also attract people to the role for monetary reward rather than altruistic concern for the welfare of this vulnerable group (Sinclair, 2017). Such debate is present in the literature and there is conflict about how foster care is considered, but equally, arguments suggesting that professionalisation and delivering care are not mutually exclusive (Sinclair, 2017). It is worth noting that although foster carers are subject to scrutiny from local authorities prior to employment, there are no minimum formal academic requirements (DfE, 2012), which would usually be associated with the concept of professionalism. It is positive, however, that the government have re-emphasised the need for those working in care homes to be trained to a minimum level, the level 3 Children and Young People's workforce Diploma, within the first two years of appointment (White et al., 2015). What this does not address though, is high turnover of staff and so many may leave before achieving this and equally some question the suitability of this

diploma for preparing staff to work with children and young people (White et al., 2015). Different requirements for those in care and foster homes may create a disparity in the quality of provision and may lead to problems recruiting individuals to work in these areas.

In their study of 129 university students who had experienced care, Jackson and Ajayi (2007) found that over a third of their foster parents were graduates. The study did not investigate whether a social worker had identified academic potential in the young person and made the placement with that in mind or whether the young person's academic ability became apparent afterwards (Jackson and Ajayi, 2007). However, this is a much higher proportion than foster carers generally (at the time only 5% had qualifications equivalent to National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) level 3) and underlines the value of positive role models who support and place emphasis on education. Following this Jackson and Ajayi (2007) proposed a new approach to fostering whereby education foster carers should be recruited to work with schools and offer additional, educationally rich experiences and support for young people in care. Key figures in the lives of children and young people, including carers and professionals are as likely to reinforce class, gender and sometimes stereotyped assumptions about educational and career pathways as they are to challenge them (Mayall, et al., 2015), which links to the discussion concerning primary and secondary habitus presented in Chapter three. Therefore, it is vital that the substantial contribution that well-educated carers can make in both facilitating and shaping the lives of this group is recognised (Mayall, et al., 2015). However, whilst recruiting carers with high levels of educational attainment is desirable, once again, funding and availability of such foster carers is problematic.

In 2015, there were 52,500 foster carers, but at least a further 8,340 foster carers were needed nationally to provide homes for children and young people entering care and to replace around 13% of foster carers who left the profession in the previous year (The Fostering Network, 2015). More recent figures indicate an increase in applications to foster, but a reduction in approvals from 57 to 49% (Donnovan, 2018). The data provided by Ofsted does not always indicate the reasons applications are not approved, but do

refer to a decline in the number of LA approvals (Ofsted, 2018). This suggests that LA's may have changed their standards for approval or that the quality of applications has deteriorated. This is further compounded by the increase in approved placements that have become unavailable, 63% of which were de-registered at the foster carers request (Ofsted, 2018), meaning the gap in need versus provision persists. Consequently, selection based on academic qualifications is unlikely. Although there are debates about professionalisation of the foster care profession, investing in the education and training of existing staff may lead to lower turnover. This was noted as a problem within the literature, mainly in relation to social workers, where turnover was very high and in one study a young person had had at least 6 or 7 social workers, some for only a few weeks (Gaskell, 2010). This creates difficulties for young people in developing positive relationships, as well as having someone they can turn to for advice and support. Earlier research cited having a good relationship with and being able to contact their social worker was important and equally, even in well-established and settled placements, regular contact, instigated by the social worker showed the young person they had a genuine concern for their welfare (Martin and Jackson, 2002). This was supported by Gaskell's (2010) study, which indicated that social workers can be positive role models and sources of support for young people; here there were cases where young people felt valued and that social workers had treated them with care, compassion and respect.

Both placements and changes in social workers were potential sources of instability and created a problem for some young people in maintaining stability within their academic lives, particularly where moves in school occurred, as mentioned previously (Martin and Jackson, 2002). However, according to some of the studies, this instability could be cushioned by positive school experiences and even when placement changes were unavoidable, efforts to enable children and young people to remain in the same school by assisting with bus passes or transport is helpful (Gaskell, 2010). Schools were cited as being safe havens, where young people could seek respite from other stressful events in their lives and could build wider

social networks (Bluff, King and McMahon, 2012). Equally, academic environments provided the potential for young people to find positive role models within their peer group; this could be either those enjoying success (Bluff, King and McMahon, 2012) or through normalisation of attending school regularly, affirmed through the attendance of peers (Martin and Jackson, 2002).

In a study of care leavers in social work education by Mayall, et al. (2015), the value of significant others was highlighted. Here, a participant referred to one social worker who had recognised her needs and had invested time in supporting her, and who became an inspirational figure and role model. These features were recognised as being important in Martin and Jackson's (2002) earlier study, where the participants felt that professionals should be aware of pupils in care and the potential need for extra support. Here, it was felt that teachers could work more closely with social workers to support children in the care system. Such work reflects the role of the Virtual School Head (VSH), given statutory powers under The Children and Families Act (2014). The remit of the VSH is to promote, enable and monitor the educational attainment of all children looked after within specific local authorities. Whilst this role is positive in that the VSH can be a constant advocate and support for looked after children and young people (LACYP), even in the presence of school moves, the impact of this role has been questioned. Indeed, some suggest VSH's are not equipped to lead in this unique area of practice and are beset by reductions in LA funding and reduced availability of services to meet the complex needs of LACYP (Parker, 2018). Furthermore, Parker (2018) notes the emphasis on data collection about this group by DfE and warns that the wider supportive nature of the role can be overshadowed by this process.

### **2:7:3 Identity**

Discussion around identity links to the concept of aspiration and possible selves (Markus and Nurius, 1986), where individuals have ideas about what they might become, what they would like to become and what they are afraid

of becoming. As such, individuals have both positive and negative images of the distal future (Lee and Oyserman, 2012). Focusing on the future possible self is thought to improve optimism through the promise of change and achievement of goals, however, this is influenced by the individual's views about whether such goals can be achieved (Lee and Oyserman, 2012). These views may be well formed or shaped by experience and consequently the importance of contextual factors and significant others is influential in helping determine whether the individual embraces or rejects their notions of what is possible (Stevenson and Clegg, 2011; Woodier, 2011). Possible selves can only include those selves that it is possible for the individual to perceive and it is here where encouragement, support and the introduction of possible alternatives is essential (Stevenson and Clegg, 2011). Often when individuals think about future aspirations they are shaped around work life and home life and for university students, study (Folgueiras and Palou, 2018). It is clear that they are shaped by exposure to the education system and here, experiences of success or failure influence how individuals visualise the future and articulate strategies to attain the desired possible self (Lee and Oyserman, 2012). Here, there is also potential for mismatch between aspiration and achievement (Sammons, Toth and Sylva, 2016) and whilst visualising the possible self is important, in isolation, it is not enough to produce the desired results and must be linked to other factors including a clear strategy and support and encouragement (Côté, 2001; Lee and Oyserman, 2012).

In Martin and Jackson's study (2002), which focussed on successful care leavers in HE, the concept of identity was evident. When participants were asked what should be done to improve the chance of success for those in care, they stressed the importance of normalisation. By this, they meant that they wanted to be like everyone else, they did not want to stand out from their peers and they felt this was important for others in care (Martin and Jackson, 2002). They also felt that for children in care there was sometimes an absence of every day contacts because of the exposure to the care system. To address this, they felt that support should be given to promote participation in clubs and societies outside of school where young people

could interact with others and develop social confidence, as well as networks and other social identities (Martin and Jackson, 2002). This was echoed in another study, where it was found that peers could help to shape identity by providing those in care with hope and the idea that they could have a positive identity with a future beyond the care system (Bluff, King and McMahon, 2015). Indeed, one participant in this study felt strongly that his experience of the care leavers he had met was that they ended up either pregnant or in prison and consequently meeting a care leaver who was at university gave him the confidence that he too could go (Bluff, King and McMahon, 2015).

This notion of normalisation is perhaps a reaction to the stigma many care leavers felt. Indeed, one participant reported being embarrassed and ashamed of their care background, because of the negative labelling they had experienced (Bluff, King and McMahon, 2015). This care leaver's identity was shaped by the stigma she felt and because of this she did not want to associate with other care leavers or that identity (Bluff, King and McMahon, 2015). In Martin and Jackson's (2002) study of care leavers who had all completed a minimum of a degree programme, they found that almost a third of the 38 participants involved, stressed the need for care leavers to overcome negative stereotypes. Whilst many children in care have low self-esteem because of their pre-care experience, this is reinforced by negative social stereotypes, which assume that children are in care because of a personal deficit in their character or behaviour, as well as assumptions that they are of inferior intelligence (Martin and Jackson, 2002).

These assumptions pervade many professions including carers, social workers and teachers; those in ideal positions to challenge them (Martin and Jackson, 2002). Mannay et al. (2017, p 686), suggest that such labels are problematic in a number of ways. Firstly, care leavers are often labelled or perceived by the professionals working with them as having lower abilities than those not in care (Jackson and Cameron, 2012) and as such assigned the position of failing subject (Mannay et al., 2017). This serves to stigmatise, but also potentially undermines expectations for achievement and gives permission not to succeed, ultimately leading to self-fulfilling prophecy outlined in seminal work by Rosenthal and Jacobsen (1968). Secondly, this

increases the chance that particular learning or support needs are misunderstood, entrenching the failing student label (Mannay et al., 2017). Furthermore, the positioning of students is problematic in that the dominant discourse promotes and favours the concept of the desired student, thus polarising the failing and the successful (Mannay et al., 2017). Such experiences, therefore, impact on how care leavers position themselves in the education system and not only undermine their aspirations for success, but negative attitudes constitute another barrier that they must overcome (Jackson and Cameron, 2012).

Many care leavers chose not to reveal their care background in the university setting and this was both during the application process and once they had become a university student (Mayall et al., 2015). This was partly explained by wanting to avoid the stigma and stereotypes they had come to expect through being in care. For example, feeling they might be rejected because of their background or experience pity from peers or lecturers (Mayall et al., 2015). This raises questions about whether support for this group should be targeted or universal. Whilst such discussion was not evident in the discourse for care leavers, this does reflect wider debates in relation to working with vulnerable groups and high risk or under-represented populations as to whether services should be targeted or universal; the answer is not straight forward (Hutchings et al., 2013). However, what was also evident was that some care leavers did not disclose because it was considered irrelevant or personal information that they could decide whether or not to disclose. This indicated a sense of autonomy, control, ownership of the information, as well as perhaps the opportunity to construct a new identity characterised by self-confidence (Mayall et al., 2015).

For many care leavers who did reach university, they were able to overcome negative perceptions or develop self-belief and the notion of a different identity because key individuals had believed in them; this might be a carer or a professional or a friend (Cotton, Nash and Kneale, 2014; Mannay et al., 2017). In some studies, young people were driven to succeed in university as a means of rejecting the assumed identity, instead creating one that featured academic success and doing better than those around them (Jackson and



Ajayi, 2007; Cotton, Nash and Kneale, 2014; Mannay et al., 2017), but also pursuing a lifestyle that was completely different from their birth parents (Jackson and Cameron, 2012). In the case of successful care leavers, these learner identities are characterised by working hard and achieving a strong sense of self through developing mastery in their subject area (Reay, Crozier and Clayton, 2010). In view of this it is important to provide care leavers with positive academic role models and this has been embedded in the work and websites of organisations providing support to care leavers, including Propel, a website funded by Become, a charity for children in care and young care leavers (Propel, 2018). Here, showcasing examples of academically successful care leavers is thought to help in raising aspirations of other care leavers to attend university (Wyness, 2017; Propel, 2018). Further impact could be produced if there was greater representation in the academic staff in universities from non-traditional backgrounds (David, 2011). This would help to shape pedagogical practice and policy to engage with non-traditional learners, as well as provide positive role models for care leavers and other non-traditional students once at university (David, 2011). However, given the inequity within the education system, this may prove difficult.

Several studies referred to academic motivation where care leavers demonstrated not only a more positive attitude to university, as described earlier, but also the desire to complete their studies (Jackson and Ajayi, 2005). It was found that young asylum seekers who entered care had a very clear sense that educational success was their best hope of integrating into British society, which brought about both a clear vision and determination in relation to going to university (Jackson and Ajayi, 2007). In later work Jackson and Cameron (2012) compare care leavers' experiences to the history of immigrant communities in the UK and draw parallels with being uprooted and placed in unfamiliar circumstances. This experience is thought to drive an interest in succeeding and striving for academic attainment (Jackson and Cameron, 2012).

## **2:7:4 The university experience**

The transition to university generally focusses on how institutions support students to adapt to university life, how the individual does this and also the long-term impact on the person's ideas about a possible self (O'Donnell, Keane and Stevens, 2016). Whilst this is often considered to refer to the first year, it is important that transition is considered as a process rather than a time period and that attention is paid to how and why the transition is or is not made (O'Donnell, Keane and Stevens, 2016). This remains an under-researched area specifically for care leavers, but is thought to be of importance in that they may have less social support than students generally (Bluff, King and McMahon, 2012). Equally, recent figures suggest overall withdrawal rates of 18% for care leavers, compared to 10% for the general university population (Harrison, 2017a), notably higher than the rates presented earlier in the study by Jackson, Ajayi and Quigley (2005). Many care leavers defy the traditional linear view of a three-year degree and instead, withdraw, return, switch routes or have periods of interruption and dormancy (Harrison, 2017b). Consequently, it is difficult to capture specific data about the year or level of study at the time of withdrawal. Furthermore, those who withdraw from their studies were 38% more likely to withdraw and not return to HE than other students (Harrison, 2017b). The reasons cited for withdrawal from HE in Harrison's study were largely due to academic failure and personal reasons, which included financial hardship and health issues (Harrison, 2017a; 2017b).

Preparation for university was a challenging time and some young people reported having been ill prepared for university in terms of the step-up academically and the emphasis on independent learning (Cotton, Nash and Kneale, 2014). This was echoed in research by Mayall et al. (2015) where the lack of efforts from professionals to support aspirations for going to university, as well as poor availability of advice and support was noted. A further study found that those in care were not well informed about university by professionals and often social workers underplay the role of academic progression and its importance in terms of overall life chances (Jackson and

Cameron, 2012). Jackson and Cameron (2012) noted that many students in care were steered towards vocational courses in preference to traditional academic subjects. This reflects earlier discussion around the emphasis placed on education for those in care, and was supported in qualitative data from Harrison's (2017b) study where there was a mismatch between the aspirations of young people and those the LA held for them. This was partly explained by the LA's inexperience in supporting care leavers into HE (Harrison, 2017b), but also in Jackson and Cameron's study, as being an inappropriate fit for the person, as well as borne out of a desire for children in care to become self-supporting as soon as possible (Jackson and Cameron, 2012).

It is noted that whilst many universities do provide pastoral support there is very little in the UK, which is aimed specifically at care leavers (Mayall, et al., 2015). The Propel website, which is funded by Become, the charity for care leavers, is a website where potential and current students can find information and contact details for care leaver support from individual UK universities (Propel, 2018). This may help those in care who do not have support from significant others in relation to academic study, as discussed earlier, however, this relies on the young person knowing about the resource and being able to access the site, as well as having the confidence to contact the identified university representatives. Indeed, in Harrison's (2017b) study, 37% of the cohort of 212 care leavers who completed an online survey, were not accessing any university support. Cameron et al. (2018) indicate more evidence about the explicit support needs of care leavers is needed to inform practice and support the transition to university.

Some of the evidence in the literature contradicts the notion that care leavers are ill-prepared and found in some cases they were actually better equipped to deal with the transition to university (Cotton, Nash and Kneale, 2014). This was partly linked to individual factors, which will be discussed later, but also because this group of students had learned from a very early age to be self-reliant, and so they found living independently at university easier than students who had not experienced looked after care or been away from home. Indeed, Cotton, Nash and Kneale (2014) note the irony in the term

looked after, when these children and young adults are actually more accustomed to looking after themselves. In this study several participants reported being sources of support for their housemates, helping them to adjust to independent living, cooking, cleaning and household activities (Cotton, Nash and Kneale, 2014). It is worth noting that this was small study of 8 female care leavers and so the results are not necessarily representative of the wider population of care leavers at university. However, what this study does highlight is that there is individual experience in the university setting.

Some students selected certain programmes of study for altruistic reasons, resulting directly from their experience in care, with the aim of joining professions such as social work in order to make a difference and to positively impact on the care experience of others (Cotton, Nash and Kneale, 2014; Mayall et al., 2015). This was often in response to negative experiences they had personally experienced whilst in care (Cotton, Nash and Kneale, 2014). The desire to attain a specific career was a motivating factor to succeed academically (Harrison, 2017b), as well as the means for care leavers to show they are capable of success (Cotton, Nash and Kneale, 2014) and are able to escape the circumstances of their youth (Brady and Gilligan, 2018). This reflects the sense of autonomy Brady and Gilligan (2018) mention, whereby care leavers express agency by defying the structural constraints and restricted possibilities imposed by the care system and the invisible constraints of an education system, that deems those in care as less able. These optimistic views are a positive asset, but can be offset by the attrition rates mentioned earlier (Harrison, 2017b).

Many studies did not clarify which courses students chose, but some referred to the limitations experienced by care leavers. Indeed, one such restriction was highlighted by Cameron et al. (2018), who note that care leavers are more likely to become parents at a younger age than their peers. Consequently, this may limit location and the nature of provision open to them. For those who had chosen courses such as social work, they felt that their past experience was helpful with their studies. For example, they were able to empathise with service users in practice-based programmes and

were able to use personal experience to enhance their academic work (Cotton, Nash and Kneale, 2014). The process of reflecting on and drawing on experience to inform academic work was, for some, therapeutic (Cotton, Nash and Kneale, 2014), however, it must be noted that these benefits were linked to specific programmes of study where care leavers could utilise their experiences and may not be readily transferrable to all programmes.

Despite the positive views many care leavers held about university the literature refers to some of the challenges faced by this group of students. Substantial differences were noted between staff responses to students concerns, with some refusing to offer any help outside lecture time (Cotton, Nash and Kneale, 2014). The reasons for this were not clear, nor did the study indicate whether the lecturers were aware of the students' care leaver status. This cohort of students can be difficult to help, combining vulnerability and maturity with a sense of self-sufficiency and self-reliance and, as noted previously, in some cases young people are keen to disassociate themselves with the care leaver status (Mayall et al., 2015). What is important here is that when care leavers do ask for help, it is there and for those care leavers who are reluctant to seek help, it is proactively and repeatedly offered (Cotton, Nash and Kneale, 2014; Harrison, 2017b).

Some students felt lack of time was a key barrier to accessing services (these were not explained) within university, perhaps reflective of the fact that many care leavers (57%) have jobs outside of university (Harrison, 2017b). The issue of financial support reduces access to higher education for this group and more support is needed in signposting and supporting young people from care in obtaining financial support for their studies and managing their finances whilst at university (Propel, 2018). The additional challenge of having to work whilst studying also emerged in the study by Cotton, Nash and Kneale (2014), where some young people reported working up to 20 hours per week whilst at university. In this study funding for care leavers whilst at university was considered a postcode lottery and the care leavers often lacked financial support that would be offered to other students by their parents. Many students can phone their parents when they are short of money, but this is not usually the case for care leavers, which

means they often struggle and rely on finding work in order to survive (Cotton, Nash and Kneale, 2014). What is more worrying about this situation is the fact that the absence of familial support may trigger deep seated emotional issues for care leavers relating to their pre-care experience and some students report feeling alone and isolated (Harrison, 2017b).

In Jackson and Ajayi's study (2007) many students looked for full-time work during holiday periods to reduce indebtedness or save for the following year, which meant that unlike students who had returned home, they did not begin the new semester feeling refreshed. Whilst financial hardship is an additional barrier to accessing university it may also compound the transition to university. Extra curricula activities at university, including socialising and enjoying the freedom and exploratory experiences provided is considered an important feature of being at university and one that can enhance academic learning and success, but is potentially missed by many care leavers (Jackson and Cameron, 2012; Mayall et al., 2015).

## **2:8 Summary of the chapter**

Although reaching university underlines the success of the care leavers included in these studies, it also served to highlight the disadvantage these young people had experienced before and during their university experience journey. For example, the instability of placements and compulsory education can cause significant disruption, but equally the emphasis placed on educational attainment by all involved in the care of these young people sometimes perpetuates this disadvantage (Gaskell, 2010; Jackson and Cameron, 2012; Mayall et al., 2015; Harrison, 2017b). This may mean that the idea of going to university is not considered, but equally, choice of university and programme of study may be limited.

Whilst many of the studies did not provide detail about the institution or programme of study, generally there was a tendency for vocational courses, usually more widely available in post 1992 institutions (Jackson and Cameron, 2012). In some of the studies this was explained by personal

choice, but in view of the wider literature in this area, this may also be linked to the experience of compulsory education for those in care, local commitments, as well as the relative lack of role models to encourage and facilitate academic aspirations. What was very clear from the review was the significant role of schools as safe havens in providing stability, as well as the influential role of key people in helping to shape and sometimes turn around the lives of young people in care (Jackson and Ajayi, 2007; Jackson and Cameron, 2012). Here, more emphasis was needed on ensuring those key people helped develop, raise and sustain aspirations (Mayall et al., 2015).

David (2011) suggests that there has been increasing rather than widening opportunities for non-traditional students and the policies have not led to increasing fairness of access or opportunity. Consequently, emphasis should be placed on not only widening access in terms of recruitment of non-traditional students across all HE provision, but also on the factors that help to retain them and ensure they are able to succeed and have the same opportunities as students from traditional backgrounds. Here, addressing some of the structural barriers noted in the review, which include entry criteria and financial concerns would help. This might include a clear commitment to reduce entry criteria and move away from an approach that blames other parts of the education system, such as schools, or parents and moves towards an approach that aims to transform the university (Reed, King and Whiteford, 2015; McLellan et al., 2016). This would also help challenge the pervasive social norm that judges degrees from Russell Group universities differently (Reed, King and Whiteford, 2015; McLellan et al., 2016). In a report for The Sutton Trust produced by Wyness (2017), it was noted that students from disadvantaged backgrounds would benefit from support throughout the admissions process and this not only includes entry requirements, but also help to meet timelines for applications and the specific requirements of each course. What was important in this report is that it suggests potential university students from disadvantaged backgrounds are likely to need customised and timely advice that moves beyond that which is given through passive information sources such as websites. Here, this

might specifically benefit care leavers, who are the least likely group to apply to university.

Providing more varied approaches to the delivery of theoretical content i.e. via e-learning might help those who rely on part or full-time work to support their studies, or those who have family responsibilities (Roberts, 2011; Cameron et al., 2018). This would also be supported by expansion of the financial support available to care leavers from LA's. Some routes into HE, such as vocational routes, may not prepare learners for self-directed learning or indeed some of the more academic challenges university presents and should therefore be addressed by academics within their teaching practise, through extra support and preparation (Roberts, 2011).

It was clear in this review that the nature and availability of support in the university setting varied, but also that high numbers of care leavers did not access support (Harrison, 2017b; Cameron et al., 2018). This is clearly an area for consideration and where more insight from care leavers would help guide the support needs and the reasons for seeking and accepting support.

The review has proved helpful in providing an insight into the journey into and through university of care leavers, however, it is limited by the availability of published research. All of the studies in this review utilised qualitative methodology, with the exception of Harrison's (2017b) research, which used both quantitative and qualitative methodology. This underlines the value of examining the unique experiences and interpretations of this group and indeed, this was noted as adding value to statistical data (Harrison, 2017b). The dominant use of qualitative approaches in this review has further endorsed a qualitative approach for my own research, highlighting the need to give care leavers a voice, but also to ensure that they are partners in the research process and that their views and opinions are captured and interpreted with accuracy and respect.

Given the qualitative approaches used, it is not surprising that the numbers taking part were generally small ranging from 8 participants (Cotton, Nash and Kneale, 2014) to the largest number of 212 (Harrison, 2017b). Harrison's study perhaps reflects the increasing use of information technology to access



participants, less available in some of the older studies, as well as the dominant quantitative approach used. What was important in relation to the qualitative studies, was the emphasis on understanding the individual interpretations and explanations participants gave about their experiences rather than generating statistics or making broad generalisations. In these studies, the complexity and diversity of care leavers in university were noted.

Individual interviews were widely employed within the studies and were conducted in a range of ways including face to face and telephone interviews. These provided a forum for young people to talk in confidence about their experiences and thus are deemed of value for this study. Only one study (Cotton, Nash and Kneale, 2014) referred to the value of narrative accounts, but no detail was given about how narrative methodology had informed the study and it appeared that a case study approach had been employed. It is here, where this narrative study can add value in providing an alternative method of understanding this unique group of university students. This was further supported by the approach used by Mannay et al. (2017) who used a life course approach to consider how care leavers' view their educational journeys. This links nicely to narrative research, which focuses on the temporality of life and how this is reflected in the meaningful stories we tell about particular experiences.

Some of the studies included in this review are dated (Martin and Jackson, 2002; Jackson and Ajaiyi, 2007), which is a potential limitation. However, these present the findings of seminal work in this area and are still frequently cited in some of the later studies, for example Harrison, (2017b). Whilst this is problematic in relating this to the contemporary experiences of care leavers, it is noted that many of the concerns and experiences highlighted by Jackson and colleagues continue to be evidenced in later research, for example in Harrison's (2017a; 2017b) work.

The research reviewed has been critically considered and highlights the journeys of care leavers into and through university. Whilst the review illustrates examples of success, some of the challenges facing care leavers have not been addressed by the policy framework. Through research and

publication, the profile of this group can be understood and communicated further. This confirms the relevance of this study.

In the following chapter I will consider the conceptual framework, Bourdieu's (1984; 1990) theory of practice, which guides this study.

## **Chapter Three: The conceptual framework**

### **3:1 Introduction to the chapter**

This chapter presents an overview and critical exploration of the conceptual framework that underpins this study. The chapter begins with an overview of the relevance of using a conceptual framework and then an introduction to Bourdieu's theory of practice (Bourdieu, 1984; 1990). The key concepts in Bourdieu's theory of practice are habitus, capital and field and these will be considered in turn.

### **3:2 The conceptual framework framing this study**

The terms conceptual and theoretical framework are used differently. Sometimes researchers prefer one or the other term and some use them interchangeably, but they denote the overall space in which the study is situated, what the study is and is not about and they are used to support and interpret research findings (Pearson Casanave and Li, 2015). In qualitative studies, the concepts do not usually shape the study from the outset, as the intent is not to test theory in a deductive manner, more to build theory inductively and in this case the conceptual framework developed through the process of reviewing existing theory and questioning emerging ideas that shaped the aims of the study (Pearson Casanave and Li, 2015). It is important that the study does not use theory to "mine" data and only emphasise that information which supports the theory and instead uses it as a way of understanding the empirical data better (Webb et al., 2017). This is reflective of assertions that in the absence of theory, research is narrow and empty and research without theory is an "armchair contemplation" or blind (Bourdieu, 1988; Silverman, 2017). Indeed, it is noted that knowledge and understanding are developed through consciously and unconsciously drawing on existing theory, producing a complex interplay between research, theory and practice (Swedberg, 2016).

The literature concerning students from non-traditional backgrounds highlights the struggles students have in relation to accessing university.

Indeed, Bathmaker (2015) suggests that students are sorted for different types of HE. They are also thought to experience difficulties fitting in (West, Fleming and Finnegan, 2013) and in relation to how they manage their experience and construct their identity in the university setting (Leathwood and O'Connell, 2013). In the context of widening participation research emphasis is placed on exploring current educational policies and practices that continue to reproduce social inequalities in the academic setting (Webb et al., 2017). Consequently, Bourdieusian theory is both relevant and central to framing this study in that emphasis is placed on social formation, causation and ultimately, transformation (Webb et al., 2017).

In the field of education, the main contribution of Bourdieu's (1993) early work was the development of a broad theory to explain the reproduction of cultural and social inequalities through education and the impact of misrecognition in legitimising these, whereby the education system was aligned with and therefore helpful to the qualities possessed by certain classes and misrecognition of these qualities (social capital) was ascribed to difference in individual ability (Bourdieu, 1993). Later, using the analogy that it is the law of gravity that enables us to fly, Bourdieu underlined the need to understand the laws of reproduction to minimise, even in small ways, the reproductive effect of the education system (Bourdieu, 2008). It is Bourdieu's enduring concern for the role of education in perpetuating inequality that attracts me to his theory and this has been noted by other researchers as providing a useful framework to understand features of HE, such as unequal access to and experience of the education system (Murphy and Costa, 2016). Indeed, whilst the social world changes rapidly, inequality and its legitimisation persists and here, Bourdieu's tools provide valuable resources for educational researchers to examine this (Gale and Lingard, 2015).

Bourdieu's theory of practice attempts to reconcile the dualities of structure versus agency referring to the interconnections with practice, habitus and forms of capital and social fields (Bourdieu, 1984; 1990). This theory is based on the premise that the actions of social groups are not simply the aggregate of individual behaviours, but are influenced by culture, traditions and the objective structures in society (Rhynas, 2005). Although reluctant to

offer a definitive definition of practice, Bourdieu broadly referred to practice as being a core feature of social life that requires explanation (Rawolle and Lingard, 2008), characterised by attention to logic, flow and contest of practical activities and their place in time. These interconnections are often explained as:

“[(habitus) (capital)] + field = practice” (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 101).

Here, practice is conceptualised as a complex interaction of the social space, the dominant values within it as well as the capitals of those acting within that space. It reflects the cultural and social norms that are constructed between individuals and institutions (fields) (Webb et al., 2017) or more simply, the relationships between habitus, fields and capitals produce social practices whereby the objective structure and subjective perception impact on human action (Suminar, 2013). Within practice, Bourdieu recognised the patterns, exclusivities, classifications and struggles of social life (Rawolle and Lingard, 2008).

### **3:2:1 Habitus**

Habitus is the basis for apprehending practice and this couplet is an important feature of Bourdieu’s unique contribution to sociology, noting the ontological complicity between the two concepts; habitus is the collection of dispositions that allow agents to engage with and contribute to practice, required as a prior condition for consuming and producing practice (Rawolle and Lingard, 2008). Bourdieu (1984) explains habitus as a product of a person’s own history, whereby the conditions of existence are internalised and converted into a disposition that generates meaningful practices and meaning giving perceptions; thus, social and cultural messages shape individuals’ thoughts and actions (Suminar, 2013). Habitus is the process whereby the social in the individual also becomes the individual’s contribution to the social (Bourdieu, 2000), so here, past experience shapes the present and the present continues to shape the future, reinforcing the status quo (James, 2011). Reay (2004) suggests this is the key tenet of

Bourdieu's theory of habitus, it is embodied, the body is in the social world and the social world is in the body. Habitus is a durable concept, producing practices that are engendered through history, but evolve in relation to social context (Bourdieu, 1984). Here, history relates to the individual, but more broadly includes the collective history of family and class (Reay, 2004). In Bourdieu's work he rejected specific boundaries between classes and this has led to both criticism that his concepts are vague, but also praise that they are malleable (Murphy and Costa, 2016). The malleable nature of class allows for social change and for his concepts to remain useful to this study, given the current UK definition of social class noted in Chapter Two. What is also relevant is that Bourdieu noted that different lifestyles acquired different social status and thus produced manifestations of social class (Weininger, 2002). Consequently, the intersection of social class, status and the experience of socio-economic disadvantage are intrinsic features of Bourdieu's theory of practice and are useful in considering the outcomes of particular members of society, specifically care leavers in this study.

Habitus is more than habit (Suminar, 2013), individuals possess internalised and embodied social structures that often function unconsciously and restrict what individuals feel they can and cannot do, making the person and social rationality bounded; rationality is socially structured and determined and consequentially, limited (Bourdieu, 2004). This links to Aristotle's theory of hexis, which outlines the role of education in shaping human action through the acquisition of skills, positions and capabilities, often considered to have been influential in developing Bourdieu's theory of habitus (Rawolle and Lingard, 2013; Asimaki and Koustourakis, 2014). The impact of this is that non-traditional and working-class students, as in Bourdieu's work, may have internalised assumptions that going to university is not for the likes of them (Burnell, 2015); their horizons are thus limited (James, 2011). So, through habitus, agency and disposition become connected with the setting (field) (Reay, 2004).

Primary habitus is initially developed in the home setting, where the values and practices of parents during childhood, as well as their social position and status shape that of the child (Burnell, 2015). Bourdieu (1984) refers to this

as habitus de classe, noting not only status, but the differing lifestyles, tastes and interests between social classes. Within families the intersection of habitus and cultural, economic and social capital are connected, producing what Archer et al. (2012) refer to as family habitus. In families, children learn their place in society; they learn to value certain forms of culture that are socially esteemed in the education system and this applies to those who find them available and attainable, as well as those to whom they are remote and unattainable (English and Bolton, 2016).

Secondary habitus develops through exposure to institutions such as schools and universities, as well as life experience (Burnell, 2015). Important for this study is Reay's (1998) work on institutional habitus and how school experience shapes this. Although Reay is focussing on compulsory education, consideration of how educators shape habitus is important. Part of this is about the role of educators as gatekeepers to enabling knowledge and whether support and encouragement to help individuals attain is given or not; institutional habitus shapes the way students think and the aspirations they have (Reay, 1998). In Reay's work (1998) this role seems to have more significance in the absence of primary habitus and situations where young people may not have positive educational influences from their family and social contacts. So, within the same institution (field), institutional habitus' are mobilised differently for different students, according to Reay (1998) sometimes based on prejudice and cultural biases. This links to discussion presented in the literature review concerning the role of significant others and the school as an important influence in the lives of young people in care. Whilst the extension of Bourdieu's theory to consider institutional habitus has led to criticism for obscuring the contradictions within institutions and suggesting collective practice, it is also commended for capturing the relationship between the individual and the collective (Stahl, 2016).

The organising structures in society set out rules, roles and rituals that govern ways of thinking and behaving in relation to speech, career and clothing, which allow individuals to be identified as members of a social class or cultural type and importantly provide them with a set of skills to operate in particular social spaces (cultural capital), thus creating a feel for the game or

a natural sense of social aptitude (Bourdieu, 1990). So, in educational terms, Bourdieu's theory asserts that for some social classes, education is easily obtainable, but for others (namely the working class) it is not, because here, habitus is limited (Burnell, 2015). Indeed, the feel for the game is thought to explain the way habitus is transferred across different realms of consumption i.e. music, sport, food, but it is noted that this is often within and among the same social class, grounding distinctive lifestyle choices (Wacquant, 2004) and consequently reinforcing the social order and the sense of cohesion amongst collective groups (Rawolle and Lingard, 2013). Here, the most unlikely practices are rejected, but concurrently only a limited range are considered possible (Reay, 2004).

There is debate about whether habitus can be developed or altered. Reay, Crozier and Clayton (2009), for example, refer to habitus as being permeable, whilst others such as Grenfell and James (1998) suggest that habitus does not change, but instead new layers are built over the old, which often leads to habitus conflict. Bourdieu (1990) seems to suggest that the primary habitus is long lasting, or a living memory pad, but exposure to different social environments can generate a different habitus. Change in habitus is often difficult and the primary habitus resists change and protects itself from crises and critical challenges by providing a milieu to which it is well adapted (Bourdieu, 1990). Primary habitus is second nature, so individuals tend to act the same way in similar situations; it never loses its impact and always influences secondary habitus (Bourdieu, 1990). Bourdieu (1990) uses the analogy of being a fish in or out of water, so when the person or habitus is in a social world of which it is a product, this is second nature, but in certain situations, where there is a sense of not belonging this creates conflict and can lead to the individual acting clumsily or acting in an inappropriate way, a direct result of differential levels of capital.

Bourdieu's theory helps to explain why some social groups aspire to go to university and some do not (Burnell, 2015). Equally, for those non-traditional students who do go, once there, they are at an immediate disadvantage not having shared the same socialisation processes and thus, having no cultural history or identity in the field (Burnell, 2015), which results in them having to



try to develop a new habitus and adapt to the field (Grenfell and James, 1998; Grenfell, 2008), producing feelings of dissonance (fish out of water). Habitus is thus constantly adapting to the outside world, but only exceptionally leading to radical transformation (Reay, 1988).

### **3:2:2 Capital**

Bourdieu (1986 cited in Richardson, 2002) considered the forms of capital to be responsible for making the games of society something other than simple games of chance; capital generates social order and dictates a person's position in the social order. In its objectified and embodied forms, it accumulates over time and is reproduced through the structure and functioning of the social world, so that everything is not equally possible (Bourdieu, 1986 cited in Richardson, 2002). According to Nash (1990) this results in acceptance of the individual's position in society and is partly achieved through education or what Bourdieu (1984) indicates is resignation to the inevitable. Bourdieu's taxonomy of capital (economic, cultural, social, symbolic) is relational in that it positions capital as being a resource employed in determining power and control of social resources and social reproduction (Webb et al., 2017).

Economic capital refers to money and material wealth (English and Bolton, 2016). It is a helpful form of capital, especially in the field of education, where, for those who have access to it, it can buy access to types of service i.e. extra tuition and scholarly resources that can improve a person's position. A key example of the impact of economic capital in HE links to the financial implications of entering HE considered in Chapter Two. The large debt associated with going to university for some students produces a barrier in terms of access, as well as the burden of re-paying student loans on completion, producing and resulting from, in Bourdieusian terms, limited economic capital (English and Bolton, 2016). In isolation this form of capital is not enough to buy status or social position, relying on the other forms of capital (O'Brien and Ó Fathaigh, 2006). However, the importance of

economic capital is that for those who are able to invest in the best schooling, they are more able to access the best university education. Consequently, they are likely to yield the best jobs on completion and thus accrue social status and position, as well as economic capital (Bourdieu, 1986 cited in Richardson, 2002).

Cultural capital can exist in three forms; embodied (the long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body expressed through clothing, accents, learning dispositions); objectified (in the form of cultural goods i.e. books, art, ownership of culturally valued possessions) and institutionalised (a form of objectified culture in the form of qualifications or attendance at educational institutions that symbolise culturally valued competence and authority (Tittenbrun, 2016). Cultural capital is dependent on habitus and thus, the cultural capital one possesses links to the circumstances that a person has been born into (Burnell, 2015).

Cultural capital consists of internalised ways of thinking and being in terms of culture that are reproduced inter-generationally within families (Patiniotis and Holdsworth, 2005). Thus, cultural capital is considered class specific, but equally that capital which is accrued by the middle classes is afforded greater social status (Bourdieu, 1990), thus helping middle class students move more easily into and within and through university (Patiniotis and Holdsworth, 2005). One example of this is that middle class students are comfortable with academic language, which helps them to succeed in HE (Burnell, 2015). Such capital links to Bernstein's (1964) work on speech codes, whereby the development of our speech and language is linked to socialisation and our social position. This begins early in life, as a product of primary socialisation, but is reinforced through secondary socialisation (Bernstein, 1964). Language and ability to use language is therefore social in origin, but also produces social consequences (Bernstein, 1964). A further example of the social outcome of language is included in a report by Moore et al. (2016) for the Social Mobility Commission, which reflects recent media debate, whereby regional accents are considered a barrier to the best jobs. In this report, accents, as well as other features of culture and social background, including dress, are thought to be involved in the informal

screening of job candidates, whereby those from more deprived backgrounds are overlooked, due to concerns they may not fit in or project the desired company image (Moore et al., 2016). So, here, the accrual of certain cultural capitals, such as language begin early in life, but are present in the schooling and academic discourse. Such capital is needed at university, but also needed to get to university in the first instance. Furthermore, cultural capital extends to education through the different levels of prestige attached to certain qualifications and certain university settings; this capital is not evenly distributed in the field or equally accessible to all (English and Bolton, 2016).

There is notably a reciprocal link here with economic capital in that being able to buy or invest economic capital in the acquisition of knowledge and culturally valued skills is likely to increase cultural capital and ultimately social capital. This is connected to the concept of power in that holders of social, cultural and economic capital have the power to place their offspring in a privileged position in the education system and to capitalise on the social networks to take advantage of the qualifications received (Murphy, 1982). These factors have raised questions about the value of Bourdieu's explanation of cultural capital in education and some suggest that educational privilege is more likely to be the result of economics and encouragement than cultural capital itself (Sullivan, 2002). However, it is arguably a complex intersection of both and simultaneously a means and an end, whereby education is a means of acquiring capital, but also an end in that it is not socially neutral and is closely aligned with the interests of those who control it (English and Bolton, 2016).

Social capital for Bourdieu operates as a mechanism for social reproduction, using networks, contacts and social relations to maximise individual and communal gain (O'Brien and Ó Fathaigh, 2006). It is the aggregate of actual or potential resources, which allow membership to and the sustaining of social groups or networks, which produce collective capital and access to this capital for individual members (Bourdieu, 1986 cited in Richardson, 2002). For individual agents, the level of social capital they possess is dependent on the networks they access, as well as the personal capital they

bring to the network, so whilst, habitus can bring with it high levels of familial social capital, the individual must work or invest in maintaining this (Bourdieu, 1986 cited in Richardson, 2002). Social capital exists in practical, monetary and symbolic states and these states maintain such capital (Bourdieu, 1986 cited in Richardson, 2002). In the field of education this links to the role of influential people in the person's life who may be able to support, enable and provide resources to promote success (O'Brien and Ó Fathaigh, 2006).

Symbolic capital is used by Bourdieu to explain the way certain forms of capital are viewed in society, so the values attached to items i.e. books, activities, educational qualifications and institutions; essentially all forms of capital are symbolic (James, 2011). It is these that give recognition, prestige and ultimately, power and consequently symbolic appropriation of capitals is more important than simply possession of them (O'Brien and Ó Fathaigh, 2006).

Capitals are described as a trans-substantiated bundle of social energy; the different forms can be converted by specifically located agents under specific circumstances and with different exchange rates dependent on the relationships with different social fields (Bourdieu, 1984). Often those from poorer and non-traditional backgrounds are disadvantaged in relation to capitals, for example, in education, recent research for The Sutton Trust conducted by Donnelly and Gamsu (2018) refers to the combination of capitals affecting non-traditional students. These include lack of role models and encouragement from family and significant others (habitus), lack of representation (social), as well as economic disadvantage (Donnelly and Gamsu, 2018). This disparity continues beyond the education system where work experience is seen to be invaluable in helping students gain post university employment and often internships are the first rung on the professional ladder. However, many of these are filled informally (social and cultural capital) and are unpaid (economic), which does little to challenge social structures (Montacute, 2018). This is of relevance to this study, given the background of many care leavers, described in Chapters One and Two.

One criticism of Bourdieu's theory is that the concept of capital is too constrained, and the sociological focus negates the impact of other types of capital, such as psychological or experiential. For example, for HE, the experience and impact of life-long-learning in transforming habitus and capitals of individuals (West, Fleming and Finnegan, 2013). Indeed, Côté (1996; 2001) developed Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital to include identity capital. Here, the individual either consciously or unconsciously utilises personal resources that help them to mature and develop the means of fitting in or becoming. The individual will make strategic efforts to acquire this form of capital and in the process will employ exchangeable resources including skills, abilities, as well as personal agency to take advantage of opportunities that will help them accrue capitals that are valuable in that field. So, in the university field, this would mean investing time and effort in maximising opportunities to succeed, as well as taking responsibility for this (Côté, 2001). In doing this the individual would increase both identity and cultural capital. Reay (2004) refers to a similar concept, work on or of the self. As with Bourdieu's theory there is a link between personal agency and structural factors and consequently, variation in ability to accrue this form of capital. Indeed, Reay, Crozier and Clayton (2009) refer to working class students' shift in habitus, based on work on and of the self and Stahl (2015a) values the accrual of such capital.

### **3:2:3 Field**

In Bourdieu's (1990) theory, fields are broad social and structural domains that shape habitus and determine what counts as valuable capital (Meuleman et al., 2015); essentially fields of forces that are relational rather than being independent (James, 2011). Field is closely entwined with the concepts of habitus and capital and Bourdieu argues that they cannot be considered separately (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). So, whilst habitus affects possessed and pursued capital, this capital can only be measured in the context of the field (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992).

Fields are the macro concept that structure Bourdieu's theory and are referred to as the sites of struggles, representing a network of positions in a competitive game, whereby the individual must employ various strategies to either maintain or improve their position (Bourdieu, 1990). Although the borders of fields are porous, each field is characterised by its own logic or rules and knowledge of these is linked to success in the field (Ignatow and Robinson, 2017). Within social fields there is inequitable access to the stakes (capitals) of that competition (Rawolle and Lingard, 2013) and those agents within the field are ultimately defined by their relative position within in it (Bourdieu, 1986 cited in Richardson, 2002). As with habitus, Bourdieu did not provide a closed definition of field, but instead highlighted key characteristics: there are general laws in different fields; all fields are characterised by struggles between agents who possess different forms and volumes of capital; the functioning of the field relies on people prepared to play the game of the field; the structure of the field is a state of power; all agents in the field share fundamental interests and invest in the value of playing the game; this is often unconscious (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). The metaphor of the game refers to the rules of the university field and the position of students within it (Bathmaker, 2015). Here, individuals must use various strategies to maximise their position in a contest to maintain or increase academic capital (Bathmaker. 2015). The value of playing the game and trying to fit into the field, links to the symbolic value of university education, whereby even those who struggle to access the field and fit into it, hold a shared belief in its value and legitimacy (English and Bolton, 2016).

For this study, what is important is that the porous concept of field allows for consideration of progressive change in education; this is what Bathmaker (2015) refers to as thinking beyond Bourdieu. This links to the role of those working in education to challenge the doxa, which Bourdieu (1990, p. 68) explains as a "state of immediate adherence" and one that "escapes questioning" (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p. 98). Here, using Bourdieu can lead to research that challenges the doxa and helps pave the way for change and reform (Harman, 2017). Consistent with the widening participation agenda described in Chapter Two, Bathmaker (2015) refers to

the emergence of new alternative routes into and within HE, such as vocational routes, that can be considered transformative, but are misrecognised as such, because their value may not transfer to other fields that have different laws. Bathmaker (2015) suggests the concept of field must be questioned and such debate must consider whether HE is a distinct field or one that contains sub-fields (i.e. HE in FE settings) or is a hybrid space. Using Bathmaker's (2015) hybrid interpretation of field is useful in this study, to reflect not only the different types of institution, but also the campuses and the courses undertaken. Such discussion is important in the current political and social climate where there is increasing focus on the cost-effectiveness of a university education and how this improves widening participation and social mobility (Blake, 2018). Indeed, this links to Bourdieu's assertion that the ability to invest in and profit from education are not equal (Bourdieu, 1986). For Bourdieu, education, rather than being a field for social change, operates as the mechanism by which the prevailing class system is reproduced (Harman, 2017). Working class and non-traditional students often choose not to enter a system which is outside their habitus and if they do, may experience challenges, such as less economic capital (English and Bolton, 2016). Often the lack of representation of non-traditional students in HE is misrecognised (James, 2011) and understood as individual deficit (discussed in Chapter Two) rather than structural in origin (Harman, 2017). Equally, the success of higher-class students is viewed as deserving (Burnell, 2015); consequently, the injustice is misrecognised.

What is important with Bourdieu's approach to considering misrecognition is the assertion that social reproduction in advanced societies is symbolic, so usually at a subconscious level, agents are complicit in their own oppression (James, 2015). Here, the very fact that non-traditional students buy into the system and enter HE, they are unknowingly contributing to their own oppression, by creating a mirage of widening participation and social mobility (Harman, 2017). For Bourdieu, individual success is thought to cement and further mask the prevailing inequality of the education system by giving the appearance of meritocracy, thus negating the need to tackle it (Sutherland, 2002; West, Fleming and Finnegan, 2013). Whilst there is the possibility of

individual agency, the most disadvantaged often end up with a de-valued degree with few success stories from UK elite universities (Reay, Crozier and Clayton, 2010), contradicting the notion of widening participation and social mobility. This reflects Bourdieu's reference to the socially constructed value of education (symbolic power) and the way the field of education exercises this power, creating an invisible, soft form of violence that masks the structural differences (symbolic violence) (James, 2015). However, some authors (Reay, 2004; Burnell, 2015; English and Bolton, 2016) question the extent to which agents are unaware of their own oppression and instead suggest choices can be made and agency exercised even in the presence of structural inequality. Equally, some can overcome the structural constraints to enjoy success. Furthermore, to think beyond Bourdieu, we must explore the other benefits of going to university, which include work on the self (Reay, Crozier and Clayton, 2009) as well as reaching potential and intended outcomes that for some students are not dependent on an elite university education (Bathmaker, 2015).

For those who do enter HE, the analogy of students being fish in or out of water (Bourdieu, 1990), captures the incongruence, for some students, in assimilating or reconciling their habitus with that of the university field; usually middle class / traditional students do this with ease (West, Fleming and Finnegan, 2013). Through primary and secondary socialisation some learners are intuitively more confident with the rituals or rules of the game in HE and so possess capitals that are closer to the habitus of the institution, whereas often non-traditional students may struggle, particularly in elite universities because the social and educational/ cultural capital they bring is somewhat removed from what is practiced and valued (West, Fleming and Finnegan, 2013). Students naturally form cliques (social networks) with those who are like themselves, whether that is based on social class, age, gender, ethnicity or disability and these cliques help students to adapt to university life (Keane, 2010). Given the over representation of white middle-class students and the under representation of those from minority backgrounds, this may make it difficult for some students to find support and indeed fit in, especially in university fields where they are fish out of water (Keane, 2010).



Work by Stahl (2015a) refers to the development of a counter-habitus. Here, this is founded upon a disposition toward fitting in and also being loyal to oneself; a process of reconciling aspirations with current social and economic inequalities and ameliorating the dominant values of the HE field of attainment with those values shaped by primary habitus (Stahl, 2015a). Although Stahl's (2015a) work is very much focused on working class young people, given that many care leavers are likely to be working class (see Chapter One), it is possible to draw parallels. Here, drawing on Bourdieu's theory, Stahl refers to the fluid operationalisation of capitals across fields that help the middle class to successfully navigate them and the difficulty working class students have in doing this. So, for non-traditional students, there can be tensions between the transforming habitus that allows them to fit in to and embrace the rules of the university setting and achieve academically and the potentially, opposing primary habitus of ordinariness and not having ideas above one's station (Stahl, 2015a). Stahl's work (2015a) conceptualises how habitus is in constant negotiation with the field/s rather than submitting to it / them, however, feelings of tension (cleft habitus) between the new field and the primary habitus can impact on the perception of self and how identity is shaped.

Stahl (2015a) concedes the notion of assimilation or fitting in is arguably reductionist and deterministic in that it assumes there is a single mode of adaptation to the academic context or field, notably that students submit, when students may have a plurality of assimilations and identify with norms within and without the academic field (Gilardi and Guglielmetti, 2011). In this way Bourdieu (1990) perhaps overlooks the impact of personal agency and the subjective experience and possibilities and achievements of students who do prosper despite being outside the norm (Patiniotis and Holdsworth, 2005). For successful students, it is useful to consider Reay et al.'s (2009) reference to the paradox many face when they feel like fish out of water with their working-class counterparts in state schools, where their academic prowess meant they fitted uneasily into the field of working-class schooling. Puwar (2004) refers to this as strangers in paradise, but familiar strangers, who may not fit in, in terms of class, but who do fit in academically.

Increasingly, consideration is being given to this in educational policy, whereby the student journey and reasons for attrition are monitored and some reasons cited refer to lack of belonging and peer networks despite academic ability (Thomas, 2012). So, again, although criticised, the value of Bourdieu's theory is that it allows us to think about the field/s, or a set of relationships defined by differences in capital without losing the individual (James, 2011).

A strength of Bourdieu's argument is that he is often regarded as a principled eclectic arguing for scientific rigour rather than rigidity (Gale and Lingard, 2015) and that, as mentioned earlier, the tools of habitus, capital and field are designed to help researchers with thinking, as opposed to providing a regimented framework (Webb et al., 2017). Indeed, the value of the theory encourages researchers to think more broadly and move beyond the isolated experiences of individuals, to also acknowledge how people and institutions act and operate in the field (Webb et al., 2017). So, thinking with Bourdieu focusses on the relational, but also promotes reflexivity and the relationship between the researcher and what is being researched is a concern (James, 2011) and whilst much of his work focussed on issues of class, it is suggested that the tools can be used for considering other important social issues (Reay, 2004), in this case, the experiences of care leavers.

### **3:3 Summary of the chapter: Bourdieu and this study**

In using Bourdieu's concepts, I concede that other theories may have been consistent with the research aims. However, the value of Bourdieu's theory of practice is that it considers the broad context in which students experience university and has enabled consideration of not only the experience of individuals, but also how people and institutions interact and function in that particular field (Webb et al., 2017). Equally, important for studies that focus on widening participation and non-traditional students, Bourdieu's theories can help to explore the dominance of some groups and the oppression of others (Reay, 2004). Whilst some of the studies mentioned have used aspects of the theory, for example, Reay, Crozier and Clayton (2010)

focussed on habitus and Bathmaker (2015) used the concept of field, this study will remain true to Bourdieu's assertion that the concepts should not be used separately (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992).

In this study I hope to defy accusations that suggest Bourdieu's theory of practice is used habitually or superficially (Reay, 2004) and instead demonstrate its utility and validity for this inquiry. It is not the intent to reify his work, but more to show how his conceptual tools have helped to shape and inform this study and apply them to the specific context of care leavers in HE (Stahl, 2016). Some of the criticism of Bourdieusian studies suggests they fail to consider how Bourdieu is helpful in transcending the dualisms of agency and structure, objective and subjective and the micro and macro (Webb et al., 2017). Part of the criticism is also attributed to studies underplaying the impact of the structured and structuring aspects of Bourdieu's theory (Webb et al., 2017). For Reay (2004), criticism of Bourdieu's work is not always justified and is applied in the context of studies that refer to Bourdieu without doing any theoretical work and over playing the latent determinism mentioned earlier. Here, this is where Bathmaker's (2015) work has relevance; the university field broadly contains different types of field, for example, professional and academic degrees and whilst the value of academic capital accrued via professional degrees may not transfer to other university fields, it is possible for individuals undertaking such degrees to meet their goals and enjoy success. Furthermore, university may produce other personal benefits including increased confidence and a sense of personal development (Reay, Crozier and Clayton, 2009). Therefore, the value of university education is not solely linked to attending an elite institution.

Bourdieu encourages the researcher to be reflexive about application of the concepts and it is useful to acknowledge here that wittingly or unwittingly, those working in HE can also be agents of inequality (James, 2015). Bourdieu (1990, p. 68) refers to the doxa as a "state of immediate adherence" and one that "escapes questioning" (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p. 98). Here, using Bourdieu can lead to research that challenges the doxa and notions of the transformative role of education, underlined in the

widening participation agenda, being met with suspicion (Rawolle and Lingard, 2013), but also serves as a reminder to consider the role of academics in drawing attention to ongoing oppression and by doing so paving the way for change and reform (Harman, 2017). Bourdieu's tools should not be used without recognising and showing concern for the role of education in naturalising social difference (James, 2015).

Central to good research is researcher habitus that understands and acknowledges the position of the researcher in relation to what is being researched, as well as the relation to the field in which the research is situated, what is referred to as rejection of epistemological innocence (Rawolle and Lingard, 2013). Bourdieu often provokes intense resonance with those who have moved through fields and experienced class practices, as in the case of my own experience (Stahl, 2016). His work can provide both the conceptual tools to bridge the theory / method divide, as well as the language to articulate the theoretical position of researcher and Stahl (2016) notes that many scholars of his work have a deep and enduring respect for his diverse scholarship, which offers so much to so many.

This chapter has presented an overview of Bourdieu's theory of practice and how the concepts of habitus, capital and field have influenced this study. In the following chapter I will provide an overview of the research methodology, the approach and methods used in this narrative study.

## **Chapter Four: Methodology**

### **4:1 Introduction to the chapter**

In this section I will present an overview and rationale for the methodology employed in this study and how the methodology connects to the theoretical framework described in the previous chapter. This chapter will include detail about the narrative research approach and methods used to select the participants, gather and analyse the narratives. Within this discussion I will consider the key ethical issues involved in selecting the participants and ensuring participants were not harmed by taking part in this study. I will also consider the emotional impact of the study on me as a researcher.

### **4:2 Interpretivism**

This study is situated within the interpretive paradigm. This epistemological stance stems from the idealist viewpoint, which emphasises that there is no single reality, but multiple individual realities that are based on the person's interpretation or construction of reality (Slevitch, 2011). Silverman (2017) asserts that all qualitative research is broadly interpretive. Those adopting an interpretivist philosophical position contrast with positivist paradigms where the world is viewed objectively (Hammond and Wellington, 2013) and share the goal of understanding the complex world of lived experience from the point of view of those who live in it (Schwandt, 1994, cited in Denzin and Lincoln, 2013). So, here, meaning is constructed by individuals as they live in and engage with the social world and even the same experiences can be interpreted differently (Crotty, 1998). Interpretivists adopt a broadly post-positivist stance, which recognises that knowledge is not absolute and instead it is relative and subjectively created (Patton, 2015).

Interpretive research is appropriate to investigate individual student experiences while preserving the setting and the larger context (Patton, 2015), which is central to the ethos of this study and links to the conceptual framework. So, whilst recognising individuals have their own point of view (Schwandt, 1994, cited in Denzin and Lincoln, 2013), this approach provides

the opportunity for the researcher to consider how this individual reality may be shaped by temporal and wider social factors (Thanh and Thanh, 2015). The close relationship between the researcher and what is studied is also noted (Denzin and Lincoln, 2013), which makes it relevant to the narrative approach to data collection and analysis, which embraces co-construction (Mischler, 1986).

Typically, the types of research question addressed within this paradigm are those where the boundaries are not always clearly defined, they are exploratory in nature and are not designed to test hypotheses, but to generate them (Burck, 2005). It is not the intent of this study to provide objective and quantifiable results, but to explore the unique and detailed narratives of care leavers' and to try and understand and explain their habitus, forms of capital and experiences in the university field. This is consistent with the broad aims of qualitative researchers who inquire about peoples' experiences of events and situations and seek to uncover how these are perceived and experienced by individuals and groups (Agee, 2009). The aim is not to produce theoretical generalisation, but to provide a detailed account of these individual experiences at a specific time and in the social context of the university.

Drawing from this discussion, this study is based on the philosophical assumptions that absolute truths may not exist and that the world around us may be interpreted subjectively. It is concerned with theory building (inductive) rather than theory testing (deductive) (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2012). The nature of knowledge is dynamic and evolving and transient in nature and so the findings of the study, at some point may, no longer be correct, but essentially this is inherent within interpretivist research (Denzin and Lincoln, 2013). Within my study it is important to acknowledge that the findings will be based on my interpretations of the interpretations of others, which are essentially subjective and value laden (Slevitch, 2011).

#### **4:2:1 Interpretivism and narrative inquiry**

The epistemological and ontological debates presented about the nature of knowledge link not only to the interpretive paradigm, but also to the narrative methodology chosen for this study, which will be explored in the following section. Interpretivists seek methods that enable them to understand the relationship of human beings with their environment through a series of individual interpretations of the world and narrative inquiry is highly compatible with this (Thanh and Thanh, 2015). However, it is important to consider the role and value of narratives and whether we live them or tell them (Meritoja, 2014). According to Mink (1970) life has no beginning, middle or end and so it is the process of looking back and ordering events and giving them importance that makes the story; essentially creating a false order, rather than the real disorder of human existence (Meritoja, 2014). It is this false order that sometimes leads to criticism of the narrative approach and questions concerning how accurate narrative studies are. However, what is important is that stories are true for the teller (Fincher, 2012). They may be questioned by the audience and disregarded at times, but it is important to recognise they are subjectively told and heard (Fincher, 2012).

According to Denzin and Lincoln (2013) some of the criticism of interpretive research is rooted in the threat to the experimental, positivist sciences, where qualitative research undermines the scientific, objective monopoly on the truth. Critics focus on the lack of objectivity and generalisability, however, this is addressed by the post-positive rejection of these (Denzin and Lincoln, 2013). Equally, whilst the results of interpretive studies may not be statistically generalisable, qualitative researchers refer to analytic generalisation, where prior theory is used to compare empirical results or case to case transferability, where the transfer of knowledge to a new situation can be achieved (Gobo, 2008; Hammersley, 2008). Subjectivity is an inherent part of narrative inquiry and often the feature of co-construction through interviewing is viewed as a limitation. However, referring to Bruner's (1990) explanation of narrative cognition, this process is helpful, as the holistic and empathic interaction is likely to illicit access to deeper

experiences. Denzin and Lincoln (2013) assert that the varied interpretive practices employed in qualitative research aim to provide deeper understanding of the subject matter and each qualitative approach makes the world visible in a different way. In achieving deep understanding, the interactive nature of qualitative research, as well as the impact of the individual researcher on shaping research is noted and valued (Denzin and Lincoln, 2013).

#### **4:3 Rationale for a narrative approach**

Narrative research is considered an extension of the interpretivist approach, which makes it applicable to this study because it has the potential to address ambiguity, uncertainty and complexity (Mitchell and Egudo, 2003). The aim here, is to find out about the lived experiences of individuals', consistent with the narrative approach (Creswell, 2013). It is noted here, that Creswell (2013) suggests for narrative research the unit of analysis focuses on one or more individuals and thus, the number of participants are usually small. This will be considered in section 4:5, but emerged quite early in this study as a consideration, given the small numbers of care leavers thought to be attending university (Become, 2017).

A more explicit justification for using this approach links to Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) belief that because experience happens narratively, educational experience should also be studied narratively. People by nature lead storied lives and narrative researchers describe such lives, collect and tell stories of them (Clandinin and Connelly, 1990). Clandinin and Connelly are often cited as being the first to use the term narrative inquiry (Webster and Mertova, 2007) to describe an approach to teacher training that focussed on telling stories about experience in the education setting. In their work narrative is considered both the phenomenon and the method (Clandinin and Connelly, 1990). Narrative inquiry focuses on the individual, society and culture expressed through narration and analysis of this (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). The term inquiry underlines that the stories or narratives are being used for research purposes and so move beyond



retelling of events, to interpreting them (Holloway and Freshwater, 2007); the story is viewed as rhetorical, constructed and interpretive (Riessman, 1993). The development of narrative research within education is an important way of framing the study of human experience and tapping into the social and cultural context and has been recognised as helping to understand how students make decisions, think about their identity and give meaning to their experiences (important features of this study). Thus, narratives are a powerful mechanism, whereby complex problems in teaching and learning can be illuminated and explored (Webster and Mertova, 2007).

The theoretical framework highlighted the concepts of social settings, forms of capital and the dynamic nature of habitus and this links well with narrative inquiry, which focuses on the life stories of individuals and how they are shaped by social experience (Creswell, 2013). Narrative approaches are also suitable for considering identity, the construct which provides people with a sense of continuity of being over time, whereby experiences form a whole and thus give meaning to life as a whole (Roesler, 2006). All aspects of identity are created by merging our experiences in life into a life story, or a narrative and so it is argued that identity itself is a form of narrative.

#### **4:3:1 Overview of narrative inquiry**

Narrative inquiry studies the way that human beings experience the world around them; it is about the study of epiphanies, rituals, routines, metaphors and the day to day experiences of life (Barton, 2004). Whilst narrative inquiry is a comparatively new approach to conducting qualitative research, emerging from post-positivist philosophies about the nature of the world, narratives themselves have been used to depict the experiences and activities of humans throughout history and are thus deeply connected with human life and the way we seek to explore and understand it (Barthes and Duisit, 1975; Webster and Mertova, 2007).

Narratives are a universal mode of human expression and are sometimes considered oral versions of human experience (Labov and Waletzky, 1997).

Life experience and our dialogic interactions occur continuously both with the world that surrounds us and within ourselves (Moen, 2006), what Polkinghorne (1988, p. 160) refers to as humans being “immersed in narrative” and telling themselves stories in a “virtually uninterrupted monologue”. Bruner (1990) suggests that this everyday way of thinking is the narrative mode. Because the complexity and volume of life experience in its entirety is, for many, overwhelming, we deal with it by organising our experiences into meaningful units or stories. It is difficult for humans to separate the life led from the life told and often the process of creating and sharing stories, means that they are constantly being reinterpreted, reshaped, told and retold (Webster and Mertova, 2007). Furthermore, linking to earlier debate around enduring habitus, it is accepted that as we go through life, we may edit, adapt, extend, reject or repress some of our stories, but we will never be without storied versions of who we are (Cousin, 2009). So, stories are dynamic entities in a state of flux (Wang and Geale, 2015) as are the individuals who tell them.

Narrative inquirers essentially study human experience (Clandinin and Rosiek, 2007); the focus is on the study of experience as a story; people shape their lives by stories of who they and others are (Creswell, 2013). Stories are a portal through which the person enters the world and by which their experience of the world is interpreted and made personally meaningful (Reissman and Speedy, 2007). As with the above discussion, the terms story and narrative are used interchangeably in the literature, however, Polkinghorne (1998) suggests that the story is the outcome of events or experiences being told, whereas the narrative extends beyond this to consider the thought processes and influences that shape the story. Consequently, the story is much more than an aimless string of words, it is constructed and meaningful and links to Clandinin and Connelly’s (2000) use of the term narrative inquiry.

Often, narrative studies are differentiated along a number of lines. One approach considers how the data is analysed and often this follows one of three approaches: thematic, whereby the researcher identifies themes; structural, which involves analysing how the story is told i.e. the story can be

cast in comic, tragic, satirical or romantic form; and a dialogic / performance analysis, in which the focus is on how the story is produced and performed (Riessman, 2008). Labov and Waletzky's (1967) influential work in the field of narrative research, refers to the event narrative framework that organises stories into structural units based on replaying events i.e. abstract, orientation, complication and coda. These are thought to be present in all narratives and are expressed mono-logically. Emphasis is often placed on the role of the story teller, how they tell the story, how events are replayed and thus become part of the speaker's biography (Labov and Waletzky (1967); so, the spoken element rather than the experience element. Whilst important, their approach negates the value of stories that are told in other ways i.e. those told as part of conversations, collaboratively or in a disordered or fragmented way as other types of speech events, as well as the wider social context that shapes narratives (Squire, 2008). Consequently, for this study the approach is too narrow and rigid and whilst I wanted to focus on the past tense narratives, consistent with Labov and Waletzky's work, I also wanted to include the present and future and the wider social context of the narrator's experience (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000).

Referring to her research with women in the process of divorce, Riessman (2013) reflected on her notes about respondents going on and on, despite having been asked a simple question. Riessman (2013) later interpreted this as participants resisting efforts to shape their stories into imposed structures or themes. Riessman used this to embrace the human element of narration, as well as a less dominant interviewing approach, where the narrator was in control of the direction and as a researcher she followed their stories and digressions. Riessman (2013) describes her approach as focussing on discrete and topically specific events and experiences that may be brief, but also extended accounts over a number of interviews. It is this style that influenced my own approach to interviewing and in this study an experience rather than event focused approach was used (Squire, 2008).

Another approach is to consider the type of narrative. Holloway and Freshwater (2007, p. 16) present a typology of narrative research, which helps to further explain some of the key features of this approach. This

includes the everyday story, which considers time and continuance; the autobiographical story connects past, present and future; the biographical story sees the world from other peoples' point of view; the cultural story links to cultural meanings and the collective story is linked to culture, autobiography and biography. Here, stories are usually linked to others i.e. belonging to a particular group, care leavers for example. Whilst this typology is not exhaustive, and there are other examples in the literature for example, oral history approaches, which focus on disrupting dominant discourses or advocating for specific groups (Chase, 2005 cited in Denzin and Lincoln, 2013), narrative studies should not follow a fixed approach, but instead represent an informal collection of principles (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). Often some of the key features of narratives are that they have a finite time sequence, they have a narrator and an audience, they are linked to the individual and are based on subjective experience and they are capable of holding the audience's attention (Holloway and Freshwater, 2007). It is important to remember that individuals are narrators of their own stories, but that these cannot be separated from the social context and so stories about similar experiences may reveal patterns, but essentially, they are also unique (Holloway and Freshwater, 2007). Equally, they are dependent on the social and cultural knowledge of the narrator who interprets them subjectively (Holloway and Freshwater, 2007).

#### **4:4 The narrative approach in this study**

Whilst a narrative methodological approach was deemed to be the most appropriate in this instance, like all approaches, there are weaknesses and critics (Barrett, 2015). One of the most common is that the increase in popularity of the approach has led to a corresponding propensity for low quality research, compounded by studies that fail to acknowledge the complexity of narrative methodology (Clandinin, Pushor and Orr, 2007). Indeed, frequent use has led to a blurring of the boundaries of narrative research and the range of interpretations and approaches to undertaking narrative research has led to some confusion regarding the purpose and

impact. Equally, some studies claim to be narrative, without having followed the principles of narrative inquiry (McMullen and Braithwaite, 2013); these will be considered in the following discussion.

Whilst there are different approaches to conducting narrative research, Clandinin and Connelly (2000, p. 20) refer to three “commonplaces” that are essential in distinguishing narrative inquiry with other methodological approaches. These are temporality, sociality and place. These commonplaces are linked to the philosophy of Dewey (1938) whose theories on education referred to the importance of exploring the personal, social, temporal and situation and so, to understand people, we need examine not only their personal experience, but their interactions in the world. Equally, Dewey (1938) suggests that experiences grow out of other experiences and this can be expressed through the continuum of the imagined now, imagined past and imagined future. So, essentially here, it is important to recognise the immediate impact of experience, as well as the later and possible future impact this has on on-going experience and understanding (Ricoeur, 1984). This is a vital feature of narrative inquiry, whereby attention is paid to how we look back and look forward (Cousin, 2009; Ricoeur, 1984). In this study I used this approach by asking students to look back at how their aspirations for university developed, to look to their present experience and to look forward to their imagined futures.

The past and present actions of the storyteller or narrator can provide insight into potential future action (Wang and Geale, 2015), but as mentioned previously, the narrator may have multiple versions of their history and may also select which version they present (Cousin, 2009). This links to the performative nature of storytelling (Polkinghorne, 1998). The notion of temporality differentiates narrative research from other approaches such as phenomenology, but also underlines the value of individual experience and meaning (Ricoeur, 1984; Lindsay, 2006). I felt this was important for my research because I wanted to understand the way experience shapes decisions to go to university, as well as experience once there. The second commonplace, sociality, refers to the milieu, the conditions under which peoples’ experiences and events are unfolding. So, in the case of this study,

the social context of widening participation for care leavers. The third commonplace is the specific place or sequence of places that the events took place. So, in this study, place is university, but notably other places may also be of relevance, for example the care setting, compulsory education; this study includes three different university settings and the care settings also differ. This three-dimensional way of working is what allows narrative research to be considered a methodology, rather than simply a method of data collection (Clandinin, 2006).

By attending to these commonplaces, the narrative inquirer studies the complexity of the relational composition of peoples lived experiences, as well as imagining the future possibilities of them (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000), or what Ricoeur (1984) refers to as a sense of hope. Consistent with the interpretive paradigm described previously, experience centred narrative research is based on the belief that human knowledge is not fixed, there is no single dominant or static reality and human knowledge of the world is relative (Squire, 2008). The essence of narrative research is that whilst it may be possible to produce an authentic view on reality, reality itself is dynamic and subjective (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000) and the process of reflection on experience may change the meaning and importance attached to it, bringing to light untold details of past events (Ricoeur, 1984). This is also an important distinguishing feature of experience centred narrative research, as opposed to event centred, where individual representations are thought to be more or less constant (Squire, 2008).

For this study, aspects of Holloway and Freshwater's (2007) typology are relevant in that the temporal nature of experience and habitus is considered, as well as the links to wider social and cultural influences and the collective experience of care leavers. I wanted to focus on personal, experience centred narratives with an approach Riessman (2008) refers to as asking the narrator to share brief, topically specific stories, but developing these through discussion, over more than one interview. Experience focussed narrative researchers consider the sequential and meaningful nature of stories and how they are used to re-present past experience and display transformation and change (Andrews, Squire and Tambouka, 2013). The way narratives

help to segment and organise experiences, actions and events are useful both in helping the narrator to express them and for the researcher to capture and understand them (Elliott, 2005). Equally, there is emphasis on empowering research participants and giving them a voice in determining the salient themes in research, as well as recognising their role and that of the researcher (Elliott, 2005).

It is often the case that researchers who are interested in personal accounts of experience are also interested in the role of stories as a means to express and build personal identity and agency (Squire, 2008). These features are central to the ethos of this study and the recognition (shown in the literature review) that often care leavers do not have a voice and whilst stories may change and be altered over time, this study aimed to capture what the participants wanted to share about their lives. In doing this the process of narration can help the individual to think more deeply, to not only give meaning, but to make sense of experience and emotions, as well as consider responsibility, blame and praise for specific individuals and circumstances (Elliott, 2005). Given the complexity and diversity of care experienced students, it is hoped this may be a valuable process.

#### **4:5 Selection of participants**

Polkinghorne (2005) suggests that the term sampling has been adopted from quantitative practices and gives the impression that those chosen are representative of a population, allowing findings to be applied to that population. Indeed, lack of generalisability is one of the most frequent criticisms of qualitative research (Silverman, 2017). However, there is debate about this and Gribch (2009) suggests that by using theory to underpin research or using research to develop theory, we can make generalisations, given that theory can be applied to similar people in similar situations.

In this study participants were chosen for being able to provide valuable insight about specific experiences, from their own perspective (Merriam, 2002). Consequently, Polkinghorne (2005) prefers the term selection as

opposed to sampling. Gobo (2006) asserts that whilst very different to quantitative approaches, providing detail about how participants are selected is vital for transparency and quality. Equally, recruiting the right participants is essential because those selected need to be able to help answer the research questions (Silverman, 2017). Consequently, for qualitative research it is entirely relevant to select settings, groups and individuals where the issues under scrutiny are likely to occur (Denzin and Lincoln, 2013).

In this study “going deep rather than wide” was important (Cousin, 2009, p. 99). Therefore, there were no initial aims to recruit a specific number of participants, but simply to try and access as many as possible who fulfilled strategic criteria consistent with the research aims (Silverman, 2017). In this case the criteria were: firstly, it was necessary for the students taking part to have been in the looked after care system and secondly to be currently an under-graduate in a university. This strategic approach is consistent with a non-probability technique (Gribch, 2009). Non-probability techniques tend to be used in qualitative studies and a wide range are reported in the literature, but some common approaches include purposive, convenience, accidental and network or snowballing (Gribch, 2009; Moule and Goodman, 2009). In this study a number of these were applied and selection was flexible and pragmatic to try and recruit as many students as possible (Marshall, 1996). Initially, purposeful selection was deemed appropriate to ensure that those taking part were able to help answer the research questions in a meaningful rather than representative manner (Polit and Beck, 2010). Theoretical sampling was not applicable, here, as the purpose was to select individuals rather than focusing on concepts (Gobo, 2006). No restrictions were imposed about the nature of the undergraduate programme or the year of study.

Selection took place across all five universities in the North East of England and therefore included two universities in the Russell Group and 3 post-1992 universities. The aim was to try and include students with a range of experiences or what Gobo (2006) refers to as maximising variation. Silverman (2017) notes the importance of selecting the setting and here, different settings may provide insights into some of the social processes, which reproduce unequal power in the education field.



In January 2016, a recruitment flier (see appendix three) was emailed to the designated team for care leaver support at each university, as well as to each Students' Union. These departments agreed to circulate the flier via their internal email systems to the students in their organisation. Both the Students' Union and the care leaver support team are involved in providing advice and support to care leavers and specific support teams also have university data about care leavers in their organisation. Using these services to share the flier had very limited success and initially there was only one response (Matthew). Further fliers were distributed by visiting central campus locations at each university in February 2018. Following this, two students (Kelly and Kimberley) responded and were selected to take part because they met the selection criteria outlined above. A further two students later contacted one of the care leaver support teams and were given my contact details and again were selected (Connie and Abiah).

Lily contacted me about taking part after a colleague opportunistically mentioned my research to her. This is consistent with network or snowball sampling, where a third party can provide access to and help to recruit individuals to the study, often this is via word of mouth (Moule and Goodman, 2009; Gribch, 2009). This approach was helpful in selecting a student who would otherwise not been located or accessed.

Those students who volunteered to take part were also asked if they knew of any care experienced peers who may wish to take part, also consistent with snowballing (Gobo, 2006), but this did not lead to any more potential candidates. A further student (Kouassi) was accessed by chance at a conference for care leavers, where I was able to talk to delegates informally about my research. Again, through word of mouth, a delegate was able to introduce me to Kouassi, who agreed to take part, also consistent with the network or snowballing approach (Gobo, 2006). The Students' Unions and care leaver contacts were emailed again in April 2018 and this led to Zoe and Georgia being recruited. So, although generally consistent with a purposive approach, it was necessary for the selection process to be flexible to recruit as many care experienced students as possible (Sarantakos, 2013).

At this point, having selected 9 students who met the criteria and self-identified as care leavers, it was deemed sufficient to proceed with the study. It is noted that qualitative studies often recruit a small number of participants who are context specific (Bold, 2012); some narrative studies include only one participant (Cousin, 2009; Creswell, 2013). Other sources indicate a minimum of 5 and to be able to say something plausible and compelling, ideally to try for between five and ten (Cousin, 2009; Bagnasco, Ghirrotto, and Sasso, 2014). Although a small selection, using multiple participants allows for accounts from different perspectives, which may help to identify both patterns and variations, but also deepens understanding of the experiences of care leavers at university (Polkinghorne, 2005). Some suggest that researchers should continue to select until the data reaches saturation point (Mason, 2010), however, Silverman (2017) suggests that, although, saturation is often mentioned, it is difficult to prove. Equally, the focus is on depth and it is noted that qualitative approaches often generate vast amounts of rich data, even if there are only a small number of participants (Holloway and Freshwater, 2007).

In this study, the students came from both post-92 and Russell Group universities and were studying a range of under-graduate degree programmes. All except one of the students were interviewed twice and this was because Abiah had very limited availability. Each interview lasted 60-90 minutes, generating a total of 50,707 transcribed words. In total 17 narrative interviews were captured.

The 9 students included in this study were characterised by diversity. They were from 3 institutions and studying a range of programmes, which allows for the exploration of experience in a range of settings (Gobo, 2006). There were 6 female students and 3 male students. Their ages varied from 19-48, which was considered useful in adding variation (Gobo, 2006). Most of the students (7) were White British, but Kouassi entered England from the Ivory Coast as an unaccompanied asylum seeker and Abiah described himself as Black British African. There was also variation in relation to social background, with Connie, Matthew and Kouassi referring to their affluent family backgrounds and their privately funded compulsory education. Further

to this, Connie, Matthew and Abiah entered the care system as a result of bereavement, which is not typical of the statistical data presented in Chapter Two, which indicates that 62% of children and young people enter care as a result of neglect and / or abuse (DfE, 2017s). Several of the students in the study reported having special educational needs with Lily and Kelly having dyslexia and Matthew having Asperger's Syndrome.

Whilst some of the students included in this study are not typical of the profile of care leavers identified in Chapter Two, this is consistent with earlier discussion outlining the concept of intersectionality. Although selection was based primarily on the defined category of care leaver, this does not negate the presence of other multiple, fluid and dynamic social categories that combine to produce inequality and influence both educational trajectories and identity (Pheonix, 2016). Indeed, the contribution of this study to what is already known is that it illustrates the complexity and diversity within the category of care leavers. Another important feature of this study was to recognise that those taking part self-identified as care leavers and also came forward willingly to tell their stories and have them heard. As such, it was both my responsibility and privilege as a researcher to listen to, to carefully co-construct and to re-tell these important narratives. In doing this, this study celebrates both the similarities and the differences among and between these nine university students who had experienced looked after care.

Detail about the students selected to take part in this study is presented in Table 1 on the following page.

Table 1: Overview of the selected students							
Student	Setting	Programme of study	Gender	Age	Ethnicity Country of origin	Interview 1	Interview 2
1 Kelly	Post-1992 (Acton)	Nursing (adult) Year 2	F	40	UK White/British	Face to Face (f2f)	(f2f)
2 Zoe	Post-1992 (Acton)	Nursing (adult) Year 2	F	20	UK White/British	(f2f)	(f2f)
3 Kimberley	Post-1992 (Acton)	Nursing (mental health) Year 2	F	32	UK White/British	(f2f)	(f2f)
4 Lily	Post-1992 (Acton)	Nursing (child) Year 2	F	21	UK White/British	(f2f)	(f2f)
5 Matthew	Russell Group (Burnell)	Physics Year 1	M	19	UK White/British	(f2f)	(f2f)
6 Connie	Russell Group (Burnell)	Education Year 1	F	19	UK White/British	(f2f)	(f2f)
7 Abiah	Russell Group (Burnell)	Business Studies Year 1	M	24	UK Black British African	T	
8 Georgia	Post - 1992 (Langley)	BSc (Hons) Specialist Community Public Health Nursing Year 1	F	48	UK White/British	(f2f)	Telephone (T)
9 Kouassi	Post-92 (Langley)	IT Year 2	M	22	Ivory Coast	(f2f)	T

#### **4:6 The interviews: The storytelling space**

Most narrative inquirers begin their inquiries either with engaging with participants through telling stories or through coming alongside them in the living out of stories (Clandinin, 2006). In this case, as the students were unknown to me, I had to invite the stories through interview conversations (Clandinin and Huber, 2010). The interviews were arranged via e-mail or telephone with each student and were conducted on the university campus at a time convenient for the student. Most of the students requested a campus venue, citing this as a convenient and familiar location. I felt it was important to offer this choice, as it is consistent with the narrative approach, which fosters shared decisions and negotiation. The face to face interviews were held in either private study rooms in library locations or private rooms within the campus, which provided familiar and comfortable surroundings and avoided interruptions (Cousin, 2009). Each interview lasted about 90-100 minutes and for all except one telephone interview, two interviews with each student were carried out.

Second interviews are noted to be valuable in adding depth and generally one interview is not sufficient (Polkinghorne, 2005). The second interviews allowed both the student and the researcher time to reflect on the discussion and the opportunity to further explore any points or add detail and depth (Polkinghorne, 2005). In this study the second interviews did not generate any new themes, but did allow participants a chance to confirm what they had said, but also to ask questions. During Lily's second interview she asked me questions about her previous interview where she asked me to recall information she had shared previously (See field notes, appendix eight). Whilst she did not explain this, I felt it was a valuable way of showing her I had listened, remembered and was interested in her story. Abiah wanted to take part in the study but had very limited availability and was away from the campus for the summer. At his suggestion a telephone interview, lasting about 60 minutes, was completed. Georgia and Kouassi's second interviews were conducted over the telephone at their request.

There is no set formula for getting narrators to tell their stories, but the important thing is to use an approach that encourages the story teller to do most of the talking (Cousin, 2009) and allows them to speak first (Connelly and Clandinin, 1990). The interviews began with some explanatory discussion about my role and the rationale for my interest in the study before asking students to share some personal information about themselves such as their age, programme and year of study. The aim, here, was to try and make the student comfortable; Riessman (2008) refers to this as establishing a climate that allows for storytelling. Others refer to this as “the space for tales” and suggest that as narrative researchers we create or visit a space for tales (Barusche, 2012, p. 5). These spaces can be, as in this case, through conversations, but may also include spaces such as correspondence, emails, social media (Barusche, 2012). Creating this space was helped by introducing some general small talk at the beginning of the interviews i.e. asking how students were enjoying their courses. According to Kvale, 2011 and Elmir et al. (2011) this can help initiate conversation, helping participants to feel relaxed and creates a conversational approach as opposed to a more interrogative style.

The work of Wengraf (2001) was influential in guiding part of the approach taken in this study, particularly his work on the biographic narrative interpretive method (BNIM). Some narrative researchers engage in rapid questioning and ask participants to justify, explain and consider alternatives. However, what I wanted to do was to provide a space where the students could speak and be listened to, which is consistent with the minimalist approach Wengraf (2001) describes. The first part of Wengraf’s (2001) BNIM was used, beginning with one broad question to illicit the narrative or the single question initial narrative sub session (SQUIN). The narrator is then able to take as much time as they wish to answer, without questioning from the listener. During this time the listener should make notes based on what is said, which forms the next part of the interview. I found this part of Wengraf’s method helpful in that the narrator had control over how much and what they shared (Bold, 2012). However, I felt the second and third stages of Wengraf’s approach were too rigid in that he suggests only questioning from

the narrative and not going back over issues. Therefore, a semi-structured approach was used (based on the interview schedule in appendix four, which allowed more flexibility and both the narrator and the listener to have influence over the agenda, or co-construct the narrative (Bold, 2012). My questions were asked when it seemed appropriate to do so, taking cues from the content of the narrative, rather than following a set approach (Mischler, 1986). The questions I used were broad and open-ended, which served the purpose of asking for specific stories whilst also allowing open dialogue (Bold, 2012). This was more consistent with Kvale's (2011) approach to interviewing, where the semi-structured nature of interviewing allows for a combination of specific, probing, interpreting questions in response to what is said. Kvale (2011) also refers to throw away questions, which may not link specifically to the study, but can help the storyteller relax and feel they are being listened to. An example of this in my study was asking students about things they mentioned that were important to them, for example, Lily mentioned her dogs and other students mentioned personal interests. The interview schedule is presented in appendix four.

#### **4:6:1 Co-construction: The relationship between the narrator and the researcher**

Narrative researchers recognise and accept that the narratives told are influenced by who is telling them, to who and for what purpose, as well as the impact of the researcher's own subjective interpretation of them (Reissman, 2008) and consequently they are often considered to be co-constructed (Mischler, 1986). Consequently, reflexivity is an important part of the narrative research process, and was relevant throughout data collection and analysis. This relationship reflects the multi-dimensional nature of narrative methodology and whilst working in the three dimensions outlined by Clandinin and Connelly (2000), the researcher's role must be made clear. In this methodological approach it is not possible to bracket the researcher out of the inquiry, instead attention must be paid to the relational process and acceptance that the researcher is complicit in the world they study

(Clandinin, 2006). Importantly Reissman (2008, p. 6) refers to narrative methodology using the analogy of “nested uses”. These begin with the narrative impulse, the desire to tell a story, which is in itself interpretive. This leads to narrative data that is then interpreted by the researcher. A further stage of analysis occurs when the published account is read. To add to this process further, drawing on the work of Bruner (1990), the entire process helps both the narrator and the listener pause to look, a time for reflection on the narratives of their lives and those of others. Such reflection may lead to personal and practical change as we understand how we compose and recompose the stories we live by (Clandinin, Pushor and Orr, 2007).

Some narrative researchers see themselves and the participants as co-constructing each part of the inquiry, whereas for others, they prefer to maintain some distance (Clandinin and Huber, 2012). In this case I wanted to strike a balance between providing a comfortable arena for storytelling, but was also conscious of my professional role, particularly in the institution where I work. Even in my role as a doctoral student I had a dual role “in an intimate relationship with the participant and in a professionally responsible role in the scholarly community” (Wang and Geale, 2015, p. 197). These roles may have led to potential power imbalances (Elmir et al., 2011). Underlining the confidential nature of the study and my own position as a student in this situation rather than an academic, was useful. Also, central to addressing power imbalances in the interview process was the fact that the students were in control of which narratives they shared (Clegg and Stevenson, 2013), as well as the venue and the approach. I also shared aspects of my personal story where relevant and was honest about my interest in the topic, when asked. What I wanted to do here was establish my genuine interest, but also show honesty (Fincher, 2012). In doing this I hoped to minimise what is referred to as the halo effect whereby, narrators tell you what they think you want to hear (Kvale, 2011). Sometimes it is easy to accept what narrators say unquestioningly, but it is important to consider how dynamics affect the narrative (Fincher, 2012).

I was aware that having invited the narrators to be interviewed, this necessarily meant the interviews would be shaped by my presence, as



opposed to stories that emerge in daily life (Narayan and George, 2013). Indeed, the entire study was arguably driven by my own agency in terms of choice of topic, methodology and theory (Narayan and George, 2013). Whilst listening to the narrators I was aware that even by nodding or offering affirming sounds or even saying “go on”, this might indicate that the narrator was relaying something of interest to me (Narayan and George, 2013). More than that, I was aware that the narrator and I were engaging in a process whereby we were both monitoring what was said,

Indeed, Kelly (introduced in detail in 5:2) shared during her interview that she was watching for my reaction and would change her approach, consistent with the halo effect (Kvale, 2011).

**Kelly:** “I do reflection in action all the time. So, every time I say something to you, I look at how you’re reacting, and I change what I say, and I know exactly what I can say that might spoil it or change it”.

This discussion clearly points to the halo effect, but Kelly followed this up by saying:

**Kelly:** “So, after doing research [a taught research module] you have your interview bias, but because I’ve come in and said I’m going to be honest, I’m going to tell you everything, because I’m comfortable with it”.

What may also have been happening here, is that Kelly was establishing entitlement to speak and presenting what she considered were tellable stories. This is sometimes considered a defensive approach where the narrator is defending the validity of their position, but is also responding to their interpretation of the research context (Andrews, Squire and Tambouka, 2013).

Being conscious of my influence, I used the initial single question initial narrative sub session (SQUIN) approach in all interviews and tried to avoid giving too many non-verbal and verbal affirmations. However, it was important to strike a balance between saying too little, which might close conversation down and saying too much (Narayan and George, 2013).

Equally, in some cases (Connie) the interview did not flow well and so here, it was important to try to engage more and ask more questions. It is useful to remember that not all narrators are skilled in telling stories and equally, I had to ensure I thought about open ended questions rather than those with a yes/no answer (Narayan and George, 2013).

#### **4:7 Emotion work**

As a qualitative researcher the aim is to try and see the world through someone else's eyes and consequently it follows that research should be experienced intellectually and emotionally (Gilbert, 2001). It was necessary to acknowledge the potential emotional impact on those being researched and the emotions generated in doing the research; researchers are not faceless interviewers and so being distanced from the study is difficult (Dickson-Swift, James, Kippen and Liamputton, 2008). Perhaps some of the students I felt had told less of their story (Connie) had actually told as much as they wanted to at that particular time. Equally, perhaps the process was stressful for them.

The concept of emotion work is largely derived from seminal work by Hochschild (1979) and was based on studying the significance of emotions within the workplace and the work expended in managing these. There are social rules that require us to induce or suppress emotions, depending on situation and context (Darra, 2008). These rules generally go unnoticed until there is a mismatch between what the individual feels and perceives they should feel. When this occurs, the individual is required to engage in emotional labour, which requires acted behaviour in order to try and show the socially accepted behaviour; this is likened in some studies to acting and putting on a happy face (Darra, 2008). As a nurse and experienced health visitor, this is something that resonates with the researcher's professional experience and indeed, there have been occasions when acted behaviour has been performed.

The literature around emotion work and labour has focussed on a range of occupations including flight attendants (Hochschild, 1979) and health professionals (Darra, 2008), but few studies have considered the impact for qualitative researchers. Campbell's (2002) work was useful because it did specifically focus on the impact of undertaking qualitative research with rape victims. Here, personal interaction with the research subjects and the sensitivity of the topic, were noted as requiring emotional labour in order for the researcher to manage their emotions. In relation to this study, given that those in care usually enter the system as a result of neglect or abuse, as outlined in previous chapters, it was anticipated that emotional labour might be a factor. The researcher felt that having managed safeguarding cases as health visitor, the experience in dealing with emotional work might be useful, but also anticipated that the study would generate emotions and require empathy. Whilst the literature around dealing with emotions during interviews varies with some researchers showing visible signs of being upset, including openly crying, others felt it was inappropriate to show such emotions and indicated these should only be released afterwards (Dickson-Swift, Kippen and Liamputton, 2009). During the interviews it was necessary to show empathy, and this was done by paraphrasing when it felt appropriate and picking up on the emotion, using appropriate statements. For example, "So, at this point you felt no one listened?" Wengraf (2001) indicates this is important and is consistent with mirroring the emotion without imposing judgement.

One particular emotion that was not expected, was the experience of strong feelings of dislike for one student. This was encountered during the interviews and was reflected upon afterwards. There was no real reason for this, other than perhaps a human preference, but it was important to acknowledge it may have impacted on the interview. It is noted that many factors can impact on the dynamics of the interview, including age, gender, social class and that these can be conscious or unconscious (Bold, 2012). By being aware of it at the time, I was able to draw on previous professional experience to show empathy through active listening and whilst being conscious of the feeling, I was able to value the student's unique contribution

to the study (Wengraf, 2001; Yow, 2006, cited in Bold, 2006). In this case, suppressing this emotion during the interview was paramount (Darra, 2008).

A concern in suppressing emotions is that researchers can feel frustrated or overwhelmed (Dickson-Swift, Kippen and Liamputton, 2009) and in my case, guilt for not liking the student. Furthermore, listening to some of the narratives where students had experienced pre-care neglect or abuse also led me to think about my own health visiting practise and “should I have done more” (Clandinin, Pushor and Orr, 2007, p. 31) to safeguard children. These feelings are known to occur, especially when doing emotion work (Clandinin, Pushor and Orr, 2007) and at times, collecting, reflecting on and engaging with the narratives was stressful. Consequently, it was important for me to ensure that I had time to reflect after each one and that I spaced them apart where possible and also talked about the narratives and my own thoughts and feelings during doctoral supervision. Further to this, I also drew from Yow’s (2006, cited in Bold, 2006, p.104) framework to question myself and the relationships I developed with the students. Here, some of the questions I asked myself included, why am I feeling this about the narrator; what are the similarities and differences between us? I also considered the effect on me, as well as how my reactions might impact on the research (Yow, 2006, cited in Bold, 2006). Although this can never completely remove my impact from the study, this reflexive process was helpful in examining my role and the developing relationships with the students.

#### **4:8 Closing the storytelling space**

Closing the storytelling space is an important stage and here again, I was influenced by Wengraf (2001), who suggests being aware of cues that the narration is complete. When the narrator starts to say less, this may be simply that they are thinking about what to or not to include, therefore, I tried to pick up on closing statements i.e. that’s where my story ends or that’s about it (Wengraf, 2001; Riessman, 2013). Wengraf indicates these often occur spontaneously (Wengraf, 2001). This was the case in Zoe’s narration (introduced in detail in 5:2) when she said:

**Zoe:** “I think I’ve kind of covered most of it really.”

At the end of the interviews, students were given the opportunity to ask me questions and talk about the interview process. For those, who agreed to a second interview, this was arranged, and students were asked to think about anything they thought they wanted to tell me in the second interview. Given the potentially distressing nature of sharing the narratives, it was useful to be able to signpost to support mechanisms within the universities for students. Equally, as some interviewees often reflect on the events once the interview has finished and think about things they might have added (Clegg and Stevenson, 2013), my contact details were re-iterated.

#### **4:9 Capturing narratives over the telephone**

It is often assumed that only face-to-face interviews are useful in narrative research, however, three of the interviews in this study were conducted over the telephone. For Abiah, this was the only opportunity to capture his narrative, as he was out of the area and busy working. Second interviews with Georgia and Kouassi were over the telephone at their request. As the students had shown interest in my work and they were of interest to me, I wanted to ensure they took part. In keeping with the ethos of narrative research, it is important that the interviews are negotiated and show respect for individual choice (Oltmann, 2016), as well as enabling the participants to have a stake in setting the agenda for the study (Holt, 2010). This is important in making narrators feel empowered and valued (Oltmann, 2016). When I phoned Georgia at the agreed time, she asked me to call back in 10 minutes, which suggested she felt comfortable making that request (Holt, 2010).

This approach meant I was unable to observe body language and non-verbal communication, which I had written about in my notes in the face to face interviews, but what was important here, was actually listening to what was being said. Equally, although I was monitoring body language in face to face interviews, this does not mean my subjective interpretation of it is accurate

(Oltmann, 2016). Telephone interviews can provide privacy and anonymity, useful for students providing sensitive information and this may have been helpful for Abiah, who I did not ever meet face to face (Oltmann, 2016).

The narratives gathered during the telephone interviews were detailed and although Abiah was only interviewed once, he spoke at length. Georgia and Kouassi also gave detailed narratives and although this is subjective, I felt that the quality of these interviews compared well to the face to face approach. I did not ask Abiah how he felt about the telephone interview approach, which would have been useful, however, when I mentioned it to the other two students, they did not have a preference over the two approaches they experienced (Holt, 2010).

#### **4:10 Transcribing the narratives**

Each narrative was transcribed verbatim by the researcher, mostly on the same day, but all within one week of the interview. I was aware that my own voice might dominate that of the participant and so rather than transcribing what I felt to be relevant parts of the narrative, I transcribed them all verbatim (Birt et al., 2016). Although this was extremely time consuming, it was of immense value in terms of becoming familiar with the data and starting to consider what was said, how it was said and in generating initial thoughts about emerging themes. Wengraf (2001) recommends spending time going over notes from the interviews to also help this process.

As soon as they were transcribed, students were emailed a copy for comments. All students agreed that the transcriptions reflected what they had said and did not suggest any changes. However, after reviewing her transcriptions, Lily asked for the original pseudonym I had given her (Jenny) to be changed and this was done. Only during the writing up of the thesis, did it occur to me, this should have been offered to all those taking part. I had considered using pseudonyms to be merely an ethical measure, but through later reflection and Lily's comment, I realised, this is important and may link to how the individuals I am working with during my research may wish to be

represented. This reminds me that ethics, although an organisational requirement, is more than a form filling exercise (Clandinin, 2006).

Ethics in narrative research is very much about negotiation, respect and mutuality (Huber and Clandinin, 2010) and thus sharing data and ideas as they develop is important, as was showing Lily that I respected and valued her wishes.

#### **4:11 Working in other narrative spaces**

Although, one of the most widely used approaches to collecting narratives, interviews are not the only way to do this (Barusche, 2012). Indeed, within the invitation letter, the participants were invited to bring any information with them they felt was important. Although none did for the first interview, two students, Lily and Kelly did bring some documents with them to the second interview. Lily brought with her four large files containing her case files from social services and Kelly brought some essays from her first encounter of university. They both allowed me to keep them to examine within the context of my study. Although, I wanted to mainly focus on capturing spoken narratives through co-constructed interviews, I did not want to exclude any information that could add to the study and examined them in detail for information that would add to my understanding (Bold, 2012). The documents Lily and Kelly brought to their interviews were discussed and looked at during the interviews and so formed part of their transcripts. Equally, important parts of the documents that related to their educational journey into university and, for Kelly, through her first university experience, were included in the data and analysed alongside the transcripts.

There were remits in terms of time imposed on this study, but it would have been useful to incorporate some other approaches to capturing narratives, for example, by asking participants to produce their own written narratives or produce field notes about their experiences (Bold, 2012). This is a potential area for exploration in my future research.

#### **4:12 Data analysis: The long and winding road**

The process of analysing the data was challenging, complicated and eventually an interwoven process. This is aptly described by Hunter (2010) as the long and winding road. There is no single process to analysing narratives and it can begin at any point within an iterative process, which Bold (2012, p.121) suggests involves “analysing, collecting data, synthesising, reanalysing and so on”. Therefore, analysis began during the interview and the transcribing process (Bold, 2012). Within the interpretive paradigm, I acknowledge that my data analysis is influenced by my own interpretation and the theories I have brought to this study (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000; Riessman, 2008).

I used notes in the interview to add to my interpretation of what was said i.e. noting whether there was a pause, aspects of body language, although, as mentioned, this was not possible for the telephone interviews (see appendix eight for examples). I also made post interview notes to capture my feelings as I interpreted the data. I was aware that my thoughts and data presentation might cause harm if later read by those who participated (Barusche, 2012). For instance, when referring to the differential value of types of programme and types of university I did not want to undermine the achievements of the students in getting to university. At this point I had to reflect on how my feelings might be influencing the analysis and whether I was editing out sensitive information or information where my analysis may not concur with how the individual feels or their awareness of wider social structures. This reflexive approach was also helped through doctoral supervision.

One overarching definition of narrative analysis is an approach to examining how people make sense of their lives through the stories they construct and tell (Earthy and Cronin, 2008, cited in Gubrium and Holstein, 2013). So, here it is important to consider what stories are told and for what purpose, as well as what the stories mean (Earthy and Cronin, 2008, cited in Gubrium and Holstein, 2013). Riessman (2008) refers to four main approaches to analysing narratives: thematic, where content is the exclusive focus; structural, which looks at content as well as the form or the way the narrative



is composed; dialogic/performance, where who, why and when come to the fore, linking to the social aspect of the narrative and finally visual, an approach that integrates words and images.

For me, the structural approach, often influenced by Labov and Waletzky (1997) looking at the abstract, orientation, complicating action, evaluation and result, was not of interest as I wanted to instead focus on experience and meaning (Holloway and Freshwater, 2007). I wanted to capture themes within and across the narratives, contradictions, as well as the relationships between people and contexts, which is consistent with thematic experience focussed narrative analysis (Riessman, 2008; Simmons, 2009; Bold, 2012). Here, I am focussing on the told, rather than the telling (Riessman, 2008) and the actual content and what it means to the narrator and those listening rather than the form of the story (Earthy and Cronin, 2008, cited in Gubrium and Holstein, 2013). This approach is consistent with the research questions, where the focus is on individual experience.

Whilst using a thematic approach, because of the powerful impact their stories had, I felt very strongly, that within my study, I had to represent the students as individuals and avoid fragmenting them “into thematic categories” (Riessman, 2008, p. 12). So, what I will present in the following chapter is an introduction to each student and in Chapters Five and ix, my re-interpretation of their stories, using thematic analysis. Therefore, the data is presented with both a biographical and interpretive focus.

#### **4:12:1 Using NVivo™**

NVivo™ is computer assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) and whilst there are other packages, this one was chosen simply because it was readily available within the context of my employment. I had originally thought that NVivo™ would code the data for me, which is a common myth (Stuckley, 2015) and whilst it did not, it did prove helpful in managing the data (Silver and Lewins, 2014). Within NVivo™ I was able to upload all the interview recordings, transcribed data and images taken from the documents

given to me by Lily and Kelly as documents into the source feature. This meant that the data was in one place and was easily retrieved (Silver and Lewins, 2014).

I was aware of some of the criticisms of NVivo™ and CAQDAS in general. For example, it can distance the researcher from the data and potentially drives the analysis process (Tummons, 2014), partly because some researchers are thought to be reluctant to alter initial coding categories once identified (Bergin, 2011). However, these criticisms are open to challenge, given the increasing use of information technology in research and suggestions that whether you use software or the traditional approach of highlighting and cutting paper transcripts, the actual process remains the same (Stuckley, 2015). Furthermore, whether the traditional approach brings the researcher closer to the data is a topic of debate (Tummons, 2014) and arguably CAQDAS can aid this process by making the data easier to organise, navigate and retrieve (Silver and Lewins, 2014) avoiding the need for large volumes of paper clippings from the transcripts (Stuckley, 2015). I revisited visual data and the audio recordings of the interviews regularly throughout the process, which also helped me to remain close to the actual narratives and not just the sections of narrative I coded.

The first part in the process was to spend time looking through the data I had collected, re-reading and re-listening to the interview recordings and verbatim transcripts several times. After the initial coding process 28 codes were generated (Appendix Six). Here, I had used what Cousin (2009) refers to as a wild approach, whereby any time I came across something I felt was significant I coded it, sometimes using more than one code for the data; arguably the advantage of using NVivo™ (Silver and Lewins, 2014).

After this point, returning to the aim of my study was helpful in trying to refocus the analysis, as well as using the theory described in Chapter Three. This meant I was less likely to dismiss novel insights, but was also able to identify meaningful codes and answer the research questions (Riessman, 2008; Gale et al, 2013 ). This process meant that I moved from an inductive approach to one more consistent with a deductive approach to data analysis

(Gale et al., 2013). During this process, I was able to re-adjust some of the codes and combine any that made similar points. For example, past history and pre-care experience were repetitive and later combined into the code primary habitus. My overall approach was based on looking for units of the narratives that showed incidents or key statements or experiences; sometimes this was a line and sometimes it was a larger chunk of text (Riessman, 2008).

Looking for categories or themes is useful for identifying experiences shared across the data (Earthy and Cronin, 2008, cited in Gubrium and Holstein, 2013). Within this, I was looking for recurrent content in the narratives, which is another useful way of identifying key themes (Andrews, Squire and Tambouka, 2013). This is one of the features of our storied lives, where key narratives that have been told and retold become polished and ready to be shared, but are also perhaps those, which have deep personal relevance (Andrews, Squire and Tambouka, 2013). In this study, the key themes were organised into broad categories that focussed on journeys into university and experiences through university (Appendix Seven). These broad categories were used to organise the narrative data and the codes created, but during analysis and writing the discussion, I frequently returned to the whole narratives and my field and reflective notes (Appendix Eight) to inform my work and the themes were further revised to reflect the discussion presented in chapters five and six.

#### **4:13 The ethics of narrative inquiry**

Negotiating entry into the field of narrative inquiry is often considered an ethical process and it is important to clearly set out the responsibilities for researchers and the students taking part (Clandinin, 1990). Key responsibilities include protecting dignity, privacy and well-being of participants (Wang and Geale, 2015). This was given much consideration during the entire process of undertaking this study and the development of this thesis.

Ethical approval was granted from Durham University (Appendix Nine). Formal approval is essential and demonstrates that key ethical concerns have been considered, however, it is noted that the researcher's responsibility extends beyond simply being granted institutional ethical approval (Clandinin, 2006). In this study the researcher felt a great sense of privilege in being able to hear and work with these students and the responsibility of ensuring that they were not negatively impacted by taking part. Having worked in the NHS for over 20 years and being a current Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) registrant, ethical conduct is an integral part of my personal and professional duty (NMC, 2015). This Code (NMC, 2015) as well as BERA (2011) guidance have been integral in shaping the researcher's conduct throughout this thesis.

#### **4:13:1 Informed consent**

Informed consent is one of the main ethical responsibilities and linked to the principle of autonomy (Hammersley and Traianou, 2012; NMC, 2015). In order to facilitate informed consent, I provided all potential participants with an essential overview of the study (Hammersley and Traianou, 2012). This was presented in an information letter (see Appendix Five) and included detail about the nature of the study, why they were being asked to take part, how their information would be used and shared, consistent with The British Educational Research Association guidance (BERA, 2011). All participants were able to make a voluntary decision about responding to the recruitment flier and as they were unknown to the researcher, there was no pressure on anyone to take part (BERA, 2011). Furthermore, the students were all over 18 and were deemed to have capacity and the intellectual capability to make this decision (BERA, 2011).

Whilst travel expenses and a small token to cover any subsistence costs were given, participants were not given financial incentives (BERA, 2011). This reflects the key principles of disclosure and voluntariness (Franklin et al., 2012). Although there were no direct benefits to the students, they were informed that the results may be used to inform educational practice. They

were also informed that the study would be written up in the form of a doctoral thesis and for publication.

All who expressed interest were emailed an information letter (Appendix Five), which provided information about the nature of the study, how information would be used and shared and who would be accessing the data (BERA, 2011). This is the most common approach and whilst not a blanket solution to any ethical problems, it does allow individuals to consider some of the key concerns (Hammersley and Traianou, 2012). Furthermore, this letter was included during the university approval processes for scrutiny by organisational ethics committees. At this point it was important to provide clear information and inform students that their information could be withdrawn prior to the end of the study without consequences (Hammersley and Traianou, 2012). As only nine students were selected to take part in the pilot and main study, the researcher was pleased that attrition did not occur. However, it is vital that this opportunity is available at any time and irrespective of whether any incentives to take part have been offered (Breakwell, Smith and Wright, 2012).

The study was explained again at the beginning of each of the first interviews, which allowed for any questions or clarification to be given. At this point verbal and written consent was obtained (Appendix Five). Whilst, again this is problematic, it is useful to consider consent as an on-going process, rather than a one-off event (Hammersley and Traianou, 2012; NMC, 2015).

#### **4:13:2 The welfare and protection of those taking part**

A fundamental principle of research is that those taking part should not experience harm (physical or emotional) beyond that, which they would encounter during the course of their normal lifestyle (Breakwell, Smith and Wright, 2012). Whilst, there is discrepancy in the literature about what constitutes a sensitive research topic, I was very conscious that asking for stories about care experience may bring about powerful emotional responses including sadness, anxiety, anger and embarrassment and consequently

considered the study to be a potentially sensitive area of inquiry (Elmir et al., 2011). Consequently, a private venue and convenient time were important to promote safety for both the interviewee and the interviewer (Elmir et al., 2011). What was also important about this setting was that it framed the interview in a way that helped students retain their student identity (Clegg and Stevenson, 2013), which was a fundamental driver for the study.

During the interviews, I was able to draw on the extensive experience of assessing emotional well-being, developed throughout a 23-year nursing career. Whilst no adverse impacts were detected, the support available via student support mechanisms in each of the students' universities were shared at the end of each interview.

#### **4:13:3 Confidentiality**

This principle is also linked to data storage (which will be considered next) and requires the researcher to safeguard the personal information of those taking part, as well as gaining their consent to use their anonymised data (Moule and Goodman, 2009). Whilst it is difficult to guarantee absolute confidentiality, given the detailed inclusion of sections of narratives in the final thesis and any potential publications thereafter, every effort was made to protect the identity of the individuals who took part (Traher and Wai Ming, 2015). During the narration I did not refer to individuals by name and when I transcribed them each narrator was assigned a pseudonym, which was used from that point onwards. Any references to the universities were also removed (Traher and Wai Ming, 2015) and a fictitious name was given. Researchers must make decisions about whether the narratives may include any information that would obviously lead to confidentiality being breached (Traher and Wai Ming, 2015). In this study most of the narrators had not disclosed their care status and this helped to protect their anonymity. Had this not been the case, it would have been important to discuss this with the student and then agree whether their data should be withdrawn (Traher and Wai Ming, 2015). The exception to this was Lily who had revealed this to an

academic colleague. However, as an NMC registrant and an academic, confidentiality is an inherent part of their professional role.

#### **4:13:4 Storing the narratives**

Thinking about how information shared by the students would be stored was essential and had to comply with the Data Protection Act 1988 and the revised Data Protection Act 2018. Having access to a university computer, which is password protected and compliant with data protection procedures was helpful in storing electronic data in the form of voice recordings and transcripts and for using NVivo™. Data that was not needed was deleted immediately and in the case of personal documents, given back to the individual as soon as possible. Any written information was stored in a locked filing cabinet in the researcher's locked office on a university campus. Students were informed about these processes and advised that some of their data might be retained beyond the study for the purposes of further academic work and publications. This is deemed acceptable as long as it continues to be stored safely (Data Protection Act, 1988; 2018).

#### **4:14 Summary of the chapter**

In this chapter I have presented a detailed overview of how this study was conducted using narrative methodology and methods. I have given my rationale for using narrative methodology and have made connections between this and the theoretical framework described in the previous chapter. I have described the process of selecting participants and how their narratives were captured and co-constructed, referring to pertinent ethical considerations. The final part of this chapter has detailed the process of analysing the data using a thematic experience centred approach, supported by use of the software package NVivo™.

In the following two chapters I will present the findings of this study.

## **Chapter Five: Findings. Looking back: Aspirations to attend university**

### **5.1 Introduction to the chapter**

The aim of this chapter is to answer the first research question: How do care leavers' explain their journeys into university? Chapters One and Two show that few care leavers go to university and therefore this chapter considers why the students in this study aspired to do this. In doing this, I asked the participants to look back at past experience, a key feature of narrative research (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). This chapter contributes to what is already known about the aspirations of care experienced university students, but also adds depth and personal meaning through use of narrative inquiry.

I used the literature and conceptual framework introduced in Chapters Two and Three to help me make sense of the narratives and develop three themes to answer this research question, which are presented in this chapter: primary habitus; secondary habitus and aspirations sustained through experience. This chapter will begin by presenting a pen portrait of each of the students who took part in the study.

### **5:2 Introducing the narrators**

**Kelly** was 40 years old when we met and in her final year of the BSc (Hons) Nursing Studies (Adult) at a Post-1992 university, which will be given the pseudonym Acton in this study.

Kelly entered care in 1989 aged 14, following sexual abuse, perpetrated by her father. She was placed in an emergency foster placement before being moved to a long-term placement and remained there for several years, leaving care at the age of 19. She attended over 11 schools during her compulsory education, as her father was in the army. Prior to going into care Kelly referred to an old school report that had described her as unteachable. After entering care, she was able to achieve GCSEs, 9 of which were at C and above, including English and Maths. Kelly did not pass A Levels and initially enrolled on a Diploma in Adult Nursing, but did not complete this. She



attributed this to the legacy of her pre-care experiences. After a number of jobs ranging from working in care, cleaning, in a local optician's, Kelly was made redundant from a job in student support at a local FE college. This prompted her to complete an access course and return to nursing aged 37. Kelly referred to her success at Acton University and was determined to complete her course. Kelly indicated that during her access course she was diagnosed with dyslexia.

**Zoe** was 20 when we met and was in the second year of the BSc (Hons) Nursing Studies (Adult) at the university named Acton in this study.

Zoe was 8 and her sister 6 when they entered care. She mentioned that she has not had any contact with her birth mother since the age of 10. Zoe indicated that she was placed in care, as a result of poor parenting, neglect and domestic violence between her mother and her male partners. She informed me that her mother misused alcohol and had financial problems. Zoe and her sister were placed together in local authority foster care and, in total, had 4 placements. Zoe spent 4 years in her final foster placement before moving into university student accommodation aged 18. Her sister remains in the placement and Zoe has regular contact with her. Zoe informed me that changes to her state schools meant that her education was disrupted, but she was able to pass her GCSEs and got C's and above in Maths, Sciences and English. She went on to complete a Diploma in Health Studies at a local college before applying to university to study nursing.

**Kimberley** was 32 years old when we met and pregnant with her second child. She was in year 2 of the BSc (Hons) Nursing Studies (Mental Health) programme at the post-1992 university referred to as Acton in this study.

Kimberley first briefly entered care aged 1 before being returned to the care of her birth mother. Following that she entered care for several brief episodes, before being permanently removed from her mother's care aged 10. Kimberley spoke of her mother's alcohol misuse and informed me that

she entered care as a result of neglect and safeguarding concerns. Kimberley's brother was 16 at the time and chose to remain with his mother, although he too was later removed and placed in "a care home for young kids". He became involved in alcohol and substance misuse and died aged 26. Kimberley and her sister were accommodated together in two short placements, before being placed separately. Kimberley then remained in her final placement between the ages of 12-18, when she left local authority foster care. Kimberley attended several state schools, but her comprehensive education was in the same location. She left school with 5 GCSEs at C and above and went on to complete an NVQ before working in an office job for 10 years. As a new mother, Kimberley indicated she had a different outlook on life and although she referred to financial struggles, she wanted a stable career. This prompted her to complete an access course for nursing.

**Lily** was 21 when we met and in her second year of the BSc (Hons) Nursing Studies (Child) at the post-1992 university referred to as Acton in this study.

Lily informed me that she had been on the Child Protection List<sup>3</sup> since birth and her pre-care life was characterised by poverty, neglect, emotional and sexual abuse, as well as domestic violence between her mother and her mother's partner. Lily also informed me that her older sister subjected her to physical and sexual abuse. Lily described her mother and her grandmother as having "mild" learning disabilities. She and her 2 sisters entered care when Lily was 11 years old. Lily had 6 placements in total and described disruptions to her compulsory state education. She left school with GCSEs, all at A-C, except for PE. Lily entered what she called supported living "where you live with a foster family, but they don't do as much for you" and stayed there between the ages of 16-21. She currently lives independently in a rented flat with a female friend. Lily did not pass her A Levels and felt this was partly due to her care experience, but also because she was travelling a

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<sup>3</sup> The Child Protection List is a list of children held by LA's of children multi-agency safeguarding conferences deem to be at risk and who need of safeguarding intervention to keep them safe.

long way to college, as well as holding down a job. She went on to complete a Diploma in Health Sciences, before going on to her nursing studies. During this time Lily was formally diagnosed with dyslexia.

**Matthew** was 19 and studying for a first degree in Physics at a Russell Group university, referred to by the pseudonym Burnell. He was approaching the end of his first year.

Matthew lost his father at a young age and then his mother, which meant he and his brother entered care; Matthew was 11 at the time. His mother had arranged for Matthew and his brother to be cared for by a friend, under private fostering arrangements, where they remained for two years, before being cared for by their aunt and uncle, under the Special Guardianship Regulations Act (2005). When I met him, Matthew was living in university halls of residence and returning to a home co-owned with his brother, which was purchased with money inherited following the death of their parents. Matthew spent much of his time there alone and had little contact with his brother or aunt and uncle, who had moved to Wales. Matthew indicated that he did not have any financial worries, as a result of his inheritance. Matthew was educated in a privately funded fee-paying school and left with what he described as excellent GCSE and Advanced Level (A Level) results. Matthew informed me that during his childhood he was diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome. Matthew had always aspired to go to university and was intent on studying at an elite university.

**Connie** was 20 years old studying for a first degree in English, also at the Russell Group university, referred to as Burnell in this study. Connie was in the second year of her degree programme.

Connie lost her mother at the age of 12 and although she maintains occasional contact with her birth father, entered privately arranged foster care with a family friend, as he lives abroad, and she wished to remain in the UK. She indicated they were not particularly close, but that he supported her

financially. She described herself as being financially secure following her inheritance from her mother. During term time at university, Connie was living in rented student accommodation with three friends, returning to her care placement in holidays. On entering care, Connie was able to remain at the private school she attended where she successfully completed GCSEs and A Levels. Connie had always intended to apply to a Russell Group university and both of her parents were educated at Burnell University.

**Abiah** was 24 when we met, studying for a BA Business and Management with Foundation at the Russell Group University referred to as Burnell. When we met he was at the end of year 3 and looking forward to going into his final year.

Abiah informed me that when his father died his relationship with his mother, which had always been difficult, broke down completely and she asked him to leave the family home. At this point he was accommodated by the Local Authority in what he described as a hostel for 16-25-year olds, supported by key workers. Abiah informed me that many of his co-residents were young offenders and he did not enjoy living there. Abiah completed compulsory education in a state school in London and said he did well at GCSE level, despite his father's illness and subsequent death. He did go on to college, but did not pass his A Levels. He attributed this to his bereavement, as well as entering the care system. Whilst working full-time for an insurance broker he met graduates who were earning more than him, and this led him to re-evaluate his situation and apply for university. It was only through the UCAS website that he became aware that the elite university he is attending would accept students who did not have A Levels via the Foundation Studies route. He applied to Burnell University and was accepted. During term time he lives with other students in rented student accommodation, but in holidays returns to the Local Authority maisonette he has rented in London since turning 18. In order to keep his maisonette, Abiah works full time during all holiday periods doing administrative work in a large hospital in London. Abiah spoke

of his financial struggles several times, but was determined to complete his studies.

**Georgia** was 48 when we met and already a qualified nurse. She was studying for the post-registration BSc (Hons) Specialist Community Public Health Nursing to achieve registration as a Health Visitor at a post-1992 university, referred to as Langley in this study.

Georgia spoke of a difficult childhood living with her mother and a “succession” of violent partners. She informed me that social services had been involved with the family for as long as she could recall and that she and her sister were finally removed from her mother’s care when her sister sustained an unexplained fractured femur as an infant. The exact cause was never determined. Georgia and her sister were initially placed in the care of their grandmother, but due to illness, she was unable to continue caring for them. Georgia was 8 when she and her sister entered a local authority foster placement. Georgia remained there until she was 18 and moved into rented social housing with her now husband. Georgia indicated that she was “bright”, but left school with “no decent qualifications”. She worked in a local shop until she was old enough to enrol on her nurse training course at 21. At the time, for those who did not have the required 5 Ordinary Levels, it was possible to sit an entry test (Dennis Child / DC Test) to gain entry (Kevern, Ricketts and Webb, 2001). Georgia described her nurse training as hospital based and vocational rather than academic. Diploma level nurse education was introduced several years after she qualified in 1989 (Francis and Humphrey’s 1998). Determined to progress in her career, Georgia had undertaken continuing professional development modules at Level 6, in order to gain a place at university.

**Kouassi** was 21 when we met opportunistically at a conference for care leavers. Kouassi was in year 2 of the BSc (Hons) Information Technology (IT) at a post-1992 university, referred to as Langley in this study.

Kouassi’s father was involved in politics in the Ivory Coast and one day Kouassi was taken by one of his father’s assistants and put on a plane, after being informed both of his parents had been murdered. He was 16 when he

arrived in Heathrow airport unaccompanied, unable to speak any English and not knowing where he was. Kouassi was unable to recall where he was taken initially, as he was in shock, but said “the government took me somewhere in London and then I came here” (to his current foster placement). Kouassi has remained in the same foster placement and he currently resides there whilst he completes his university course. Whilst with his parents in the Ivory Coast, Kouassi’s parents paid for him to be educated at a fee-paying school. Kouassi was encouraged by his foster parents and his social worker to complete an English for Speakers of Other Languages study programme at a local college. At this college he completed a BTech Information Technology before applying to Langley University.

### **5:3 Primary habitus**

Three of the students, Matthew, Connie and Kouassi, described their backgrounds as affluent and their parents, who had all completed university, held senior professional roles. It was clear within the narratives that the parents of these three students had provided informal support in relation to education from an early age. For example, Kouassi [studying IT at Langley] was very clear that both of his parents had helped to “educate me at home” and both Connie and Matthew had had similar experiences. Matthew [studying physics at Burnell] recalled his father “printing off maths questions”, which they completed together each morning and similarly, Connie [studying English at Burnell] remembered reading with her mother. She indicated:

**Connie:** “My mother always encouraged me to learn. I could read before I went to school and she [her mother] always pushed me to learn and to do my best at school”.

This early socialisation contrasted with the experiences of Kimberley, Georgia, Lily and Zoe who referred to their parents having low levels of educational attainment, not having worked and living in material disadvantage. Indeed, Lily [studying nursing at Acton] made the following comment about her mother and grandmother:

**Lily:** “Apparently she had some sort of mild learning disability; same with my nanna as well [...] I know my mam went to a special school”.

Whilst Kelly’s [studying nursing at Acton] father had a secure job in the army, she indicated that her mother had “no qualifications whatsoever” and that her parents had not promoted or supported her education. These students recalled lack of parental stimulation in terms of play, reading and encouragement to learn in the home environment. Indeed, Zoe [nursing student at Acton] made the following comment, which is a stark contrast with Connie’s experience:

**Zoe:** “I don’t think we ever got a lot of stimulation at home, we were behind the others when we started school. I don’t remember having books to read or anything like that [at home]”.

Matthew, Connie and Kouassi’s parents were able to use their own cultural capital, i.e. educational attainment, to develop that in their children through activities, which supported learning, such as reading and mathematics. Such capitals would subsequently help their children in the formal education system (Papapolydorou, 2016) and set them apart from the other students in this study, whose early life experience was not characterised by support for learning.

According to Manstead (2018) educational attainment is an important cultural symbol of middle-class identity and one that provides access to other symbolic capitals, such as occupational and economic status. In this study, the difference in parental educational attainment and social roles meant some of these students, even at an early age, would be likely to consider such possibilities within their own futures (Manstead, 2018). For Kelly, Kimberley, Georgia, Lily and Zoe, this was an absent feature of their early life experience and although this could be partially explained by familial social and cultural capital and lower parental educational attainment (Bourdieu, 1977), some of this experience was likely compounded by the cumulative impact of neglect and physical harm (Metzler et al., 2017). In Zoe’s previous statement she felt her experience had impacted on being prepared for school and Kimberley referred to ongoing issues with confidence and self-esteem,

which she attributed to her pre-care experience. This was also evident in Georgia's [post-registration nursing student at Langley] recollection of her pre-care experience:

**Georgia:** "Because of what had gone on before, well, I think me, and my sister were both quite shy. I think we were scared of mixing and scared of adults, I suppose".

It is notably difficult to make direct causal links between specific types of experience of abuse and neglect and long-term outcomes for those in this study (Wilkinson and Bowyer, 2017) and even young people who have had similar experiences are known to have differential susceptibility (Woolgar, 2013). However, it is recognised that such experiences can interfere with neurological development (Bick and Nelson, 2017), as well as language and communication skills and emotional and behavioural development (Wilkinson and Bowyer, 2017). Furthermore, the literature notes that adverse outcomes cannot entirely be ameliorated by secondary socialisation and being removed from harm (Wilkinson and Bowyer, 2017). As such, some of the students, whose parents possessed lower social and cultural capital, appeared to enter formal education at a disadvantage, as noted specifically by Zoe, Kimberley and Georgia. Here, the norms of the field are more familiar to middle-class pupils (Bourdieu, 1990) and the middle-class students in this study seemed more prepared for this environment.

Whilst some of the students shared similar social class backgrounds and were exposed to adverse childhood experiences, these were unique to each person. For example, Abiah [Business and Management with Foundation student at Burnell] recalled:

**Abiah:** "Growing up in [his inner-city home town] was tough, you were a young, black male, growing up in a council estate, you're exposed to various forms of violence, like so many different things and it was just a system I just didn't want to be part of",

Abiah experienced some of the adverse childhood experiences known to reduce life chances, including poverty and racism (Metzler et al., 2017). However, what was valuable for Abiah was that, although his parents were



not well educated, they instilled in him, from an early age, social values that would help him in the education system, including providing him with early childhood stability (Bick and Nelson, 2017) and role models who worked hard to succeed:

**Abiah:** “My father became a self-made businessman [...] I’ve always had a dream to emulate him, do more so, than what he achieved”.

In one sense, this reflects the class dichotomy Bourdieu describes where Abiah’s values are not consistent with class habitus (Bourdieu, 1977) and his aspirations extend beyond those of his childhood peers. However, in another sense, his values are essentially grounded in social class. In subscribing to the notion of meritocracy, Abiah had an early perception of being in a social hierarchy (Manstead, 2018) and his father’s achievements, despite ethnic origin and social background, indicated to him that you can succeed if you work hard. Here, as with neo-liberal explanations, they attributed success or failure to the individual, rather than wider structural determinants (West, Fleming and Finnegan, 2013; Stahl, 2015a; 2015b). The individual success of Abiah’s father is positive, but serves to help mask social inequality (Bourdieu, 1990; James, 2015) and is thus reflective of Manstead’s (2018) claim those from lower social classes support and help preserve a social system that ultimately disadvantages them as a collective group. Furthermore, this helps perpetuate the social paradox evident in Bourdieu’s work, whereby those who are least likely to benefit from structural inequality are least likely to question it (Manstead, 2018).

#### **5.4 Secondary habitus**

The benefits of early socialisation in terms of support and encouragement from parents are helpful in the education system (Papapolydorou, 2016), but what was also helpful for Matthew, Connie and Kouassi was that their parents had economic capital, which enabled them to invest in privately funded education for their children. The following comments illustrate their awareness of this:

**Matthew:** “Not being in a financially disadvantaged background – I went to a, a very good school, a private school”.

**Connie:** “My parents paid for me to go to a really good independent school, one that would help me to achieve good marks. I had to sit an entry test to get in, but that was fine [...] There was a focus on studying, but I also enjoyed music and drama there”.

**Kouassi:** “They were very well educated [his parents] and so, I was too at school. I was in a private school in my country and I was doing very well at school”.

These three students attended fee-paying schools with rigorous entry and pupil selection criteria and thus reaped the added benefit of both educational and social capital this provides (Warin, 2016). This is an example of the enduring position of power differentials within the field. The middle-class students in this study were able to enter this elite field and thus their elite status was secured (Costa and Murphy, 2016).

What was further illustrated in this study is the positive impact of the relationships Matthew, Connie and Kouassi had with their peers, as well as teaching staff (Warin, 2016). Kouassi and Connie recalled being advised to work hard at school and strive to go further in their studies. For Connie, she and her friends were all focussed on their studies and aspired to attend Russell Group universities. Whilst Matthew referred to the positive relationship he and his peers had with teaching staff:

**Matthew:** “One time we met a tutor [teacher], met at a coffee shop and I know other tutors [teachers] invited students to their house”.

The positive relationships students develop with peers, serve to reinforce social values and commonly accepted educational goals, as highlighted by Connie and Kouassi, but Matthew’s reference to the relationship with teaching staff is also important. The habitus and capitals of middle-class children help them to successfully negotiate with professionals and other adults, which gives them a sense of entitlement, rather than an acquiescent response to those in authority (Warin, 2016). So, here, these particular

experiences of privately funded school environments exposed them to both educational and social experiences that further developed the capitals needed to successfully navigate the education field and consequently reproduced class privilege (Stahl, 2016).

Matthew, Connie and Kouassi recognised the value of their private education noting they had received high quality schooling, which reinforced their aspirations. Indeed, Matthew referred to his private schooling as “better” than state education, indicating his awareness of differential quality in the field (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). Connie stated that going to an elite university was something she would “naturally do”, alongside her peers and her parents before her. Here, her cultural experiences led her to develop embodied dispositions that were directing her towards certain practices (Bourdieu, 1984).

Matthew and Connie progressed to elite universities of their choice immediately after A Levels, which is consistent with the habitus of their backgrounds (Burnell, 2015). This was not the case for Kouassi. Kouassi’s arrival in the UK and entry into the looked after care system meant he entered state education and although he spoke positively of his foster carers, their educational attainment and social class were much lower than those of his parents. The capitals he had accrued in the Ivory Coast and his prior success in education were of less help in the UK, hampered by his lack of English language skills. This led to his main goal, educationally, being focussed on learning English; a noted priority in UK policy for refugees and asylum seekers (Doyle and O’Toole, 2013).

Kouassi recalled support from social services about making plans on completion of his further education:

**Kouassi:** “Social services had a drop-in service, so every young person in their last year [of FE], ready to go to university or apprenticeship, they come to speak to us”.

Whilst he was supported by his carers and social worker to attend university, the advice given to him focussed on vocational training or attending post-1992 establishments close to his home with carers. Given that many in the

caring profession have completed vocational courses themselves, this is likely to be consistent with their own educational habitus, but also reflects the lower expectations some professionals have for those in care (Jary and Thomas, 1999; Leathwood and Connell, 2003; Bathmaker, 2015).

Entering care was a turning point where Kouassi's trajectory began to follow a different path to Matthew and Connie and that of his initial primary and secondary habitus (Bourdieu, 1990). Kouassi, not having been exposed to UK social culture or education, was unaware of the different value ascribed to elite, as opposed to post-92 HE, described in Chapter Two. Like other asylum seekers, he reported high levels of satisfaction with the care he received and the opportunities he had in the UK (Doyle and O'Toole, 2013). Here, his behaviour is an example of rational actions superseding the habitual and varying in relation to his new context (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). What is important is that Kouassi may have had a different educational trajectory had he not entered the care system, based on his earlier primary and secondary socialisation. Kouassi explained one of the challenges he faced in relation to accessing HE in the UK:

**Kouassi:** "I'm not allowed to apply for student finance. I don't get any bursaries at university or anything, but I get help through social services".

Consistent with earlier discussion about unequal access to HE (Doyle and O'Toole, 2013), like others coming to the UK, Kouassi's asylum seeking status meant his funding was restricted and he was not eligible to apply for student finance to support his university education (Children's Legal Centre, 2017). In accordance with statutory guidance, Kouassi was able to stay in his foster placement and receive LA support until the age of 25 because he was in HE (No Recourse to Public Funds Network, 2018) and he indicated this influenced his decision to attend the closest university to his foster home. For Kouassi, his educational aspirations were compounded by cultural and economic capital that led to unequal access to the field (Bourdieu, 1990), but also by the wider policy landscape discussed in Chapter Two.

For Lily, Abiah, Zoe, Georgia, Kelly and Kimberley, exposure to schooling (secondary habitus) shaped their aspirations differently. In Lily's early life she enjoyed school and felt it had provided her with stability and affirmation of her ability. She described school as "a safety net" and stated that she had been in "all of the top groups". However, moving into care led to frequent changes in placement and school and what she referred to as "rebellion" against the moves imposed on her. She acknowledged this impacted negatively on her behaviour and education and she experienced labelling and lower expectations from teacher's. Here, whilst Lily was demonstrating personal agency shown through rebellion, she was also contributing to her negative experience of her placements and schooling. Such experiences of labelling and lower expectations were echoed by Kimberley [nursing student at Acton]:

**Kimberley:** "My maths teacher, in one of my reports "don't expect anything remarkable from Kimberley" and I passed and got a grade C".

Georgia recalled that schooling was not emphasised enough by the professionals in her life and consequently, for these three students their secondary habitus was characterised by disruption to their home lives and their education and being expected to achieve less. Indeed, Zoe also indicated that doing "OK" was acceptable. It is difficult to determine from this study whether labelling and low expectations were related to their care status or the fact that these students were from socio-economically deprived backgrounds and attending state schools; both are likely to impact on educational attainment and aspirations (Bathmaker, 2015). Indeed, the experiences the students reported are consistent with the symbolic violence of the education system, which only rewards those who conform to the rules of the game and show the cultural and social capitals valued in this field. These include communication, language and social skills, as well as academic ability (Tzanakis, 2011).

For Abiah entering care was also a negative turning point in relation to his education:

**Abiah:** “It had a detrimental effect on me and a terrible effect on my GCSE preparation in year 11 and onwards after that in the early stages of college and stuff”.

Although he ascribed aspects of this to bereavement, he was very clear that his care experience was detrimental and resulted in him failing to achieve the expected A\* GCSE results he had been working towards. He was accommodated by the local authority initially in a hostel, alongside youth offenders and felt that his “teenage years were sacrificed” and he was “forced to become an adult”. He articulated very clearly that had he not entered care, he felt this would not have happened.

What was different for Kelly was that she considered going into care as being a positive turning point.

**Kelly:** “It’s the best thing that ever happened. I wouldn’t have got my GCSEs [had she not entered care]”.

Here, she was provided with a secure foster home and this led to changes in her educational attainment. She described her foster carers as well-educated professionals and their own children were at university. So, for Kelly, this provided an opportunity for her secondary habitus to embrace the values of her middle-class care environment and aspire to succeed in the education system and go to university (Bathmaker, 2015; Costa and Murphy, 2016).

### **5:5 Aspirations: Sustained through experience**

It was evident that life experiences influenced the participants' aspirations and helped to sustain their goals of going to university. This theme is connected to the development of secondary habitus, but importantly work on or of the self, whereby individuals actively endeavour to accrue capitals that will help them achieve their aspirations (Reay, 2004). Here, this also links to the concept of a possible self, in that the students imagined the possibility of going to university (Markus and Nurius, 1986). Indeed, whilst she did not pass her A Levels, Kelly imagined a future at university and applied for a Diploma in Nursing at a post-92 university. Kelly indicated she choose

nursing because she did not have the entry criteria for other academic courses. For Kelly, this initial experience of university proved unsuccessful and she was asked to leave the course, being unable to meet the academic requirements. This reflects the findings in Harrison's (2017b) study where academic failure is one of the most common reasons for attrition in care leavers at university. It was apparent that the legacy of her care experience meant she could not engage with the subjects she was being assessed on. These subjects included assignments, which she brought to her interview, that focussed on the family and on identity. When showing me these documents she made the following statement:

**Kelly:** "I've put a line there about child abuse and then I've just missed that bit and haven't done any more on that [...] This one's about self-concept. So again, that's going to be an issue because of my development of self-concept at the time".

Kelly felt that she did not fit in with her peers and had not received tutorial support or support for her dyslexia. What is important is that she did not request or seek support and nor was any offered. Kelly's behaviour was consistent with her primary habitus, where she had asked professionals for help when she disclosed the sexual abuse she was experiencing and ultimately "nothing was done". Therefore, her habitus at the time was not aligned to seeking help or expecting to receive it. Whilst she had the academic capitals that enabled her to legitimately enter the field, Kelly was unable to develop the skills or strategies that would support her success, not having been exposed to the workings of the field that would allow her to play the game (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992).

It was interesting that Kelly focused on her deficits and inability to engage with the requirements of her programme, rather than the absence of support from the university. Bourdieu (1990) explains this self-elimination from the field as the result of a shift in aspirations, often unconsciously and without real assessment of the individuals actual chance of success. Here, Kelly positioned herself as a neo-liberal subject and seemed unaware of the structural inequality of the field (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992; Campbell

and McKendrick, 2017). After leaving university Kelly described feeling very much alone, not having foster care or family to support her. This meant she moved in with her boyfriend and entered employment, undertaking a series of jobs that did not provide her with long term satisfaction.

Zoe immediately went on to university after leaving college, commencing nurse training in a post-92 university close to her foster home. However, Abiah, Lily, Kimberley and Georgia left school or college with some or no (Georgia) qualifications and entered the field of employment. It was clear that their aspirations to attend university or achieve a better future did not disappear and Abiah referred to his experience as having “delayed” rather than prevented him. In their respective jobs Kimberley, Lily, Georgia and Abiah did not feel like “fish in water” and struggled to adjust to the future associated with their capitals at that time (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p. 127). Indeed, Lily recalled:

**Lily:** “I was going to work on the bus crying my eyes out [...] I don’t want to be a sales assistant for the rest of my life”.

Similar points were made by Georgia, Kimberley and Abiah, who found their jobs unfulfilling, but at the time, due to financial commitments and lack of relevant qualifications, they did not have either the educational or economic capital to enter HE.

Unlike Matthew, Connie and Kouassi, whose aspirations for university were essentially a future that was present since childhood (Bourdieu, 1984), key turning points in the lives of Kimberley, Kelly, Georgia, Lily and Abiah prompted them to revisit their aspirations of going to university. Kimberley, a new mother, was made redundant and this prompted her to think about the future. At this time, she felt strongly that she wanted to be a role model to her children. Kelly shared a similar experience, but also felt that she needed to return to university to complete her nursing course and “not let it be the thing that beat me”. Kelly, Kimberley, Lily and Zoe saw university as a way of shaping a new identity, where they could create a different life from their childhood and reject some of the stereotypes imposed upon them through



contact with social services and teachers who had not expected or encouraged them to achieve.

**Kimberley:** “Because of my background it’s made us [me] want to do well and prove I’m not just a statistic, people from care don’t always go down the wrong path. [...] There’s a lot of negatives [about children in care], they don’t go to university, they don’t work, they’re just on the dole [...] I think I’ve always had that strong urge inside to want a better life”.

**Lily:** “I think what drove me on is they [professionals] always say that people who are in care don’t necessarily do well [academically]”.

For Georgia, she had grown up children and having worked as a nurse for many years, wanted to do something for herself. She successfully completed a degree level continuing professional development module, as part of her nursing role, and this gave her the confidence to apply to complete a degree level nursing programme.

**Georgia:** “I can do this, I’m a good nurse and I can actually study and do a degree and make up for that time where I left school with no qualifications and not much of a future really”.

Here, realising they did not fit in and were not satisfied with working life, Lily, Kimberley, Kelly, Georgia and Abiah embarked on FE courses that would give them the legitimate qualifications they needed to enter HE (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). For these students, their aspirations were not solely a product of primary or secondary habitus, but more akin to what Reay (2004) described as work on or of the self. These students familiarised themselves with the capitals required to enter HE and worked towards achieving them (Bourdieu, 2000), thus transforming their cultural capital and their habitus (West, Fleming and Finnegan, 2013). Furthermore, they show evidence of the features of Markus and Nurius’ (1986) concept of possible selves, whereby there are features of what the students might become, would like to become and are also afraid of becoming.

For Zoe, Kelly, Kimberley, Lily and Georgia, whilst they aspired to attend university, they were very focused on caring, vocational programmes of study, in post-92 universities, close to their homes. This is partly explained by their experience of the care system and exposure to caring professionals including social workers and nursing staff and a desire to help others (Cotton, Nash and Kneale, 2014). Indeed, Kimberley stated:

**Kimberley:** “I think it’s [nursing] because I’ve got experience linked to my mam, because she’s a heavy alcohol user. I felt like I could draw on some of my life experience”.

What was also interesting is that the care leavers in this study considered these roles as being able to provide them with long term job security:

**Zoe:** “I knew nursing would allow me to be financially secure and independent, a job for life really and that’s what’s important, being secure”.

Their aspirations were consistent with their primary and secondary habitus where their family life and compulsory education had not encouraged them to consider elite university education and this did not feature within any of their narratives. For these students, their aspirations were simply to get to university and here, they had internalised the dominant discourse of the benefits of a university education (Bathmaker, 2015; 2016). None of the students made the distinction between different types of university or different types of course and their focus was on aspirations to join their identified profession. This reflects key differences in the choices of students who have social, cultural and economic capital and those who do not. For these students, knowledge for its own sake was not a possibility (Kloot, 2016) and for them knowledge was very much about securing their future financially, or what Maton (2005) referred to as social advancement.

Several of the nursing students also commented that their aspirations had been shaped by availability of funding. All the nursing students in this study had commenced their university programmes prior to the introduction of fees for pre-registration nursing, which meant they did not pay any fees, and all were in receipt of an NHS bursary to support their studies. Several of the

nursing students, Kelly, Kimberley and Zoe stated that had this not been the case, they would not have been able to contemplate going to university. Lily felt the introduction of fees would be particularly harmful for care leavers:

**Lily:** “Things like making it £9000 a year [at the time] is ridiculous, losing the bursary. It’s going to be impossible for people in care to go. I would not have been able to do this course if it was not for the NHS bursary”.

Lily’s statement is a powerful reminder of the influence funding can have in relation to aspirations for university. For students, like Lily, economic capital could be a deciding factor in relation to whether she aspired to enter HE. This links to the recent decline in numbers for nurse education mentioned earlier (UCAS, 2018a), who are more likely to be from widening participation backgrounds. Lily indicated she had aspired to “do medicine”, but this aspiration was later modified to nursing. Here, this is reflective of Bourdieu’s consideration of determinism. Lily’s actions are being determined by her habitus; her prior experience allows her to make decisions based on “calculation of chance and profits” (Bourdieu, 2000, p.138) and here, nursing and the bursary she would receive seemed like the best option, combined with her existing educational profile.

What is also apparent is that all the nursing students in this study aspired to attend universities close to home, which is consistent with the nature of widening participation students generally (Donnelly and Gamsu, 2018). This class-based immobility, referred to as “the stickiness of place” is often thought to result from localised social, material and imagined opportunities (Allen and Hollingworth, 2013, p. 514), but in this study many students explained this differently. As mentioned earlier, for Kouassi, only a limited range of options were considered possible because of his financial status (Reay, 2004; 2015) and Kelly, Kimberley, Lily and Georgia had family commitments, which meant they could not move out of area.

**Georgia:** “We were interviewed by the local trust, who sponsor us to do the course. So, because of that, this university, is really the only

one locally. I suppose you could apply to other areas, but because of where I live and my family, I do need to stay where I am”.

This contrasted with Matthew and Connie who were able to focus purely on the status of the institution and courses of study, which interested them, and they were good at (Murphy and Costa, 2016). These two students were also younger and had no family commitments. Furthermore, both Matthew and Connie mentioned that they were financially secure and so had both the cultural and economic capital to support their respective choices, regardless of location.

What stood out in Abiah’s explanation is that he was very focussed on both going to university, but also ensuring that this was an elite university.

**Abiah:** “For me personally, obviously because of all my struggles and stuff, I wanted to go some university that counted for me”.

Abiah’s entry into the workplace meant he socialised with colleagues from a range of social backgrounds. Here, he observed that those who were successful [he measured this by income and status in the organisation] had degrees and some had attended Russell Group universities; these are the cultural symbols, which fuelled his aspirations (Manstead, 2018). His entry into care also had a profound impact on his aspirations. He felt that he had no one to rely on and he had had to support himself emotionally and financially. Abiah knew he would leave university with a lot of debt and so was very focussed on reaping profits from his investment. For him, aspiring to go to university involved “calculation of chance and profits” (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 138) and he invested time and effort in exploring routes into elite universities to achieve his aspiration. Abiah’s habitus was not static and here, he demonstrated the ability to evolve over time and use his wider social experience to shape his future aspirations (Pimlott-Wilson, 2011).

Although Matthew and Connie’s entry into care did not alter their aspirations to attend elite universities, it did reinforce them. Matthew explained that losing his parents increased his focus on education and his aspirations were linked to:

**Matthew:** “some desire to make sure I succeed, make sure I honour them, if you like”.

Connie made a similar statement and worked hard to respect her mother’s aspirations for her to do well. For these two students, entering care did not challenge their habitus, but the legacy of their bereavement served to reinforce their desire to fulfil their family habitus and the social and cultural expectations they had embodied (Webb et al., 2017).

## **5:6 Summary of the chapter**

In this chapter I have considered the first research question: How do care leavers’ explain their journeys into university? What the students in this study had in common was the enduring aspiration of going to university and this was a key feature of the possible selves they imagined (Markus and Nurius, 1986). The massification of higher education has produced a dominant cultural trend towards going to university and in this study the students strongly believed that a university education would be valuable for their futures and long-term aspirations (Bathmaker, 2015). However, through consideration of the themes presented in this chapter, a detailed picture emerged of the varied influences that shaped aspirations for university.

Primary habitus was important in helping students aspire to succeed in education. For two students, this was very much linked to their middle-class family backgrounds and social circles and entering care did not disturb this habitus, but instead, alongside experience of elite schooling, served to reinforce these ambitions. One student in this study, Abiah, who held the same aspirations for an elite university education, was from a working-class background, where success in the elite education system was not the norm. Here, the development of his secondary habitus and work on the self was key in shaping his goals (Pimlott-Wilson, 2011), as well as the impact of entering local authority care and losing his family support network.

It was evident that secondary habitus could serve to reinforce or instigate aspirations to attend university and for some of the students, who had

developed lower social and cultural capital through primary habitus, attending schools and entering foster care was a turning point in their educational trajectory. This did vary between the students and as described, some, for example, Lily, who had shown early promise at school, found that entering care disrupted her education.

For some of the students in state education they articulated very clearly that they had been subject to lower expectations from professionals and that teachers had based some of this on stereotypes about children in care. This is an area where educational providers and LA's could do more to support those in care. Indeed, in recent DfE (2018f) guidance, there are recommendations for LA's to work more closely with universities and other organisations supporting care leavers to raise aspirations for HE. Whilst this is positive and helps to improve knowledge about access and the opportunities going to university presents (DfE, 2018f), the participation in such work is voluntary and ad-hoc, reflective of the general approaches taken nationally to widening participation. What is important is that the students in this study showed personal agency in relation to aspiring to defy these stereotypes, as well as the stigma associated with their pre-care backgrounds. The overarching dominant cultural power of the education system and the opportunities for social mobility helped these students sustain their ambitions, but they were shaped by a varied combination of factors. These included the impact of financial, geographic and family concerns, as well as, for some, the legacy of their childhoods and wanting to either honour their parents or create a different identity to that of their childhood.

The answer to this research question is not straightforward and the explanations given by the students show a range of sources of aspiration. Essentially, these were based in the dominant cultural trend of going to university, but developed further through primary and secondary habitus and wider social experience, as well as the personal agency of the students in accruing the necessary forms of capital to enter the field.

This research question and the discussion presented in this chapter provides the foundation for the subsequent chapter, which will focus on the experience of these nine students at university.

## **Chapter Six: University and beyond: The present and the future**

### **6:1 Introduction to the chapter**

This chapter focuses on answering the second research question: How do care leavers' explain their experiences in the university setting? The chapter builds on the discussion presented in the previous section, which focused on the students' aspirations for going to university. These aspirations influenced the institutions attended and the courses the students were studying. The first part of the chapter considers students accounts of fitting in to the university field. Here, this will include exploration of individual attributes as well as features of the university. The second section will consider experiences of standing out in the university field. Again, this will include personal and institutional attributes, focusing on academic, economic and social capital. The final section considers how the university experience influences what students would like to become; their imagined possible self (Markus and Nurius, 1986).

### **6:2 Fitting in to the university field (fish in water)**

For the students in this study, it was evident that their social transition to university was influenced by institutional habitus. With the exception of Matthew, Kouassi and Abiah, the students in this study selected universities that were aligned with their prior social and cultural backgrounds.

Consequently, it was not surprising that Georgia, Kelly, Kimberley, Zoe and Lily were at post-92 universities and Connie at Burnell, an elite Russell Group institution. For these students making the transition to university and fitting in with the culture and values of the organisation was helped by being among students they could relate to (Reay, Crozier and Clayton, 2010; Tarabini, Curran and Fontdevila, 2017) and this was evident in some of the comments they made. For example, Zoe felt she was "like all of the others" and Georgia made the following point:

**Georgia:** "So, we are all qualified nurses with our own homes, families etc [...] it's not really like being a traditional student. I think in



that sense, I'm just the same as everyone else is here, so we all just muddle along together and have similar issues and, yes, I think I just fit in with everyone here really”.

So, here there was a social element to feeling like a fish in water. This was reinforced by their journey into university, whereby Kelly and Georgia had already been exposed to the culture of nurse education through previous experience of studying and/or working in that field and Kimberley and Zoe's FE experience was geared towards preparation for vocational HE provision. Indeed, she indicated:

**Zoe:** “I suppose my course kind of linked to nursing and maybe, looking back, it did prepare us to go into those sort of university courses, you know in health or social work, the placements we had were all in those areas, so that gave us an idea of what to expect [...] They were the courses most of us applied for after college and the ones our tutors recommended”.

Connie reported to have settled well into Burnell University and indicated that her school had actively encouraged her and her peers to apply to elite universities and had helped prepare them for what to expect, which was useful once they were there.

**Connie:** “Because of school, I kind of knew what to expect. My teacher had been to Burnell and so had both of my parents, so I already knew a lot about the university and the way the Burnell works”.

Here both Connie and Zoe's statements illustrate that their pre-university education had been helpful in giving them insight into the nature of their chosen universities, but also, particularly in Zoe's case, her studies had combined academic and placement experience in the field of health and social care, which reflected the nature of her nursing degree. It was evident that tutors were preparing students for, as well as recommending certain educational trajectories. In one sense this is consistent with Bourdieu's notion of social reproduction, whereby education operates as the mechanism by which the prevailing class system is maintained (Harman, 2017) and

students are encouraged to continue on educational trajectories consistent with their backgrounds (Stahl, 2015a). So, for Georgia, Zoe, Kelly and Kimberley, arguably, the symbolic violence of the education system is evident, in that these students are unknowingly contributing to their own domination, by subscribing to these trajectories and not exploring other opportunities (James, 2015), including accessing elite universities. However, what must also be considered is that these students were already subscribed to the value of university education and invested in gaining the necessary entry criteria to access their chosen universities and courses. So, here, rather than being passive agents, they were actually actively engaged in shaping their futures. Therefore, helping them to prepare and encouraging these aspirations meant they were better equipped to settle in. Consequently, there were fewer tensions between their primary habitus and their respective university fields and there was no evidence of the cleft habitus Stahl (2015a) refers to.

Drawing on Bourdieu's theory, Côté (1996, p. 425; 2001) made the link between cultural capital and identity capital and here Connie, Kimberley, Georgia, Kelly and Zoe possessed both in their respective universities. Part of Connie's experience at university was linked to intergenerational continuity, following in the footsteps of her parents (Côté, 1996). Here she had a strong cultural and historical sense of identity in the field, which helped her fit in (Burnell, 2015). Unlike Connie, Kimberley, Georgia, Kelly and Zoe did not have this, but what they did have in common with her was that their student identity was reinforced by membership of their peer group and this was very clear in Georgia's comment. The formation of peer relationships not only helps students to settle in (Keane, 2010), but also to develop cultural capital (Côté, 1996). This in turn facilitates the successful transition to university through shared experience and this was a notable feature of Georgia's experience where she referred to similar home circumstances and university "issues" as her peers. Here, Georgia felt that she fitted in, rather than feeling like she stood out (Tarabini, Curran and Fontdevila, 2017). This also links to institutional habitus, where there are shared cultural values and prior experience (Reay, David and Ball, 2001).

As with Connie, Georgia, Kelly, Kimberley and Zoe, Kouassi had also been given advice from professionals in relation to HE:

**Kouassi:** “A teacher inspired me at college. I come to open days, university open days and so I felt, yes, I will go to university”.

What was different in relation to Kouassi’s experience is that the advice he received and his decision to attend Langley, a post-92 university, was not consistent with his primary and secondary habitus. However, this can be explained by the educational habitus of those around him (Bathmaker, 2015), and the unequal opportunities faced by student asylum seekers in the UK (Doyle and O’Toole, 2013). Although his prior social and cultural experience would have prepared him for attending an elite, rather than a post-92 university, he did not struggle to fit in at Langley. However, as already mentioned, Kouassi was not aware of the divided and elitist HE system in the UK and so had limited frame of reference by which to compare his current university experience. He indicated that he was happy at university:

**Kouassi:** “I get on with everyone, I have lots of different friends and I go out [...] yes, I’m happy at the university and they treat us equally”.

Here, Kouassi’s use of the term “different” is important. He has observed the diverse student population, which characterises post-92 universities; they are known to host a higher proportion of both non-traditional and non-white students than their traditional counterparts (Shepherd, 2017). Consequently, it is usual for students to bring different social, cultural and learner identities to the institution and therefore, difference is not something that would inhibit success or make individual students stand out (Burnell, 2017), but instead is a feature of their provision and institutional habitus (Reay, Crozier and Clayton, 2010). The impact of this for Kouassi, was that he felt he was treated “equally”, and this was a positive feature of his experience. Further to this, Kouassi’s move to the UK and entry into care, meant he had previous experience of coping with transitions and had developed a habitus that was able to adapt to new situations and add such experiences to his living memory pad (Bourdieu, 1990; Grenfell and James, 1998). Here, having already settled into a new country and new foster family, he was able to

apply these skills to the university field and, as he stated above, get on with others and establish new social relationships. Therefore, like Connie, Kimberley, Georgia, Kelly and Zoe, there was no evidence of a cleft habitus for Kouassi (Stahl, 2015a).

When examining student experience through Bourdieu's concept of field, whereby the university in its broadest sense is the field, it is important to recognise that Bourdieu was reluctant to provide a closed or definite definition (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992) and instead described the borders of fields as porous (Ignatow and Robinson, 2017). In this study, whilst the students had all entered the field, what was evident is that universities are not homogenous and therefore reflect this notion of being porous (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). Also, because of this, the institutional habitus Reay, Crozier and Clayton (2010) refer to, differs between and within institutions and in this sense reflects Bourdieu's broad interpretation, but also Bathmaker's (2015) use of the terms sub-fields or a hybrid field.

Abiah informed me that his BSc (Hons) with Foundation was delivered on a specific campus for those undertaking degrees with a foundation year. For Abiah it was positive that he was benefiting from widening participation policy and accessing elite education, and this was something he clearly articulated when he said:

**Abiah:** "So, when I saw that, you know, after being out from education that you can do the foundation, I cried literally cause [...] I'd looked at and wanted to go to Burnell so badly and then realising that I actually could go".

However, the fact that he and his peers were both tutored and accommodated on a site that he described as being about 20 miles from the main campus, is reflective of criticisms that widening participation can be tokenistic and bolted on to core work, rather than an integrated feature of provision (Stevenson, Clegg and Lefever, 2010). Furthermore, this approach helps to preserve the cultural exclusivity of traditional university courses, which remain on the main campus (Hoare and Johnston, 2011) and the

overall status quo of the elite features of the institution and its habitus (McLellan, Pettigrew and Sperlinger, 2016).

This was also apparent in the post-92 institutions, where the vocational courses were separated geographically from other non-vocational provision and for Lily, Kimberley, Kelly and Zoe, their academic provision was several miles from the main university campus. What is important here, is the impact on experience, as explained by Kelly and Georgia:

**Kelly:** “It’s not attached to the university [...] you don’t feel part of the university”.

**Georgia:** “We don’t really mix with the wider campus, in the School of Health, it’s just nursing, social work, physio’s and so everyone is doing a professional course. So maybe that makes it different too [...] and the students are more mixed, lots of mature students and not just 18-year-olds”.

Separation of campuses is problematic in that it can create geographic as well as status related divisions where satellite campuses may be considered inferior (de Beer, Smith and Jansen, 2009). Whilst this reflects earlier discussion highlighting divisions in the status of both universities and the courses they deliver (Evans et al., 2017) it may be that the separation experienced by students in this study was not a planned feature of provision (Wong, 2018), but was simply due to the historical development and expansion of the institutions. Indeed, even within the same campus, provision is differentiated between academic departments and specific programmes (Prospects, 2018) and so arguably, this is an inherent feature of many universities. The impact of the geography of campuses is not widely considered in the literature, but the expansion of provision across cities and different sites may, at some point impact, on the coherence of the university. This was mentioned in a report by Temple et al. (2014) for the Higher Education Academy. Here, it was found that bolstering provision on a main campus enabled the investment in centralised resources, but also produced a more unified campus, where students felt a sense of belonging; both features were thought to enhance student experience (Temple et al., 2014).

What the report does not consider, is that the size of the campus may then become problematic. Indeed, this is recognised in *The Complete University Guide* (2018) where large universities can be intimidating and impersonal for some students; here the value of separate, smaller campuses is apparent. It is difficult for universities to please all students, but what may be required is more explanation about how and why the geography of the campus has developed. Furthermore, looking at other strategies such as improving transport links between campuses and facilities could help (Temple et al., 2014).

Whilst Kelly's comment indicated she didn't feel "part of the university" this did not prevent her from fitting in and she reported having good relationships with her peers and academic staff and a different experience to her first entry into the university field:

**Kelly:** "It's nice to come back and see that uni has changed [...] Here I feel like we walk around and we bump into you [academic staff] and we can have a chat".

Georgia's comment also indicates a sense of cohesion where she mentioned the common vocational connections with her peers, as well as the diversity of the student body in her campus, producing a both a vocational and institutional habitus (Reay, Crozier and Clayton, 2010). This echoes Kouassi's earlier comment about inclusivity and reinforces the argument for smaller campuses (*The Complete University Guide*, 2018). In this study, with the exception of Matthew and Lily, all of the students indicated they fitted in with their peers at university. Consequently, seven of the students experiences of their respective university settings meant that they were not fish out of water and nor was their habitus challenged (Bourdieu, 1990; Burnell, 2017).

In one sense these students are defying assumptions that working-class students are fish out of water in educational contexts (Leathwood and O'Connell, 2013), and particularly elite establishments that are not aligned with their habitus (Bourdieu, 1990). However, for these students, they were able to fit in because their habitus was aligned with that of the institutions

they were exposed to and they were able to understand the logic or rules and knowledge of those particular fields (Ignatow and Robinson, 2017). Furthermore, several students indicated the background of their tutors helped them to fit and this was evident when Zoe said:

**Zoe:** “The tutors are all nurses too, so that helps, us all being in the same profession. They know what it’s like and can relate to what we are going through and think of ways to help us”.

This reflects the vocational habitus of tutors mentioned in theme one and further supports the concept of an institutional habitus and how this helped some students successfully make the transition to university and understand the rules of the field (Reay, Crozier and Clayton, 2010).

### **6:3 Standing out in the university field (fish out of water)**

What stood out in this study is that Matthew and Lily were struggling to fit in with the habitus of their respective institutions, despite them being aligned with their prior social and cultural experience. For Matthew, this was largely explained by a mismatch between his prior educational experience and that in the university setting:

**Matthew:** “University has been different, more difficult [...] more work, less time with a tutor or teacher to kind of guide you individually and answer questions and stuff and resolve problems [physics problems] a bit quicker”.

Like Connie, his prior social and cultural background had helped him aspire to attend an elite university and supported the achievement of the academic qualifications to achieve this goal (Murphy and Costa, 2016), but what it had not prepared Matthew for was the independent study required. This was also a feature of Lily’s struggles and whilst she had previously described her natural academic ability, this was not enough to succeed in the university setting.

Both Lily and Matthew felt the transition to university was impacting negatively on their student identities and Matthew referred to himself as feeling “entirely below average”, where previously he had always been “one of the best” students academically. For Lily, her relaxed attitude to her studies meant she had poor attendance and completed coursework “the night before”. These struggles were partly explained by the institutional habitus of the institutions they were attending, but also partly explained by their individual attributes. For Matthew the independent study, noted to be a feature of many universities (Murtagh, 2012) was not characteristic of his previous educational experience and he felt impacted by this, evident when he re-iterated his earlier point:

**Matthew:** “It’s just that university has been different, more difficult, having to put more time in and struggling slightly with the changes [...] Just more work, less time with a tutor or teacher to kind of guide you individually and answer questions and stuff and resolve problems [relating to physics coursework] a bit quicker”.

Here, whilst his school education had been helpful in terms of educational attainment, it had also created reliance on high levels of academic guidance and support to achieve this and he clearly articulated that he found the absence of this difficult to adapt to.

In a similar way, Lily was also struggling to adapt to making the transition from a controlled environment [a feature of her compulsory education] to one where she was responsible for her attendance and academic needs (Murtagh, 2012). Lily’s compulsory education was characterised by placement and school moves and poor attendance, but this had been heavily monitored by the professionals involved in her care. At university Lily did not have such social support mechanisms and without “a kick up the bum” she was unable to govern her own attendance, resulting in features of her past resurfacing in her behaviour at university (Bourdieu, 2000). Lily indicated this was inconsistent with the rules of her university programme, which required a minimum attendance and as such, harmed her position in the field, leading to



discussions about deferring her first-year assessments and back-grouping to join the following programme cohort:

**Lily:** “The reason I was going to defer my year was ‘cause I’ve missed so much [academically] already [...] and missing so much in first year, people have formed their groups, their friendship groups”.

Here, Lily’s comments reflect a combination of personal, academic and social challenges, but are also linked to the concept of institutional habitus where fitting in relies on the individual embodying the specific rules, social and cultural values of that particular field (Reay, Crozier and Clayton, 2010). The tensions both Matthew and Lily experienced were different, but resulted in the cleft habitus described by Stahl (2015a) where there was a mismatch between the new field and their primary habitus. This was not evident in the experiences of the other students, as described in the previous section, as they had been prepared by their prior social, cultural and educational experience, to successfully fit in with the habitus’ of their respective institutions. Therefore, ability to fit in is to some extent related to preparation for, perception of and expectations of the university field; these differed and so too did the students’ experiences.

Stahl (2015a; 2015b) indicates that the cleft habitus leads the individual to question their self-perception and this was evident in Matthew’s revision of his learner status. Although both students were struggling academically, they retained strong connections to their previous learner identities characterised by success at school. For Matthew this prompted him to focus on “working harder” to accrue the capital to achieve this (Reay, Crozier and Clayton, 2010) and for Lily she felt she had to lie about her marks:

**Lily:** “I’ll hear them [peers] saying their marks and stuff for their assignment and saying – “what did you get?” I’m like, yeah I got 80%, like lying, I’ve only got like 50%”.

This was connected to defying the stereotypes imposed on her at school, as well as not wanting to stand out from her peers (Reay, David and Ball, 2001). Lily’s cleft habitus was compounded by the nature of her nursing programme, which involved 50% academic assessment and 50% practice-based clinical

nursing assessment and here, practice-based success and academic struggle created further tension for her.

**Lily:** “I enjoy it so much more than the academic side. I feel like I learn a lot more with hands on [...] they [university lecturers] don’t necessarily have the different styles of teaching that I learn by, that I need, like the hands on”.

As with Matthew, the challenges she faced were complex and for both, compounded by their learning needs, which will be considered in the following section, as well as the circumstances imposed by entry to and experience of the looked after care system. Both students recognised they would need to engage in work on the self in order to align with the institutional habitus’ they wanted to be part of (Reay, 2004).

#### **6:4 Forms of capital and their utility in the university field**

This section will explore the themes academic, economic and social capital and how these linked to the students’ experiences in the university field.

##### **6:4:1 Academic capital and formal university support**

Several students in this study reported having special educational needs. Matthew recalled being diagnosed with Asperger’s Syndrome (AS) in childhood and Kelly and Lily have dyslexia. Kelly and Lily indicated their dyslexia had been formally assessed and recognised by their university (Acton, a post-92 university), whereas Matthew had not disclosed his AS to his university (Burnell, Russell Group). As noted previously around 27% of those in care are reported to have a special educational need (Sebba et al., 2015) and therefore, this may mean that those care leavers in university are more likely to require specific learning support. However, this is not solely attributable to having been in care and about 6% of the general university population have a specific learning difficulty, with the numbers presenting having increased by around one third since 2008/9 (Rodger et al., 2015).

Whilst the presence of a special educational need can make university life more challenging (Rodger et al., 2015) it is positive that there has been increased emphasis and funding for universities to provide specific support (HEFCE, 2018). However, it must be conceded that this does not mean all students who are eligible will access the support on offer, and this was evident in Matthew's case.

Kelly and Lily demonstrated self-awareness and analytical reasoning skills to assess their situation and identify their need for support; skills noted to help negotiate success in the field (Edgerton and Roberts, 2014). Both had individual support plans and were receiving specific help, including tutorial support and additional time to work on summative assessments. As discussed in the previous section, Lily was struggling to engage with the academic element of her studies, but she attributed this to her personal life rather than her dyslexia. Indeed, she indicated that for some of her assignments, when she committed to working on them, she was able to achieve "a mark of 80%". Similarly, Kelly was achieving very high marks, however, what was interesting was she sometimes felt guilty about this and was concerned about discrimination from one of her peers:

**Kelly:** "I think she [one of her peers] might feel why she is not getting any help, when my marks are good, and I am getting help. Maybe it should go to everybody. The stuff they tell you is basic stuff".

Here, this links back to her previous experience of discrimination and stereotyping and like many care leavers, not wanting to stand out (Mayall et al., 2015). Having failed her first attempt at nurse training, she indicated:

**Kelly:** "Maybe it was because I failed at it [nursing] and I did not want it to be thing that beat me, 'cause I don't like failing at anything. I'm already planning my graduation".

Accessing learning support reflects Reay's (2004) concept of work on the self and Côté's (2001) theory of identity capital (both extensions of Bourdieu's original work), whereby Kelly was making strategic decisions about using available opportunities and investing time and effort to improve her academic skills. Here, she recognised that specific support would

increase her academic capital and consequently, her position in the field (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). Her determination to succeed is underlined by her plans to celebrate her future graduation and this shows that Kelly has transformed her academic habitus, adapting well to the rules of her university field (Grenfell and James, 1998; Grenfell, 2007). Furthermore, according to Sammons, Toth and Sylva (2016), the ability to visualise success increases the chances of attaining personal goals.

Unlike Kelly and Lily, Matthew had not disclosed his AS to his university (Burnell, a Russell Group university). As noted in the previous section, he struggled to make the transition to university and Matthew felt this was partially attributed to AS where communication, social skills and changes to routine are problematic (Hughes et al, 2010) and he reported being “uncomfortable in social situations”. Whilst AS is often thought to primarily affect communication and the social aspects of university, Hughes et al. (2010) note, it is also likely to impact on understanding of, for example, exam or essay questions. It is this element of Matthew’s AS, which would also explain his poor academic success and is where assessment and support would help (Hughes et, 2010).

Entering care meant Matthew had less social capital in the form of parents or significant others to support him in recognising his learning needs and accessing support, as had happened during his school education (Papapolydorou, 2016). Consequently, this impacted on his position in the university field (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). This complex interplay of challenges was partially attributed to his entry into care and Matthew conceded it had “bred a mentality of being on my own” and being self-reliant and this, along with his AS, resulted in him being less likely to seek help. As with Kelly’s initial experience at university, Matthew had no prior experience of seeking help or the workings of the university field and the resources available that would allow him to accrue the capitals to play the game and “fit in” more effectively (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992).

Paradoxically, whilst Matthew wanted more tutorial support, he made it clear that this would purely be on academic grounds and although he recalled

having been offered specific support due to his care leaver status, he had rejected this:

**Matthew:** “It would have just been some email I had read and then deleted [...] If someone contacted me individually then I would say no, thank you”.

This dismissal of care leaver support links to the personal beliefs he held about both his own care leaver status and that experienced by others, evident when he said:

**Matthew:** “I think there’s a big difference between someone who has entered care due to bereavement or somebody who has neglect or abusive parents or something like that [...] it did not feel like foster care, like an episode of Tracy Beaker<sup>4</sup> [...] I suppose it’s probably better than most foster care”.

Here, Matthew is making a judgement that his experience was both “different” and “better” than his perception of that of other care leavers. This reflects the wider social stigma attached to being labelled a looked after child and subsequently a care leaver (Bluff, King and McMahon, 2015; Mannay et al., 2017). In Matthew’s construction of his university self, he foregrounds his academic identity and at the same time rejects the aspect of identity linked to his care leaver status. This reflects the value laden nature of identity and through his prior social and cultural experience, Matthew is making a choice about which aspects of his identity he reveals (Martin et al., 2014). Because he did not want to define himself as being the same as other care leavers, he also felt that care leaver support would apply to others and not to him. Furthermore, because he had no experience of seeking help outside of the family, or for reasons other than purely academic grounds, seeking and accepting care leaver support was not consistent with his cultural habitus (Bourdieu, 1990) and was something he was opposed to.

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<sup>4</sup> Tracy Beaker is a fictional character in the book *The Story of Tracy Beaker* written by Jacqueline Wilson. The character has been the focus of several TV series, as well as stage plays. The character Tracy Beaker is in looked after care and is accommodated in a residential care home referred to as “The Dumping Ground”.

Although, Kelly and Lily were accepting support, this was for dyslexia and not because of their care leaver status. Whereas AS is less common in HE, dyslexia is known to be the most common specific learning disability and as such, is widely acknowledged and supported in the university field (British Dyslexia Association, 2018), which arguably makes seeking and accessing support easier and less associated with stigma than the care-leaver status. However, what was also evident in the narratives of both Kelly and Lily was a history of receiving input from a range of professionals, reflected in Lily's reference to having "loads of professionals around". Therefore, unlike Matthew, accepting professional support was a feature of their personal biographies and, as noted in the literature review, is linked to experience of local authority input (Unrau, Font and Rawls, 2012).

All except Matthew and Connie had experienced local authority care and the stigma associated with this was a common feature of their experience and one highlighted in the literature review. Indeed, Kouassi recalled an experience at Langley University:

**Kouassi:** "I met a person who wanted to go out with me, but she did not know I was in care. I told her, you need to know me, I'm in care [...] We don't go out together any more [...] I think that [care] could be the reason, because her mum and dad, she thinks they will worry. They will think it's bad. So, we need to do something about care leavers. We need to do something about it".

Zoe, Kelly, Lily, Kimberley, Georgia and Abiah reported similar experiences of stigma and, as mentioned in theme one, had experienced stigma from a range of professionals and peers. Whilst some of these examples referred to their school education, the impact was evident during their time at university, where defying stereotypes partly explained their desire to complete their studies. Zoe indicated she was determined to "prove them wrong" and a similar point was made by Lily:

**Lily:** "Oh, you're not going to go anywhere. You're just going to end up in prison. A teacher saying that. So, I'm just kind of like, if I could just see him now, I'd like to give him the finger".

The stigma associated with care experience did not present a barrier to them accessing help and what was evident is that seeking help, should they need to, was part of tackling the prejudice they had encountered. Also, for Kelly, she felt she was now much more “willing to seek help” and wanted to preserve her place in the university field.

Kimberley, who was pregnant with her second child, felt very strongly that her care leaver status should be recognised, and specific support should be available because of it. She felt the focus on those under 25 years of age was unjust:

**Kimberley:** “How can you put an age limit on it [...] What happens if I hit 35 or have this baby and it triggers it [the impact of the legacy of her pre-care experience]? So, would I not be able to get help? I don’t agree [...] Some things are boxed away in there and I’ll talk about it every now and again and I definitely think there is stuff in there that will come out”.

Kimberley explained this approach as “putting people in boxes again”, linked to the stereotyping and discrimination she had felt during her time in care. This reflects the fluid and multi-dimensional nature of identity, which is about social and personal perception and so whilst socially, in the university field, Kimberley would not be identified as a care leaver, she herself, identified as one (Martin et al., 2014). Here, there is a tension in terms of how universities offer support and how some care leavers, such as Kimberley, envisage support should be offered. What this statement also reflects is the legacy of the care system and here, Kimberley’s reference to her pregnancy with her second child, is considered a potential trigger for painful memories to recur and she was very aware of this. Here, this created a cleft habitus between her previous experience and the identity she was developing as a student and in her vocational role and suggests that this new identity, although emerging, was fragile (Stahl, 2015a; Reay et al., 2010).

Whilst Kimberley wanted the specific support to be available, like Matthew, Kelly and Lily, she did not identify any specific needs relating to her care leaver status, which, as mentioned previously in this thesis, often focuses on

financial support and accommodation. Instead her needs were reflective of the challenges that Wong (2018) suggests many students are generally known to experience, mainly relating to academic work. However, it was clear that Kimberley wanted that safety net, which perhaps, like Kelly and Lily, reflects her previous experience of having professional support during her time in care and also her desire to protect her developing student identity and transforming habitus (Bourdieu, 1990; Reay, Crozier and Clayton, 2010).

Generally, in this study, the students found the academic work at university challenging and all, except Matthew, had accessed general support in the university to help with this, for example, from the library and academic staff. Georgia, Kimberley, Zoe and Kouassi reported having positive and accessible support:

**Georgia:** “We are quite lucky on our course, because we all have a personal tutor. They see us regularly and we know we can get in touch about anything that’s affecting us”.

**Zoe:** “At least once or twice a term she [personal tutor] catches up with us, just to make sure we are OK and see how we are getting on and I know I can ask for support at any time, which is good”.

Whilst Evans et al. (2017) indicate that post-92 universities have a track record of attracting and supporting non-traditional students, this was a feature evident in the provision of all three universities in this study. However, the experience of support varied in some of the students’ accounts and whilst Matthew’s earlier experience indicated a need for more support, this was not the case for Abiah, who was also at Burnell. In contrast he had received both academic and pastoral support, and this was a planned and organised feature of his programme. Here, this was linked to the nature of his programme, as mentioned earlier, and is central to the ethos of degree programmes with a foundation year (UCAS, 2018b). Abiah noted how this had proved invaluable in both helping him to make the transition to university, but also allowing him to access his elite institution; without this course, he would not have had the necessary capitals (Russell Group, 2013). This is a distinct feature of degree programmes with a foundation year and is



a noted policy response by elite universities to widen their offer to attract and retain students from widening participation backgrounds (Guild HE, 2015; 2016).

What was also evident was the provision of other forms of support. For example, both Connie and Abiah were accessing bereavement support at Burnell University and it was clear that entering the university field was a turning point for both students:

**Connie:** “After speaking to Liz [carer] and my friends, they suggested I speak to my personal tutor. Jo [tutor] was great and directed me to the counselling service. I did have counselling previously, but I just felt, coming to university, it, my grief, resurfaced”.

As with Georgia, Kimberley, Kelly, Zoe and Kouassi, accessing their tutors as well as other formal university support was not something they were concerned about. This was partly explained by the lack of stigma associated with bereavement. Equally, Connie had not experienced the stigma or stereotyping associated with being in looked after care, as described previously and consequently, sharing her reasons for entering care were not difficult and nor was accepting support because of it. Furthermore, particularly in the case of Connie, she was confident in communicating and engaging with professionals, reflecting the habitus and capitals developed during primary and secondary socialisation (Warin, 2016) and was therefore, able to successfully navigate the university field and ensure her academic and pastoral needs were met (Stahl, 2016).

Whilst Matthew felt he had not received sufficient formal support from Burnell University, this is explained by the fact that, unlike the other students, he did not seek it, rather than it not being available. Here, unlike Matthew, Georgia, Kimberley, Zoe, Kouassi, Connie and Abiah were able to employ aspects of cultural capital described previously, including being aware of their support needs (Reay, 2004; Edgerton and Roberts, 2014) and, recognised that accepting support would ultimately improve their position in the field (Edgerton and Roberts, 2014).

## 6:4:2 Economic capital

Only two of the students in this study, Matthew and Connie, possessed high levels of economic capital and described themselves as “well off”. They both noted the advantage this gave them at university and Matthew indicated he had a lot “more time than people with jobs”, whilst Connie felt that she could enjoy the freedom to socialise with friends and enjoy her time off. For Georgia, her course was funded by her NHS sponsor and she was paid a full-time qualified nursing salary throughout her course. Whilst she was not impacted financially, she did indicate that

**Georgia:** “To be honest, if it wasn’t for the funding and being paid, it’s not something I think I would be able to do, and I think that would be the same for the rest of our group. It must put a lot of people off”.

Here, this illustrates the inequity in access to university for some students and whilst all in this study had gained access to university, there was recognition of the financial constraints encountered by some students and the link between economic capital and the accumulation of cultural and social capital (Reay, 2004).

To support their studies, Abiah, Lily, Zoe and Kouassi had part time jobs whereas, Kimberley and Kelly referred to the financial strain of supporting their families with “only one wage” coming from their husbands’ incomes. This meant they had to think carefully about spending on “anything that is not necessary”. Because of their part time employment Abiah, Kouassi, Lily and Zoe felt they had less time to focus on their studies and also this meant they were often tired as a result of getting home late. This echoes the findings of previous studies that refer to the challenges of working and studying and the impact on being able to focus on studying (Cotton, Nash and Kneale, 2014).

Although both Lily and Abiah were in receipt of grants, they felt this did not cover the costs of maintaining their respective flats and both noted the difference in their circumstances to their peers:

**Abiah:** “I’ve got like a maisonette, it’s a flat over in London and I pay for my rent here, obviously when I’m at uni, I pay for rent over there as

well [...] So, what that meant then, for me, is every single holiday period I have to work, whether it's 2 hours, whether it's 4 hours, whether it's 8 hours, minimum, I have to work [...] You guys [his peers] are given money to buy your food, that's the key difference. Some of the people I'm living with had weekly shops done online by their parents and I was just like, I don't have that".

Lily also struggled to live independently and pay her rent. However, this was compounded by the challenge of budgeting:

**Lily:** "It is financially difficult, as I'm finding out lately with gas and electric and stuff like that, but there is things about to help me [student grants], but it's not enough because I've got no skills with budgeting and things like that. I've not had someone to tell me to stop spending this".

Many students generally express concerns about tuition fees and living costs associated with university (Universities UK, 2018) and it is thought that over 50% of students engage in part time work to help fund university tuition and subsistence (Richardson, Evans and Gbadamosi, 2014). Consequently, the experiences of juggling work and university commitments noted here are not particular to care leavers (Reay, Crozier and Clayton, 2010). However, what their care leaver status does mean is that some of the students in this study had fewer sources of economic capital and could not rely on social networks for support in times of hardship (Cotton, Nash and Kneale, 2014). Indeed, as noted by Lily above, she felt her financial situation was compounded by the absence of parental guidance and here, she indicated she would welcome support in terms of helping her to budget or with giving her "money and stuff". Similar points were made by Zoe, Kouassi and Abiah and they felt this made them different from other students, who had financial help or support with other living costs, including food. Again, as discussed previously, these four students were open to support and financial help and were accepting it in the form of grants. This is partly explained by the social norm of financial hardship for many students (Universities, UK, 2018), but also, as mentioned

earlier, these students had, had more experience of accepting support and realised the benefit of doing this.

Managing the financial challenges described reflects the logic of necessity (Bourdieu, 1990), whereby those students with less economic capital needed to work harder to access and sustain their university life. However, what is apparent here is that these students were also showing a form of cultural capital whereby, the delay of gratification is a worthwhile sacrifice for academic and subsequently the occupational success they aspired to (Edgerton and Roberts, 2014). Therefore, working to support their studies was considered a necessary feature of attaining their academic and future goals.

### **6:4:3 Social capital**

This theme will consider the impact of social capital on the university experience. This form of capital is not independent of other forms and indeed, for some students their social capital was linked to economic capital.

Wong (2018) notes that academic success often relates to significant others and this can come from within or beyond the university. As mentioned previously, several students were receiving various types of formal support from the university and this was helpful in relation to academic success, but also generally fitting in. Equally, many students described informal support and the value of social relationships. Indeed, Connie was able to go out “several times a week” and develop a network of friends within the university, as well as being able to attend university social events. These are features of university life, which are known to support the transition to university and enhance overall student experience (Blair, 2017). Whilst this was enabled by her economic capital, in contrast, Abiah and Kouassi felt their financial situation impacted on their extra-curricular university experience:

**Kouassi:** “This is why [lack of money] sometimes I don’t go out with my friends or to the cinema. So, often I don’t go out, things like that. Sometimes it’s difficult for me [financially] to go”.

Here, this reflects unequal experience of the university field, based on the presence or absence of economic capital, as well as the aggregate and collective capital that leads to social reproduction (Bourdieu, 1986 cited in Richardson, 2002; O'Brien and Ó Fathaigh, 2006). Because Connie had a wide circle of friends in the university field, she was able to draw on these for both social and academic support and this enhanced her overall university experience.

What was interesting is that none of the nursing students participated in university social events, but nor did they expect to. This was partly explained by the fact that Kelly and Kimberley had young children and Georgia had family commitments. Often students with family commitments have to juggle the challenge of university with family life and have less time to socialise (Murtagh, 2017). This reflects the experience of many widening participation students where they often have family or work commitments that mean they are different to other students and cannot engage fully in extra-curricular university life (Gilardi and Guglielmetti, 2011). The nursing students were focussed on the end result and joining the nursing profession. Their view of university was very much captured by Zoe's comment "it's a means to an end". Therefore, although they had to juggle their university and personal commitments and described having little time to socialise, they felt this sacrifice was worth it to achieve their academic and professional goals (Reay, Crozier and Clayton, 2010; Edgerton and Roberts, 2011). Furthermore, because many of their peers were making similar sacrifices, this became their shared habitus.

In contrast to the nursing students both Connie and Kouassi were engaging in other university activities that helped them accrue social and cultural capital. Kouassi described taking part in university open days and acting as a student ambassador:

**Kouassi:** "I do get paid for the open days, but I want to do it, it's not about money. It's basically experience for me, because in future, that's all good for your CV".

Connie also made the following comment:

**Connie:** “I’ve really enjoyed being able to get involved here [referring to her college]. So last year I was part of a group working to raise money for Plan International [a charitable organisation] and we put on sports events. It was a great cause, but I made some good friends too”.

Here, such activities helped Connie and Kouassi to enjoy their university life, but also to set themselves apart from their peers (Wong, 2018) and accrue important social and cultural capital to help them in the university field and beyond. Côté (1996) refers to this as investment in the self and this was evident in some of the other opportunities Connie took whilst at university, including taking part in what she described as “show-casing events”, where examples of innovative student work were shared more widely across the campus. Like other socially and culturally advantaged students Connie and Kouassi were able to add to their repertoire of capitals by engaging in activities that would help them develop further on a personal and social level, thus increasing both identity and cultural capital, as well as their skills for future employment (Côté, 1996; Bourdieu, 1986 cited in Richardson, 2002; Warin, 2016).

Given the massification of a university education described earlier in this thesis, there is increasing emphasis in HE on graduate outcomes and there is recognition of a gap in the expectations a university education will bring and the reality, whereby the expansion of graduate level jobs has not matched the overall expansion of the sector (CIPD, 2017). Consequently, in contrast to the nursing students, because Connie and Kouassi were not undertaking vocational courses, it was more important for them to accrue capitals that would help them secure employment. Here, they were making logical and strategic moves in the field of education to set themselves apart from their peers (Wong, 2018), but also because of their prior cultural capital, had greater confidence and skill in doing this, consistent with Bourdieu’s enduring view of education as a system of social reproduction (Bourdieu, 1990).

Although the students in this study had varying levels of engagement with

the social aspects of university life, many referred to having other social support mechanisms. Indeed, all of the students, with exception of Matthew and Lily reported having friends within and outside of the university setting who offered a range of support, including friendship, encouragement and support with childcare. Kimberley indicated this was vital in helping her deal with the challenges of her course:

**Kimberley:** “I can’t do it and they’re like “you can” and it’s just [her friends] they’ve got a lot of belief and they’ve got confidence and they push me and I’m not quitting”

Zoe made a similar point and indicated that her sister and her former foster carers “were always there to talk to and encourage me”. Here, this links to discussion presented in the literature review, where ongoing support and positive encouragement for educational attainment is helpful in creating or reinforcing a new identity, as well as self-belief (Cotton, Nash and Kneale, 2014).

What was clear in this study is that the students had various support needs and that many were able to recognise them and make efforts to ensure they were met. The capacity to seek support, was helpful in enabling them to adapt to the university setting and deal with the challenges they faced (Bourdieu, 1990). Côté (1996) describes such investment in oneself as a feature of identity capital and notes the link with cultural capital in the sense that there is a reward or pay off for this. For Connie, Abiah and Kouassi accessing bereavement support during their time at university meant they were able to focus more effectively on enjoying the student experience and succeeding in this field and for Kelly, Kimberley, Zoe and Georgia, their informal support was important in sharing concerns and, as Zoe and Kimberley mentioned, having people to talk to and who offered them encouragement. Here, they also demonstrated some key features of cultural capital, in that they were able to employ self-awareness and analytical reasoning skills to assess their situation and identify their need for support; skills noted to help negotiate success in the field (Edgerton and Roberts, 2014).

In contrast to this, Matthew and Lily had little social support and as such, there were no significant others to act as an advocate or provide the impetus to seek support (Papapolydorou, 2016; Wong, 2018). Neither had friends at university who might offer support or role model successful student behaviour (Warin, 2016; Donnelly and Gamsu, 2018). For both students, this linked to the complex interplay of learning needs, less social capital and the self-reliance they had developed as a result of their care experience. Indeed, having frequently been let down by significant adults Lily explained “they’re the only thing that’s been there”, when talking about the three dogs she owned.

### **6:5 Family ties and the stickiness of place?**

This theme will consider how vocational aspirations are influenced by what Allen and Hollingworth (2013) refer to as the stickiness of place and will explore the role of family ties in determining geographic connections and movement for employment.

Given the occupational nature of their studies, it is not surprising that the nursing students were very clear that they wished to enter the nursing profession. Here, based on the national nursing shortage, which is noted in the UK (House of Commons Health Committee, 2018) there was a general sense among the nursing students that they would not struggle to find employment and would be able to choose their favoured area of clinical practice. However, what was different in their aspirations to the other students, is that they aimed to work in the same region where they had grown up and attended university. For these students going to university had not altered this geographic connection to their home towns, in spite of the fact that their nursing degree would provide them with the necessary academic and professional capital to work anywhere in the UK and also, should they wish, internationally (Royal College of Nursing, 2018).

**Kimberley:** “I would love to just get a job and we haven’t had the best time financially with me being at uni [...] So, just to know you’ve



got that secure job for life here [in the North East of England] [...] I'm going to have a job for life here and that's huge".

For Kimberley, remaining in the North East of England was linked not only to her family commitments, but also to the enduring aspiration for financial security, connected to her early social and cultural biography. In the North of England, as with areas of socio-economic deprivation generally, there are comparatively high levels of public sector employment (Office for National Statistics, 2018) and this reinforced aspirations to work and remain in the area, not only for Kimberley, but also for the other nursing students, who also desired job security.

Unlike Kouassi, Matthew, Connie and Abiah, the nursing students all cited family commitments. Hayley, Kelly and Georgia were mature students and like other mature students had children and for Georgia, grandchildren, which cemented their links to the area. However, Zoe and Lily did not have either partners or children, but felt they could not leave the area because of their siblings:

**Lily:** "My family, my two sisters are here. They've got no one but me".

**Zoe:** "I would always want to be here [the North East], well, as long as my sister is. There's no way I could move away from her".

For Lily and Zoe, it was very clear that their vocational aspirations were restricted by feelings of responsibility to their siblings and the desire to see them regularly. They both felt the need to stay in the North East in order to be close to and have regular contact with their sisters.

For Matthew, Connie and Abiah, Bourdieu's reference to the doxa and habituated aspirations, help to explain their plans to pursue occupations that were similar to those of their parents (Gale and Parker, 2015). Unlike the nursing students, these students, along with Kouassi, did not feel attached to their university towns and unlike the nursing students, had no family ties in the area. Instead, all referred to initially returning either to their home towns or to wherever they were best able to find employment. For Connie and Matthew this can be explained by the common practice of many middle-class

students, who move away from their area of origin to attend university and then return (Donnelly and Gamsu, 2018). However, Abiah and Kouassi's explanations were more attributable to their care experience, which had instilled in them the need to be self-reliant and to secure their economic futures:

**Abiah:** "In terms of like financial support, it's all myself. I've had to do whatever I've had to do [to complete his degree]. So, all the money I've pumped into it and all of the stress, I will reap the rewards and then [use his degree] as a basis to kind of push myself onwards and do what I need to, to get into the jobs that I know that I can do and should be paid rightly so for".

**Kouassi:** "This is my country now, this is my home [the North East], but if my job, if you need to travel or move away, I will have to go for it".

As mentioned previously, although Kouassi had settled into his foster placement and had a strong relationship with his carers, he was aware that post university, he would need to be self-sufficient and would have no one to rely on to support him. For Kouassi, aspirations for both educational and occupational success correlate with Jackson and Ajayi's (2007) seminal work, which found that young asylum seekers who entered care had a very clear sense that achievement in these areas was their best hope of integrating into British society. Abiah made similar points and indicated he would do whatever was necessary to obtain a good job with a good income:

**Abiah:** "So, the kind of jobs I will apply for will, it has to be starting at 35 upwards or even 40 upwards, where ever they are. So, I can look back in myself and be, like, you know what, all of this was worth it".

Here, the legacy of entering care meant that both students felt securing well paid and stable employment was more important than retaining social or geographic connections. This is consistent with the cultural tool kit Edgerton and Roberts (2014) refer to, where both were showing reasoning, self-regulation and ability to forgo gratification in order to achieve their aspirations. As with access to HE, greater capacity to become mobile is also

likely to increase advantage in the field of work (Stellar and Gale, 2011). Stellar and Gale (2011, p. 118) use the term “mobility complex” or field in the Bourdieusian sense and here, because Matthew, Connie, Abiah and Kouassi were able to envisage moving nationally or globally for work, this would open up opportunities in the field beyond, as well as, those available locally. Being open to geographic mobility allows individuals to accumulate social capital in the form of wider and culturally richer networks, which in turn can support the acquisition of other capitals, such as economic, cultural and symbolic capital through increased employment opportunity and experience (Stellar and Gale, 2011). These capitals can be what Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) described as aggregate, whereby they add value to existing social networks. However, the risk of geographic mobility is that some social relations are not sustained and added to, but are lost (Stellar and Gale, 2011) and whilst Kouassi, in particular, was aware that he may lose links with his foster carers, his aspirations to succeed and be self-sufficient showed his ability for rational actions to supersede the habitual (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992).

This reflects earlier discussion about the “stickiness of place” (Allen and Hollingworth, 2013, p. 514) and is consistent with the enduring, place specific habitus the nursing students possessed. What was evident is that their occupational plans were tied to the other features of their personal biographies already described, namely prior social and cultural experience and their broader habitus; those consistent with the nature of widening participation students generally, influencing choice of university, course and subsequent vocational aspirations (Donnelly and Gamsu, 2018). In this case, the experience of the nursing students very much reflects Bourdieu’s key arguments about social reproduction and the symbolic violence exerted by the education system. Here, going to university, had not necessarily produced in the nursing students a habitus which incorporated the mobility complex (Stellar and Gale, 2018).

This is where Bathmaker’s (2015) suggestion of moving beyond Bourdieu is relevant. Here, the benefits of going to university link to the individual sense of achievement and success in that particular field or sub-field; this encompasses personal development, satisfaction and self-esteem and is

less dependent on the competitive nature of Bourdieu's theory (Bathmaker, 2015). In this sense the nursing students had successfully achieved their goals and the possible selves they wished to become as nurses (Markus and Nurius, 1986). In one sense their post-university outcomes may be more restricted geographically than Matthew, Connie, Abiah and Kouassi but, for these students, the benefit of "stickiness of place" meant they could join their chosen professions and at the same time retain their local ties to family and friends. As such, it is possible to say that the nursing students had benefitted from going to university and the widening participation agenda (DfBIS, 2014). Such benefits were captured by Kimberley's reflection on her university experience:

**Kimberley:** "It's given us [me] such a lot of confidence and it's opened my eyes. I've got a total [totally] different outlook, a broad outlook and I'm excited to see what's out there [speaking of the future]".

## **6:6 Summary of the chapter**

Generally, with the exception of Kouassi and Abiah, the students had chosen universities and courses consistent with their primary habitus and this subsequently influenced their occupational aspirations. For many, including Abiah, what helped them to be fish in water was the ability to fit in with the habitus of the institution (Reay, Crozier and Clayton, 2010). As mentioned, a number of students studied on campuses geographically separated from the main university and for them this was helpful. However, this was also reflective of divisions in relation to the status of institutions and the courses they provide and here, although they were fitting in, this was because their habitus was not challenged (Bourdieu, 1990).

Although Matthew and Lily's experiences were very different, what they had in common is that they had also chosen establishments and courses that were consistent with their primary and secondary habitus. However, their ability to succeed in the university field was compounded by lack of social

capital, both in the form of peers and wider social support, as well as their specific learning needs. Consequently, assumptions cannot be made about the habitus and capitals of students and their ability to fit in at university. This is further underlined by the success of students such as Abiah and Kouassi, who were fitting in to institutions that were not aligned with their primary or secondary habitus and also students such as Kelly, who was achieving high marks despite being dyslexic, which is not consistent with the discourse of deficit.

A common feature in this study was all of the participants experienced some challenges. However, some of the issues are not solely linked to being care experienced and indeed are similar to those reported generally by students making the transition to university, where financial support, support from tutors and the social aspects of university are deemed to be important (Blair, 2017). For those citing financial struggles, this meant they engaged with part time employment, which affected their overall university experience.

Furthermore, many would not be eligible for grants on the basis of being a care leaver because they are over 25, or like Kouassi, do not qualify for some of the support available. It was also noted that whilst the nursing students in this study were not affected, had they been subject to recent changes to the funding of nurse education, this would have deterred them from going to university. These are areas for potential policy and institutional change.

The students facing challenges relating to their academic or broader experience were not afraid of disclosing their care-leaver status, which contradicts some of the evidence cited in the literature (Mayall et al., 2015). Here, for Abiah, Kouassi, Connie and Matthew, this was explained by the lack of social stigma associated with their entry into the care system, whilst Georgia, Zoe, Kelly and Kimberley had created learner identities and were focussed on success (Cotton, Nash and Kneale, 2014). Whilst Matthew had not sought any support, he remained focused on completing his course. Consequently, all demonstrated different propensities and forms of capital that helped them in the field (Reay, 2004). Edgerton and Roberts (2014) refer to this as a cultural toolkit, whereby individuals are able to harness skills

that include reasoning, self-regulation and delay of gratification in order to succeed.

Of the 9 students included in this study, Lily and Matthew's challenges appeared to impact more on their overall university experience. As mentioned previously, Matthew's experience increased his social isolation and ability to seek help and Lily had a range of challenges that impacted on her attendance and academic performance. What both students lacked was social capital and a significant other to offer a parenting role. However, what they shared in common with the other 7 students was determination to complete their course and this had been strengthened by the legacy of their care experience.

In this study, the experiences of care leavers at university showed variation and in this sense there are no ready-made solutions to supporting them (Martin et al., 2014). Some students faced a number of intersecting challenges imposed by their care leaver status, as well as, for example, specific educational needs and lack of social capital. However, whilst specific support may be useful for some, what was commonly required for the students in this study, is the general academic and pastoral support offered to all university students.

When focusing on the benefits of going to university, the middle-class habitus of the university field, which is often cited in the literature, is thought to engender aspirations in non-traditional students akin to those of their often, middle-class counterparts (Reay, 2004; Pearce, Down and Moore, 2008; Reay, Crozier and Clayton, 2010). However, what was evident in this study, is that many of the students had not experienced radical transformation of their habitus', particularly in the case of the nursing students. This is partly explained by Bourdieu's (1990) concept of the living memory pad, as well as the nature of their degree programmes.

Those students in post-92 universities did not show recognition of the divides in university education. For them, what was important was that they were at university and the status of the institution was not in question or mentioned (Bathmaker, 2015; 2016). This reflects the pervasive notion that university

education is valuable, but also the symbolic violence of the education system, where those exposed to the most inequality of opportunity are the least likely to question it (James, 2015). However, what was equally relevant is that, for the nursing students in particular, their sole focus was to enter the nursing profession and have long-term job security. This reflects some of the values of widening participation and social mobility considered in Chapter Two (Guild HE, 2016). Whilst this is aligned with much of Bourdieu's work (1984; 1986; 1990) and the reproduction of enduring social elites and social inequalities, what is important to recognise is the wider social benefit of the university experience, shown in this study, in terms of increased self-esteem and personal achievement of aspirations, as well as the value of training for a profession where salary may not be the prime concern (Guild HE, 2015; 2016).

Bathmaker's (2015) notion of moving beyond Bourdieu is important here and raises the point that whilst inequality does prevail, education is essentially of benefit and the benefits can manifest in various ways. All of the students in this study viewed their university education positively and felt it was the pathway to future employment and to the accrual of cultural and economic capital. This fundamental belief is what helped them to persevere despite any challenges they faced. Arguably, because many of the students had defied the trajectory associated with many care leavers, as described in the introduction to this thesis, as well as that of their early family life, going to university had led to transformation of habitus and increased social, cultural and identity capital and therefore, was beneficial.

## **Chapter Seven: Conclusion**

### **7:1 Introduction to the chapter**

The purpose of this chapter is to explore the findings and implications of this research study. This will include the contribution this study makes to what is known about care leavers in HE, as well as the implications of the findings for professional practice in university settings. The chapter will address some of the limitations of the study, as well as make recommendations for future practice and research.

This study used narrative inquiry to examine the experiences of 9 care leavers at university to answer the following research questions:

1. How do care leavers' explain their journeys into university?
2. How do care leavers' explain their journeys through university?

As discussed in Chapter One, it is difficult to define care leavers and the use of inter-changeable terms, such as care experienced does complicate this. Those selected to participate included both, but importantly were students who defined themselves as care leavers because of their personal experiences in looked after care.

### **7:2 Summary of the main findings**

The students who took part were characterised by complexity and diversity, both in relation to their demographics, as well as their prior social and cultural experiences. This reflects the diversity of care leavers in HE noted by Harrison (2017a; 2017b). The students had entered care from a diverse range of social and cultural backgrounds and their reasons for entering care are also varied. The inclusion of one student who entered care as an unaccompanied asylum-seeking child, underlines this diversity, as well as the changing nature of care leavers in England. Therefore, one of the key messages from this study, is that we cannot make assumptions or generalisations about care leavers and instead we must recognise them and their needs at university as being diverse and individually unique.



### **7:2:1 How do care leavers explain their journeys into university?**

The answer to the first research question is not straightforward and the explanations given by the students show a range of sources of aspiration for going to university. These were based in the dominant cultural trend of going to university (Bathmaker, 2015), which reflects the wider social discourse presented in Chapter two. It was clear that aspirations were connected to primary and secondary habitus and wider social experience, as well as the personal agency of the students in accruing the necessary forms of capital to enter the field. This meant that some students took longer than others to enter university, which is also consistent with literature concerning non-traditional students presented in Chapter Two (Harrison, 2017a; 2017b). Two of the students in this study, Kouassi and Abiah, selected universities that were not consistent with their prior social, cultural and educational backgrounds. For one student this was explained by entering the UK as an unaccompanied asylum seeker and for the other student accessing an elite university via widening participation policy.

It is clear that many of the students in this study, particularly those in LA care, had faced negative stereotypes and assumptions about their abilities, based on their looked after care status, which reflects the discourse concerning looked after children and young people described in chapters one and two (Bluff, King and McMahon, 2015; Jackson and Cameron, 2012; Mannay et al., 2017). Those who had experienced LA care described low expectations from professionals in relation to educational attainment.

### **7:2:2 How do care leavers explain their journeys through university?**

In relation to the second research question the evidence generated in this study shows further complexity. The students' experiences at university varied and were dependent on a range of factors, including habitus of the individual and the institution, as well as the forms of capital the individuals possessed. All students referred to some challenges in the university setting. Whilst for two students, Lily and Matthew, this did intersect with their care

leaver status, for the other 7 their needs generally reflected those more broadly voiced by university students linked to academic, social and financial support, which supports the findings of previous studies (Blair, 2017; Harrison, 2017a; Wong, 2018). Out of term accommodation is considered a priority in the sector for this group (UCAS, 2018b), but my findings did not reflect this and none in this study required such support. This is largely explained by the number of mature students with families in this study, as well as the close proximity of the university campus to some of the students' usual place of residence.

What also contradicted some of the published literature (Bluff, King and McMahon, 2015; Mayall et al., 2015) is that the students were not afraid to reveal their care background and for most of the students this was not a barrier to them seeking help. This was largely explained by the lack of stigma associated with some reasons for entering care i.e. bereavement, but also that students realised accepting support would improve their chance of success. However, complexity was added by the fact that some in this study (Kimberley) wanted help to be available, but did not need it, whereas, other students (Matthew) appeared to need help, but did not seek it. Furthermore, the presence of specific needs did not result in attrition as with 38% of care leavers generally, as noted by Harrison, 2017a; 2017b). In this study all 9 care leavers demonstrated high levels of commitment to completing their studies, supporting previous research by Jackson and Ajayi (2005).

Such experiences raise questions about how best to support care leavers at university. As discussed within this thesis, the policy emphasis has focused on targeted support for this group. However, the findings of this study question whether this is the most appropriate approach, not only in terms of the experience of care leavers, but also in relation to cost effectiveness of service provision for universities. The findings of this study, although tentative, indicate that the general support on offer to all students may adequately meet the needs of care leavers.

The transformative nature of university education (Reay, Crozier and Clayton, 2010) was not apparent in this study and none of the students

demonstrated radical shifts in their habitus. This is largely explained by the vocational nature of the programmes of 5 of the students and the overall selection of courses that were consistent with primary and secondary habitus. However, the findings do show an overall benefit in going to university, manifest in the accrual of social, cultural and economic capital and the overall belief that university education was useful. For those who had experienced LA care, this also linked to defying the assumed trajectory of care leavers, consistent with the findings of previous research in this area (Cotton, Nash and Kneale, 2014; Brady and Gilligan, 2018).

### **7:3 The theoretical contribution of this thesis**

Within this study the thinking tools Bourdieu provides in the concepts of habitus, capital and field have been used to explore the journeys of care leavers into and through university and as such, I have remained true to Bourdieu's assertion that the concepts should not be used separately (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). However, it was not the intent to reify Bourdieu's work or use the theory of practice as a rigid framework, but instead for habitus, capital and field to help with thinking (Stahl, 2016; Webb et al., 2017). In this way, my approach has used the theory in a fluid manner and has drawn on the work of other researchers to stretch the concepts in order to examine the experiences of the nine students who took part in this study.

Bourdieu suggests that fitting in is dependent on the university field being aligned with the individual's habitus (Bourdieu, 1990), but in this study the concept of habitus was stretched to consider how the habitus of the institution influenced individual experience (Reay, Crozier and Clayton, 2010). Such "thinking" allowed for recognition that the boundaries of the university field are porous (Ignatow and Robinson, 2017) and as such, the field is a hybrid space, incorporating sub-fields (Bathmaker, 2015), which include post-92 and elite universities, as well as the different campuses and courses the students in this study experienced. Here, the field and the

institutional habitus influenced whether the students fitted in, but also illuminated the complexity of individual experience. For example, Kelly fitted in to her campus because she was able to identify with the culture of the institution and her peers, but this also meant she did not feel “part of the university”. Equally, as noted in the experiences of Matthew and Lily, who struggled to make the transition to university, despite choosing universities aligned with their prior social and cultural backgrounds, it was possible to use the work of Stahl (2015a) to examine the cleft habitus and the intersection of other factors including the legacy of care producing a mismatch between the field and their primary habitus.

Reay’s (2004) reference to work on the self and Côté’s (2001) theory of identity capital are examples of how the concept of capital was expanded to consider how exposure to the field of employment and dissatisfaction with their circumstances prompted Kimberley, Kelly, Georgia and Abiah to gain the necessary academic capital to enter the field of HE. Once in the university setting, there were also examples of personal agency, for example, in the case of Kelly, where she proactively engaged with university services to increase her academic capital. This foregrounds personal agency and ability to transform and strategically accumulate the necessary capitals to achieve ones goals, as opposed to the often emphasised, enduring nature of primary habitus and the latent determinism so often criticised in Bourdieu’s original work (Bourdieu, 1990).

Perhaps the most significant stretch of Bourdieu’s theory was to consider the impact of going to university and whether this had transformed the lives of the students who took part. The “stickiness of place” assumes a complicit link to the notion of doxa, whereby individuals are passively aligned to particular trajectories (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992; Allen and Hollingworth, 2013, p. 514). Whilst this was consistent with the enduring, place specific habitus the nursing students possessed, by stretching this concept or using Bathmaker’s (2015) notion of thinking beyond Bourdieu, it was possible to see that the students in this study were making rational choices, as opposed to the doxic or habituated aspirations one might expect (Gale and Parker, 2015). In this sense the nursing students had successfully achieved their goals and the

possible selves they wished to become (Markus and Nurius, 1980). More importantly, for some of the students in this study, particularly evident in Kimberley's narrative, going to university had, had a profound impact and it was clear from her narrative that she was forming a new identity as a successful student. Whilst this emerging identity was fragile and she was clearly concerned about the legacy of her care experience re-emerging, she was able to look forward to the future and imagine a life of possibility and a new identity, fuelled by the confidence her university experience had given her.

The principal theoretical contribution of this study is the ability to use Bourdieu's concepts in a flexible manner and here, the concepts of habitus, capital and field were almost "stretched beyond their limits" (Ball, Macrae and Maguire, 1999, p. 212). However, this was necessary in order to overcome the latent determinism in Bourdieu's (1990) work and to fully account for the experiences of the care leavers who participated in this research.

#### **7:4 What does this study contribute to our understanding of care leavers at university?**

The main contribution of this study is that it provides in-depth insight into the experience centred narratives of 9 care experienced university students. This insight reveals there is not a stereotypical care leaver and instead they are characterised by diversity in relation to their prior social, cultural and educational experiences, as well as the intersectionality of personal characteristics including social class, gender, age and disability that influence experience at university. This diversity and intersectionality of experience meant the care leavers in this study were able to utilise forms of capital to varying degrees in order to fit in and succeed. As a consequence, it is not possible to assume that all care leavers will require, seek and accept the same support in university. However, what is clear is that support should be offered and available.

Of particular interest in this study are the varied reasons for entering care, which include bereavement and asylum seeking, as well as the variation in relation to family and social background. Such diversity and intersectionality of experience is not always apparent in the statistical data and whilst such data is valuable, arguably the value of narrative research, is the ability to highlight the individual within the collective data and also within the overarching category of being defined as a care leaver.

Identity is a key theme throughout this thesis and underpins the narratives of the students in this study. Here, the complex intersectionality of experience influenced the students' identities in the university setting. Some of the students, Connie, for example entered university with a strong learner identity, embedded in her prior social and cultural experience. Whilst she experienced the intersectional challenge of grief resurfacing at university, she was able to seek and accept support, consistent with Côté's concept of identity capital (1996). In this way, Connie was able to reinforce her sense of self. In contrast, for Matthew and Lily, their strong learner identities were challenged by entering the university field. Here, the intersectionality of experience was also evident and Matthew's difficulty fitting in was compounded by value laden views about which parts of his identity he chose to reveal. In doing this he was opposed to seeking help because of his care leaver status and this alongside AS meant he struggled to fit in to the university field. Unlike Matthew, the other students in this study were willing to share their care leaver status and Kimberley felt very strongly that this was very much part of her identity. Here, this perhaps reflects her personal experience of having professional support, as well as the desire to protect her emerging identity as a student (Reay, Crozier and Clayton, 2010).

Several of the students, particularly those who are arguably more typical of the profile of care leavers outlined in Chapter Two and who had entered care as a result of neglect and / or abuse, saw going to university as a way of shaping a new identity. Here, Kimberley, Kelly, Lily and Zoe were clear that they wished to defy the stereotypes imposed on them because of their care status or the life trajectories of many care leavers outlined earlier in this thesis. Whilst not all of these students entered university with strong learner

identities, these were further developed through identity capital and a sense of fitting in (Reay, 2004) at university, as well as the accumulation of academic capital and ability to seek and accept support.

The narrative methodological approach has enabled important experiences to be told, analysed and re-told. In doing this it has been possible to examine the complexity of care leavers' identities and experiences and the intersectionality of their lives. In re-telling the stories I have attended to the three commonplaces of narrative research, temporality, sociality and place (Clandinin and Connolly, 2000). The temporality has identified not only important past experience, but how the individuals positioned themselves at university and also how they envisioned their futures. Through inviting a number of voices to tell stories (Andrews, Squire and Tambouka, 2013) it has been possible to examine individual, as well as shared experience. It is the in-depth exploration of these features, that add detail to what is already known about care leavers in the university setting.

### **7:5 Recommendations for professional practice**

One of the key recommendations of this study is that support for care leavers should be both offered and available in universities. This support must be based on the diverse and individual needs of each particular student rather than a one size fits all approach. It is important that all institutions and professionals recognise the diverse make-up and nature of care leavers and consequently do not make assumptions about their backgrounds and their needs within the university setting.

All professionals working with those in care, leaving care and those who have left care need to contribute to addressing negative stereotypes and low expectations of this group in the education system. This can be achieved through our everyday work, where we have an important role in encouraging, believing in and supporting care leavers to aim high. We can also contribute to this through engaging in and disseminating research about care leavers. There are recommendations in DfE (2018e) guidance, for LA's to work more

closely with universities and other organisations supporting care leavers to raise aspirations for HE. This is an area where educational providers and LA's could do more. Here, responsibility lies with all key stakeholders to achieve this.

Financial concerns are apparent, and more research is needed to consider how best to support care leavers financially, particularly unaccompanied-asylum seeking students. However, it is important that those working in HE are able to signpost students to the correct services and ensure they are able to access the correct advice in a timely manner.

### **7:6 Recommendations for my own practise**

Completing this research and doctoral thesis has prompted personal reflection about my academic and professional roles and whether I practise in a way that stigmatises or leads to lower expectations of individual students. Here, the recommendation for my own practise and that of my peers is to engage in the formal and informal mechanisms available to us to try to identify and prevent this, including peer observation and support and in accordance with my professional regulatory body, revalidation (NMC, 2018). Whilst this is not a panacea for poor practice, a shared culture of learning and reflection is thought to improve practice and identify developmental areas (NMC, 2018).

Given that part of my academic role involves offering pastoral guidance to students, I will endeavour to be approachable and accessible, as well as improving my knowledge about the support mechanisms available to students within the university. This will ensure that when needs are identified, care leavers feel listened to and supported.

In listening to the care leavers in this study, I am conscious that some of the sensitive topics I regularly teach including safeguarding vulnerable adults, children, child sexual exploitation and domestic violence, may be attended by not only care leavers, but other students who have personal experience of these issues. Whilst this would not alter the content of the sessions, I am



more aware that, as with Kelly's first experience of being at university, the reasons for difficulty engaging with such subjects may or may not link to the individual's prior experience. Therefore, in my future practise, I will be more aware of this and endeavour to work in a way that allows students to access support if they need or wish to and I will make efforts to offer it.

### **7:7 Recommendations for future research**

This is an under researched area and consequently more research is needed generally to add to what is already known about care leavers in university settings. However, the findings of this study, particularly highlight the need for research that focuses on how to raise aspirations for university and particularly for care leavers to aspire to attend elite universities. Here, it would be useful for joint research between all key stakeholders, for example, LA's, schools and universities, as well as those in care, leaving care and who have left care. One of the tentative findings of this study is that widening participation policies can help in supporting students from non-traditional backgrounds to gain entry to elite universities. However, as this applied to only one of the nine students who took part (Abiah), there is a case for more research in this area.

This study included one student who entered the UK as an unaccompanied asylum seeker. Given the significant increase in numbers entering looked after care, future research would be helpful in this specific area to identify potential support mechanisms and policy reform. This should include the financial impact of entering HE.

More research is needed to explore the impact of funding changes on care leavers and how this influences entry into HE and experience once there.

Without further research about care leavers in university, it is difficult to make claims about their support needs or to inform future policy. Such research is essential to understand the impact of targeting a group who, within this study and in existing research, have experienced stigma and negative stereotyping. The removal of specific support may mean that the needs of

this under-represented group are missed and should also be approached with caution and following further research. This research must include care leavers as key stakeholders.

The post university outcomes of care leavers were not the focus of this particular study, but future research could consider this and further explore whether the students completed their under-graduate degrees as well as the long-term benefits of going to university.

### **7:8 Limitations of my research**

The strength of this study is that the narrative methodological approach has enabled detailed insight into the individual experiences of care leavers aspirations for going to university and once in the university setting. However, whilst it was not the intent to make statistical generalisations, it must be underlined that this is not possible (Polit and Beck, 2010). The fact that only nine students were recruited reflects the difficulty in engaging with students from a care background and we must accept that some do not wish to be identified.

The timeframe for which to conduct this study meant that there were restrictions on the amount of time spent with each narrator. For most, two interviews were conducted, but further interviews and use of other methods to capture narratives, would enhance this study further.

The regional focus of the study is a potential limitation and selecting students from across the United Kingdom would allow further insight. However, this was somewhat addressed by the selection of students from three universities, one of which is part of the Russell Group. This allowed for the inclusion of students from different backgrounds, who were studying various under-graduate courses. Five of the nine students were completing nursing courses, which is a potential limitation in that their experiences may not be reflective of care leavers generally. However, this may also be explained by the over-representation of care experienced students in such professions.

In response to some of the above limitations, I have focused on providing rich detail about how the study developed and the methodological approach

taken. This will enable the reader to determine whether the results of this study are transferable to a broader population of care leavers, as well as allowing for judgements about whether my findings are deemed credible (Polit and Beck, 2010).

A major concern for this study, is that the data collected relied on the honesty of those narrating their stories (Shenton, 2004). To address this, I was transparent about the purpose of the study from the outset and how I would manage any data. Equally, participation was voluntary, and students were encouraged to be frank about their experiences. Whilst this minimises issues regarding honesty, it is not possible to know how much of the stories I was told were true, however, this is the case for all qualitative studies.

Through the process of storying and re-storying, the narrator and the researcher remove themselves from the lived experiences and events that were the starting point of the inquiry (Moen, 2006), which may impact on the original meaning. This is compounded by the relationship which I developed with the students. A number of mechanisms were employed to reduce the impact of these challenges, as outlined in Chapter Four. However, what would have enhanced my research is being able to conduct further interviews or engage in some of the other approaches identified to gather more narratives in order to compare the content and look for consistency. Due to the constraints of this doctoral thesis, this was not possible, but is something I will bear in mind for future research.

I was able to debrief throughout the entire study with my supervisory team, which allowed for scrutiny of my work and ideas. Such reflexivity is central to this study, but also Bourdieu's ideas about conducting social research, whereby Bourdieu (1994) questions whether research is merely the reflection of the researcher's partial and positioned viewpoint. Maton (2005) suggests part of this involves enacted and individualised reflexivity, whereby the researcher engages in autobiographical reflection. Here, because of my own experience, outlined in Chapter One, I had a negative view about widening participation in elite universities and the support mechanisms provided. This is perhaps also influenced by my current position in a post-92 establishment.

This was identified through the supervisory process and was something I had to be aware of and address when analysing the data to reduce the impact of my own bias on the findings.

The theoretical framework emerged as relevant through wide reading around the area of widening participation and was consistent with the aims of my study. This became a challenge for the interviews because I had to resist shaping them towards the theory and had to work to allow the narrator to share their stories (Riessman, 2013). Using the theoretical framework to inform data analysis also meant that much of the data shared by the students was not included in the final thesis. Therefore, it may be useful to reanalyse the data through a different theoretical lens.

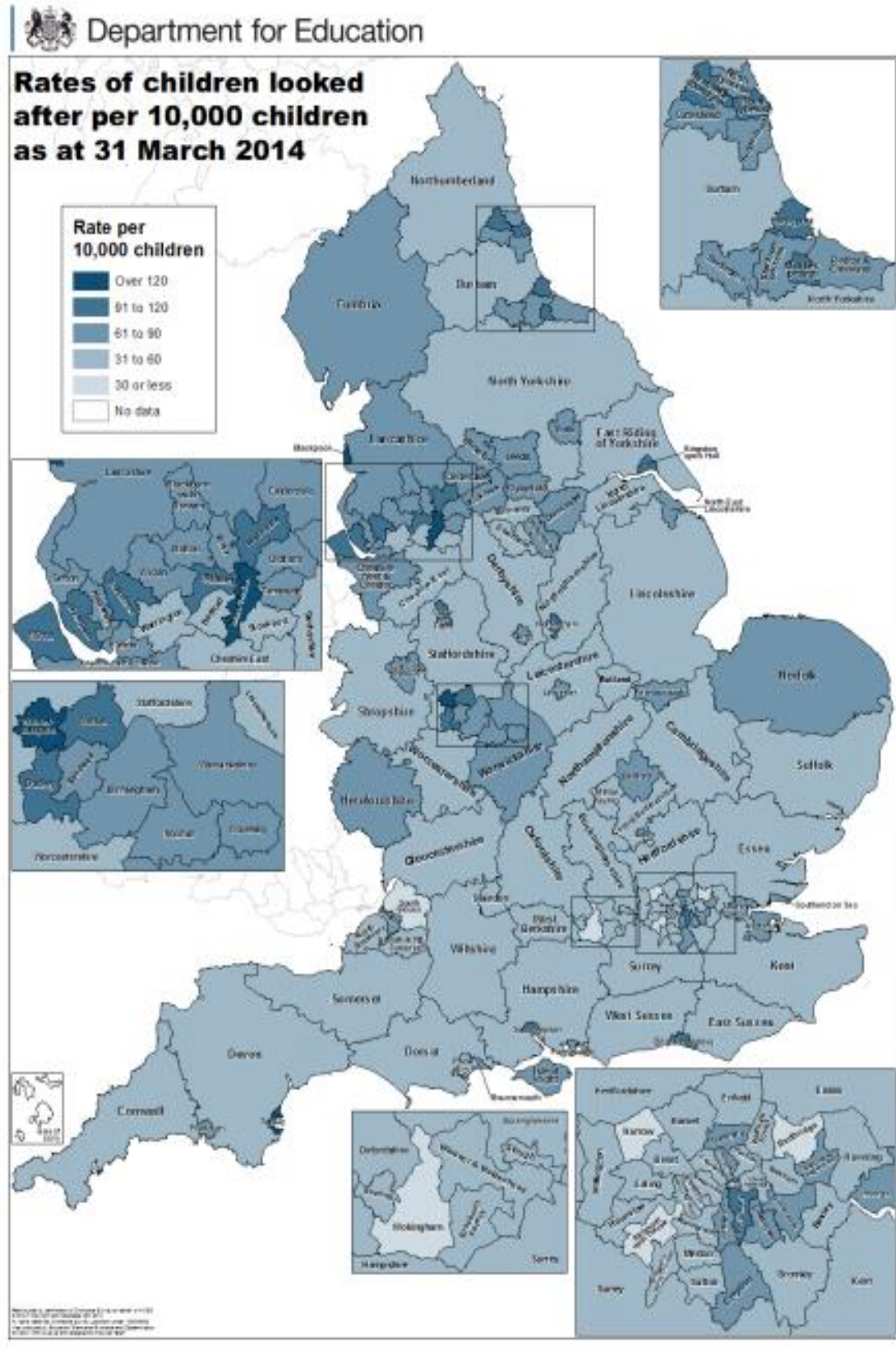
### **7:9 My personal journey**

As a novice researcher I learned an insurmountable degree of knowledge about the research process and indeed, the value of narrative methodology to capture and make sense of human experience. I am fortunate to have had the opportunity to listen to and work with the stories the students shared, and I am thankful to them for this. Whilst the full extent of their experiences was not relevant to or captured within this thesis, their stories have had a profound impact on me. They have helped me to reflect on and strive to improve my own practise as a lecturer, but also to aspire to continue engaging with research in this area and raising the profile of under-represented groups in HE. I believe that this research area is important and the stories of those in care and who have left care must be told, but also listened to, re-told and responded to.

Completing this Doctorate in Education has been an invaluable, although challenging process and at times, I have questioned both my commitment and ability. What has helped me sustain my aspiration is a belief in the value of this research subject, as well as a personal ambition to return to an elite university where I once was a fish out of water and to continue developing the necessary capitals to fit in.

## Appendices

Appendix one: Children looked after in England (including adoption and care leavers) year ending 31 March 2014 (DfE, 2014a).



Source DfE (2014a, p 5) Available at:

[https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/359277/SFR36\\_2014\\_Text.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/359277/SFR36_2014_Text.pdf)

## **Appendix two: Definitions of care leavers produced by English Universities**

The below examples are the first 7 hits from a google search using the term “university care leaver” produced by English Universities. More examples could be included, but even the first 7 definitions show variation in relation to definitions and eligibility for types of support.

**Durham University (2018):** “We particularly welcome applications from those who have spent time in care”. Beyond this no specific definition was found.

**Oxford University (2018):** “The University of Oxford is committed to supporting students from a care background to ensure that you receive the help you need in order to have a successful university experience.

**Birmingham University (2018):** “A care leaver is defined as a young person over the age of 16 who has been in care of the local authority and/or Health & Social Care Trust for at least 13 weeks since the age of 14”.

**York University (2018):** If you answered 'yes' to the question on your UCAS form that asked if you have ever been in care, UCAS will have let us know and following this you should have received an email from us. We offer a Care Leavers' Bursary to students who meet ALL of the following criteria:

You are studying an Undergraduate degree course

You are a Home UK student

You will be under 25 on the first day of your university course

For any three-month period ending after your 16th birthday and before the first day of the first academic year of your course you have been in the custody of, in legal care of, or have been given accommodation by a Local Authority BUT you have not been under the legal care of your parents

**University of Bristol (2018):** The University of Bristol provides support to care leavers interested in Higher Education. No specific definition was found

**University of Sheffield (2018): Care Leaver:** A person aged 25 or under, who has been looked after by a local authority for at least 13 weeks since the age of 14; and who was looked after by the local authority at school-leaving age or after that date.

**Staffordshire University (2018):** “A care leaver is defined as a person aged 25 or under, who has been looked after by a local authority for at least 13 weeks since the age of 14; and who was looked after by the local authority at school-leaving age or after that date”.

**University of Cumbria:** Are you a Care Leaver? The level of support young people receive depends on their status as a Care Leaver. The following are the defined status that the University of Cumbria will support.

*Eligible child* - A child aged 16 and 17 who has been looked after for at least 13 weeks since the age of 14 and who is still looked after.

*Relevant child* - A child aged 16 and 17 who has been looked after for at least 13 weeks since the age of 14 and who has already left care.

*Former relevant child* - A young person over 18 who was previously ‘eligible’ or ‘relevant’. Local authorities support this group at least until age 21 or until 25 if in education or training.

*Qualifying child* - Any young person under 21 (or 24 if in education or training) who ceases to be looked after or accommodated in a variety of other settings, or privately fostered, after the age of 16. This also includes young people who are under a special guardianship order.

Remember in order for the University of Cumbria to know you are a care leaver you need to tick the box on your UCAS application to let us know that you have been in care. We also request that you send



us evidence that you have spent time in care. This can be an email or letter from: Social Worker; Social Services; Local Authority; Pathway Team; Previous Tutor at Sixth Form/College; Local GP.

### **Appendix three: Recruitment Flier**

**You are invited to take part in a Doctoral Research Study.**

**I am interested in the experiences of students in University who have been in looked after care.**



This study is primarily part of a Doctoral thesis, but your contribution may add to the very small body of knowledge in the UK about university students who have been in care.

Taking Part!

You will be asked to give a small amount of time (about 90 minutes) to meet for two informal individual interviews.

This is a chance to tell your story about your experience of care and how this links to your journey in education.

You will be consulted throughout the research process.

Your confidentiality will be guarded.

**If you are interested in taking part, please contact me for more information.**

#### **Researcher Details:**

**Lynette Harland** [Lynette.harland@northumbria.ac.uk](mailto:Lynette.harland@northumbria.ac.uk)

Research Supervisors: Professor Ray Land

[Ray.land@durham.ac.uk](mailto:Ray.land@durham.ac.uk)

Dr Jonathan Tummons

[Jonathan.tummons@durham.ac.uk](mailto:Jonathan.tummons@durham.ac.uk)

## **Appendix four: Interview Schedule**

(Single initial narrative question SQUIN) As a care leaver please tell me about your journey into university and your experience of being a university student.

Further questions, where needed, were flexible and responded to the nature of discussion generated. Generally, these questions related to exploring the research questions.

How do you feel your background relates to going to university?

(prompts around the impact of family, carers, professionals)

How does your background and prior experience impact on you at university?

(prompts around educational experience, social, cultural and economic attributes)

What are your plans for the future?

(prompts around future at university and in relation to after university)

## Appendix five: Participant information and consent form

Shaped by the past, creating the future



[DATE]

### Participant Information Sheet

**Title:** You are invited to take part in a research study: "Graduating from Care: A narrative study of the experiences and identities of University students who have been in the care system in the North East of England".

Please read this form carefully and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

The study is conducted by Lynette Harland as part of her EdD studies at Durham University. This research project is supervised by Professor Ray Land ([Ray.land@durham.ac.uk](mailto:Ray.land@durham.ac.uk)) from the School of Education at Durham University.

The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences and identities of University students who have experience of being cared for in the Looked After Care System. If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to take part in individual interviews where the researcher will ask for your narratives / stories about how your experience of the Looked After Care system has influenced your identity and experience of being a University student.

Your participation in this study will take approximately 60-120 minutes and will be voice recorded.

You are free to decide whether or not to participate. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time without any negative consequences for you.

All responses you give or other data collected will be kept confidential. The records of this study will be kept secure and private. All files containing any information you give are password protected. In any research report that may be published, no information will be included that will make it possible to identify you individually. There will be no way to connect your name to your responses at any time during or after the study.

\* **FUNDING.** The study is not funded, but the researcher may access research grants to support the study. These will not influence the study in any way.

\* **REIMBURSEMENT** For your participation, you will be compensated for out of pocket expenses and any travel or subsistence costs will also be covered.

If you have any questions, requests or concerns regarding this research, please contact me via email at [lynette.harland@durham.ac.uk](mailto:lynette.harland@durham.ac.uk)

This study has been reviewed and approved by the School of Education Ethics Sub-Committee at Durham University (date of approval: 5 November 2015)

Lynette Harland / SIGNATURE]

\* delete if not applicable

Leazes Road  
Durham City, DH1 1TA

Telephone +44 (0)191 334 2000 Fax +44 (0)191 334 8311  
[www.durham.ac.uk](http://www.durham.ac.uk)

Durham University is the trading name of the University of Durham

#### Declaration of Informed Consent

- I agree to participate in this study, the purpose of which is to explore the experience and identities of University students who have experience of being cared for in the Looked After care System.
- I have read the participant information sheet and understand the information provided.
- I have been informed that I may decline to answer any questions or withdraw from the study without penalty of any kind.
- I have been informed that all of my responses will be kept confidential and secure, and that I will not be identified in any report or other publication resulting from this research.
- I have been informed that the investigator will answer any questions regarding the study and its procedures. Lynette Harland, School of Education, Durham University can be contacted via email: [lynette.harland@durham.ac.uk](mailto:lynette.harland@durham.ac.uk)
- I will be provided with a copy of this form for my records.

Any concerns about this study should be addressed to the Ethics Sub-Committee of the School of Education, Durham University via email (Sheena Smith, School of Education, tel. (0191) 334 8403, e-mail: [Sheena.Smith@Durham.ac.uk](mailto:Sheena.Smith@Durham.ac.uk)).

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Date	Participant Name (please print)	Participant Signature
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I certify that I have presented the above information to the participant and secured his or her consent.

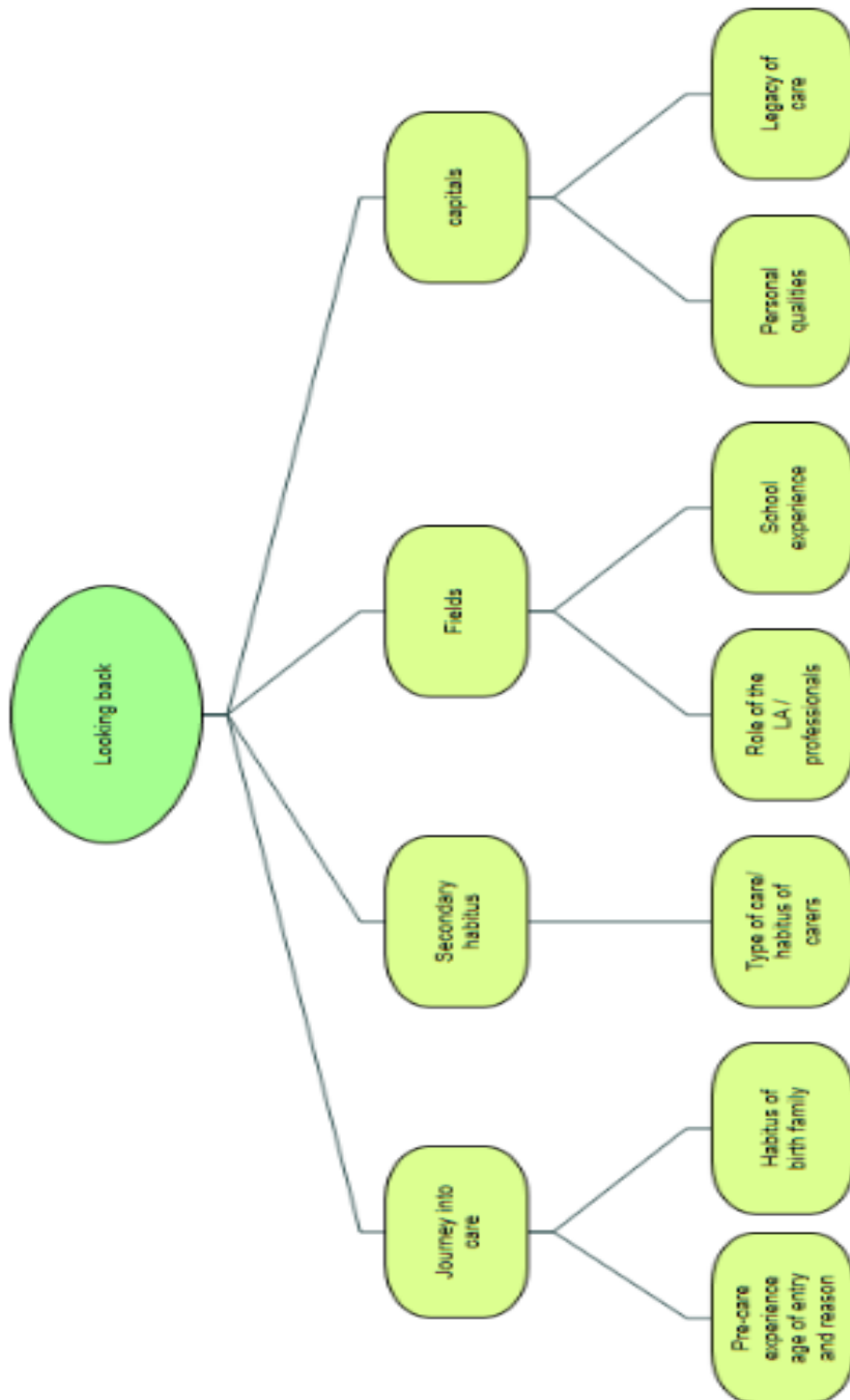
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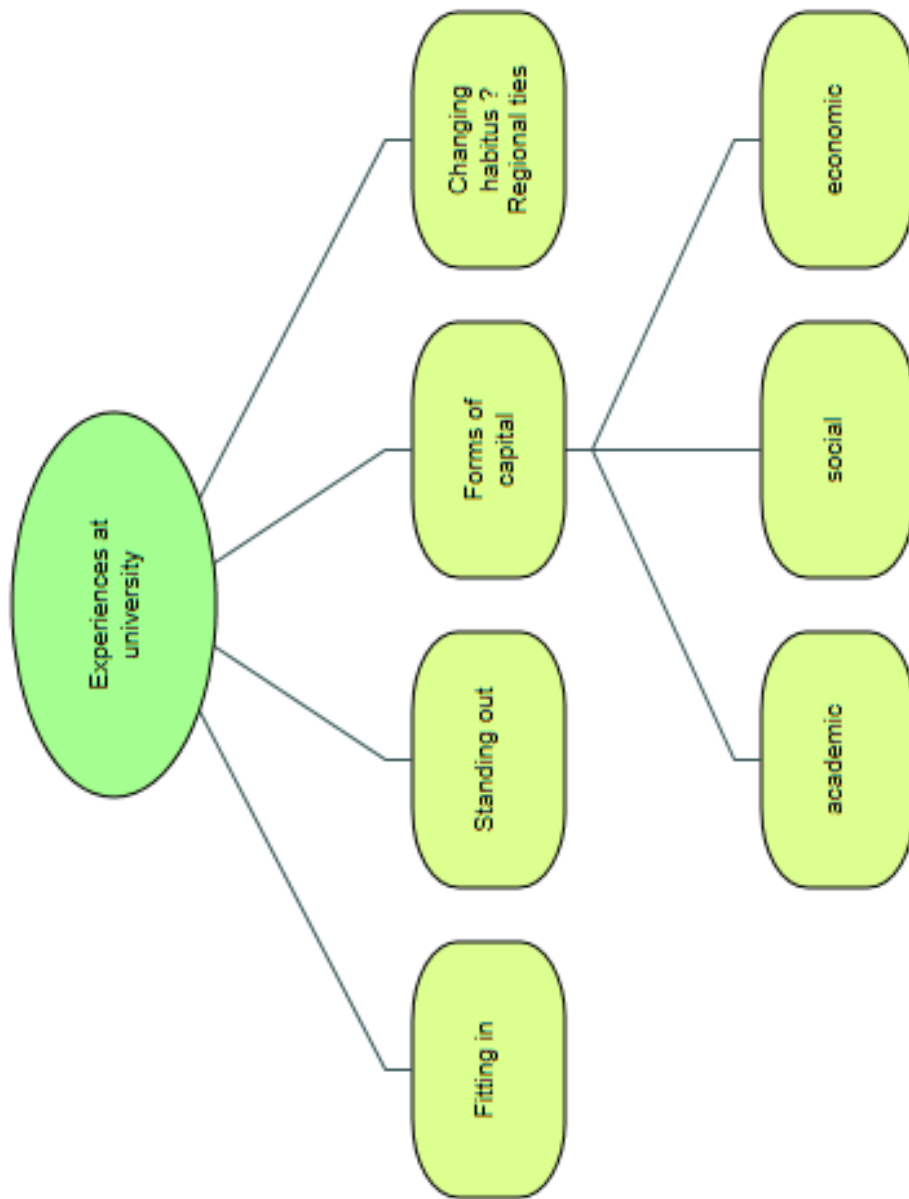
Date	Signature of Investigator
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## Appendix six: Screen shot of the initial NVivo™ Codes

Look for	Search In	Nodes	Find Now	Clear	Advanced Find
<b>Nodes</b>					
Name	References	Created On	Created By	Modified On	Modified By
assets	7	15 30/05/2018 16:24	LHS	04/06/2018 15:26	LHS
barriers to support	2	5 29/05/2018 15:06	LHS	31/05/2018 15:51	LHS
care leaver support at university	7	14 29/05/2018 14:57	LHS	04/06/2018 15:29	LHS
choice of course	6	9 29/05/2018 14:56	LHS	04/06/2018 15:24	LHS
disclosure of care status	8	12 29/05/2018 14:58	LHS	04/06/2018 15:27	LHS
experience at university	8	15 29/05/2018 14:58	LHS	04/06/2018 15:28	LHS
experience in care	9	21 29/05/2018 14:50	LHS	04/06/2018 15:23	LHS
finances	8	16 29/05/2018 14:53	LHS	04/06/2018 15:24	LHS
future	9	15 29/05/2018 15:10	LHS	04/06/2018 15:26	LHS
habitus of birth family	9	26 29/05/2018 15:01	LHS	04/06/2018 15:24	LHS
Habitus of carers	8	12 29/05/2018 15:00	LHS	04/06/2018 15:24	LHS
identity	6	17 29/05/2018 14:51	LHS	31/05/2018 15:53	LHS
Journey pre-university	3	6 29/05/2018 14:52	LHS	04/06/2018 15:21	LHS
Lack of control	3	4 29/05/2018 15:02	LHS	31/05/2018 15:48	LHS
legacy of care	6	18 29/05/2018 14:52	LHS	04/06/2018 15:27	LHS
motivation to complete university	7	15 29/05/2018 14:55	LHS	04/06/2018 15:22	LHS
past history	2	2 29/05/2018 15:04	LHS	04/06/2018 15:20	LHS
Pre care experience	8	8 29/05/2018 14:47	LHS	04/06/2018 15:23	LHS
preparing for university	6	8 29/05/2018 14:53	LHS	04/06/2018 15:25	LHS
Reason for taking part in study	4	6 31/05/2018 15:13	LHS	04/06/2018 15:29	LHS
Role models	3	4 29/05/2018 15:03	LHS	31/05/2018 15:38	LHS
school experience labelling	4	4 29/05/2018 14:49	LHS	04/06/2018 15:28	LHS
school FE qualifications	8	16 29/05/2018 14:50	LHS	04/06/2018 15:23	LHS
stability of school	5	12 30/05/2018 16:20	LHS	31/05/2018 15:56	LHS
stereotyping	6	15 29/05/2018 15:09	LHS	04/06/2018 15:27	LHS
Support networks	5	8 30/05/2018 16:16	LHS	31/05/2018 15:52	LHS
support whilst at university	4	7 29/05/2018 14:54	LHS	31/05/2018 15:52	LHS
truthfulness	1	1 29/05/2018 15:01	LHS	29/05/2018 15:01	LHS

## Appendix seven: NVivo™ Theme Maps







## **Appendix eight: Example transcript, field notes and post interview thoughts**

Georgia

(SQUIN) LS As a care leaver - tell me about your journey into university and your experience of being a university student

Oh – well, erm, it's quite a long story really. Long pause.

Well, erm, I think when I look back to being young, going to university wasn't really anything that would come up. For people like me, it just never, well it wasn't part of life. Pause

I remember when I left school it was just really about getting a job and earning some money and so university wasn't.... but to be fair, even if it was... well because I left school with nothing – no qualifications – then I wouldn't be able to do that anyway. So, I just, well one of my friends and me a job in a local supermarket – so I just stayed in that really.

I can always remember though wanting to do something more – having more of a proper job, a career and so that's really why I think I got into nursing. I just really thought it would be something I could be good at and that I would enjoy doing ....I suppose at the time, I felt frustrated by working in the shop – I mean the people were nice and I did have friends and that, but it wasn't really fulfilling, you never felt you had done anything, well I mean, I suppose I'm not trying to say it isn't a worthwhile job, but for me, I did want to feel like I'd done something to help someone or to make a difference to them, you know.

Pause.

So – erm, so why did I get to university -well to be honest I'm 48 now and have just started at university. It's been quite a long journey really because when I first was working I just thought because I'd left school with no O Levels I wouldn't be able to do nursing, but then one of my friends said she knew someone who had done a test to get in and had passed. So that really led me to look into it and see if I could do the same thing. I think as well because I'd gotten married so young – I was only 18 and had a husband – it would have been easier to drift along and stay in the shop, but to be honest, when I told

him about it he was over the moon and really supported me to go for it. So, my friend put me in touch with her friend and I got to know about what you had to do and how old you had to be – so I just really stayed in the shop until I was old enough to do the entry test. At the time I was worried I would fail, but I got in.... I remember thinking at the time how amazing it was and how proud I would be to get my nursing...

Pause

LS – so you became a nurse – was that at a university?

Yes – I got through the training and worked as a nurse in the same area until now – starting this course – so a long time – over 20 years, but no, my training, well I'm not sure what the level was really – it was different then, before project 2000 and so we were just based in the local hospital (name of hospital) and mainly worked in practice, with some blocks of teaching and then practice exams and tests. It's so different to the students we train now – they are much more at university than we ever were – more like what I'm doing now. So, yes, I just did it and I loved it and passed...and then got a job in special care babies which is where I've been since and have really loved my job..... but I suppose in the last few years, now my kids are up and I'm a Gran, I've been able to think more about what I want to do and trying to progress and that's really why I've been trying to prepare for this course for a while to be a health visitor. So over the last couple of years I've done some extra courses within my nursing and one of them was a degree level module, which I got a really good mark for – so that's really what's motivated me to now start to think – I can do this, I'm a good nurse and I can actually study and do a degree and make up for that time where I left school with no qualifications and not much of a future really.

It was really hard, but my kids were up and having children of their own and I wanted to do something for me.....to prove that I could do it. Going to university wasn't something people like me did back then...but I'm here and I'm doing it. It's amazing.

LS – so, the course is a progression in terms of your role?

Yes – it's that and I suppose as well, more probably, it's the degree, the qualification.

LS –how do you think your background relates to going to university?

Erm, well, it's a long time ago now really and I'm a different person, but when I think back to how I felt at the time I suppose we – well me and my sister had a difficult time, cos my mam was – well she was just chaotic really. She always had a new partner and most of them were – well we just hated them and there was lots of violence and arguing and swearing, so we would see all of that...and my Gran was about, but what could she do really? I know social services were involved from us being quite young and I think it was only when my sister got hurt – she had an unexplained fractured femur – so that was when we were put into care and went to stay with Gran – because my mam said it wasn't her, but wouldn't say how it had happened.

So – that was difficult, but we did like living with Gran and we were there until I was about 8 – so for about 2 years. But after that we had to go into foster care because Gran was unwell and couldn't really manage with 2 young kids. So that was tough, but we got to stay together and the family we lived with were nice and they did look after us and made sure we saw Gran and had the things we needed. Thinking about it now – it was better in lots of ways.... It would probably have been better if we'd left Mam sooner....

Long pause

LS – so tell me about how being in care influenced your education.

Well – I think in some ways in a positive way, but I suppose in others, because of what had gone on before, well I think me, and my sister were both quite shy. I think we were scared of mixing and scared of adults, I suppose. I did enjoy school, but I don't think it had ever been something that had been encouraged or at the time we even thought of as important. I remember when we did settle into school for me the main thing was to try and get along with people and to be popular – so I suppose that was at the expense of the school work.... Don't

get me wrong, I was bright and could talk about things, but actually doing the written work and exams, at the time, I'm not sure really...it just didn't happen.

LS – how did your family background influence your journey into university?

Well certainly not my mam, definitely not, she never worked or not that I know of and didn't have any qualifications herself – so -it wasn't really something I remember.... And I think, well Gran did do her best to get us to school, but again, I think it was - but when you go into care, well our foster carers – yes, they did in a way. They made sure we went and had what we needed, but I don't think they were focussed on getting qualifications as such...they didn't really have formal qualifications themselves and so it was more about making sure you went, and you knew you had to get a job at the end of it.

Tell me about what made you choose this university and this course.

Well it wasn't really a choice in terms of the university. When I applied to get on the course, we were interviewed by the local trust, who sponsor us to do the course. So, because of that, this university, is really the only one locally. I suppose you could apply to other areas, but because of where I live and my family, I do need to stay where I am. As for the course, well it's the only course you can do where you train to be a health visitor – so it's more about that than anything else and, like I said before, it's about the fees and also being paid to do the training. I know that years ago the course wasn't degree level, but all health visitors have to have a degree now and some in our group are doing the course at master's level. For me, the main thing was to progress in my nursing and I wanted to be a health visitor – so that's it really in terms of choice.

LS – can you tell me about your university experience?

I don't know really, erm.. I'm really pleased to be here and just so grateful for the chance. I know a lot of students now have to pay their fees and it's such a lot of money now, but because of the nature of our course, we are fully funded and get paid as a staff nurse for doing it. As well, at the end, although we are not guaranteed a job, everyone always gets one – so again, we know there is something worthwhile at the end of it. To be honest, if it wasn't for the funding

and being paid, it's not something I think I would be able to do and I think that would be the same for the rest of our group – it must put a lot of people off.

So, what was the rest of your question – I don't know if I answered it.

LS – it was just about your experience at university.

I think our course is hard because we work in practice to learn the job, as well as studying and the entire degree is in 1 year – so it really is a lot of hard work. I think being at university is pretty good, there is a lot of support on the campus from the library and the staff and tutors, but it is tough. Doing the single module helped me because I already knew my way about and how to use all of the electronic systems and the referencing, but if it was all new, I think it would be really, really hard. I think the module I did before and doing so well in it has really helped and to be honest, my marks have all been really quite high, apart from one, that I got 68 for – so I am kind of hoping I could get a first, because the last module counted twice. To be honest, we all say we want to pass and we do, but imagine a first, it would just be – wow, not many get one! So – I'm just really going to keep trying my best really...

LS – how do you feel your background has influenced your time at university?

Long pause – I'm not 100% sure, if I'm honest. I think it helps and it hinders....not just this, but everything really.... I think as I've gotten older, I've dealt with things better, but if I'm being honest – I don't think you can ever move away from the things you experience when you are young. In my job and learning to be a health visitor I see people in the same situation and obviously want to try to help, which is why I want to do the job, but you can see the impact and imagine how the children are feeling and think about the support they might need. I think when you are let down, maybe not even at the time, but later, you think, why did that happen, why didn't my mam look after me...things like that really. So, I think it influences every part of your life.

Pause. ... especially being a parent, you want your own kids to have a better life, and mine did – they've all done really well, my daughter is a midwife and has children herself and is happy and settled and we are really close. Looking back, I think I wanted to make sure that they had a stable upbringing and I

suppose that I was someone they could be proud of..... (upset – looks a little bit tearful)...I remember being feeling let down and I just felt I suppose embarrassed that my mam couldn't look after us... and we had to go into care.

LS – did being in care influence your education?

I think looking back at school – when we changed schools, yes, we were – not singled out as such, but people knew we were in care. I didn't realise at the time, but if I look back now, I think it does affect things and I'm conscious of that in my job..

LS – can you tell me more about that?

Well – just ..I think expectations are lower – for children in care – so you don't expect them to succeed – or I don't...for me – I was bright, but I can't remember anyone ever trying to help me to focus or try to do better ...it was just ok to drift along.

LS what about here at university – did you disclose your care status?

I'm not sure if I did to be honest – I don't think it ever came up....so – no, but I do talk about it sometimes – to the people I'm closer to at university....although, it's a long time ago now so..

LS has the university ever contacted you about being a care leaver?

No – I definitely haven't been contacted – I honestly don't think they would know.

LS – I think usually universities focus on those 25 and under in terms of care leaver status – how do you feel about that?

Really – to be honest – it's not something I've ever thought about, but I suppose younger people in care or who are leaving care.. well – I suppose a lot of university students are quite young, I'll be one of the older ones, but yes, I imagine they might need more help. I mean, age doesn't necessarily mean there isn't an impact. For me one of the biggest things was always confidence – I always think everyone else is better than me, but when I do things, I'm actually quite good. So, yes, working on things like that could be helpful.

LS – are there any positive aspects to having been in care – things that have helped you?

In some ways, I think when you are in care – so, like I said earlier, I was pretty good at getting on with people. So, when we went into foster care, we had to settle in and become part of a family, fit in to a new school and meet all these professionals – so I think that does help you – to get along and I suppose to adapt.

I think it can also help you to be resilient – so bouncing back and I suppose just being able to cope at whatever life throws at you. I think I've been one of the lucky ones really, because I met my husband quite young and we've had a happy and stable life – so whether that is part of being in care -looking for stability – or maybe one of those things, but it has been good for me..well for all of my family.

I think, as well, what it has done for me, is when I left school, I think I did realise that I wanted a job that helped others and I think that's why I'm now doing this course. You see some awful things in health visiting, much worse than I ever experienced – but I think that has helped me to cope with the challenges of the course and the job and to think about ...I don't know, just coping with the emotion of it....

What future do you see for yourself after university?

Oh, I think just being a health visitor and just getting on with life really. I think – well I don't think I'll do anything else after this – just keep up to date and enjoy the job really. I think after this, if – well hopefully when I get my degree, it will be just amazing and I think that will be more than I ever hoped for....I think it also proves that being in care doesn't mean you can achieve and have goals – it might sometimes make it a bit harder, but it doesn't have to stop you – you can do it – you might have to go the longer way round like I did, but you can get there in the end....

LS – is there anything else you feel may be relevant to add?

No – I don't think so – I just hope I've been able to help and to give you the information you need really.

Closing discussion and thanks for taking part. Date and time of next interview – agreed for telephone interview at Georgia's request.

Telephone interview.

Opening discussion and welcome to interview

LS – so, after our last meeting – were there any points or comments you wanted to add about any of the issues we discussed?

Well – I think, when I went away, I did reflect on the interview and I suppose, well, when I spoke to my husband - in a way, it did bring back some memories about the past that were quite difficult. I think, being let down by your parents, does, like I said, it does have...well a long-lasting impact. I think it affects your confidence, like I said before, but who you are as a person...so, in a sense your identity – you're seen as a foster kid and that can mean – I think I said this last time, that expectations of you are less than for other children who aren't in care... I also think when you asked about did I disclose it...well, when I've thought about it, you know in my nurse training and my work as a nurse, I don't think I have disclosed it generally – so maybe, unless I've become close friends with someone – I'm not sure if I would tell people – not so much now, as it doesn't matter, but when I was young, I wouldn't necessarily be thinking it would be something to share.

LS – why is that?

Well, to be truthful, I suppose, it was...

I suppose, it was maybe embarrassment. Possibly, not wanting people to think badly, not badly, but I don't know, maybe judge it. I'm not really sure – it was still a bit raw really. I was just focusing on trying to do my nursing and that was the main thing.

LS – did you think about any more ways that it may have influenced your education?

I suppose just what I said last time – that expectations would be lower...I think from my background anyway, we were quite poor, my mam was on benefits and we lived in a council house, so went to the local school – so going into



care didn't change that – but we did move schools, which is difficult. I know that we were lucky, because some children move time after time – we only had one foster placement, which was a nice one. I think – this is what I've been thinking for myself – is whether health and social care professionals push school enough – looking back, I don't remember that – I think as long as you went they were happy, but in my work now with kids who are in care – do we push it enough? I just know there was no emphasis on resitting O Level's to get higher grades in Maths and English – that would have helped me get into nursing, although, I was lucky, we could still do the entrance test – that wouldn't happen now.

LS – can you add anything in relation to being a student now?

I think because I'm older and have had a well-established career as a nurse, doing this course, is the next step for me, but maybe for younger students, doing something else, it might be a challenge. I think most of the issues I had when I was young, they are sort of still there in one sense, but not in another – so being shy and not having confidence – my nursing has over the years really helped with that, because of the nature of the job. I think as well because you have to stay up to date in nursing, there is always a course to do or CPD, so for me, it's been a gradual progression to this course. I'm not a young person living away from my local area, I'm going home every night to my husband. To be honest though – everyone on my course is doing that too – so we are all qualified nurses with our own homes, families etc. I think the youngest person on our course is 26 – so- we are very different to other university programmes – it's not really like being a traditional student. I think in that sense – I'm just the same as everyone else is here, so we all just muddle along together and have similar issues and...yes. I think I just fit in with everyone here really.

LS – so, do you think the nature of the course and your fellow students are the key factor that help you to fit in?

Yes, I think so – I mean we all have differences – you know, some people have done a lot of studying, but some haven't. A lot of us are in our 40's and have worked in the NHS for years, so yes, there are differences, but mostly we are

just nurses who want to develop and maybe change the direction of our job and I think because of our course and where we study, we don't really mix with the wider campus – in the school of health it's just nursing, social work, physio's and so everyone is doing a professional course – so maybe that makes it different too – it's more of a mix of theory and practice and the students are more mixed – lots of mature students and not just 18 year olds..

LS in your last interview – you said you hadn't had any support from the university in relation to being a care leaver – do you have any more thoughts about that?

I don't think so – well not for me.. I think, well, just because of what I've said – I don't really need anything myself. I think, as you said, I wouldn't fit into that anyway....I mean I do think that is quite difficult anyway – how can you say someone who is 24 needs support and someone who is 25 doesn't? But I think there are always cut offs. I do think though, that maybe younger students may need more support. I was thinking what I said about going home every night to my family – I don't know what young people from care would do – what about holidays and things like that? Maybe that would be an issue.....and I suppose, well, depending on why they've been in care – would there be any on-going issues? I think courses like this one – might be a challenge for some people who've been fostered because you are exposed to safeguarding – again, I'm not sure whether that would be an issue. I suppose it's treating people as individuals and making sure if they need support they know where to go. We are quite lucky on our course, because we all have a personal tutor – they see us regularly and we know we can get in touch about anything that's affecting us. We also have a practice mentor and so, we can get support there too. I'm not sure if that is the same on all courses – I know our numbers are small – there are only 16 in the group, but on pre-reg nursing I think they have over 300.

I think support though – that should be there....

LS – do you have any other thoughts about being in care and education?

I'm not sure if I can add anything really. I think for me, in my job now, I want to get across to children in care that they can have a positive future. I know that

a lot of children in care don't succeed and like me might not leave school with good qualifications, but I think it's about encouraging them to think about the future, to try and get into something, a job or training that they are interested in and I suppose.....well –making them feel worthwhile. Hopefully research like yours can also be useful – because that can show people that we can get to university and we can get good jobs and we can have good lives with things to look forward to...

Pause

LS is there anything else you want to add?

I think that's about it really – that's the main point..

Closing discussion and thanks for taking part and contact details re-iterated should Georgia wish to add anything to her narrative.

Questions invited from Georgia about the research

## Georgia

Beginning long pause - / late too  
y falling &  
past.

Not to people else me!

No quals - job - unhappy

↳ Entry test nothing.

→ LU = no quals - prep for course

"Amazing" to be at uni.

No encouragement for ed. -

family / slw etc.

Mom no quals / work.

- uni - local / family sponsorship

Paid to attend -

aware of financial hardship

SO / SO course

Campus - fellow su club

Good marks

Background confidence / also

helpful - gets on 1/2 people

CLL status not signif issue

→ get there in the end.

→ Quiet, unassuming - gets on with everyone - peers - turned to adapting / being in?

→ Long journey into the - CPD = ↑ confidence and also entry requirements

→ ? uncomfortable talking about past → ? new identity?

→ Enjoying course - well prepped → prev nursing - suited to her prev experience in nursing.

- history of lower expectations

- close family network i.e. grandchildren, husband

- LIT to be least visible - vocational.

Lily - 2 / asked about  
her case notes  
to read, read about  
her father -  
what the

- called about issues she saw  
in last interview -
- re-ut did for core en testing  
me?
- Stereotypes - teacher - got remember  
to def stereotype when she  
trace
- dogs + family / system unponed she ✓  
to check → issues & finance

- check / doesn't see Jerry → Lily

- school / ~~map~~ → MTS job  
unhappy - Niomata will  
aspire?

→ desire to study  
uni - money

- Identity - I came. / you can burn  
my candle
- person (I don't have one -

After → why did Lily ask me  
questions? I.e. do you remember what  
happened with my bed  
also teacher -

- checking I was listening??

## Appendix nine: Ethical approval confirmation letter



Shaped by the past, creating the future

6 November 2015

Lynette Harland  
EdD

[Lynette.harland@durham](mailto:Lynette.harland@durham)

Dear Lynette

**Graduating from Care: A narrative study of the experiences and identities of University students who have been in the care system in the North East of England**

I am pleased to inform you that your application for ethical approval for the above research has been approved by the School of Education Ethics Committee. May we take this opportunity to wish you good luck with your research.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "P. M. Holmes".

Dr. P. Holmes  
Chair of School of Education Ethics Committee

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