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Abstract

Commuting to class: an ethnography of commuter students' experiences of UK Higher Education.

Emma Maslin

In UK Higher Education (HE) around a quarter of undergraduate students are considered 'commuters' yet little is still known about this group, largely due to the absence of a sector-agreed definition and accompanying sector-wide data. This thesis seeks to address this gap in the literature through exploring the lived experiences of commuter students in HE at three universities in the North of England. Through an innovative combination of methods I deepen known understanding of what being a commuter student is like through exploring not just how commuter students experience their commute, but their interaction with the places and spaces that collectively influence their wider university experience. Using actor-network theory (ANT) in combination with the multi-sited ethnography (MSE) this thesis employs also enables identification of the networks of people and things that commuter students are situated in that affect their commuting practices. The findings of this thesis highlight how the deficit narrative previously purveyed around commuter students' experiences do not reflect the complexity and heterogeneity that permeates across their lived experiences of travel, their arrival on campus, experiences of their academic studies and interaction with wider university life. Further research is necessary across different institutions and regions to continue building a richer understanding of what it is like to be a commuter student in the UK.

Commuting to class: an ethnography of commuter students’ experiences of UK Higher Education.

This thesis is submitted to the School of Education, Durham University

for the qualification of Doctor of Philosophy
by
Emma Louise Maslin

2024

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List of Abbreviations

Actor-network theory	ANT
Access and participation plan	APP
Black, asian and minority ethnic students	BAME
Coronavirus pandemic	COVID-19
Department for Business, Innovation and Skills	DfBIS
Department for Education	DfE
Department for Transport	DfT
Extra-curricular activity	ECA
Higher education	HE
Higher Education Funding Council for England	HEFCE
Higher education institution	HEI
Higher Education Statistics Agency	HESA
Multi-sited ethnography	MSE
National Union of Students	NUS
Office for National Statistics	ONS
Office for Students	OfS
Teaching Excellence Framework	TEF
Travel to work area	TTWA
University and Colleges Admissions Service	UCAS
University College London	UCL
Widening participation	WP

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Chapter One: The commuter student landscape

1.1. Introduction to the research

Prior to this research I was a widening participation (WP) practitioner at a university in the North of England, tasked with creating and developing programmes of support for mature students, student parents and commuter students enrolled at the university. These programmes were designed to complement the university student services provision of wellbeing and disability support and improve the retention of WP students who were statistically considered more likely to drop out of university (Wainwright et al., 2020). On starting the role I asked my manager some preliminary questions to inform my programme planning, namely in regards to how 'commuter student' was defined and the number currently at the institution. At this point, I was met with a blank face and the phrase 'we don't know, but we know there's a lot [of commuters]'.

This is not an unusual statement within a wider higher education (HE) context. The absence of a sector-agreed definition as to what constitutes a 'commuter student' means it is left to individual institutions to initially decide how to define this student group (Maguire & Morris, 2018; Thomas, 2020). Section 1.2 will discuss more thoroughly the rationale behind the terminology and definition of 'commuter student' used in my research. Until then, the phrase 'commuter student' broadly refers to any student who lives in the parental or own home as opposed to university-owned or privately maintained student accommodation.

Where a definition is instated within an institution, providers have opportunity to subsequently collect data on this student group. In research by the Sutton Trust, around a quarter of students in higher education institutions (HEIs) in the UK were found to commute to university in 2014/15 with notable regional variations in England; students living in the North East and more generally the North of England were more likely to be commuter students than their southern peers (Donnelly & Gamsu, 2018). This is with the exception of

London, the region of England with the second highest proportion of commuter students within their student population after the North East. Multiple studies since this report have explored the experiences of commuter students in London (Chappell et al., 2020; London Higher, 2019; Thomas, 2019), yet there remains an absence of research looking to understand commuter student experiences in the North East of England, notable given the high percentage of commuter students in this region. This highlighted to me the importance of work to be done in this area to understand this student group in this specific context and thus formed the motivation of this work in the North of England more broadly.

1.1.1. Setting the scene

It is important to first review the historical underpinnings of HE student mobility in England in order to better contextualise contemporary mobility trends, including that of commuting to university (Holdsworth, 2009b). At the establishment of Oxford and Cambridge as the first universities in England in the 11th and 13th century respectively, it was the expectation that students live in accommodation to be fully immersed into the scholarly community whilst also instilling behavioural and academic discipline (Whyte, 2019). This approach continued in the 19th century with some institutions yet not others. The University of Durham, for example, was modelled and based on the same student residential expectations as Oxford University (Stevens, 2005). Yet in the design of University College London (UCL) shortly before Durham's establishment, student accommodation did not feature (Andrews, 2018). Whilst UCL's approach was also due the universities' poor finances at the time (Whyte, 2019), the establishment of the wider University of London and the University of Manchester were both examples where student accommodation was notably absent, the premise being that it was unnecessary for students to live at university for their studies (Holdsworth, 2009b). Consequently, commuting to university from home was becoming the assumed mode of university access for the incoming student population across the majority of the established universities during the mid-19th century.

In the 1940s just under half of the student population remained in the parental home for their university studies (Maguire & Morris, 2018). However, at this time living in university accommodation became increasingly recognised for offering a student culture that emphasised participation in sports, societies and consequently community building with their peers (Tight, 2011). Offering live-in facilities also provided greater financial security for institutions by being able to attract larger numbers of students to the university than simply those local to the area (Whyte, 2019).

Two key policies further contributed to the living situation of students during the mid-20th century. The 1960 Anderson report, which was the culmination of a review into the grant system for first-time undergraduate students, recommended that student maintenance grants should be offered regardless of financial background to enable students to live in university accommodation (Anderson, 1960), a recommendation that was subsequently implemented by 1962. Three years later the 1963 Robbins Report, following an enquiry into the future of higher education, emphasised the need for university expansion in England (Robbins, 1963). The reports combined gave more students both the opportunity to study for a degree course and also the financial backing to live in student accommodation. This contributed to a decline in the number of students living in the parental home for university, with around 8% of students living in the parental home by the mid-1980s (HEFCE, 2009).

By the 1990s, the HE landscape had undergone significant change. The 1992 Further and Higher Education Act by providing polytechnic institutions with university status and thus expanding the university places available (Bathmaker, 2003) consequently led to a doubling of the university student population (Stevens, 2005), a trajectory supported by the New Labour government who pledged to enable 50% of young adults to enter university (Blair, 1999). The growth in the diversity of institutions thus enabled students to study a wider subject curriculum, bringing with it a significant expansion of part-time and distance provision (Taylor, 2003).

Despite greater diversity offered by HEIs in relation to subjects on offer and delivery mode, thus broadening the HE student demographic, this did not automatically shift expectations of student living; moving away for university remained an expectation with living at home thus considered an "inferior model of participation in HE" (Holdsworth, 2006, pp. 495-496). This is in spite of previous student mobility trends which found living away from home to be a minority form of HE participation at particular points during the 20th century. This perspective of certain mobility practices as being superior to others thus arguably links not to the statistical mobility trends but instead to a particular set of ideals prescribed to university participation from other sectors of the English education model.

Providing university accommodation at universities during the 19th century was in part a mirroring of the independent English boarding schools that often fed into the elite universities of Oxford and Cambridge (Whyte, 2019). Independent boarding schools are, barring those offering a small number of scholarships, for the privileged few able to afford this type of education; a particular sub-set of fee-paying schools that educate roughly 0.7% of children aged 11-18 in England and cost an average of £13,002 per term (ISC, 2023). Despite educating a minute percentage of the secondary school-aged population, students attending a boarding school are more likely to achieve higher academic grades (Foliano et al., 2019) with students who attend fee-paying schools in general substantially more likely to progress into elite professions than those who do not (The Sutton Trust, 2019). It was thought therefore that by having HE provision mimic the accommodation model where students move away from home for study, this would provide students irrespective of background with opportunities to participate in the wider university experience and gain independence in a way that living at home could not provide (Whyte, 2019).

This approach is argued by some scholars as to have simply stratified HE participation. Rather than being an option available to all students irrespective of background, moving away to attend university is argued by

such as Donnelly and Gamsu (2020) as to have remained a preserve of the privileged that are able to do so. Regardless, living away from home for university continues to be considered the default option for students undertaking their undergraduate studies at university and thus considered “a deep-seated part of the English culture” (DfE, 2019, p. 195).

1.1.2. Contemporary context and parameters of the research

Since 2017 students originally from England and choosing to study full-time at public universities in the UK pay £9250 per year in tuition fees, an amount which can be covered by a tuition fee loan irrespective of a student’s household income (UCAS, 2024b). However, the amount of maintenance loan in which English students studying a full-time course are eligible to receive predicates on multiple factors: household income, residential status, university location and age at the start of study (Gov.uk, 2024a). For example for the 2022-23 academic year when majority of the fieldwork took place, students with a household income of under £25,000 studying away from home in London could receive up to £13,815 per year to cover their maintenance costs in comparison to £11,064 for those living away from home outside of London (Gov.uk, 2024b). However for those students living at home, even if located within London, students with the same household income were only eligible for £9,640 per year (Gov.uk, 2024b). This current loan structure does not recognise that living costs can differ regionally for those living with parents, particularly in respect to London and the rest of the UK, the former of which has been recognised as one of the most expensive cities to live in the world (ECA International, 2023).

The research undertaken for this study operated in a context with specific societal challenges that were unforeseen at the beginning of the research, the first of which being the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. In March 2020 I received confirmation of my funding for my doctoral studies on the same day the first government national lockdown was announced to curb the spread of COVID-19 in the UK. This lockdown, and the subsequent lockdowns that followed over the next eighteen months, included the

requirement for universities from the UK Government to deliver their courses first entirely remotely, and then later using a hybrid model of both in-person and online provision (Montacute & Holt-White, 2021). Whilst the use of digital tools to support learning was not new, the pandemic meant an acceleration in their use and commonality amongst university teaching provision (Brassington, 2022). The use of digital tools for academic purposes will be further explored in Chapter Six in relation to how this impacted the academic experiences of this specific subset of students.

The COVID-19 pandemic had implications not just for the delivery of academic classes in a university setting, but more generally on the size of the UK HE student population. More students enrolled onto undergraduate courses in 2020 and 2021 compared to pre-pandemic levels (UCAS, 2021) as a combined result of the demographic increase in the UK 18 year old population (Van Essen-Fishman, 2022) and more students achieving higher grades as a result of centre-assessed grading (Hubble et al., 2021); students were not able to sit in-person exams as a result of COVID-19 restrictions (Ofqual, 2021; UCAS, 2020). This increase in student numbers meant a greater demand for university accommodation, an increase in which some universities could simply not accommodate and thus resulted in students living in student accommodation in nearby towns and cities or commuting from the family home if remaining local (Fazackerley & Livingston, 2022; Smith, 2022; Wooton-Cane & Greasley, 2022). This sparked wider discussion in the sector in how this could contribute to increasing the number of students needing to commute to university because of a lack of university accommodation (Dickinson, 2023), although this supposed increase has not occurred (Hillman, 2022).

The ongoing UK ‘cost-of-living crisis’, originating in 2021 from a sharp rise in inflation (OfS, 2023b) continues to impact the daily lives of university students. An average student now reports working 14.5 hours a week in order to afford basic living costs (Neves et al., 2024). Students report that they are spending less on food and socialising to keep down costs (Dickinson, 2024; The Sutton Trust, 2023) and often cite the cost of living as

a key factor in poor mental health (Savanta, 2023). Furthermore, prospective students are increasingly listing the cost of living crisis and the associated rising living costs as a key factor in why they plan to live at home for university (Boffey & Lawrence-Matthews, 2024; Shao, 2023).

In this section I have considered the contemporary context in which this research sits. This research focuses on understanding the experiences specifically of UK home full-time undergraduate students that commute to university. This consequently means that the experiences of international students, part-time students and/or postgraduate students that consider themselves to be commuter students are not included within the study. This is not to suggest that these experiences are less important than those explored within this thesis. Simply that I am specifically interested in the undergraduate student experience where commuting for higher education is considered outside of the 'norm' and therefore arguably a marginal experience in need of further exploration.

1.1.3. Widening participation and commuting: a special relationship

Within the recommended expansion of UK HE in the 1960s (Robbins, 1963) came the 'guiding principle' that any young person regardless of background should have opportunity to access a university education (Boliver et al., 2020, p. 117). Key to this was the HE expansion of the 1990s which resulted not just in an increase in the number of students entering HE, but also the type of student attending university (Patiniotis & Holdsworth, 2005). The expansion of university places meant 'non-traditional' university entrants, such as students from minority ethnic groups and working-class backgrounds, were increasing in number across the broader student population (Reay et al., 2001). Reay et al. (2001) also acknowledged that an expansion of university places did not automatically create a more diverse student population, the increase in places also often benefiting those already represented in the student population such as students from middle-class backgrounds. Nevertheless, the HE expansion highlighted a shift in the types of students that were attending university.

Equality of opportunity to participate in higher education is a rhetoric which has remained constant in contemporary HE policy and practice (Dent et al., 2023), albeit has shifted since the 1990s to more broadly encompass the entire student lifecycle. That is, students regardless of background should not only be able to access university, but do well in their degree course and progress into a graduate-level career. This is regulated in England by the Office for Students (OfS) where English HEIs that charge above the basic tuition fee cap are required to have an Access and Participation Plan (APP) where they outline how they will ensure "equality of opportunity for underrepresented groups to access, succeed in and progress from Higher Education" (OfS, 2022a). The OfS (2024b) at the time of writing currently deem the following as underrepresented groups in HE:

- students from areas of low higher education participation, low household income or low socioeconomic status
- some black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) students
- mature students
- disabled students
- care leavers
- carers
- people estranged from their families
- people from Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities
- refugees
- children from military families

Therefore in any reference to students from WP backgrounds, or underrepresented groups in HE within this thesis, it is from this list that this categorisation derives from.

Research into the experiences of widening participation students in HE has previously acknowledged a relationship between being from an underrepresented group in HE and commuting for university studies (Bhopal, 2011; Christie et al., 2005; Clayton et al., 2009; Crozier et al., 2008; González-Arnal & Kilkey, 2009; Reay, 2003). Students from South Asian communities are one such minority ethnic group that are statistically more likely to commute than their white counterparts, with Donnelly and Gamsu (2018) finding British Bangladeshi and Pakistani students six times more likely to commute than their white peers. Similarly mature students are more

likely to be living in their own home for university study than their younger counterparts (Artess et al., 2014), with further links made between commuting to university and having caring responsibilities (Abrahams & Ingram, 2013; Cullen et al., 2020) or being from a low-income background (Maguire & Morris, 2018; Thomas & Jones, 2017). There is further complexity when taking into account the relationship between commuting and an intersectionality of demographic characteristics. For example, South Asian women have been often highlighted as a particular demographic of student that often commute to university (Gibbons & Vignoles, 2012; Hussain & Bagguley, 2007; Khambhaita & Bhopal, 2015), as are mature students with parental or caring responsibilities (MillionPlus, 2018). Consequently, any links made between underrepresented groups and commuting must also acknowledge where relevant the complexity of student demographics when exploring commuter students' university experiences (Holton & Finn, 2018; Thomas, 2019; Thomas & Jones, 2017).

Nonetheless, commuting to university and being from a widening participation background are not mutually exclusive; students from WP backgrounds are not always commuter students and commuter students are not always WP students. Students with a disability for example are classed as an underrepresented group in HE (Connell-Smith & Hubble, 2018) yet "students in receipt of Disabled Students' Allowance have a lower rate of living at home (compared to all other students not receiving this allowance)" (HEFCE, 2009, p. 3). Whilst acknowledging that not all students that register as having a disability on enrolment into HE are in receipt of the Disabled Student's Allowance (Johnson et al., 2019), the HEFCE (2009) data does suggest that the relationship between commuting and underrepresented groups is more complex than often argued. This is further acknowledged in literature examining experiences of care-leavers and students estranged from their families who, given the nature of their situation rarely live in the family home for university (Costa et al., 2020; Stevenson et al., 2020). Consequently, previous framings of commuting to university as a by-product of being from an underrepresented group (e.g. Clayton et al., 2009; Crozier

et al., 2008) ignore the complexity of characteristics that this umbrella term refers to.

So far I have highlighted some relationships between underrepresented student groups and commuting to university in the extant literature. However, contemporary policy has increasingly conceptualised commuter students as an underrepresented student group in their own right. Whilst commuter students are not listed in the OfS (2024b) groupings previously noted, the Augar report recommended that commuter students be included within APPs in order for HEIs to be held more accountable for supporting this student group's experiences (DfE, 2019). Whilst this is not currently a regulatory requirement, the OfS (2020a) in their advice and guidance for HEIs in promoting equal opportunities for underrepresented groups list 'local and commuter students' in a page titled 'Effective practice in access and participation'. Furthermore in the launch of their 'Equality of Opportunities Risk Register', a tool which HEIs are expected to use to inform their APP design to address and mediate the risks to equality of opportunity for particular student groups (OfS, 2024a), commuter students have been highlighted as a group with risks to their access, participation and success in HE (OfS, 2024c). Consequently this highlights how commuter students are being increasingly seen in education policy as an underrepresented group in their own right.

In this section I do not provide an exhaustive account of the relationship between commuting and being from an underrepresented group, rather simply acknowledge that such a relationship often exists within the commuter student body. This research will recruit students based solely on their commuting status at the specific institutions of interest [see Chapter Four]. I will however note any intersection between the two, and thus how being from an underrepresent group interacts with a commuter student's experience of university where appropriate. This approach is for two main reasons. Firstly, by ensuring that the commuting is the main focus it will provide an opportunity to explore instances where a commuter student may not necessarily articulate themselves as being from an underrepresented group.

Secondly, it can potentially avoid making ingenuine connections between commuter student experiences simply on the basis of their also possessing certain demographic characteristics. Chapter Four highlights in further detail the methodological approach in respect to the validity of this thesis' research.

1.2. Defining the 'commuter student'

The absence of a sector definition for the 'commuter student' in the UK (London Higher, 2019; Maguire & Morris, 2018; Thomas, 2020; Thomas & Jones, 2017) means that the understanding of what is meant by a 'commuter student' is fast becoming a 'wicked' problem (Trowler, 2012) in that it is fundamentally complex with no easy terminological solution. Therefore, it is imperative the term is properly unpacked for employment within this thesis. In this section, I will unpack the main conceptualisations of commuter students found in the literature ('live at home', 'day' and 'local' students) before producing a working definition of the term 'commuter student' for use within this thesis.

1.2.1. Live at home

A popular phrase used to frame the commuter student is a student 'living at home' (Artess et al., 2014; Bagguley & Hussain, 2016; Holton & Finn, 2020; Thomas, 2020). This refers to a student living in the parental or guardian home on entry into and/or during their first year of university (Khambhaita & Bhopal, 2015; Patiniotis & Holdsworth, 2005; Southall et al., 2016).

A key limitation of this proxy for commuter students is the assumption the term makes of 'live at home' student characteristics; namely that they are school leavers living in the familial home. In reality, students who are 'living at home' may be living in a range of living situations, such as living independently, with partners, spouses and/or dependent children juggling caring responsibilities and/or working commitments (Artess et al., 2014). More recently, students in these alternative living situations have been included within the 'live at home' grouping through specification that home

may include ‘own home’ in addition to a familial home, the former of which could be privately rented or owned by the student and/or partners (Holton & Finn, 2020; Smith, 2018; Thomas & Jones, 2017). Nevertheless, ‘live at home’ as a term still proves problematic for employment in my research mainly as it lacks reference to the travel undertaken by the student.

1.2.2. ‘Day’, ‘stayeducation’ and ‘learn & go’ students

In contrast, the use of the terms ‘day’, ‘stayeducation’ and ‘learn and go’ students to describe the commuter student centre on the temporal aspect of commuting to university.

‘Day student’ likens students attending their university studies during the day to commuting for work (Christie, 2007; Christie et al., 2005); the student travels to campus, attends classes and/or studies in university facilities before leaving in the evening each day to travel home. Students described themselves as day students which resulted in this term being used by Christie (2007) and Christie et al. (2005), increasing the accuracy of the portrayal of the lives of the students being studied. Students also identified with the term irrespective of whether they were a mature student, overcoming the criticism noted of the more popular ‘live at home’ terminology.

Similar terms have arisen based on the notion of students’ day visits to university. Pokorny et al. (2017, p. 544) referred to this student group as ‘stayeducation’ students, deriving from the tourism phrase ‘staycation’ where individuals take day trips in their local area for holiday and recreation purposes. Here, ‘stayeducation’ refers to students taking ‘day trips’ to university whilst living at home. In a similar vein, the term ‘learn and go’ was used by some institutions in the study by Thomas and Jones (2017, p. 24) to refer to these students who attend classes for their academic studies to ‘learn’, before ‘going’ home.

The terms discussed in this section all emphasise the times commuter students spend, or consequently do not spend, on campus. Specifically, the ways in which their being at university is tied into their day visits to and from campus, thus acknowledging that these visits are inextricably linked to the commuter student experience. However, there are still issues with these terms which results in their inappropriateness for operationalisation within this particular thesis. Pokorny et al. (2017) for example specifically states they deprioritised the physical commuting experiences in their research, instead focusing on students' social and emotional relationships. Whilst Christie (2007) acknowledges the physical commute linking students' home and university lives, their term 'day student' also still fails to acknowledge students' travel experiences outside the temporal realm.

Ultimately, this thesis seeks a definition that highlights the temporal and physical attachments to space and place within the commuter student's experience of HE. It is arguably the act of travelling to their place of study which separates their experiences from those of the traditional undergraduate student who has moved away from home to live in close proximity of their chosen HEI. As the travel is not inherent within the 'day' or 'stayeducation' terms, these feel inadequate for application in my research.

1.2.3. 'Local' students

The term 'local students' has been used to describe commuter students and refers to those students who already live in the locale in which their HEI is situated (Abrahams & Ingram, 2013; Browitt & Croll, 2015; Holdsworth, 2009a; Holton, 2015a). Using this term to describe students who commute to university centralises the importance of the 'locale' for these students' identity; namely in that they identify as a student of the university whilst maintaining a connection to the surrounding local area. Nevertheless, this definition fails to account for students commuting that travel large distances to participate in HE; students that are not 'local' to the area (Finn, 2019; Holton & Finn, 2018; Mannerings, 2018). Thus, by using the term 'local students' as a proxy for commuter students, this excludes and misnames

those students who do not live in their HEI's locality yet commute to the institution.

The above can also be linked to wider concerns surrounding the ambiguity of the phrase 'local student'. Arguably, local students could refer to both those who commute to university within their local area, but also those students who choose to live away from home but still attend a university in their locality. The combination of the two make up a large population of the general student population as statistically evidenced by Donnelly and Gamsu (2018):

> "the majority of young people (55.8% in 2014/15) stay local for university, attending a university less than about 55 miles away from their home address" (Donnelly & Gamsu, 2018, p. 4).

Here the phrase 'local' is used not just to refer to those who commute, but any student attending a university within 55 miles of their registered home address, part of a set of thresholds established by Donnelly and Gamsu (2018) to consider the distance students move or commute to university. More than half of these students moved away to study within this short distance (32.5%) compared to those choosing to stay in their familial home (23.3%), meaning that more 'local' students actually moved into student accommodation for university rather than living at home (Donnelly & Gamsu, 2018). Whilst Donnelly and Gamsu (2018) acknowledge their statistics omit the HE mature student population, their analysis of younger student HE mobility demonstrates the ambiguity using the term 'local' student engenders in relation to accommodation type.

Nevertheless, the term 'local students' is persistently used by government and wider sector policymakers to refer to students who live at home and commute for HE study (DfE, 2017; MillionPlus, 2022; OfS, 2020b). The measurement of this student population derives from the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), a framework introduced by the 2016 UK Government to measure the teaching quality of individual HEIs (DfE, 2017). As part of the submission, HEIs were expected to include the number of local

students at their institution. This was defined as "students whose home address is within the same Travel to Work Area (TTWA) as their location of study" (DfE, 2017, p. 29), a TTWA being a statistically calculated, bounded geographical area where the general population are considered to both live and work (ONS, 2020). The issue regarding 'non-local' commuter students persists when using this term and accompanying measurement, as the definition provided by the Department for Education (DfE) fails to account for students who travel across TTWAs for their studies (DfE, 2017). Whilst the TEF no longer collects data on 'local students' as a contextual category, using TTWA as an indicator of graduate employment opportunities only (OfS, 2022b), it persists as a reference of measurement used by HE policymakers (OfS, 2020b).

1.2.4. The 'commuter student'

Contemporary research increasingly uses the terms 'commuter' or 'commuting' student to refer to this student group (Chappell et al., 2020; Maguire & Morris, 2018; Southall et al., 2016; Stalmirska & Mellon, 2022; Thomas & Jones, 2017). Other terminology explored in this chapter (live at home, day, stayeducation, local students) lacked sufficient emphasis on the commute in their phrasing (Maguire & Morris, 2018; Webb & Turner, 2020). In contrast, the travel students undertake is at the heart of the phrase 'commuter student', centralising their commute within their HE experience.

How the 'commuter student' is defined, however, has more variation amongst scholars. A small number of studies termed a commuter student as living a specified mileage from their university campus to determine commuter students as falling outside or inside a pre-determined radius from the university campus (Browitt & Croll, 2015; University of Edinburgh, 2018). Whilst mileage is useful in contributing to our understanding of the demographics of commuter student travel (Chappell et al., 2020; Donnelly & Gamsu, 2018), it is problematic due to the nature of setting a numerical boundary. For instance, in Browitt and Croll (2015) students needed to live within 30 miles of campus to be classed as a commuter student, their

rationale for this particular mileage threshold unclear. Arguably, by omitting students 30 miles or more away from their institution, this misses out students who are commuting for considerable amount of time and distance to reach university and therefore an understanding of how this can impact their HE experience.

A more popular measure used to define the commuter student is a student with the same term-time and home address (Chappell et al., 2020; Thomas, 2020; Thomas & Jones, 2017). Using this measure suggests that a student holding the same term-time and home address does not move home during traditional student migration periods such as Christmas and Easter, and therefore is likely to be living outside of a traditional student accommodation provider and thus commuting to campus.

Two main concerns arise from using this definition. Firstly, the definition relies heavily on accurate student input of their address details. This can produce data quality concerns as students do not always accurately update their term-time address when moving to, and between, student accommodation (NUS, 2015). Thomas and Jones (2017) recommend that institutions ask for students' residential details on registration, information which is collected by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) through HEIs enrolment and re-enrolment processes (HESA, 2021). However, this fails to resolve the reliance on students to accurately report their accommodation status to their institution, and thus the data quality concerns raised by the National Union of Students (NUS) remain (NUS, 2015).

Secondly, using this method of measurement fails to factor in the travel times of those who commute (Thomas, 2020; Webb & Turner, 2020). Consequentially, a student living in their parental or own home next door to a university campus would be classed as a commuter student the same way someone travelling from an address two hours away from campus could be similarly classed a commuter student. This observation has sparked other scholars to consider whether travel time and distance should be used as an accompanying caveat when defining a commuter student. Webb and Turner

(2020) modified the term-time and home address measurement by using additional spatial boundaries to separate those commuting within the city versus those from further afield. By using a combination of measurements, Webb and Turner (2020) here suggest that time and/or distance travelled by a commuter student is a necessary component to their experiences in addition to their accommodation type. However, by doing so this definition is arguably in danger of minimising the existence, and subsequent experiences of, commuter students who have shorter distances and/or shorter commute times.

Keeping the 'commuter student' definition broad could be a way to remedy this concern. Maguire and Morris (2018) define a commuting student as:

> "those for whom the travel between their residence and principal study location materially affects their ability to succeed in higher education" (Maguire & Morris, 2018, p. 9).

This definition centres the impact of travel within the commuter student identity, thus encompassing commutes of multiple transport types, lengths and student living situations. Yet this definition also relies heavily on constitution of 'material affect' on students' success in HE. 'Material affect' could refer to a multitude of factors such as class attendance, extra-curricular activity participation or more broadly students' degree outcomes. So too could the phrase 'student success' and what this constitutes in a HE context.

Troublesome concepts persist, however, in the definition's requirement for students to self-identify with the provided description. Whilst commonplace for this student group (Stalmirska & Mellon, 2022; Thomas & Jones, 2017; Webb & Turner, 2020), a lack of foregrounding of what is meant by 'residence' means that students of any accommodation arrangement under this definition could identify as a commuter student should they consider travel as impacting their study. This is particularly pertinent in large cities like London where the student accommodation often requires an element of travel to campus (Thomas, 2019) or where university-owned accommodation is located in nearby towns and cities. Similarly, the definition suggested by

Maguire and Morris (2018) suggests that a student is not a commuter if their travel does not impact their university experience. This predisposes a negative categorisation of the experiences of commuter students which is juxtaposed with this thesis' aim to provide a holistic view of their lived experiences.

1.2.5. Moving towards a definition

This section has unpacked the different ways the commuter student is conceptualised within contemporary literature due to the absence of a UK sector definition (London Higher, 2019; Maguire & Morris, 2018; Thomas, 2020; Thomas & Jones, 2017). Different phrasing (live at home, day/learn and go, local, commuter) and the subsequent differing forms of measurement currently used within the sector have left researchers and HE policymakers responsible for deciding on the most appropriate definition and form of measurement to determine this cohort of students. From critically analysing these proxy constructs of the 'commuter student' currently in practice, I have demonstrated that generating an unambiguous definition that refers to this particular group of students is challenging, largely because of the subtleties in which they speak to different shades of the same student group. This is interesting given that they are generally considered as proxy constructs; differing terminology and definitions treated as speaking of the same group of students. In reality as shown in this chapter, these terminology and definitions all refer to a slightly different sub-set of students within this wider group (Maslin, 2024).

This thesis shall use the phrase 'commuter student' due to the emphasis placed on the travel these students undertake to get to campus, and the incorporation of differing modes of transport, commute lengths and living situations it allows for. In this thesis, the commuter student will be defined as any student living in the parental home or own residence, the latter of which can be owned or privately rented (Stalmirska & Mellon, 2022) but not residing in student accommodation or with other students. Living in either university-owned or private student accommodation has been noted in

Section 1.1.1. as providing opportunities for community building for students (Tight, 2011; Whyte, 2019). Therefore by excluding students in this type of living situation I am focused on those students living in alternate living situations, such as living with parents, spouses and/or families where community building may be more difficult for students. This is combined with a purposeful removal of any distance or time parameters attached to this condition to ensure I encapsulate commuter students with a range of travel experiences. Consequently, I am interested in the ways commuter students experience university life and the networks they are a part of that make their university experience.

The definition established for this research is also not without its own challenges. I acknowledge, for example, that this definition could exclude some students who would not be considered a commuter under my definition, yet would be in the definitions previously outlined. For example, students living with other students in an alternate town/city would not meet my accommodation-based criteria yet could be considered commuters under different definitions that use time or distance as a commuting indicator. This further highlights the troublesome nature of setting particular parameters around a student group.

Consequently, rather than trying to frame my constructed definition as absolute, instead it is an emergent term that will be informed by my empirical work. Throughout this thesis, I will therefore interrogate and examine its usability within my research findings to stretch and challenge my own construction of the 'commuter student' and the appropriateness for its use in understanding these students' experiences. I will also add a caveat for participant recruitment that, whilst providing the criteria above, allows students who self-identify with the term 'commuter student' but live in alternate accommodation to that specified in the criteria to get in touch [see Chapter Four]. This is to allow for further opportunity for self-reflection around my construct of the commuter student and its appropriateness of use in this thesis.

1.3. Research questions

This research seeks to address two main research questions.

1. What is being a commuter student like?

In this research question, I seek to gain a rich understanding of how it feels to be a commuter student. This will encompass encountering with them their lived experiences of travel, arrival on campus and university academic, social and extra-curricular activities.

2. What are the networks within which commuter students are situated?

In this research question I seek to explore the networks of people and things that commuter students are situated in that affect their commuting practices. I will focus on identifying the wider networks of human and non-human agents that commuter students are situated in. This includes considering the agential behaviours that are undertaken by students as a direct result of their connection with the material, spatial and agential forces within given networks.

Combined, these research questions enable a holistic understanding of commuter student experiences in the specific context in which this thesis is situated. These will be explored throughout the three analysis chapters in this thesis [Chapter Five to Seven], before being more fully answered in the conclusion chapter [Chapter Eight].

1.4. Thesis outline

This thesis is split into seven remaining chapters. Chapter Two reviews the literature regarding the commuter student experience of HE within the UK. It first outlines common reasons students commute to university, before

exploring their experiences across two main themes: their academic studies, and their wider student experience. Through the literature review I argue that a deficit narrative has been purveyed regarding commuter students' experiences.

Chapter Three sets out my theoretical approach towards the research. I introduce actor-network theory (ANT), its theoretical underpinnings and key concepts utilised in this thesis. Throughout this chapter I critically analyse ANT's suitability for use as an exploratory tool to highlight the actors and wider network in which the commuter student is situated.

Chapter Four provides the methodological approach to the research. I outline the multi-sited ethnographic research approach in which I 'follow the actors' within a network to uncover the practices of commuter students on their commute and at university. This approach does not dictate a hierarchy of experience, but rather acts simply as a starting point in which to explore what is like to be a commuter student. It discusses the compatibility of the combination of this thesis' theoretical and methodological approach, as well as the methods used, the data collection and analytical procedures.

The three analysis chapters, Chapters Five, Six and Seven, follow participants chronologically in their 'being there' at university, rooted in the methodological and theoretical approach of the research set out in Chapters Three and Four respectively. Chapter Five follows the becoming of a commuter student and what it is like to commute to campus. Chapter Six follows their arrival on campus and their experiences of their academic studies, both their being in class and their navigation of digital tools that feature within their academic class network. It also follows their experiences navigating other spaces on campus such as the library and social spaces. Chapter Seven is the last analysis chapter and considers the ways in which commuter students navigate making and maintaining friendships with peers, along with their participation in and ultimately their 'being' in extra-curricular and social activities.

Chapter Eight will provide the conclusion to this thesis. In this I highlight the key findings of this research and how these answer my two research questions. It provides reflections on the use of this methodological approach for researching the commuter student experience, the contribution this research makes to policy and practice, and finally how future research can build on this work.

Chapter Two: Lived experiences of commuter students

This chapter provides an overview of research literature exploring the lived experiences of UK commuter students across the student lifecycle. First, it will consider how students may come to commute to university, before outlining students' experiences in their physical commute to campus. It will then explore university life for commuter students in two core spheres: academic life, and the 'wider student experience'.

Chapter One has already narrated the different terminologies and definitions present in the literature regarding this student group which requires scholars, policymakers and HEIs to decide which terminology and accompanying definition to operationalise within their particular contexts. This can cause difficulties when reviewing the literature on this topic, with different conceptualisations of commuter students meaning discussions around this student group are in danger of different parties being at cross-purposes; scholars, practitioners and policy-makers are unlikely to be referring to exactly the same type of student (Maslin, 2024). I will use the phrase 'commuter student' as a catch-all term that broadly refers to students who do not live in traditional university-owned or privately rented student accommodation. This is primarily to encapsulate the breadth of commuter student research literature given that multiple definitions have been used to frame this student group.

Another consideration is the limited research on commuter students. It is widely acknowledged by the HE sector that there is a limited body of academic literature in this area (Maguire & Morris, 2018; Thomas & Jones, 2017; Webb & Turner, 2020), although in recent years scholars have sought to highlight this student group and their subsequent experiences (see Finn & Holton, 2019; Thomas, 2020; Thomas & Jones, 2017). I acknowledge this here prior to the review of the available literature.

2.1. Reasons for commuting

Students choose to commute for a variety of reasons. The key reasons within the literature, along with the individuals and organisations that influence these decisions, shall be explored below. It is important to note that these reasons are not listed in a way that denotes rank of influence or importance in respect to the reasons why a student may commute to university. Rather, they are simply one way in which the reasons can be discussed for the purposes of acknowledging commonalities within the literature.

2.1.1. Economic influence

Commuting to university is often framed within the literature as an economic decision undertaken by the commuter student (Callender & Melis, 2022; Christie, 2007; Davies et al., 2008; Evans & Donnelly, 2018; Forsyth & Furlong, 2003). Chapter One highlighted the current UK student loan structure, outlining the difference in loan eligibility for students living with parents compared to those living away from parents. However, being eligible for a smaller loan as a result of living with parents was not always treated negatively by students. Rather, in some cases research found commuting was used by students as a debt-avoidance strategy (Forsyth & Furlong, 2003; Khambhaita & Bhopal, 2015). This is particularly noted in research on students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds where debts from student loans were viewed akin to debt from credit card loans; negatively and ultimately something which should be avoided (Christie et al., 2005). In reality debt accrued from student loans does not impact credit ratings (The Education Hub, 2023) with paying off a loan often having a positive impact on a person's credit score (HSBC, 2024). Nevertheless, commuters saw receiving a smaller loan from living at home as a beneficial economic decision in order to reduce the amount of student debt they would incur (Callender & Jackson, 2008; De Gayardon et al., 2019).

Connected to financial concerns is the influence of a local part-time job in a student's decision to commute to university (Maguire & Morris, 2018;

Southall et al., 2016). A part-time job has been described in research as an additional, and often necessary, strategy alongside commuting in order to supplement travel costs and reduce financial reliance on their parents (Davies et al., 2008; Hill et al., 2024; Reay et al., 2005). These findings are made further pertinent in regards to the contemporary HE landscape. A record 56% of undergraduate students now report holding part-time employment, a 11% increase from 2022 that has been contributed to both the cost-of-living crisis and increasing numbers of students using part-time work to supplement their university studies (Neves et al., 2024). Therefore whilst a part-time job might well factor into a student's decision to commute to university, this is increasingly likely to be a feature of students' university experience irrespective of whether they are commuting.

For the most part, commuter students are framed within the literature as basing their notion of commuting to university to save money on the anticipated costs of HE. This could relate to their actual living costs they incur, expecting to pay minimal or no rent living in the family home (Currant, 2020; Forsyth & Furlong, 2003; Holdsworth, 2009b), and also through comparing their low rent to the high rental costs incurred by their peers living in university-managed or private student accommodation (Bowl et al., 2008; Hussain & Bagguley, 2007; Morris, 2018). However, this particular framing within the literature thus ignores instances where students are commuting to university having previously lived in student accommodation (see Christie et al., 2005; Clayton et al., 2009; Finn & Holton, 2019). These commuter students are arguably not anticipating costs but instead well-informed of the costs of both modes of accessing university following from their own lived experiences. Where this movement has been noted, this was attributed to a broader range of factors such as high student accommodation costs, caring responsibilities and to maintain part-time work. Consequently, findings like these point outside of only economic influences as to why a student may commute to university, making it appropriate to consider other reasons for commuting in the remainder of this chapter.

2.1.2. Commuting, the family and the wider community

Commuting to university is not always a decision born out of economical reasoning, but rather related to family and community ties (Bowl et al., 2008; Christie, 2007; Finn & Holton, 2019; Patiniotis & Holdsworth, 2005; Smith, 2018). For many students, research has found living at home and commuting to university as a way of maintaining relationships with family (Bradley & Miller, 2010; Finn, 2019). Firstly, because of the available support network it provides to students that would not have been as readily available should they have lived away from home (Christie, 2007; Finn & Holton, 2019; Smith, 2018; Thomas, 2019). Secondly, by staying at home very little needed to change in the everyday lives of the commuter student; they could have the same part-time job, live in the same local area and have the same friends and social networks (Davies et al., 2008; Thomas & Jones, 2017; Thomas & Quinn, 2007). Consequentially, these stable home contexts were found to help support commuter students' mental health (Stalmirska & Mellon, 2022) and offered "safety and emotional security" (Patiniotis & Holdsworth, 2005, p. 92).

The latter research linking students commuting for mental health reasons is particularly pertinent to the current HE landscape with 5% of the home student population reporting a mental health condition, a number which has increased rapidly over the last ten years and likely to be a tentative estimate (Lewis & Bolton, 2023). Recent data suggests that those with a mental health condition are at higher risk of not continuing onto their second year of university and/or completing their course than those without a mental health condition (OfS, 2023a). To centralise the relevance to my thesis, Stalmirska and Mellon (2022) found multiple students citing mental health as a reason for commuting. This links with wider research conducted by student mental health charity Student Minds (2023) that found commuter students at risk of poor mental health due to loneliness, isolation and lack of belonging. Specifically commuter students attributed their not living on, or near to campus and/or being less likely to be physically present on campus as to why they felt isolated and less of a member of their institution of study

(Student Minds, 2023). Lacking a sense of belonging is not particular to this student group, as students living in student accommodation are also reported as at risk of lacking a sense of belonging to their peers and the wider institution (Worsley et al., 2023). However, this does demonstrate how commuting may influence a student's sense of belonging to their university.

The literature highlighted above promotes a particular view of commuter students' home context, one which is unequivocally supportive and positive for their mental and emotional wellbeing. Yet this is not always the case for the wider student body, particularly for students who may be estranged or care-experienced (see Blake et al., 2020; Costa et al., 2020; Pinkney & Walker, 2020). Whilst these students may not be commuting from their biological family home for university, the problematisation of the familial home as physically and emotionally safe still stands in relation to this thesis' context; commuter students may well find living in the familial home challenging during their university studies yet continue to do so for the length of their degree.

Living at home can also be challenging for the commuter student in that they may be living at home and commuting for more than just support from the family; commuters can be themselves responsible for family support. Commuting can be a necessary and pragmatic way to attend university for those with caring responsibilities, 'caring responsibilities' here referring to the care of both children and adults (Abrahams & Ingram, 2013; Bhopal, 2011; Cullen et al., 2020; Dent, 2021; González-Arnal & Kilkey, 2009). Whilst it can be acknowledged that caring for children and adults can engender different experiences for the commuter-carer, both require the student to commute in order to maintain a responsibility for a person(s) in their care. Therefore, although I will use more broadly use the term 'students with caring responsibilities' in this thesis, I will also specify which type of caring I am referring to where appropriate.

Related to family connections can also be the desire from commuter students to live at home and travel to university due to religious influence

(Smith, 2018; Thomas & Jones, 2017). In the literature these students have previously been linked to the family as it is in this setting where activities and traditions related to religion often take place (Smith, 2018). Whilst this chapter has already discussed economic influence in students' reasoning for commuting, there is a special connection between debt-aversion and particularly those practising Islam. Student loans accrue interest which Islamic faith deems as sinful (Malik & Wykes, 2018). Therefore, commuting and not applying for student loans can be a way in which Muslim students are able to finance university without the need to compromise their religious beliefs (Donnelly & Gamsu, 2018). There have been recommendations to implement a Shari'ah compliant student loan system over the last ten years, whereby an individual borrows an interest-free loan formed through charitable community contributions (DfBIS, 2014; Malik & Wykes, 2018; Muslim Census, 2022). Nevertheless, at the time of writing the implementation of this alternative student finance system had been deferred to until at least 2026 (DfE, 2024).

Another example of religious influence is through examining the impact of izzat in South Asian communities and how this may influence a students' decision to commute to university. Izzat refers to "family pride, honour and reputation" (Bhopal, 2000, p. 50), spanning Hindu, Sikh and Muslim religions within South Asian communities (Soni, 2012). By attending HE and living away from home, this means the student is unchaperoned and living independently from their family. For female students, this situation can compromise the family izzat as it gives the potential for gossip which could later harm family reputation and the individual's marriage chances (Brah, 1993). Consequently, previous research has found it to be safer for the family's reputation within their local community for the female student to live in the family home to attend HE (Bagguley & Hussain, 2016; Hussain & Bagguley, 2007).

The research above links students' reasons to commute to university with religious beliefs. However, greater nuance is necessary to be unpacked here, specifically how religious belief interacts with other demographic

characteristics of an individual; religion is not the only driving force behind students commuting for HE. In the case of students highlighted in Bagguley and Hussain (2016), ethnicity and gender were argued to be more influential than religion as to whether a student commuted, although religion was still a contributing factor. How these factors interacted with each other could hold further influence, as families within the same religious faction were reported as holding different attitudes of women and their higher education participation (Hussain & Bagguley, 2007). Consequentially discussions around the influence of religion, and by extension the family, in a students' decision to commute must address the nuance in order to accurately reflect the lived experiences of commuter students. In my research, this will be accommodated through asking minimal demographic information of participants [see Chapter Four] and instead leaving students free to narrate if their religious beliefs and/or family ties contribute to their experiences of their commute.

2.1.3. Rejecting the 'student experience'

The decision to commute to university can also be framed as an explicit rejection of the normative student living experience (Finn & Holton, 2019; Hill et al., 2024). This rejection can take multiple forms. Commuter students could reject other university towns and cities in preference of their own surroundings, attending a university in the locale (Finn, 2019). This favouring of own surroundings could also extend to their local area. In fact, for some students the attraction to commute was grounded in the idea of 'familiarity' with their locality, in respect to both its geography (Donnelly & Evans, 2016) and the community of people (Bhopal, 2011). These themes are noted as common amongst WP student groups who are less likely to express a preference to move from the local area (Gorard et al., 2006), particularly students of South Asian heritage (Bhopal, 2011) and/or students from working-class backgrounds (Clayton et al., 2009; Patiniotis & Holdsworth, 2005).

Rejection could also be in the form of repudiating the physical accommodation spaces. For example, Finn and Holton (2019) demonstrate that sometimes commuter students considered student accommodation as unappealing due to the expectation of sharing accommodation with strangers. As this chapter noted briefly in relation to economic influences, the cost of living in student accommodation was also found in some instances as a catalyst for students commuting to university (Christie et al., 2005; Clayton et al., 2009; Finn & Holton, 2019).

Whilst the above provides useful examples of reasons why students may commute to university outside of economic and family influences, the literature lacks criticality in this area. The finding that a commuter student can change their accommodation status requires further unpacking to sufficiently encompass the fluidity of a commuter students' accommodation status. For example, students may initially plan to live in student accommodation but during their degree switch to commuting from the parental home. Similarly, a student may commute in their first year of university but live with fellow students in private student accommodation for subsequent years. By acknowledging these potential fluctuations in accommodation status, this can offer a more nuanced understanding in the fluidity of commuter students' accommodation status that has not yet been recognised within academic research.

2.1.4. Reframing the decision to commute

Regardless of the reasons provided by students for commuting to university, attention must be paid to the language used in their framing. On the one hand a student commuting is conceptualised as a 'choice' (Smith, 2018; Thomas, 2019; Thomas & Jones, 2017); a purposeful cost-reduction technique (Patiniotis & Holdsworth, 2005; Thomas & Jones, 2017) or simply because students do not desire to live with other students (Finn, 2019). On the other hand, the commute is conceptualised as a necessity for students to attend HE. This could be as a result of financial constraints, not wishing or being unable to uproot their family units or due to limited space available in

student accommodation (Christie et al., 2002; Finn, 2019; Thomas, 2019; Thomas & Jones, 2017).

This either/or perspective of commuting as a choice or necessity put forward by Thomas (2019) offers some use by broadly contextualising students' reasons for commuting to university that have been outlined thus far in this chapter. However, this lens of analysis is insufficient in two key areas. Firstly, it fails to accommodate in its approach the multiplicity of reasons why students may commute, as research suggests that commuting to university is often due to a combination of factors (Southall et al., 2016; Stalmirska & Mellon, 2022; Thomas & Jones, 2017). Furthermore, a binary approach ignores the complexities of individual circumstances and reasoning for commuting to university. Commuting to university can be simultaneously an 'active' choice in which students express a preference to live with family members and commute, whilst also rooted in familial constraint which means living in student accommodation an unattainable option for the commuter student (Hussain & Bagguley, 2007). Consequently, the binary linguistic framing arguably does not adequately address all the possible complexities of why a student may commute to university and that is why a more critical approach, one that pays more concrete attention to diverse contexts, may be more useful when conducting research in this area.

2.2. Commuting to campus

Commuting to university is often described as time-consuming within the literature (Alsop et al., 2008; Forsyth & Furlong, 2003; Holley et al., 2014; Southall et al., 2016; Thomas, 2020), exacerbated if travelling at peak times (Chappell et al., 2020). This can make the commute stressful (Morris, 2018; Smith, 2018; Thomas, 2020) from commuter students navigating travel delays, restricted travel timetables and/or public transport cancellations in order to attend classes (Chappell et al., 2020; Stalmirska & Mellon, 2022; Thomas, 2019). For those commuting by car, driving to campus presents its own specific set of challenges, such as costly and limited campus car

parking permits and parking spaces (Alsop et al., 2008; Chappell et al., 2020; Thomas & Jones, 2017). The time-consuming nature of the commute thus contributes to students describing their commute as tiring (Forsyth & Furlong, 2003; Smith, 2018; Stalmirska & Mellon, 2022; Thomas, 2020; University of Edinburgh, 2018).

As discussed earlier in this chapter, commuting to university can be viewed by students as a way to reduce the costs of attending HE. However, research in this area displays a more complex picture of the cost of commuting. Commuting to HE can be costly (Alsop et al., 2008; Holley et al., 2014; Maguire & Morris, 2018; Stalmirska & Mellon, 2022), particularly if students need to travel in peak times for classes (Chappell et al., 2020; Kenyon, 2024; Thomas, 2019). How often students need to attend class can also impact the cost of the commute (Thomas & Jones, 2017). The frequency of commuter students' class attendance is subject to multiple factors including mode of study (such as full-time or part-time) and academic contact hours required by a particular course. The latter regarding the impact of academic contact time frequency on commuter students will be discussed later in this chapter within the broader scope of academic experiences.

The wider regional transport infrastructure surrounding the HEI can also impact the cost of a student's commute to university. England's public transport is governed by local mayors and councils, meaning that the cost and frequency of public transport is dictated by regional policy structures (Tyers et al., 2023). This is in addition to any localised agreements at HEIs where transport costs are subsidised for HE students and staff, both of which can impact the variety, frequency and cost available of public transport available to the commuter student.

Experiences of the commute can also differ amongst commuter students as a result of the locality and travel options available. For students at universities located in regions with fewer public transport links, experiences of driving to campus including road traffic and parking availability is a prominent theme within students' commute (Thomas & Jones, 2017). The

same is not applicable to universities in bigger, metropolitan cities like London with more reliable, cost-effective and frequent public transport networks for commuter students to access (Chappell et al., 2020; Thomas, 2019). A number of factors are therefore important to consider in respect to students' physical commute experiences that are directly impacted by regional transport infrastructure: the availability and cost of public transport, parking provision available on-campus and the number of HEIs in the region of study.

This heterogeneity extends into commuter students' own depictions of their travel experiences. The commute itself was considered by some as a positive aspect of their university experience; the travel was not always considered as a negative part of the commuter students' HE experience (Finn & Holton, 2019). Specifically, the commute was valued by some commuters for the thinking space it afforded for the commuter to mentally plan the day ahead or process the day's events (Chappell et al., 2020; Finn & Holton, 2019; Kenyon, 2024). For others, the commute was used to catch up on academic lectures and seminar reading (Finn, 2019; Smith, 2018; Thomas, 2019). Whilst this was not always possible for those that had to use transport less conducive for completing academic work mid-commute like tubes or buses (Forsyth & Furlong, 2003; Stalmirska & Mellon, 2022; Thomas & Jones, 2017), these more complimentary accounts of commuting to campus hint to a heterogeneity of commuting experiences that is less apparent when considered in isolation from each other. Consequently, it is through the conflation of these complexities and diverse experiences that demonstrate how commuter students' experiences across the UK are more diverse and complex than often noted within the prominent literature (Maslin, 2025).

Irrespective of regional and individual differences, studies portray commuter students as unprepared for the reality of commuting to university (Stalmirska & Mellon, 2022; Thomas, 2019; Thomas & Jones, 2017). Students were surprised at the amount of academic contact time they had on campus and were thus unprepared for how often they needed to commute (Thomas,

2019), the length of time the commute took and the subsequent cost of commuting to campus (Stalmirska & Mellon, 2022; Thomas, 2020). Despite this, students often consider commuting as an acceptable or necessary act favourable to living in student accommodation (Thomas, 2019).

Commuter students are faced with further challenges when arriving on campus. Not living on or near the university campus means they are often required to carry necessary academic and/or extra-curricular equipment due to a lack of storage spaces on campus (Finn & Holton, 2019; Smith, 2018; Thomas, 2019, 2020). Between classes, commuter students lack spaces to relax or meet their peers outside of a library or cafeteria setting (Thomas, 2020). Cafeteria spaces in particular could have a mixed response from commuter students within the literature, with some students noting that they felt pressured to buy food from the on-site cafeteria in order to use the space (Finn & Holton, 2019). Food from university premises is often considered expensive (Thomas & Jones, 2017) and exclusionary for those with specific dietary requirements (Hopkins, 2011), and if commuter students brought their own food, there was often nowhere to store or reheat food on campus (Thomas & Jones, 2017). However, it is worth bearing in mind that issues around cafeteria provision relates heavily on individual HEI provision and therefore can differ widely between institutions, not to mention that the issues noted above can impact students irrespective of residential status, something which is not generally acknowledged by the literature.

2.3. University life

This section will critically explore the impact of commuting on two spheres of university life: academic, and the wider student experience, referred to broadly here as additional social and extra-curricular opportunities.

2.3.1. Academic

For many commuter students, academic life is integral to their university experience; obtaining a university degree their main, and often only, priority in attending university (Abrahams & Ingram, 2013; Holdsworth, 2006; Smith, 2018; Stalmirska & Mellon, 2022; Thomas, 2020). Nevertheless, the literature demonstrates how students can face specific institutional and individual factors which can impact their academic experiences as a commuter to university.

One of the biggest structural issues for commuter students to navigate is their academic timetable. Timetabled academic classes are often “not commuter-student friendly” with early scheduled classes requiring students to travel in, and pay for, busy peak times (Thomas & Jones, 2017, p. 9). Having large gaps between scheduled classes also frustrated some commuter students for the time it required them to wait on campus (Chappell et al., 2020; Finn & Holton, 2019; Holley et al., 2014). The academic timetable, compounded with issues with travel highlighted in the previous section, can regularly impact commuter students’ academic attendance (Thomas, 2019; University of Edinburgh, 2018) whereby commuter students weigh up the perceived benefit of attending class against the financial and time costs the commute required (Chappell et al., 2020; Hill et al., 2024; Kenyon, 2024; Southall et al., 2016; Thomas, 2020).

The literature outlined thus far has purveyed an overwhelmingly negative narrative of commuter students’ academic experiences, failing to acknowledge the intricacies of both individual and institutional contexts. On an individual level, evidence identifies commuter students as utilising their timetable gaps for completing academic work on campus and using campus study facilities (Smith, 2018; Stalmirska & Mellon, 2022; Thomas, 2019). Similarly, students studying Science degrees are likely to have more academic contact hours than Arts, Humanities and Social Science students (Neves & Stephenson, 2023) due to additional course requirements such as labs or demonstrations that are specific to Science courses. This means the frequency of students’ commutes will vary depending on subject of study and

thus further contribute to the diversity of individual student's commute schedules.

The institution attended adds further complexity into our understanding of commuter students' academic experiences. Clayton et al. (2009, p. 162), in their research into HE experiences of UK working class students, found that the mature students originally chose a local post-1992 university for their degree because of its "flexible learning culture"; the institution's timetable accommodated their commuting needs which were often a result of caring and part-time work commitments. Calls for more flexible academic cultures are regularly connected in the literature to discourses on supporting the attainment and success of WP students (Donnelly & Gamsu, 2018; Million MillionPlus, 2018; Southall et al., 2016), but also increasingly in relation to the HE online learning context. Whilst the use of online learning platforms for teaching part-time and distance learners is hardly new, the use of lecture capture and online meeting tools have been increasingly adopted by traditional institutions as a way to compliment face-to-face academic teaching following from their necessary use during the COVID-19 pandemic (Brassington, 2022).

This adaption within HE teaching practice has wider implications for our contemporary understanding of commuter students' academic engagement. Previous research found HEIs reluctant to adapt their practices to an online setting (such as lecture capture and online communication) and were disapproving of student-requested amendments, such as conducting virtual meetings or requesting timetable alterations to accommodate their commute (Thomas, 2020; Thomas & Jones, 2017). However, the increased use of online learning tools for academic classes highlights the potential outdatedness of this research for addressing the post-pandemic HE context (Turner et al., 2023). This is a key area in which this thesis' research addresses this knowledge gap, particularly as the institutions of study are considered traditional campus-based institutions where online learning is not generally the default mode of study.

2.3.2. Commuting and the 'wider student experience'

So far this chapter has considered the impact commuting has on the commuter student's academic studies. However, commuting to university arguably impacts all spheres of HE, including students' participation in other areas of university life. This section will explore the impact commuting has on extra-curricular activities (ECAs) and other social activities that make up the 'wider student experience'. For the purpose of this thesis, ECAs are defined as "activities and events that students engage in, which are not part of their formal degree classification" (Thompson et al., 2013, p. 136), although I acknowledge that the meaning of ECAs can differ between individuals (Clegg et al., 2010).

Despite the limited commuter student research available [see Chapter One], commuter students are reported to participate less in extracurricular and social activities than their live-in peers (Artess et al., 2014; Christie et al., 2005; Thomas, 2020; Thomas & Jones, 2017). A key reason for this is timing; ECA and social activities often take place on evenings and weekends when commuters would not usually be on campus (Chappell et al., 2020; Helsen, 2013; NUS, 2015; Smith, 2018; University of Edinburgh, 2018). Those travelling by car are unable to engage in alcohol-centred activities (Maguire & Morris, 2018) and those using public transport often have to book in advance to reduce cost, thus limiting attendance at spontaneous social meetups (Thomas, 2019). Length of the commute can also be a factor, with students with a commute of an hour or more less likely to participate in university activities than those with a shorter commute (Chappell et al., 2020).

How socially connected commuter students feel to their peers is reported as another key factor in their participation in ECA and social activities. Commuting has been found to restrict the networks that students are a part of, with commuter students often only knowing students on their course (Abrahams & Ingram, 2013; Currant, 2020; NUS, 2015; Thomas, 2012, 2019). Even if wishing to participate in ECA, commuter students can find

participating challenging through lack of social connections; they do not have university peers who they could attend ECA with (Thomas & Jones, 2017).

The above perpetuates a deficit narrative of commuter students' social and extracurricular experiences akin to that explored earlier in the chapter in relation to academic life. This is often formulated into two main arguments: commuter students lack social connections at university, and are unable to participate in ECA as a direct result of their commuting logistics. The combination of the two suggests therefore that commuter students lack, or are unable to take full advantage of, the wider student experience in comparison to their live-in peers.

These arguments take little effort to unpick. Firstly, commuter students have been found to make social contacts with university peers outside of academic and social settings; commuting can be a social endeavour through car sharing or commuting with peers on public transport (Finn, 2019; Thomas, 2019). Secondly, contrary to the research above commuter students have been found to be active members of university sport clubs and societies (Bowl et al., 2008; Holton, 2015b), in addition to attending social activities such as nights out in their university cities (Finn & Holton, 2019). Travel concerns associated with their attendance were combatted through getting a late night taxi home (Christie, 2007) or sleeping over at friends' houses on/near campus (Holdsworth, 2006); friends that were made as a result of their ECA participation (Bowl et al., 2008; Holton, 2015b).

Furthermore, it cannot be presumed that ECA participation automatically improves commuter students' connections to their peers and the wider university. In Holton and Finn (2018) this is apparent where a participant spoke of his experiences at a university sports club. He did not enjoy participating in the sport due to the associated social activities, gravitating towards socialising with his home friends in response. In the case of this particular student, ECA had the opposite impact on his social connections, spurring him instead to socialise with his home-based peers.

This assumption demonstrates how university activities, and the spaces in which they exist, can be exclusionary towards the commuter student. Whilst the previous example can arguably occur irrespective of a student's accommodation status, other evidence exists which further demonstrates how a university activity could exclude the commuter student group. Browitt and Croll (2015) found that university orientation sessions at their particularly institution focused on providing new students with information on living on campus, living away from home for the first time and information about the city. For those students who were commuting from within the local area, these sessions were therefore considered as irrelevant and alienating. Consequently these were a prime example of an activity which was exclusionary specifically towards commuter students as they failed to acknowledge students who were living at home and/or local to the area.

As outlined in Chapter One, university life continues to assume that students are presently located in the vicinity of the university with minimal responsibilities outside of their university life, an assumption that seeps into how HEI activities and spaces operate. This can manifest through institutional expectations that students are free and physically able to attend ECA and other social activities outside of academic classes (Thomas & Jones, 2017), but also in the spaces available on campus; universities often lack common spaces that do not expect students to study or pay to use the accompanied facilities (Finn & Holton, 2019). Consequently spaces where these operate, like student unions, become "exclusionary spaces" (Brooks et al., 2016, p. 486) as they are often only accessed by, and consequently cater for, live-in students (Thomas & Jones, 2017).

Nevertheless, this model of ECA participation is not indicative of all institutions. In Brooks et al. (2016) study of UK Students' Unions, the student union appeared less central to university life for those based in inner-city HEIs with limited student accommodation and thus a larger commuter student population. This is supported by Holdsworth (2006), who found a difference between commuter students' ECA participation in two different HEIs; students living at home in the pre-1992 HEI were more engaged in

ECA activities than students living at home from similar backgrounds in the post-1992 HEI (Holdsworth, 2006). More recent data from the Sutton Trust similarly found Russell Group universities the most prevalent for student ECA participation with 75% of students participating, compared to 64% in pre-1992 and 46% in post-1992 HEIs (Montacute et al., 2021). Consequentially, these studies highlight that ECA participation amongst commuter students is nuanced, with some universities more centred around ECAs than others.

Commuter students' participation in ECA and social activities are also depicted in the literature as involving a prioritisation exercise similar to that previously explored in relation to their academic experiences. Commuter students speak of not having the time to participate in ECA alongside their studies, part-time work and/or childcare responsibilities (Brooks et al., 2016; Christie, 2007; Helsen, 2013; Snowden, 2020). Where students do participate, this is either in a role related to their academic studies, such as career support or ambassadorial roles (Smith, 2018; Stalmirska & Mellon, 2022; Thomas, 2020), and/or took place at times they would normally be on campus (Smith, 2018).

Lack of participation has been previously interpreted as commuter students not valuing ECA and wider social activities (Thomas & Jones, 2017). This conceptualisation however misses the nuance surrounding how commuter students equate value in relation to ECA and other social activities. Rather than a blanket devaluation of these activities, commuter students simply value other factors over wider activities associated with their institution. For instance, previous research has reported commuter students viewing social and ECA activities as a detraction from their academic studies (Thomas, 2019, 2020), yet this could be reframed as commuter students placing higher value on their academic studies than on ECA. Similarly, where logistical challenges with public transport were reported as a factor for lack of ECA participation (Chappell et al., 2020), this could instead be portrayed as students valuing smooth and routine travel to/from campus more than participating in ECA. By reframing the literature in this way, this assists in

enlightening our understanding beyond the deficit narrative of the commuter student experience.

2.4. Conclusion

This chapter has explored our understanding of the UK commuter student experience across the entirety of the student lifecycle. Students' reasoning for commuting to university are multiplicitous and rooted in complexity. A student may commute to university as a cost-reduction strategy, to maintain part-time work or as a result of familial and cultural factors. They can also be commuting as a rejection of the 'normative student experience' or as a result of a combination of factors. The narrative around commuter students' travel experiences is overwhelmingly negative, yet greater nuance is evident when uncovering the heterogeneity present in commuters' regional and specific institutional experiences.

A deficit narrative persists in the portrayal of commuter students' experiences of university life. Whilst there is some acknowledgement of positive academic experiences, like students using gaps in their timetable to structure independent study, in majority of the literature the commuter student is portrayed as having a negative experience of university as a direct result of their commuting status. Furthermore, this narrative ignores the individual and institutional factors which can influence their subsequent class attendance and wider academic experience. Given the contemporary context where online learning platforms are being increasingly used in HEIs, how these interact with commuters' academic experiences will be interesting to explore within this research.

In respect to the wider student experience, it is commonly inferred that commuter students participate less in social and ECA activities than their live-in peers. This is inaccurate for two key reasons. Firstly, there is evidence that demonstrates commuter students do take part in ECA and social activities, but these are often down to individual characteristics and

institutional culture. Secondly, reasons for (non)participation often involve a valuation exercise in which ECA and social activities are deprioritised by commuter students in favour of other factors, such as logistical ease or focus on their academic studies. Subsequently, the criticality I have demonstrated throughout this chapter regarding uncovering what being a commuter student is like will continue into my own empirical research in this area.

Chapter Three: Actor-network theory

Actor-network theory (ANT) derived from science and technology studies (Latour, 1993) as a way to conceptualise contemporary society that transcended the dominant lens of scientific objectivity (Blok & Jensen, 2011), thus rejecting the ontological scientific view of the world as objective and holding objective truth (Latour, 2005). Instead, ANT sought a way of understanding society which acknowledged the fluidity, messiness and connectedness of social reality (Hamilton, 2011). From this developed the 'sociology of translation' (Callon, 1984), also known as a 'sociology of associations' (Blok & Jensen, 2011), but more commonly referred to in contemporary society as actor-network theory. This chapter will explore the ontological and epistemological underpinnings of ANT, before briefly outlining its key concepts: actors, networks, the process of translation and immutable mobiles. It will then discuss some of the complexities of applying ANT in educational research, and key criticisms faced by ANT researchers.

3.1. Ontological and epistemological underpinnings of actor-network theory

ANT seeks to explore social reality which is accomplished through understanding the world as networks of people and things, things here which can refer to such as physical objects, but also textual forms, technological items and routinised practices. The specific make-up of these networks can carry influence, an influence which alters depending on both the things that make up the network, and also the other people and things that it interacts with. ANT is thus concerned with how these networks come into being, how they are maintained and how they can change into new and/or multiple networks (Blok & Jensen, 2011; Fenwick & Edwards, 2011; Gourlay, 2012; Thrift, 1996; Waltz, 2006).

Ontologically speaking, these networks of people and things cannot be known *a priori* (Blok & Jensen, 2011; Fenwick & Edwards, 2011; Latour, 2005; Sarauw, 2016); it is only through empirical research that these can be

known. Ultimately, the desired outcome is the ability to identify and describe the networks in a way that enlightens our understanding of social action as a collective, networked process of people and things (Law, 1992; Sarauw, 2016; Tummons, 2019; Webb et al., 2017).

ANT has not been discussed in great detail in relation to education (Fenwick, 2011) although this is increasing because of the insights it offers for understanding educational experiences as a network of things (Fenwick & Edwards, 2010; Tummons et al., 2018). ANT in an educational context has mostly focused on education policy reforms (Fenwick, 2011; Hamilton, 2011), schooling (McGregor, 2004) and higher education practices (Fox, 2005; Gourlay, 2012; Nespor, 1994; Sarauw, 2016; Tummons, 2009), the latter of which provides the background context of this thesis. Within the broad scope of higher education practices, this research is concerned with applying ANT in a way that will illuminate commuter students' experiences in HE. This includes identifying within the empirical research the actors that exist within commuter student networks, along with the processes in which connections between actors are formed, maintained and break down. Before this application however, it is necessary to first outline the key concepts of ANT (actors, networks & translation and immutable mobiles). Education-based examples to illustrate these key concepts will be used where appropriate, with a more substantial application of ANT to this thesis' research topic in Chapters Five, Six and Seven.

3.2. Actors

ANT seeks to trace a particular network and the moving parts within it (Tummons, 2020). Whilst what is meant by 'network' will be discussed later in this chapter, it is these moving parts that we are first concerned with. In ANT, these are known as 'actors' and can refer to both 'human' and 'non-human' actors within a given network (Blok & Jensen, 2011; Gorur, 2011; Law, 1992; Sarauw, 2016; Tummons, 2021a; Webb et al., 2017). In an education context a human actor may be pupils, students, teachers, parents

or instructors, whereas a non-human actor may refer to textbooks, whiteboards and computer systems (Gourlay, 2012).

A cornerstone of ANT is how it treats both ‘human’ and ‘non-human’ actors the same (Gorur, 2011), a process known as ‘symmetry’ (Belliger & Krieger, 2016; Callon, 1984; Tummons, 2021a, 2022). Through symmetry ANT gives equal focus and attention to the place of humans and materials in that it does not prioritise or assert that one has an influence over the other (Latour, 2005; Waltz, 2006), rather that all have an equal part to play in the network irrespective of size (Callon & Latour, 2015). Through this, ANT acknowledges the active participation of non-human actors within a given network (Fenwick & Edwards, 2011; McGregor, 2004; Waltz, 2006) and that both human and non-human actors can exert influence (Fenwick & Edwards, 2010; Gourlay, 2012; Hamilton, 2011; Latour, 2005; Tummons et al., 2018).

This section has so far outlined the concept and place of an ‘actor’ within ANT. However, ANT is concerned specifically with what the actors *do* and *have done to them* within the network (Fenwick & Edwards, 2010) and how they subsequently connect, depend on and interact with other human and non-human actors (Latour, 2005). The interaction between actors is key in ANT, where actors in a given network:

> “might be *associated* in such a way that they *make others do things*. This is done not by transporting a force that would remain the *same* throughout as some sort of faithful intermediary, but by generating *transformations* manifested by the many unexpected *events* triggered in the other mediators that *follow* them along the line” (Latour, 2005, p. 107).

Here Latour (2005) highlights the way actors can exert force on other actors within a network, although not as an isolated power but rather one that should be accomplished and traced across the network accordingly. In actuality, the human and non-human actors become the effect of simultaneous change; changes happening to them whilst also influencing changes within a given network (Fenwick & Edwards, 2011; Law, 1992; McGregor, 2004; Thrift, 1996; Waltz, 2006). As a result, any discussions of actors in ANT cannot, and should not, be considered in isolation from the

network itself (Blok & Jensen, 2011; Sarauw, 2016), the hyphen in 'actor-network' reinforcing the inextricable connection between things and the wider world (Latour, 2005). This will be explored in the next section in greater detail, specifically focusing on the network and how actors are connected and translated into a given network.

3.3. Networks & translation

A network, simply speaking, refers to the wider mass of connections or associations formed between human and non-human actors (Tummons, 2009). A network has no centre and no hierarchy to speak of (Hetherington & Law, 2000; Strathern, 1996). Rather, it can be considered as a flat plain where each connection holds equal importance (Law, 2004). It is these networks and their mass of connections that bring about 'the social' (Blok & Jensen, 2011; Callon & Latour, 2015; Law, 1992). Traditionally 'the social' has referred to explanations of the occurrence of society phenomena which ANT rejects for the notion that it is possible to explain why a thing happens (Latour, 2005). According to ANT, the social can only be studied in the same way any network can be studied, by tracing connections between actors within a given network to simply highlight a network's component parts (Blok & Jensen, 2011; Latour, 2005).

To understand a network it is necessary to look at the connections within it and how these came into being. This process is known as *translation*, whereby the ANT researcher traces the connections between actors in a given assemblage (Fenwick, 2011; Gorur, 2011) to understand the realities of how the actors have come into being and are enacted within the given network (Blok & Jensen, 2011; Gorur, 2011; Law, 2004). These translations are integral to the network structure as "without transformations or translations no vehicles can transport any effect" (Latour, 2005, p. 214), 'effect' here referring to anything that enacts change or impact on another actor in a network.

As the previous section has established, an ‘actor’ refers to a human or non-human entity within a given network. This phrasing is unpicked further by ANT, with the term ‘actant’ used in addition to ‘actor’ to refer to these human and non-human entities at different stages (Kale-Lostuvali, 2016; Latour, 2005; Waltz, 2006). Rather, the actor is in the first instance an ‘actant’ who, through a process of *translation* becomes an ‘actor’ performing a particular role within a network (Fenwick & Edwards, 2011; Waltz, 2006). In other words, *actors* remain *actants* without the translation process.

Spotlighting the actor-actant distinction provides an understanding of ANT’s emphasis on the transformative nature of belonging to, and holding connections within, a particular network (Gorur, 2011). Whilst in some ANT literature the two terms are used interchangeably (e.g. Blok & Jensen, 2011; Hamilton, 2011; McGregor, 2004), this thesis will adopt the former approach, using the separate terms of ‘actant’ and ‘actor’ in order to adequately address the translation process the actor undertakes to be part of a particular network.

Examining the translation process allows the ANT researcher to explore how the network exists in its current form. Firstly, following the translation process allows us to inspect the connections themselves. Like actants within a network, connections are heterogenous; they can be weak or strong, “thick and thin, rigid and limp, close and distant, dyadic and multiple, material and immaterial” (Fenwick, 2011, p. 119). Secondly, it allows for further examination of the “micro-negotiations” that take place between actors at the point of connection which can subsequently lead to a transformational change to actor relationships within a network (Fenwick, 2011, p. 130).

These translations of and between actors become part of a stable process which presents as smooth and seamless (Fenwick & Edwards, 2011). In Middleton (2010) where the practice of everyday walking in urban environments was explored, walking was conceptualised as an embodied act whilst also articulated as part of the translation process. What a human actor wore restricted and/or altered how they walked along a particular pavement,

along with whether they carried heavy luggage with them, or if they were trying to text whilst walking. Non-human actors (clothing, pavement, luggage, phone) were therefore all part of the translation process of the 'walking' network, altering how the human actors were participating in walking with minimal awareness; micro-negotiations that were concealed within the translation process (Middleton, 2010).

However, the achievement of an immutable, fully translated network is not always realistic; a network is never completed or ordered but in a constant process of ordering and reordering. A criticism of translation that arises is that of "partial translations" (Fenwick & Edwards, 2011, p. 127); in other words, an acknowledgement of those translations that do not fully occur or breakdown, reaching almost a 'stale-mate' through partial negotiation and subsequently have a reduced impact on the wider network. However, this is accepted by ANT as simply part of the translation process; not all translations will succeed (Callon, 1984; Thrift, 1996).

How networks come into being together and the subsequent durability of a network, therefore, is not predictable nor always involving change (Fenwick, 2011); translations can also identify simply how actors co-exist together within a given network (Latour, 2005). Ultimately, understanding translation as a fluid process is key:

> "Translation is neither deterministic nor linear, for what entities do when they come together is unpredictable. They negotiate their connections, using persuasion, force, mechanical logic, seduction, resistance, pretence, and subterfuge. Connections take different forms, some more elastic, tenuous, or long-lasting than others. Translations may be incremental, or delayed" (Fenwick & Edwards, 2011, p. 4).

Fenwick and Edwards (2011) highlight here the heterogeneity of the translation process and its subsequent impact on the wider network. Like actors, the network is not immutable (Fenwick & Edwards, 2010; Tummons et al., 2018). The network is reliant on the actors and so too are the actors on the network; actors mobilise together as separate heterogenous entities into, what appears as, a homogenous network of human and non-human actors (Law, 1992). Consequentially, all networks operate with a degree of

“precarity or fragility” in which there is a continuous danger that the network could break down at any moment (Tummons et al., 2018, p. 1919). This is due to both human and non-human actors no longer acting in the way required from the network for it to exist in its current state (Thrift, 1996; Tummons et al., 2018). Precarity of networks thus exist on a scale, with some actors more durable in their position and influence within a network than others (Law, 1992).

A university degree course is one such network that could be considered as more durable because some of the human and non-human actors that make it such are able to “maintain relational patterns for longer” (McGregor, 2004, p. 355). Nespor (1994) through his ethnographic fieldwork in a university’s physics and management programme highlighted how the doing of the physics degree course was regulated through entry requirements where students needed to have obtained a minimum standard in specific physics and calculus qualifications prior to starting their course. This practice had been established in the 1960s, continuing as a way to ensure students studying a university physics curriculum were adequately prepared for a course that had increased in complexity and difficulty during this time (Nespor, 1994). These course practices thus demonstrate in part the durability of the network. Specifically in how an assemblage of associations (university course curriculum, admissions tutors, school curriculum, examination papers and so on) is maintained and reproduced over time in order for entry onto these courses to continue.

This line of reasoning should be treated with caution as it is not that the actors within the network are objectively durable on their own, but rather within a particular network (Law, 1992). Irrespective of how durable a network may seem, they can still break down with new counter-networks produced (Fenwick & Edwards, 2011). To illustrate using the previous example, the entry requirement for a university courses may change, perhaps due to a change in the university curriculum which would thus alter this particular network in some way. The boundaries may change in that the exam paper(s) may contain different questions asked or the type of

knowledge that is tested on the paper(s) themselves may alter, but these boundaries are porous. Both could subsequently change the dynamic between this assemblage of associations and thus the doing of this course would risk the already temporary durability of the actor where it could collapse in its current state. Actors in the existing network thus need to work hard to maintain the current networks' existence and is in a constant process of ordering (Fenwick & Edwards, 2011; Tummons, 2009; Tummons et al., 2018). Here, this may refer to a university reinforcing the importance of the doing of the specific physics and calculus exams and/or maintaining the requirements for students to work towards these qualifications.

Key to illuminating the network in ANT is how it generates effects; how the network makes other things happen (Fenwick & Edwards, 2011). An effect could be the establishment of a wider network, like an overarching organisation (Belliger & Krieger, 2016; Law, 1992; McGregor, 2004), social action (Gourlay, 2012) or a social differentiator such as power (Fenwick, 2011; Hamilton, 2011; Law, 1992; McGregor, 2004; Sarauw, 2016; Thrift, 1996). The generation of power is particularly discussed in relation to ANT in that the translation process can illuminate how a network can generate power as an effect, its subsequent distribution across actors within a network (Hamilton, 2011; Law, 1992; Thrift, 1996), and how this translates into (human and non-human) actor practice (Callon, 1984; Hamilton, 2011).

Criticism has derived from this focus on identifying the establishment and transference of power, rather than stimulating more meaningful discussions around power imbalances and the subsequent inequality this produces (Hamilton, 2011; Kale-Lostuvali, 2016). Inequality is another socially differentiated effect that can be produced by an actor-network (Law, 1992), yet ANT has been scrutinised for its lack of attention on this. The concept of 'inequality' suggests that some people or things within a given network are more valued than others, directly contrasting with ANT's fundamental notion of symmetry in that all actors have equal importance within a given network. As a result, ANT has been criticised for this "lack of concern with Otherness" (Law, 2004, p. 157) as by not addressing that actors may be considered

‘other’ or less important than another, it fails to acknowledge the nuance and impact of social groupings like gender, class or ethnicity (Blok & Jensen, 2011; Law, 2004).

The lack of focus on social inequality issues could suggest that it would be hard to reconcile within this particular research, as Chapter One highlighted that they have been previously presented as inextricably interlinked with the lived experiences of commuter students. However, Latour argues that this argument misinterprets the wider aim of ANT (Blok & Jensen, 2011). ANT is not a sociological theory and does not aim to provide big social explanations about the world, rather it is interested in the configuration of a network and the negotiations that take place for this to come into being (Fenwick & Edwards, 2011). This focus helps avoid well-trodden assumptions of social life, like discussions around social inequality and commuter students, and thus allows for basing any understanding on findings from the network itself (Hamilton, 2011). This is especially pertinent to this thesis’ field of interest given that issues of social inequality within HE more generally have been theoretically dominated by Bourdieusian theoretical analysis (Reay, 2004).

Another important point to examine regarding a network is the spatial and temporal organisation of actors (McGregor, 2004), and the spatial and temporal impact they have on the wider network (Callon & Latour, 2015). Whilst it has been acknowledged that a network is ontologically flat (Law, 2004), some networks necessitate specific spatial and temporal configurations of actors to produce a particular effect. Using Nespor (1994) to illustrate once more, in order for students to learn the course content to ‘do’ their university degree programme, they need to have completed particular entrance exams on these subjects which in turn necessitates a student having studied a particular course, likely in a classroom with a teacher who imparts the content. This is not to say that within this network the teacher is more important that the students, or non-human actors within this particular network such as the classroom, the desk and the exam paper. Rather, that the teacher needs to impart information on a particular topic before the exam paper is sat; some actors have to be spatially and

temporally configured in a way for the effect, the taking part in their university degree programme, to happen.

Discussions of spatiality in ANT do not only apply to how actors are organised within a network. As a network becomes more extended, enrolling more actants into it through translation and increasing its durability potential, this enables a spatial and temporal extension of the network (Fenwick, 2011; Fenwick & Edwards, 2011; Nespor, 1994). In some cases, a network is durable enough that it can go on for a long time and continue to extend (Strathern, 1996).

To illustrate using an example from UK HE, the global coronavirus pandemic required universities to take their teaching online due to government regulations limiting the number of people able to meet indoors (Lee et al., 2022). Considering the network here to be an ‘undergraduate teaching module’, this required staff to teach online using virtual conference software in order for students to continue with their scheduled classes. This demonstrates that both human (staff) and non-human (virtual conference software) actors can enable a spatial and temporal extension of an educational network (Nespor, 2002), with students partaking in their classes from their homes across the world in different time zones, in addition to watching recorded classes ‘on-demand’. The network continued to extend to as many students needed to view the content, and in some cases online content was re-used in the following academic year (Turner, 2022).

The immutability of a network also extends to its geographical reach; the spatial and geographical extensions of a network are not fixed and can change over time (Blok & Jensen, 2011). For the 2021/22 academic year, a majority of UK universities offered a blended package of in-person and online teaching (Hubble et al., 2021). As a result, the network of an undergraduate teaching module was not geographically fixed; students enrolled on a module needed to be able to access teaching online, in addition to the in-person provision if isolating from COVID or still residing in a country where travel to the UK was not permitted. In some universities the ‘undergraduate teaching

module' network temporally changed in order to accommodate the rise of the Omicron variant, moving teaching online for the remainder of the term to reduce infections (Weale, 2021).

3.4. Immutable mobiles

So far this chapter has discussed how actors and the wider network come into being. Nevertheless networks are not just stagnant, immovable webs of connections: people and objects have agency from participation in a particular network (Tummons, 2009). Agency is not innate or pre-given, it is directly as a result of these connections (Hamilton, 2011) and it is this agency that can contribute to an actor (human or non-human) being able to move across networks with a particular intent (Tummons, 2009). This is referred to by Latour (2005, p. 233) as "immutable mobiles" in which the actor is able to hold the same meaning whilst moving within, and across, networks (Fenwick, 2011). To illustrate using an example pertinent to this research, a train timetable is one such immutable mobile. The train timetable for a particular train station sets out expectations for when the trains, driven by a train driver, should arrive and leave at a specified time in the day. The agentic nature of a train timetable is evident here (Watts & Urry, 2008) in that it is a non-human actor within a network which makes other actors within the network act in a particular way. In this case the existence of the train timetable within a network making a (human) train driver drive a (non-human) train within, and for, a certain period of time.

The discussion earlier in this chapter of power as a potential network effect can be discussed in relation to immutable mobiles. As established above, an immutable mobile is an actor-network whose enhanced durability increases its production of influential effects (McGregor, 2004). McGregor (2004) further articulates this in an Education setting through conceptualising the UK National Curriculum for school-aged children as an immutable mobile; an actor-network which holds power across multiple schools irrespective of geographical or spatial setting in establishing and subsequently normalising

how subjects are taught and assessed. With this in mind, the conceptualisation of the 'train timetable' as an immutable mobile can be further expanded. Should a technical failure result in a particular train being cancelled, or a delay en-route mean the train is unable to stop at particular stations at the specified time on the timetable, train company owners are financially penalised and encouraged to get back on timetable as quickly as possible to avoid disruption to other train services and train stations (National Rail, n.d). The train timetable being sufficiently fixed in form and suitably mobile means it can get things done, here in relation to continuing to schedule trains in and out of train stations on time, or as close to on time, as possible. This durability is relational however in that it has to be worked at; where a timetable is ignored, there is potential for the effects noted above to continue in that the trains can still enter in and out of platforms as directed by a train driver and/or station staff. Consequently this emphasis the potential power of the immutable mobile, in that the series of events noted above requires both human and non-human actors to maintain and take responsibility for ensuring the relational durability of the train timetable.

3.5. Actor-network: a complex interplay

Above begins to tease out what is a complex interplay; ANT should not be reduced to identifying actors that make up a given network. In reality there is a much more complex association of assemblages that can be seen simultaneously as both an actor and a network. Fenwick and Edwards (2011) illustrate this below using the example of a 'playground':

> "'Playground', for example, represents a continuous collaboration of bats and balls, swing installations, fences, grassy hills, sand pits, children's bodies and their capacities, game discourses, supervisory gazes, safety rules, and so on. This playground is both an assemblage or network of things that have become connected in a particular way, and an actor itself that can produce fears, policies, pedagogies, forms of play and resistances to these forms—hence, actor-network. And the objects that have become part of this actor-network are themselves effects, produced by particular interactions with one another" (Fenwick & Edwards, 2011, p. 3).

Here Fenwick and Edwards (2011) highlight how an actor, in this case the 'playground', can be simultaneously a network of objects that interact and

affect each other. Furthermore, that the network itself can contribute to the effects generated in a particular actor-network in addition to actor input (Blok & Jensen, 2011); using the example above, this may refer to the policies and forms of play undergone which is an effect translated as a result of this particular actor-network (Fenwick & Edwards, 2011).

The same application can be made to the 'university' as an actor-network (Webb et al., 2017). A university represents an assemblage of multiple human and non-human actors: academic staff, students, buildings, books, lecture halls, online learning platforms, campus cards, IT accounts, campus coffee vendors and more. Each of these listed are individual objects that have their own effect(s); a campus card, for instance, provides a student with a way to gain entry to university facilities. But as an assemblage of things, they too become part of an actor-network: a university. Any university then, has potential to be both an actor that has an effect on others, but also a social entity that is continuously shaped and a product of interactions within a network.

Above unpicks not only the complex association of assemblages, but the vast interconnectedness of "networks within networks" (Strathern, 1996, p. 523). Inspecting closer the above example of the 'university' actor-network, the actors listed can be considered as networks themselves. For example, an online learning platform is in itself made up of human and non-human actors (e.g. student and staff users, PDF files, assignment submission portals, FAQ discussion boards, module alerts) whilst simultaneously an actor within the 'university' actor-network. Not only does this exemplify how networks influence each other, in this case students submit assignments through the online learning platform which facilitates their final grading for graduation from university, but also demonstrates how network(s) are responsible for things that take place over temporal, spatial and geographical boundaries (Tummons, 2021b).

3.6. Applying ANT

When applying ANT in empirical research, it is imperative that ANT not be treated as a totalising ‘traditional’ theory which seeks to explain, apply or characterise a particular notion of the world (Blok & Jensen, 2011; Fenwick & Edwards, 2011; Law, 2004). Therefore, it is necessary to steer clear of any notion of ANT as an explanatory theory applied pre-research, but rather as:

> “a fluid, decentred and exploratory approach that challenges a priori concepts and structures and honours complexities of immanent, emergent phenomena” (Fenwick, 2011, p. 123).

Key to this is creating an ANT account which is able to describe the complexities of actors within a given network, and each part they play within this (Latour, 2005); all actors have an active part to play within an actor-network. Overall, it is the processes and subsequent complexities of the network that ANT is concerned with, how it grows or declines, rather than an explanation as to whether it has done so (Fox, 2005).

Instead, it is more appropriate to consider ANT as a “cloud” of thought (Fenwick & Edwards, 2010, p. ix) which, rather than being a totalising explanatory force, simply provides thoughtful considerations regarding the messy web. The ‘cloud’ is constantly adapting and changing (Fenwick & Edwards, 2011) which Latour (2005) also acknowledges, specifically in relation to how his own conceptualising of ANT has changed over time. This shift marks a change in Latour’s thinking in that he considers ANT, whilst illuminating in its attention to symmetry, to have reached a ‘use by’ date in which the act of tracing an actor-network can only provide a singular ontological truth (Tummons, 2021b, p. 2); it does not fit with his wider striving for ontological pluralism (Latour, 2013). Whilst I acknowledge that Latourian thought has moved on from ANT, this thesis will continue in exploring ANT in relation to this specific topic. This is because the dearth of commuter student literature [see Chapter One] means it is necessary for us to continue with this line of exploration of the commuter student as an actor-network; this topic has not yet reached its ‘use by’ date for exploration.

In Chapter Four outlining the methodology for this research, the ANT approach to tracing the network will be further stated; I chose to 'follow the actors'. Using this approach, the order in which the actors are followed is irrelevant. To illustrate once more using the 'train timetable', an ANT researcher may further delve into the network by tracing the actor(s) who create the timetable, which (human and non-human) actors circulate the finished timetable and how this is further distributed across the network. Similarly in this research, choosing which commuter student to follow first was also irrelevant. Rather, following a particular commuter student was simply a starting point to illuminate the actors, immutable mobiles and translation processes in their network. This conceptualisation will be further explored in Chapters Five, Six and Seven in relation to commuter students' lived experiences of HE.

The application of ANT itself, even with the above caveats in mind, is tricky. Firstly, regardless of how ANT is applied within research it is necessary to boundary the phenomena being looked at and perform a 'cutting' of the network. A network may come to a natural stopping point or be actively cut by the researcher during the research process due to human ownership or using monetary exchange (Strathern, 1996). Both involve human actors needing to 'cut' the network to make ownership or monetary exchange possible, resulting in a hybridisation of the network (Strathern, 1996). The nature of a research project, in that it occurs over a set period of time and for a set cost, thus requires the researcher to conduct a 'cutting' of the network in order for the research to be academically, temporally and monetarily viable.

Secondly, criticisms of ANT have argued it ignores the researcher's influence within the networks it seeks to illuminate (Fenwick & Edwards, 2011). As established in section 3.1 ANT is ontologically rooted in the messiness of assemblages and how these form with an epistemological aim to provide a reflexive account of an actor-network, yet it fails to acknowledge that the researcher's account it ends up delivering is pre-determined by the researcher in how they choose to represent the actor-network (Fenwick &

Edwards, 2011). The validity of an ANT account is something that even Latour (2005) addresses in relation to tracing connections, in that it "can put aside neither the complete artificiality of the enterprise nor its claim to accuracy and truthfulness" (Latour, 2005, p. 133). Such criticisms of ANT echo those of ethnographic research which will be further unpacked in Chapter Four in relation to researcher presence as an unavoidable necessity. Like these criticisms of conducting ethnography, Latour (2005) considers this simply part and parcel of the process and necessary in order for us to explicate the actor-network.

These criticisms of ANT, like in any academic research, are important to acknowledge and address. However, how detrimental it is to the application of ANT in academic research can be simply seen as "a matter of judgement" for the researcher (Law, 2004, p. 157). That is, it is up to the researcher in question to decide whether the criticisms are sufficient for them to steer away from ANT. In the case of this thesis, I can acknowledge that tracing connections within the networked practices of commuter students does not automatically result in a claim of accuracy or truthfulness, opening up a broader question as to whether any research methodology can produce absolute truth (Cohen et al., 2018). However this broader acknowledgement of the difficulties in achieving ontological 'truths', plus the additional need for more research in this area aforementioned, allows me to make a judgement that using ANT for this research is still an appropriate activity to undertake.

3.7. Conclusion

This chapter has sought to provide a critical overview of ANT, outlining its key concepts (actor, network, translation and immutable mobiles) whilst applying these to educational contexts relevant to the topic of this thesis. Ultimately, an actor-network is a complex association of assemblages in which actors, in their connections to other actors within a particular network, influence each other into making stuff happen. This thesis will use ANT as an exploratory tool to highlight the actors and wider network of the commuter student,

honouring the complexity and inextricable nature of these networked practices.

Chapter Four: Methodology

In this chapter, I will present the methodological underpinnings of my research. The chapter first presents a methodological and theoretical discussion of the use of ethnography in education, before moving into a more detailed discussion of my multi-sited ethnography (MSE). It will then discuss in detail the key methods and tools used within this framework (participant observation, go-along interviews, WhatsApp), before outlining the sampling and procedure undertaken within my research. The chapter will then provide a reflection on my positionality and subsequent impact of this on the research, before ending with sections on data analysis and ethics.

4.1. Ethnographies of education

Ethnography can be broadly described as a method which facilitates examination into study of the 'everyday' (Atkinson, 2015; Marcus, 1995). The use of ethnography enables the researcher to consider the workings of a given culture, such as social hierarchy and socialisation practices (Maeder, 2018), whilst simultaneously situated within a broader understanding of participants' lived experiences (Yon, 2003). This thesis operates on the methodological conception of ethnography whereby a researcher embodies and participates in their participants' daily practices (Madden, 2017).

Ethnography has been purported by some scholars as inextricably linked to anthropology given that its origin as a method arose from the discipline (Bhatti, 2012; Harrison, 2020; Pole & Morrison, 2003). However, this view can be framed as lacking methodological and disciplinary nuance (Hasse, 2015; Ingold, 2011) given that ethnographies have existed in other disciplines like Sociology and Education for a number of years (Delamont & Atkinson, 1980). The latter discipline in which my thesis sits is now a well-established interdisciplinary field of ethnography (Beach et al., 2018; Hammersley, 2018a, 2018b; Pole & Morrison, 2003).

Whilst acknowledging these prior links between ethnography and anthropology, I argue it is more appropriate to consider a continuum between ethnography and anthropology rather than a stark divide (Hasse, 2015). Ethnography is not only for the exclusive use of anthropologists. In education for example, where this thesis' research is focused, ethnography can facilitate a deeper understanding into how particular educational structures contribute and influence educational experiences in conjunction with individual agency present within these institutions (Troman et al., 2006). The ethnographic approach can thus highlight the ways in which structure and agency are enmeshed in contributing to a particular educational experience (Maeder, 2018).

Historically, education ethnographies have centred around the practices of education institutions (Yon, 2003). Focusing on UK education ethnographies given the context of this thesis, a seminal ethnography for understanding counter-school culture is Willis (1978) 'Learning to labour'. Following the lives of 12 boys in a secondary school in Birmingham, Willis (1978) explored their attitudes to school and their prospective careers into manual labour, although was not without criticism in regards to its lack of description and tendency to overgeneralise his findings (Walford, 2024). Nevertheless, secondary mainstream schooling more generally has been a focus of much education ethnography (Gordon et al., 2010), with studies including, but not limited to, the impact of policy reform (Ball, 1981; Lacey, 1970), classroom practices (Delamont, 1976) and experiences of different socioeconomic groups (Bhatti, 1999; Evans, 2016; Kulz, 2017).

In spite of its use in the above contexts, ethnography can still be considered a relatively underutilised approach in researching the HE sector (Iloh & Tierney, 2014; Lucas, 2012). This could be in a response to current epistemological paradigms legitimised by the government and wider society where a greater emphasis is placed on quantitative methodologies (Pierides, 2010) and/or those that look at 'big data' and 'what works' (Hammersley, 2018a).

This is not to suggest, however, that the underutilisation of education ethnography equates to this type of research being negligible in its contribution to knowledge; ethnography has much to offer higher education researchers. The strength of ethnographic research lies in outlining messy and complex webs that make up particular social groupings and relationships (Atkinson, 2015). This, combined with its capabilities for rich description and tracing links between people and things (Hammersley, 2018a), means that ethnography can enlighten understanding particularly around the social lives of students (Lucas, 2012). Nathan (2005) highlights this in her ethnography of freshman students' HE experiences. Whilst set in a North American context and also not without its own ethical concerns given the covert nature of her research (Lucas, 2012), Nathan (2005) is still a useful exemplar because of the ways in which she demonstrates how ethnography can uncover how students navigate university life and the networks that characterise their experiences.

Prior to discussing the methods that will be employed within this research, it is good researcher practice to acknowledge the epistemological and ontological foundations of the research (Freudendal-Pedersen et al., 2010). The qualitative research undertaken in this thesis rests firmly within an interpretivist ontology that situates knowledge as deriving from a complex interconnectedness between the social world and individual actors that exist within such (Savin-Baden & Howell Major, 2013). This knowledge cannot be extracted nor measured objectively (Bryman, 2016). Rather, I aim in this research to uncover the complex meaning actors produce through their interactions with other human and non-human actors within the social world (Latour, 2005), and the subsequent action revisions these interactions engender (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019).

The above approach does not advocate for the generalisation of the experiences of a group of people to the wider population. Ethnography as a methodological approach broadly speaking does not seek to produce findings that are generalisable to an entire population. This is because they often feature non-probability samples that cannot be considered

representative of a given population (Gobo, 2008). Mainly however, this is because of its ontological roots as highlighted above in regarding knowledge as a product of the interconnectedness of particular contexts within the social world. A further discussion of my positionality in the research and how this interacts with the methods used within the study will be explored further in section 4.6.1 once my methodological approach has been fully unpacked.

4.2. Multi-sited ethnography

Broader shifts in the field of ethnography have caused a pluralism of ethnographic forms to emerge. 'Rapid' ethnography for instance is an ethnographic approach that operates on a shorter fieldwork timescale (Vindrola-Padros, 2020) in comparison to traditional ethnographies which historically involved the researcher spending long durations in the field (Madden, 2017; Mills & Morton, 2013; Shah, 2017). The shorter timescale, with studies ranging from a few days to a couple of months (see Baines & Cunningham, 2013; Isaacs, 2012), reduces likelihood of temporal and monetary constraints whilst also offering quicker findings dissemination, particularly in disciplines like health and business where research is often commissioned for instructing change within an organisation (Tate, 2023). This kind of ethnography is not without criticism, namely for the potential compromission of research quality due to brevity in the field (Pink & Morgan, 2013). Nevertheless, it does highlight the evolving nature of ethnography and the benefits these new forms can offer in respect to quicker availability of insight into research phenomena where longer fieldwork may not be financially or temporally viable (Isaacs, 2012; Reeves et al., 2013).

Marcus (1995) introduced ethnographic research conducted across multiple, spatially distinct field sites, known as multi-sited ethnography (MSE) (Falzon, 2009; Hannerz, 2003). Field sites are established by the researcher as holding a set of logical connections or associations that make them interesting to study as a group (Hannerz, 2003; Marcus, 1995), in addition to on an individual basis. Unlike 'traditional' ethnography which generally offers

a new understanding or exploration of a singular unknown and unexplored culture or area of interest, Marcus (1999) argued that MSE could equip researchers to explore a complex web of interconnecting studies of interest.

Establishing which exact grouping of sites to study is the first step of MSE, including the kind of connections that will guide the researcher. The connections between the sites of interest are integral to MSE (Falzon, 2009; Hine, 2007), enabling researchers to establish "connections through translations and tracings among distinctive discourses" (Marcus, 1995, p. 101). This focus on connections between sites is referred to as 'translation' and is integral to MSE (Marcus, 1995) and consequently ANT as a way to spotlight how these connections are enacted within a given network (Law, 2004) [see Chapter Three]. The persuasiveness and contribution to knowledge a MSE can provide thus relies heavily on these translations between sites (Hine, 2007; Marcus, 1995).

MSE can also be referred to as 'multilocal' as whatever phenomena being studied cannot be boundaried to a particular space, but rather exists in multiple spaces (Hannerz, 2003, p. 201). Actors are now more likely to be mobile and in transit (Marcus, 1999) given the rise of globalisation and need to consider the global linkages woven between sites (Forsey, 2018; Kenway et al., 2018). MSE is therefore used as a way to "contextualise the local worlds of ethnographic encounters within the global processes of the world system" (Pierides, 2010, p. 190). In other words, MSE takes into consideration the wider context of the system and the "spatialized (cultural) difference" of sites (Falzon, 2009, p. 13), connecting them together (Marcus, 1995).

4.2.1. Using MSE to explore commuter students' experiences

Employing MSE in education research is an expansion of traditional ethnography, although underutilised within the field (Pierides, 2010). Consequently, this thesis seeks to further interpose MSE within a HE context. Focusing on three higher education institutions in the UK [see

Section 4.4], each site is treated as a particular sub-field of university space and experience. It is by using a multi-sited approach that allows for the institutional context and spaces to be explored in a way that can foreground commuting practices, and for links and associations to be drawn between and within these sites(s) in a way that is not possible through a single-sited approach. This is not to suggest that MSE claims any kind of generalisability as was highlighted in the broader context of ethnography in Section 4.1. Instead, associations between individuals and/or field sites simply highlight any reoccurring themes across sites within the complexities of commuter students' lived experiences (Boccagni, 2020).

MSE is particularly useful for exploring connections and associations in an education context because this approach recognises the unbounded-ness of education sites; educational institutions are undergoing a continual reshaping of institutional structure and practices (Wolff, 2015). Using MSE in this way can deepen our understanding of student practices beyond the structural confines of educational institutions. Forsey (2018) suggests conceptualisations of practice should extend beyond the institutions to consider the transitions to and from educational institutions like schools and universities. Here, Forsey (2018) is emphasising the mobility that these institutions engender; students at educational institutions need to travel to and from class, in a local setting or more further afield. My research aligns with this approach, exploring the transitions and practices commuter students undertake in relation to their university experience and how this impacts their university experience.

All connections can be broadly categorised as 'following' actors across a given network. In the case of my research, as a starting point in which to enter the network I 'followed the people' (Marcus, 1995, p. 106), the 'people' being students who are commuting to university. The definition of a commuter student was outlined in Chapter One, with the specific parameters further set out in Section 4.5.1. This approach was in order to uncover the practices of commuter students that exist not only within a particular site (e.g. home or university) but also spaces of 'in-betweenness', which in the case of

this research could refer to students' journeys to and from campus. It was through the initial following the people that allowed me to then trace the connections between other actors, non-human and human, that were present in these networked practices as outlined through the symmetry principle of ANT [see Chapter Three].

Looking for connections and themes within multi-sited research has been criticised, as by focusing on different people across different sites it is suggested this can place too much importance on connections that are actually incomparable (Shah, 2017). In the context of my research, I acknowledge that studying different commuter students across three institutions could have a level of incommensurability as they are situated in different institutional contexts with differing support and institutional policies acting on them. However, it is these very different contexts that is what makes this research an original contribution to knowledge; by examining the experiences of a particular group within their own particular institutional context, these comparisons can enlighten our understanding of the impact of the local context on the individual.

4.3. Method

Within this MSE, I used three core tools for data collection: participant observation, go-along interviews and WhatsApp. The following section will examine these methods in further detail, first discussing the inextricable nature of participant observation within ethnographic research before exploring this thesis' use of go-along interviews. This section will also outline my use of instant messaging application WhatsApp as an additional research tool with the ability to act as a data collection method for both textual and visual data.

I acknowledge that any employment of methods within an ethnographic context is complex; they are deeply entangled in a way that cannot easily be separated. Participant observation for example is an essential part of the

employment of a go-along interview (Falzon, 2009; Kinney, 2017) but also a tool for data collection in its own right. Therefore this section has been written in this way for the sake of this thesis as a linear text, but not in any way to suggest a level or importance, nor chronology of methods used within this thesis' research approach.

4.3.1. Participant observation

An essential component of ethnographic research, and argued by scholars to be the very essence of ethnography (see Crang & Crook, 2007; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019; Spradley, 2016; Walford, 2018), is its employment of participant observation. Participant observation refers to the researcher observing the environment and all located within it (people, objects, activities) whilst *in situ* (Spradley, 2016). Rather than gaining knowledge through what is spoken, participant observation is "a form of production of knowledge through being and action" (Shah, 2017, p. 48), in that the researcher is interested in how the participant is *being*, and the *action(s)* they take. Experiences of social life and social networks do not exist in a social vacuum. Therefore, participant observation enables the research to take a holistic study of participants' lives within the context and environments being observed (Shah, 2017). This builds a bigger picture of the social phenomena being studied within the relevant context, as opposed to relying on what a participant can articulate through language alone.

Collecting data that is not articulated through language relies on the researcher recording their observations (Madden, 2017). Descriptive fieldnotes are written within (and concerned with articulating) the specific research context, such as a room set-up, the weather or the temporal movements taken by participants (Jeffrey, 2018). Post-fieldwork, the researcher uses the fieldnotes to interpret their findings to ensure that they present a robust picture of the field of interest (Cohen et al., 2018).

For the remainder of the chapter, participant observation will be discussed in conjunction with the go-along interviews employed within the research. This

is because the go-along interview enfolds the methodological approach of participant observation within an interview setting in order to align to a more ethnographic sensibility. How this is achieved is discussed in the following section, first outlining the methodological and procedural interview structure, before a wider discussion of its overall ethnographic underpinnings.

4.3.2. The 'go-along' interview

The structure of a go-along is rooted within a qualitative interview approach. Interviews are a mainstay of qualitative social science research, a methodological tool operationalised by a researcher to construct knowledge through an interviewer directing questions to an interviewee on a chosen topic (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2014). In this thesis, this conception of an interview rests on the ontological premise that knowledge is co-constructed between the interviewer and interviewee (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2014; Roulston, 2010). As a result, using qualitative interviews more generally in research facilitates the uncovering of meanings and connections participants attach to their interactions and experiences of the social world through information shared with the researcher (Cohen et al., 2018).

There is some scholarly tension surrounding the use of interviews more generally within ethnographic research. In short, these stem from two key areas. Firstly, the very nature of interviews means that the researcher is unable to gather the same richness of data that 'traditional' ethnography affords (Walford, 2018). Secondly, that data gathered from interviews rely on what participants say, as opposed to their way of being (Hammersley, 2006, 2018b), the latter of which is key in ethnographic research.

The go-along interview goes some way to acknowledge these general criticisms of using interviews in ethnographies. During this particular form of interview the researcher 'goes along' with their participants, generally on a journey that is normal for them (Kusenbach, 2003) whilst conducting an in-depth, generally qualitative, interview (Carpiano, 2009). The questions used can be unstructured or semi-structured (Carpiano, 2009; Garcia et al., 2012),

although researchers usually have a selection of open-ended questions that they can ask in order to follow the natural flow of conversation (Kinney, 2017). The process of a go-along interview is encapsulated as follows:

> "When conducting go-alongs, fieldworkers accompany individual informants on their 'natural' outings, and – through asking questions, listening and observing – actively explore their subject's stream of experiences and practices as they move through, and interact with, their physical and social environment" (Kusenbach, 2003, p. 463).

Here Kusenbach (2003) highlights the richness of data obtainable from go-along interviews through building a contextual understanding of a topic from asking questions, listening to participant responses and observing participant practices.

It is this latter participant observation element of a go-along interview that is a key distinguishing feature from other types of qualitative interviews, utilising participant observation in order to grasp an in-depth understanding of social phenomena (Falzon, 2009; Kinney, 2017). This is achieved in part through highlighting verbal and non-verbal elements of participant experiences (Stiegler, 2021). Whilst the verbal may refer to what is spoken by the participant, the non-verbal could refer in this research to participant body language, the particular route travelled on the go-along or how the participant interacts with the space around them. Non-verbal cues are much harder to note in audio recordings as they often depend on participants to verbally articulate non-verbal acts (Garcia et al., 2012). Consequentially, researcher fieldnotes are a necessary companion in participant observation to accurately capture non-verbal data. These fieldnotes may also include how the researcher observes the verbal and non-verbal elements of the commute intersecting within an individual's experience; how the participant verbalises their experiences whilst navigating their commute and any apparent disjuncture. Being able to record this combination of elements of participant's experiences thus helps build a holistic knowledge framework for understanding commuter student experiences.

'Go-alongs' have been previously equated to other mobile methods including 'walking interviews' (Butler & Derrett, 2014; Clark & Emmel, 2010; Evans &

Jones, 2011) and ‘bimbling’, a form of walking interview where the walk is aimless (Anderson, 2004; Kinney, 2017). All involve an aspect of ‘walking’ and all empower participants to control the direction and destination of the go-along traditional interview setting as the participant is responsible for leading the chosen method (Carpiano, 2009). This approach has also been found to encourage rapport with participants by giving opportunity for researcher and participant to familiarise themselves with each other with less formality than when in an interview setting (Trell & van Hoven, 2010).

However, unlike a walking interview or bimbling a go-along can take multiple forms (Carpiano, 2009; Kusenbach, 2003; Vannini & Vannini, 2017): a ‘walk-along’ to accompany participants walking to and from a location, or a ‘ride-along’ for those using public transport. Similarly, a go-along can involve both walking and riding, depending on the combination of transportation used (Kusenbach, 2003). In this research the term ‘go-along’ will be used to encompass a range of participant journey types as most participants used a variety of transport methods to get to and from campus. Where necessary, it will be specified the type of travel undertaken by participants.

In a go-along, the researcher is ‘led along’ by the participant not only verbally through their answering of questions, but also on the journey undertaken itself and the *spaces* navigated (Carpiano, 2009) as go-alongs often rely on the participant leading and explaining a journey known to them (Garcia et al., 2012). Participants may visit particular *places* during the go-along interview which helps the researcher understand how participants can attach meaning to places and make places *become* places as a result of participant action (Anderson, 2004). Similarly, it can provide an understanding of how participants connect and weave these places together to create a connected sequence that forms part of their daily lives (Kusenbach, 2003). As a result, mobile methodologies like walking or go-along interviews are useful tools where “researchers can become aware of the key routines, habits and practices through which people inscribe their knowledges into places” (Anderson, 2004, p. 257).

Go-along interviews' interaction with *space* and *place* is a key benefit for their use in research, particularly in the way they connect space and place with meaning and how this meaning is enacted by participants (Anderson, 2004; Vannini & Vannini, 2017). Furthermore, go-alongs enable this meaning-making to be witnessed by the researcher in the context in which it is being made (Kusenbach, 2003), and in 'real-time' (Garcia et al., 2012, p. 1395). This is in combination with the ethnographers' interest in the fieldsites themselves; how space and places are presented and experienced by participants (Madden, 2017). This tying of the spatial to the meaning is unlikely to have occurred in a sit-down interview (Kusenbach, 2003) as the space and places encountered during a go-along become a kind of 'prompt' for discussions (Hein et al., 2008), triggering participants to talk on topics they may not have mentioned having not been in the particular space and place (Trell & van Hoven, 2010). More than just as a prompt, however, the researcher is able to understand how participants see and place themselves relationally within these place and spaces. Using go-along interviews for this particular research I am therefore able to locate the knowledge regarding commuter students' experiences *in situ* which by this logic is thus more likely to accurately reflect the commuter students' experiences.

Space in my research refers to the entirety of the commute, and what can be constituted as the broader institutional space that they will be traversing to and through during their commute. *Place* refers to the specific places students visit during their commutes such as a train or bus station, a coffee shop or another landmark in their journey that was meaningful to them. Alternatively, a place may be somewhere on their institutional campus that features in their daily lives, such as particular lecture theatres, student common rooms or study spaces. Ultimately, this methodological approach is useful for understanding the place(s) students experience on their commute, their routine (if applicable) when commuting and the habits and practices they display.

Due to the habituality of commuting and consequently participants' routinised practices, there is potential that participants may not consider narrating all

elements of their commuting experiences. It could be something that they do not consider worth narrating, for example, something they consider trivial or unimportant but I view as interesting (Trell & van Hoven, 2010). Similarly, it might be something that simply does not exist in their consciousness, in that they are unaware of certain practices they are undertaking (Kusenbach, 2003) or that they are unable to articulate the rationalisation for a particular act or movement (Brown & Spinney, 2010). Being a commuter student may involve elements of unconscious practices, such as choosing where to sit on public transport or their walking route to university. This was addressed in my research through asking participants' questions that directly highlighted these unconscious behaviours, such as asking a participant directly why they took a particular route in order to make the familiar 'strange', a necessity in ethnographic research (Pole & Morrison, 2003).

Nevertheless, it is important to also address potential ontological pitfalls of using go-along interviews. Go-alongs must be conducted on participants' routine journeys in order to capture data that reflects the day to day experiences of participants as best as possible (Kusenbach, 2003). Even so, the act of the researcher travelling on their journey with them automatically changes the dynamics and experiences of the participants' journey; it is no longer a participant's 'natural' environment (Kusenbach, 2003). This is coupled with a wider concern surrounding the use of go-along interviews and whether epistemologically this is at odds with an ethnographic approach in respect to the recording process. Specifically, that relying on recorded interviews as a primary data source creates an unnatural environment through the recording process (Walford, 2018).

These concerns were addressed in two key ways. Firstly, the recorded interviews were only one of multiple ways in which data was recorded in this MSE (e.g. fieldnotes, WhatsApp messages, voice notes, photos); the research did not only rely on recorded interviews as the primary data source. Secondly, the go-along is just like any other ethnographic work in that my presence as the researcher can influence the dynamic of the environment around them (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995). Whilst the possible reactivity

of researcher presence is unavoidable, this can be partly controlled through such as building a rapport with participants (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995). Furthermore student participants dictated where to meet, for how long for and for the type of journey we undertook together which increased the likelihood that I would be accompanying participants on their regular journeys to and from campus and therefore “stand a much better chance of uncovering aspects of individual lived experience that frequently remain hidden” (Kusenbach, 2003, p. 464).

Go-along interviews have increased in popularity as a research method (Vannini & Vannini, 2017), and have been used as part of ethnographic research in contexts including health (Carpiano, 2009; Garcia et al., 2012), gender and sexuality (Garcia et al., 2012; Stiegler, 2021), youth studies (Trell & van Hoven, 2010) and travel (Kusenbach, 2003; Moles, 2008). Go-alongs have also been used, albeit sparingly, within education research to investigate the HE student experience (Holton & Riley, 2014) and in one study the commuter student experience (Finn & Holton, 2019).
MSE tends to use interviews as part of its methodological approach, attributed to its compatibility with the need to be in multiple fieldsites for shorter periods of time (Hannerz, 2003) and therefore the use of go-alongs in this context is well-suited.

4.3.3. WhatsApp and visual data

WhatsApp was the third medium for data collection used within this MSE, one of the most popular social media platforms used in the UK (Kemp, 2023). Online spaces like social media platforms connect actors in virtual spaces, yet are increasingly intertwined with actor practices in ‘offline’ face-to-face spaces (Marques da Silva & Parker Webster, 2018). This commonality of digital platform use between individuals in the current digital climate, and this interconnectedness of online and offline spaces, means WhatsApp is being increasingly used as a tool to collect data within qualitative research (Barbosa & Milan, 2019; Gibson, 2020; Staudacher &

Kaider-Grolimund, 2016), and in particular to investigate participant experiences (Hine, 2020; Parker Webster & Marques da Silva, 2013).

In the case of my research, WhatsApp was used primarily as a practical solution in which to communicate with participants to organise the logistics of the fieldwork [discussed further in Section 4.5.1.1]. However, students had the option to use WhatsApp communication with myself also as medium in which to reflect on their commutes to and from campus. This could comprise of sending messages, pictures, videos and/or voice notes about their experiences of commuting to campus and more generally their life as a commuter student outside of the times I was accompanying them on their commute. There was no expectation for students to share information through WhatsApp, with students also having the freedom to choose the frequency and format in which they shared their experiences with me using this platform (Gibson, 2020). This naturally resulted in WhatsApp being used in the research in differing amounts, with some participants using WhatsApp to share their commuting experiences regularly, yet others used WhatsApp only for logistical planning of the research.

A few students used WhatsApp to share photos of their journey to and from campus with me. Photos have been used particularly within walking interviews for participants to capture aspects of their neighbourhood or local area (Clark & Emmel, 2010; Trell & van Hoven, 2010), akin to this thesis' research interest of student travel experiences. Using photography in this way supports with adding further contextual information in a way that a textual form cannot; it directly transports the viewer to 'being there' in that particular situation (Madden, 2017). Furthermore, giving participants the opportunity to take photos themselves provides them with a choice around what they deem as important to share within their experiences (Holm, 2018). Potential shortfalls around participants choosing what information to share or not to share have already been discussed and resolved in Section 4.3.2. Using photo sharing within my broader suite of methods further emphasises

my approach in gaining a rich understanding of commuters' experiences of university.

The use of voice notes, short recorded audio clips sent by one person to another, in ethnographic research is less documented and particularly so within an education research setting. However, the limited existing research brings some suggestion that using voice notes as a data form can showcase user reflexivity; voice notes enable users to articulate their stream of consciousness whilst also recording other elements of speech such as inflections of tone, pauses and background noise where relevant (Mazanderani, 2017).

Managing interactions as an ethnographer with participants in a virtual space can be complex as it can involve navigating, managing and responding to interactions that fluctuate between online and offline spaces (Parker Webster & Marques da Silva, 2013). In this study I was able to combat this by setting out the expectations for when WhatsApp would be primarily used during the study: for communicating commute logistics [see Section 4.5.1.1]. Using WhatsApp further helped combat the geographic logistical barrier of doing research over multiple sites, as it allowed for myself to be in simultaneous communication with multiple participants across different geographical locations (Holm, 2018). Consequently, this supported my aim to build a holistic understanding of commuter students' experiences through both what participants narrated about their experiences in WhatsApp, as well as through the go-along interviews and subsequent time spent observing participants.

The visual data collected through WhatsApp is not the primary focus of this ethnography, nor were participants at liberty to use visual media formats to express their commuting experiences should they not wish to during the study. This is further detailed in Section 4.8. which outlines the ethics in how this was managed. However, this research draws upon visual methods

where used by participants as an additional format for students to demonstrate their lived experience of being a commuter student.

4.3.4. Addressing the research questions

The methodological approach of this research enables me to answer my research questions in very specific ways. To answer my first research question 'what is being a commuter student like?', a multi-sited ethnography allows for the question to be considered across the three main institutions in the study [see Section 4.4]. Through this I draw on my go-along interview data and the fieldnotes from time spent with participants either commuting or navigating their university campuses. Students' voice notes and WhatsApp messages are weaved throughout in order to build a holistic picture of commuter students lived experiences of travel, arrival on campus, their academic studies and their wider university experience.

Answering the second research question 'what are the networks within which commuter students are situated?' is inextricably linked with the application of ANT in this research. An extensive discussion of the application of theory within this thesis has already been outlined Chapter Three. In this MSE the actors 'followed' are human, but in an ANT approach actors can be both human or non-human and thus multiplicitous within any given network (Latour, 2005). Consequently, the researcher must pick which actor(s) to follow. As previously highlighted in section 4.2.1, this is not to place higher importance on the role of certain actors within a given network as all actors are considered equal (Fenwick & Edwards, 2010). Rather, it is an unavoidable necessity in empirical research in which to commence and/or end the data collection period, known as 'cutting the network' (Strathern, 1996).

To answer my second research question, I am therefore able to use the interview data and observation fieldnotes from time spent with students to follow the connections between the human and non-human actors that are enrolled within their given network. Interview data from staff provides useful

contextual information regarding institutional policies and practices that can influence and affect commuter students' experiences across their respective universities.

4.4. Institutional sites of interest

The research was conducted across three contrasting HE institutions in the North of England: a small Cathedrals Group university (Institution A), a large Russell Group university (Institution B) and a mid-sized Russell Group university (Institution C). These are further outlined below.

4.4.1. Institution A

Institution A is a small university situated in the North of England with around 6000 undergraduate students and 4000 postgraduates (Institution A, 2024b). It is a member of the Cathedrals Group, a university membership organisation with an emphasis on widening access and civic community engagement (Cathedrals Group, 2024). The university has a satellite campus in addition to its main city in Institution A city which has an additional 2000 students (Institution A, 2022), although this was not the focus of this study. First year undergraduate students have the lowest entry tariff score of the three institutions in the study, an average which situates them within the bottom twenty five universities in the university league tables (The Guardian, 2024). The institution has a contextual offer scheme for majority of their undergraduate courses whereby students who meet widening participation criteria are offered a lower and/or unconditional offer (Institution A, 2024a). This in addition to a mature student offer scheme which allows mature students to apply without traditional qualifications (Institution A, 2024c). Around 75% of students are in graduate employment or further study within fifteen months of finishing their undergraduate studies (The Guardian, 2024).

Institution A is a campus-based university located on the outskirts of the city centre, around a fifteen to twenty minute walk from Institution A city train station. All facilities are located on this campus apart from the university

sports centre, around a twenty five minute walk away on the outskirts of the city with its own café, kitchenette and small number of teaching rooms. On the main campus the university has one main library, along with a selection of cafes and a chapel in addition to buildings which contain various sizes of teaching rooms suitable for lectures, seminars and tutorials. The main campus is the smallest of the three in this study; students can walk from one side to the other in under five minutes. The institution has a staff member dedicated to supporting commuter students who is located within professional and support services, along with advertising commuter student accommodation facilities.

4.4.2. Institution B

Institution B is a large university located in the North of England. It is part of the Russell Group consortium of universities with a strong focus on producing world-leading research (The Russell Group, 2024). It is the largest of the three universities in this study, with 27,000 undergraduate students and 10,000 postgraduate students (Institution B, 2020). Institution B is located in the top twenty five of UK universities in relation to the average tariff score of undergraduate students, and 86% of its undergraduate students are in a graduate level job or further study within fifteen months of finishing their studies (The Guardian, 2024). Institution B has a contextual admissions programme which UK students meeting widening participation criteria can apply for. By completing the programme students have access to a lower admissions grade offer as well as additional on-course support (Institution B, 2024a).

Institution B is a campus-based university around a twenty five minute walk from Institution B city centre. The campus has the most libraries of all the universities in the study, a total of five, with multiple cafes and common room spaces. The university has a dedicated commuter student society, the only one of the three institutions, as well as a dedicated commuter student common room space.

4.4.3. Institution C

Institution C is a medium-sized university located in the North of England with around 22,000 students (undergraduate and postgraduate) in total and a member of the Russell Group (Institution C, 2023a). It is in the top fifteen UK universities with the highest average tariff score of undergraduate students on entry into the university and 90% of undergraduate students are in a graduate-level job or further study within fifteen months of finishing their degree course (The Guardian, 2024).

Institution C is a city campus which means university departments and buildings are located across the city. There is a focal site where a number of departments in the Faculty of Science are based, along with the main university library and a couple of cafes. The rest of the departments, as well as a couple of other smaller library spaces, are located around the city centre amongst non-university buildings. Students can be walking up to thirty minutes between classes, as well as from the train station or university car park to their class or extra-curricular activity. As a collegiate university, all students are enrolled into a college on entry into the university. There are seventeen colleges where students who choose to live in student accommodation live during their first year of university. Each college also has its own small library and working space which any student linked to that college can access. The university has no dedicated provision for commuter students to speak of at the time of writing.

4.5. Sampling and procedure

4.5.1. Students

Purposive sampling was used in order to target participants holding certain ‘specialist group’ criteria (Newby, 2014, p. 255), indicating that they were a commuter student and from one of three institutions as outlined in Section 4.4. The criteria were decided through the development of an appropriate definition of ‘commuter student’ for the research (Thomas & Jones, 2017)

[see Chapter One]. Participants were able to self-identify with the phrase 'commuter student' through given criteria: namely that participants needed to be a full-time undergraduate student and living in the parental home or own residence. The latter could be owned or privately rented, but not university-owned or private student accommodation. This enabled commuter students of any distance to take part in the research whilst including students living with spouses, partners and/or children. Whilst this definition could potentially exclude certain groups of commuter students, particularly those who live with other students but in another town or city to their HEI, the advertisement encouraged students who did not meet the criteria but self-identified as a 'commuter student' to contact the researcher [Appendix 1].

A poster and blurb was used to advertise the study, including the criteria for participation and description of what the study would involve [Appendix 1 and 2]. Advertisement of the study took place by email, social media and word of mouth. Advertisement through colleges at Institution C involved contacting a "gatekeeper" (Savin-Baden & Howell Major, 2013, p. 347), whereby it was university policy to contact a member of central college administration with ethics approval in order to later contact heads of colleges across the university. Once approved, heads of college were contacted individually to ask for advertisement to their student body. In Institution's A and B, gatekeepers were not as necessary to navigate as I could use my 'insider' knowledge from previously working in HE to contact staff in roles that I thought may work or come into contact with commuter students and may be willing to disseminate my study, such as student support and university access courses.

Social media was used to share the study poster [Appendix 2], although this was mostly effective for recruiting staff participants. One participant in Institution A was recruited through seeing a physical poster advertising the research displayed in a campus building. Another participant in Institution B was recruited through word of mouth as their friend was a current participant. Similarly, a participant in Institution A was directly approached by an academic staff member who was also taking part in the staff portion of the

research. Majority of students however were recruited through email advertisement of the study sent from staff at their respective institution. This included academic staff sending emails advertising the study to students they knew to be commuting, as well as generic email newsletters to large population groups, such as course groups and WP mailing lists. In Institution C, students were also recruited through college communications.

Interested students were required to email the researcher stating their interest. In the reply, I attached the participant information sheet [Appendix 3], privacy notice [Appendix 4] and consent form [Appendix 5] for more information on the study, and sent over researcher availability for the Teams interview should the student wish to proceed with participation. Table 1 demonstrates the number of students who expressed an interested in the study, and the final number of students that participated.

Institution	**Number of students interested**	**Actual number of participants**
A	9	3
B	6	5
C	10	6

Table 1 – Student participant recruitment numbers

In Institutions A and C in particular, a number of students expressed initial interest but subsequently did not partake in the study. Students that did not reply were emailed two weeks later to enquire if they were still interested in participating. A couple of students that expressed interest were not eligible to participate as they were not attending the relevant institution or were not undergraduate students. These students were informed via email that they were not currently eligible for the study.

The initial target sample size for the research was 6-10 students per institution. This was based on the premise that each student would be accompanied for a single day, commuting with the student on both their outward and inbound journeys. Before starting fieldwork this approach changed to accompanying participants on one commute on multiple days

within a six month period, in order to experience commutes with participants over a longer period of time. Furthermore, it would be less daunting for the participant to spend time with myself over a few hours on multiple occasions rather than once over an entire day, thus allowing more time for greater rapport between researcher and participant to be built (Harrison, 2020). However the nature of ethnographic research, and in particular go-along interviews, means participation in the study can be time-consuming which may also have impacted students' willingness to participate in the study (Trell & van Hoven, 2010).

Overall, 14 participants were recruited across Institution A, B and C [Tables 2, 3 and 4]. Faculty of study has been included rather than courses for anonymity purposes, although categorising this way fails to acknowledge the breadth of courses across the sample.

4.5.1.1. Procedure

A 30 minute interview via Microsoft Teams was arranged first with participants in order to explain the study in greater detail and give the opportunity for both myself and the participant to virtually 'meet' before the research. Once participants were happy to proceed with the study and had signed and returned the consent form (either before or during the meeting), demographic data of the participant was collected. This included if the student identified as mature (yes or no), their institution, course and year of study, mode of transport used to attend university and general home location [Appendix 6]. General home location was explained as a landmark in the vicinity of where they lived such as a shop, church, school or park, and participants were explicitly told not to provide their home address. This was particularly useful for car users to understand where they were travelling from, as I would not be accompanying them in their car for health & safety reasons, and instead would be meeting them at a car park or landmark on/near their university campus.

Pseudonym	Institution	Year of study	Faculty	Transport used during commute	Number of commutes accompanied
Carmen	A	2	Social Sciences	Bus/Walk – Train(s) - Walk	4
Ethan	A	3	Social Sciences	Car/ Walk – Bus – Train(s) - Walk	5
Lyla	A	1	Social Sciences	Walk/Car – Train - Walk	2

Table 2 – Institution A student participants

Pseudonym	Institution	Year of study	Faculty	Transport used	Number of commutes accompanied
Violet	B	2	Social Sciences	Car	4
Rahmatullah	B	1	Science	Walk – Bus – Walk – Train – Walk/Bus	2
Zayn	B	2	Science	Walk/Bus/Cycle	3
Sam	B	2	Science	Walk – Bus(es)- Walk	3
Rita	B	2	Social Sciences	Car	3

Table 3- Institution B student participants

Pseudonym	Institution	Year of study	Faculty	Transport used	Number of commutes accompanied
Maddie	C	2	Social Sciences	Car - Walk	3
Niamh	C	1	Social Sciences	Car	3
Oliver	C	1	Social Sciences	Car - Walk	3
Zoe	C	2	Social Sciences	Car - Walk	2
Penny	C	3	Arts & Humanities	Walk – Bus - Walk	2
Lucy	C	0	Arts & Humanities	Bus(es) – Walk – Train – Walk	1

Table 4- Institution C student participant

The first ‘commute’, including place to meet, date and time, was arranged at the end of the Teams meeting and chosen by the student in order for them to feel comfortable in the choice of location, as well as ensuring the place had meaning to them (Castrodale, 2018). Student participants were sent reminder messages between one day and a week before meeting via WhatsApp or email. Students were met in a variety of public locations chosen by them depending on their commute, including train stations, bus stops, coffee shops, car parks or outside academic classes. For car drivers in particular, time was spent with participants to/from academic classes, and in non-academic spaces such as cafes and common rooms. Time spent with students ranged from 3 minutes to 210 minutes in length. A sample of question prompts asked of students can be found in Appendix 6.

Participants were given the option to provide their phone number to myself to use WhatsApp as a way to share their commuting experiences. At the Teams meeting, students were given three options as to their use of WhatsApp: to not use, to decide to use at a later time, or to use and give their phone number during the Teams call. All participants were happy to give their phone number on Teams, and were sent a WhatsApp message from myself after the Teams meeting to confirm this had been received safely. WhatsApp was predominantly used in the research as a communication tool with students in-between commutes to organise the next commute, reschedule or cancel. However a small number of participants sent messages via WhatsApp about their commute when unaccompanied, as well as photos and voice notes.

4.5.2. Staff

To support with building an institutional picture of the commuter students’ experiences, staff interviews were conducted and followed a basic semi-structured interview structure instead of the go-along interview method. The semi-structured interview structure is a popular choice of interview type in qualitative research (Savin-Baden & Howell Major, 2013) as it ensures that questions are structured broadly the same (Day Ashley, 2012) yet gives the researcher the flexibility to probe

participants for further exploration and explanation of responses (Cohen et al., 2018).

Staff participants were required to meet specific criteria: that they were a member of professional support staff or academic staff and at Institution A, B or C with a role that had responsibility for supporting commuter students directly or indirectly (e.g. general student support, support for part-time/distance students). Like with the student participants, staff participants were expected to self-identify their eligibility using the above criteria with the criteria sufficiently broad to cover job roles across the institutions.

Staff participants were recruited mostly through convenience snowball sampling. In Institutions A and C the majority of staff participants were contacted directly via email as they were known to the researcher. It is common for student researchers to contact people known to them to gain access to participant groups in ethnographic education research due the difficulties in accessing participants through gatekeepers (Atkins & Wallace, 2016). Whilst convenience sampling can compromise the generalisability of data (Newby, 2014), as previously highlighted the generalisability of data is of lesser importance when conducting rich and descriptive qualitative research. Furthermore, longstanding contacts of the researcher were only contacted in the instance that their roles had relevance to the study, rather than out of a requirement to interview a particular number of staff participants. A few staff participants were recruited by the study being forwarded by confirmed staff participants to colleagues who may be interested in participating (Newby, 2014).

Social media was another tool used for staff participant recruitment. Platform 'X', formerly Twitter, was used to advertise my student 'call for participants' with a number of staff members at the institution sharing the research poster [Appendix 2] on their personal Twitter platforms. This extensive sharing directly contributed to Institution B being one of the sites of interest.

Like student participants, interested staff participants were required to email me for more information on how to take part. In the case of staff having already been contacted by the researcher, they were required to confirm they would be willing to

take part before the relevant participant information sheet [Appendix 7], privacy notice [Appendix 8] and consent form [Appendix 5] were sent to them via email. The staff sample used in the study is broken down into the three institutions [Table 5]. Overall, 11 participants were recruited across Institution A, B and C. All staff participants self- identified as having a responsibility for indirectly or directly supporting commuter students, with most working in professional support roles at their institution.

Aside from Yasmin's experiences highted in Section 6.4.2, the majority of the data from the staff interviews conducted does not appear in the analysis chapters of this particular thesis. As previously highlighted [see Section 4.2.1], the methodological approach underpinning this research was to 'follow the actors' in which I followed commuter students to illuminate their commuting practices and trace the connections between them and other actors that made up the wider university network in which they were situated. The majority of the staff members interviewed were not enrolled into the network of commuting practices of the commuter students I was following. Therefore in keeping with my ANTish theoretical approach, it was not pertinent to include this data within the commuter student narratives in this thesis. Nevertheless the data collected from the staff interviews was used to provide contextual information for this research, as highlighted in Section 4.4, which describes in further detail the institutional sites of interest. Furthermore, the staff interviewed also supported the recruitment of students to the study, particularly where they could invite individual students via email who they knew to be commuting at their respective institutions. I instead aim to use the staff interview data in future research outputs, as stated in Appendix 7 and 8.

4.5.2.1. Procedure

Semi-structured interviews with staff lasted between 30 and 60 minutes, where participants were asked questions regarding three areas of commuter student experience: institution definition, experiences specific to the institution, and institutional support and policy [Appendix 9]. Staff interviews were conducted virtually via Microsoft Teams, except in two instances where these were conducted in-person at the request of the participant and at a location of their choosing. The term

Pseudonym	**Institution**	**Job title**	**Academic/Professional Support role?**
Amy	A	Student Widening Participation Adviser *N.B. Has since left Institution A for a different institution.*	Professional support
Diane	A	Senior Lecturer	Academic
Fiona	A	Senior Lecturer	Academic
Zara	B	[WP Scheme] Officer	Professional support
Yasmin	B	EDI Officer	Professional support
Tessa	B	[WP Scheme] Administrator	Professional support
Heather	B	Student Support Officer	Professional support
Manuel	C	Head of Transitional Education	Academic
Sally	C	Vice-Principal of College	Professional support
Tracy	C	Principal of College	Professional support
Rachel	C	Community Liaison Manager	Professional support

Table 5 - Staff participant sample

‘commuter student’ and how this was being referred to in this particular study was clarified verbally at the start of the interview, as well as stated in the participant information sheet [Appendix 7], in order to orientate the topic of discussion.

4.6. Positionality and other practical considerations

This section aims to address some of the key considerations of the fieldwork process. Firstly, it considers my insider-outsider positionality as an ethnographic researcher within the research context. It will then address other key practicalities which impacted the methodological approach of the study, namely timing of the research, health and safety concerns and the impact of weather.

4.6.1. Positionality

Recognising positionality and the impact this has on the interactions with participants is integral to robust ethnographic practice (Crang & Crook, 2007). Within this research, I fluctuated between possessing both insider and outsider status (Marques da Silva & Parker Webster, 2018). In two of the institutional sites studied [Section 4.4], I have previously been a student and employee. This was particularly noticeable during the recruitment process as I was able to use more informal routes to navigate institutional gatekeepers than if I had been an ‘outsider’ at the institutions of interest (Cohen et al., 2018). For instance, I was able to contact named members of the institutions known to me to share my study.

Being an insider is also useful during the translation process between fieldnotes and data analysis. The translation process from fieldnotes to analysis is an acknowledged part of ethnographic fieldwork (Spradley, 2016), but being an outsider potentially compromises this process as the interpretations are then in danger of lacking the local perspective and therefore not being adequately contextual (Kusenbach, 2003).

Arguably Kusenbach (2003) is simply stating here the importance of spending time in the field for rich contextual insight into the field of study. What she is not suggesting is that the researcher should always be an insider in the field of study. Even if a researcher holds insider status, this does not automatically mean they are able to assimilate a complete and authentic understanding of the lived experiences of the participants (Kusenbach, 2003). The use of "reflexive fieldnotes" is integral to ethnographic research to overcome this (Jeffrey, 2018, p. 119). Specifically, whereby the ethnographer can acknowledge that their understanding of a situation is through their own personal connection and experiences to their site of study and the people within them. In this research, this was interwoven through my fieldnotes concerning my own travel to and from commutes with students, and my experiences and relationships with the institutional spaces.

Above begins to highlight how, whilst useful for some practical considerations in ethnographic research, holding insider status as a researcher can be ontologically problematic. A 'traditional' anthropological ethnographic approach recommends that the researcher is an outsider (Shah, 2017) as it is the responsibility of the ethnographic researcher to treat the culture as "anthropologically strange" to sufficiently unpack the culture of the concerned research phenomena (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995, p. 9). This can be particularly troublesome in educational ethnography where educational institutions could be taken for granted in their role and practice within the wider institutional context (Maeder, 2018). It is therefore the job of the educational ethnographer to recognise these pitfalls and sufficiently address them in their research practice. In the case of this research, this was addressed by ensuring students were questioned on their practices and understanding of their institution (e.g. support available for commuters at their institution) even if I was familiar or aware from my own prior knowledge of the institution and/or wider sector practice.

The discussion above demonstrates the fluctuation between my outside and insider status throughout the fieldwork process. Marques da Silva and Parker

Webster (2018) highlight how ethnographers undertake complex (re)negotiations of their insider-outsider status during fieldwork as a result of the interactions undertaken between participants and the community of study. For example, with two participants I was invited to join their wider friendship group for lunch and coffee breaks during our time spent together. Friends of the participants would ask questions about my research, but as a group member I would often find myself invited to share in general conversations not related to the research. In these instances, I found myself as a “full participant” rather than the observant outsider (Spradley, 2016, p. 57).

To have not partaken in the group setting would have disrupted the rapport built with participants and their subsequent social environment. For the education ethnographer, sharing something of themselves with participants is a key process of “becoming *with* others” (Dennis, 2018, p. 67), integral to community building and establishing field relations. By being involved in group conversations and sharing elements of my life I thus acknowledged my role within the group at that point in time and acted accordingly.

This scenario begins to acknowledge some of the ethical complexities of being an educational ethnographer, with ethical issues pertaining to the research further addressed in Section 4.8. By conducting research a researcher should acknowledge that they are unlikely to maintain moral neutrality as a result of their demography, power relations and connection with society stratification (Christians, 2011). Discussions surrounding the ethics of social research can often become trapped into utilitarian accounts of research which homogenises ethics into a ‘one-size-fits-all’ blueprint for researchers. Instead this research, as suggested by Christians (2011), aimed for a individualistic participant-led approach whilst adhering to BERA (2018) guidelines.

4.6.2. Practical considerations

A practical consideration was the timing of the fieldwork. As previously discussed in relation to advances within the field of ethnography, time spent in the field is not always expected to be lengthy; practically speaking it can be challenging to take extended periods of time away for fieldwork (Falzon, 2009) and often relies on researchers "fitting [research] into our lives when we have a chance" (Hannerz, 2003, p. 213). Furthermore, conducting fieldwork in educational institutions often results in time restrictions (Beach et al., 2018; Pugsley, 2002). In this research, this was in respect to academic terms; students would generally only be commuting to campus, and therefore available to accompany, during university term-time.

The time I could physically spend in the field was also linked to my research funding (Shah, 2017). I was restricted as to how many journeys I could make with participants due to the cost of travel, needing to ensure I had sufficient funding to cover the cost of my travel with students, plus my own travel to and from our meeting points. A further expense was added due to the nature of the travel; public transport tickets had to be flexible in order to travel in peak hours and to be valid if a journey required altering (e.g. due to public transport delays or participant cancellations).

Ensuring the health and safety of both myself and the participants was paramount. As the researcher, I needed to safeguard my own safety as a lone female researcher travelling to, and within, unfamiliar neighbourhoods by ensuring I stuck to public, well-lit areas where possible (Jones et al., 2008). Similarly, I chose not to accompany students in their cars if they drove to campus for two main reasons. Primarily this was to ensure that the research was conducted in exclusively public spaces, but also so that participants were not distracted whilst driving. As a result, participants were met at an agreed location after their drive, and asked about their car journey. Whilst there are ontological challenges with this approach discussed earlier in this chapter in relation to the merits of go-along interviews and the

researcher being *in situ* in their commute, the health and safety of both myself and participants was in this instance more important.

In two instances it was necessary to cancel my journeys with participants due to snow forecast in my home location and/or our agreed meeting point. Weather and the wider environment are natural parts of a go-along interview (Vannini & Vannini, 2017) and can help the researcher build up a contextual representation of the research object; in this case, commuting in seasonal climates. However, the environment can also impact a go-along (Castrodale, 2018; Garcia et al., 2012) including in the case of bad weather whereby the research may not be able to proceed (Kinney, 2017). Students were messaged the day before travel after Amber weather warnings were announced by the UK Meteorological (MET) office for my meeting point locations and commutes rescheduled following MET guidance (MET Office, 2023).

4.7. Data collection & analysis

The go-along interviews, and two in-person staff interviews, were recorded using a Dictaphone. The remainder of the staff interviews, and the initial student interviews, were recorded using Microsoft Teams. Combining online and offline modes of data collection was predominantly used for flexibility for staff and student participants. An increase of hybrid in-person/at home working patterns following the COVID pandemic (ONS, 2022) were reflected in staff participant working patterns in the study, so by offering the option of online or in-person interviews this gave staff the flexibility to take part in the research in whichever mode most suited their work schedule. Conducting the initial student interviews using online video conference software was so that participants were able to meet me in advance of the research and ask questions without the need to pre-agree a meeting place and time, or to meet on campus. By using video conferencing software, students were also able to meet me in advance of our travels as an added safety precaution both for myself and for the participants.

For student participants, Microsoft Teams was used only for the collection of demographic information along with logistical organisation for the first meeting. For staff interviews, a video recording was also taken of the interview. During the go-along interviews, fieldnotes of time spent with students were recorded either after or between commutes with participants. I also took photos of the surrounding environment (e.g. train stations, meeting points, weather) on my commutes with participants and during my time on the three campuses. There were a total of 112 photos taken across the fieldwork period with each photo accompanied by a detailed description of the subject matter (Cohen et al., 2018).

Recording go-along interviews can be harder than for a traditional interview as if recording in busy areas background noise can affect recording quality (Carpiano, 2009). At the beginning of fieldwork, a microphone ‘muff’ attachment was used in order to improve the sound quality of the recordings, however this was not used after a few interviews due to concerns around weather damage (Kinney, 2017), and the quality of the recording did not seem to be overly improved with the muff attachment than without.

Recordings from go-along interviews were transcribed at a later date using transcribing software ‘Otter.AI’. When imported into the transcribing software, audio files were renamed to include pseudonym name, date of commute/interview and approximate route taken (where applicable) during the recording to support with transcription and relevant contextual information (Clark & Emmel, 2010). Interviews conducted through Microsoft Teams were automatically transcribed by the software once consent had been given. A further quality check by myself took place by checking that the automated transcriptions were accurate, as well as to remove time and date stamps within the main texts. Recordings were transcribed “verbatim” (Johnson, 2016, p. 9) which in this research incorporates pauses, laughter and verbal fillers where present, but not language inflections. Fieldnotes were typed up by myself in anticipation of the coding process.

Transcripts of any conversations between participant and researcher were entered into N-Vivo (qualitative data analysis software) for analysis, with each participant given their own folder in which to store all data pertaining to that individual. N-Vivo was employed to facilitate the secure storage and management of the anticipated rich and varied qualitative data sets (Gibbs, 2012b). Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis software (CAQDAS) is increasingly recognised as a robust method that provides storage for data, which in my research includes transcribed interviews and voice notes, fieldwork notes, photographs and descriptions, WhatsApp messages, and facilitates a uniform and rigorous approach to coding (Silver & Lewins, 2014). It also offers transparency of the analysis process as a way to establish research quality (Tummons, 2014).

Thematic analysis was the data analysis method used in this study as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2021). The research data was first coded by identifying key themes within the data and labelling these using a descriptive 'code' (Savin-Baden & Howell Major, 2013). Where I identified a theme that could not be sufficiently described by an existing code, this formed the development of a new code (Matthews & Ross, 2010). Emerging codes were used and conducted on an interim and iterative basis, allowing for revision and respondent validation both during and after fieldwork (Saldaña, 2016). This included where I transitioned codes into becoming 'top family' codes, whereby associated codes were connected and linked underneath in NVivo. An example of how the coding family was revised over time can be found in Appendix 10 and 11 respectively.

From the codes and during the coding process, I created themes through "drawing connections at a deeper level" using researcher intuition, translation of codes and the theory governing the research (Fugard & Potts, 2020, p. 4). The raw data was referred back to throughout the entire data analysis process so I could check that the code, and subsequent theoretical analysis, was applicable to the original text (Matthews & Ross, 2010).

4.8. Ethics

The study complies with the British Educational Research Association guidelines for ethical research (BERA, 2018). The research has been funded by the Economic & Social Research Council, and therefore also complies with funding body ethical guidelines (ESRC, 2021). Ethical approval was granted on 31st March 2022 by the School of Education Durham University Ethics Committee [*EDU-2021-10-11T09_53_59-vmds78]* to ensure the research adhered to the universities' ethical code of conduct (Cohen et al., 2018).

Participants were sent a participant information sheet [Appendix 3 and 7], consent form [Appendix 5] and privacy notice [Appendix 4 and 8] ahead of the Microsoft Teams meeting to inform participants' understanding of the study and therefore their decision whether or not to participate (BERA, 2018; Newby, 2014). It was stated in the consent form, and reemphasised to participants in the Teams interview, that participation in the research was voluntary and participants could withdraw their consent for participation at any time prior to data analysis, in which case all of the data pertaining to their involvement would be deleted (BERA, 2018). At the start of each commute and interview, participants were asked if they were happy for audio recording (and video recording for staff) to take place. Recording did not take place when student participants were in larger groups of students who were not partaking in the research. In these instances, I explained to the group briefly my reason for being there, and stressed that I would leave if this was what the group requested.

Participants were invited to use WhatsApp to send photos, voice notes and/or instant messages regarding their commuting experiences. It was stressed to student participants that the use of WhatsApp was not conditional to their participation in the research, although all participants elected to use WhatsApp. WhatsApp uses end-to-end encryption (WhatsApp, 2023) which meant that the messages and photos would only be viewable by student participants and myself. The chat was automatically backed up on my

personal device, with the option for participants to do the same. At the end of the research, the chat history was exported by myself and stored on a password-protected computer. Students were linked in the privacy notice to the Meta Privacy rules [Appendix 4], which outlined further how their data was stored in accordance with Meta guidelines.

Rick of physical and mental harm to participants during the study was minimal. To apply for institutional ethics approval, a risk assessment was required in order to review the risks and potential harm to participants for taking part in the study. The risk of harm to participants was rated as 'low' in all categories. It is recognised that the longitudinal nature of ethnographic research can be harmful to participants in that it requires more time and participation than other methodological approaches (BERA, 2018). When organising commutes with participants, participants were asked if they were happy to continue with the research, and were given the choice as to the next journey type/length they would be accompanied on. Students were informed in the privacy notice [Appendix 4] that if they disclosed information which indicated the potential for serious and immediate harm to themselves or others, the research team may be obliged to breach confidentiality and report this to the relevant authorities.

Participant data was anonymised at the point of transcription, and the recorded conversation transcribed by myself only, where personal information was coded and participants were given an anonymous pseudonym to ensure participant confidentiality (Vaughan, 2012). All participants were offered the opportunity to choose their own pseudonyms, with 2 staff and 3 students doing so, as this gives participants the opportunity to choose a pseudonym that holds meaning to them (Allen & Wiles, 2016). Pseudonyms were also given to identifiable features of institutions and the surrounding areas (Vaughan, 2012). Nevertheless, it can be hard to keep the anonymity of an institution even when anonymising participants and wider identifiable areas (BERA, 2018), particularly if contextualising the research with information on institutions that are easily searchable online (Pabian, 2014). Therefore, data was anonymised with wider identifiable areas discussed in less specific detail where necessary to ensure participant and

institutional anonymity and prevent inadvertent identification where possible (Christians, 2011). Data from WhatsApp was anonymised at the point where transcripts were downloaded from the application.

Ensuring confidentiality during data collection is more complex for go-alongs, and the associated participant observation, than for traditional stationary interviews as go-alongs often take place in a public space where the interview may be audible to the general public (Clark & Emmel, 2010; Garcia et al., 2012; Kinney, 2017). The public nature of the research for students, accompanying students on their commute in public areas, was reiterated in the Microsoft Teams interview to further inform their consent to the study. Students were also shown in the Teams interview the type of Dictaphone and microphone 'muff' attachment used, so that they were aware of the recording equipment and how this would be visible during the commutes (Kinney, 2017).

In the privacy notice [Appendix 4] student participants were informed that data would be collected through interviews, observations and document analysis, of which audio recordings and fieldnotes would be taken, to ensure an ethically transparent and dialogic approach to the data collection process (Barbosa & Milan, 2019). This was also to ensure that the research was GDPR-compliant more generally, and specifically in its use of WhatsApp. Signed consent forms were stored separately to project data. All personal data in electronic form was stored on a password protected computer, and any hardcopies kept in locked storage. The document containing participant's details was also password protected, with pseudonyms located on a separate document (Cohen et al., 2018). Audio recordings were stored on an encrypted device until transcribed. The recording was available to myself only, and will be erased once the PhD is completed. Anonymised transcripts of interviews and media shared through WhatsApp (such as transcripts of voice notes, photos and anonymised messages), will be retained to validate the research findings and made available in the UK Data Services repository, as per the requirements of UKRI funded PhD studentships (ESRC, 2018). All data shared through the repository will not allow participants to be traced

back to it. All participants (staff and students) were provided contact details of the research team for any queries regarding the processing of their personal data, and informed that they would be sent a copy of the finished thesis and research findings (BERA, 2018).

Participation in the study was not rewarded with monetary incentive. Offering incentives for participation in educational research can be discouraged as it could influence participant's reasons for participating in the research (Cohen et al., 2018) and cause extra expense to research projects (BERA, 2018). However, I acknowledge that a lack of incentives for research participants potentially reproduces the privilege of participation in which only particular students with financial and/or time resource to do so (Brooks et al., 2014). Whilst financially I was unable to offer a monetary incentive for participation, when commuting with students I regularly offered to purchase a hot drink for the participant during their commute as an act of reciprocity for their time spent participating in the research (Cohen et al., 2018; Gibbs, 2012a). The nature of the research also meant that I only ever accompanied students on their normal pre-planned journeys to and from campus, meaning any expense incurred from their commute on these days were part of their normal university expenses.

4.9. Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the methodological underpinnings of this research. Using a multi-sited ethnography in investigating commuter students' experiences of higher education provides opportunity to explore the experiences of commuter students through an ethnographic lens whilst also situating these within three specific institutional contexts. The combination of participant observation, go-along interviews and use of WhatsApp as a data collection tool for visual and textual data provides a set of tools that enable the collection of rich and diverse data that can document commuter students' lived experiences of their travel to campus, their academic experiences and wider university life. Through acknowledging ethical and practical

complexities of conducting ethnographic fieldwork, I demonstrate a critical awareness in ensuring my research practice is ethically compliant. The following three chapters provide the analysis and discussion of the research data collected using the methodological approach outlined in this chapter.

Chapter Five: Doing the commute

This chapter explores the 'becoming' of a commuter student by following participants in their journeys from home to campus. It starts with where students commute from and their reasons (where given) for commuting to campus. It then follows how students finance their commute and the specific costs that commuting involves. The chapter then discusses the experiences of commuter students in getting to campus, both in relation to the physical 'doing' of their commute and what their journey entails, but also how they navigate disruptions they encounter along the way. What it feels like for a commuter student to 'be' on the commute, and the activities they undertake whilst on the commute will then be explored, before following their experiences of their arrival on campus. Actor-network theory (ANT) will be used at the end of the chapter to critically analyse the definition of commuter student used within this thesis as well as the ways in which commuting practices are accomplished.

5.1. Accommodation

> Today is the second time I have met Zoe. This time I meet her at the car park where she parks her car and together we walk to her lecture, around a 15 minute walk up a residential street. During our walk, Zoe tells me that she prefers to work at home than at university saying 'it's very quiet in my house. You know, I have two older parents and... you know, nothing happens. There's no drama, there's no kids. It's quiet... there's always food in the fridge (…) and it's free...'
> *(Zoe, Institution C, Vignette).*

Half of the participants in the study were living in the parental home, with the remaining half living with partners and/or children in their own home. Zoe was one of a couple of commuter students who explicitly expressed the benefits living in the parental home had afforded them; regular food, a quiet space to work and no rent to pay. This sentiment was echoed by Carmen (Institution A) who directly linked her commuting to university as born from a preference for living in familiar home surroundings. Both experiences thus echo previous narratives in the commuter student literature where the family home was valued for the stable home context it could provide [see Chapter Two].

For other students it was a rejection of the alternative accommodation offers available that meant they commuted to university. Niamh (Institution C) was one commuter student who outright rejected the idea of living in student accommodation:

> Niamh: I wouldn't have NOT wanted to commute though.
> Emma: That would always be your preferred, like [accommodation option]-
> Niamh: -oh god yeah. Living with 18 year olds? They can't empty bins!
> *(Niamh, Institution C)*

Niamh considered living in student accommodation unappealing, echoing previous research whereby commuter students rejected student accommodation for its common expectation of sharing with strangers (Finn & Holton, 2019). However for Niamh this was arguably more intertwined with her broader opinion of higher education. Niamh was a mature student in her first year of a professional university degree course, having previously served in the armed forces. On multiple occasions Niamh stressed that she had only attended university because her desired career required a university degree.

> Niamh: Uni is a waste of time. The money is a waste of time. I don't think anyone should ever need a degree for anything. I'm a big fan of apprenticeships. (…) I wanna go into [career]. There is no way for me to be a qualified [job] without a degree of any kind (…)
> Emma: Okay. So kind of it's more like career-based? that you're like solely doing it... for your career.
> Niamh: Yeah.
> *(Niamh, Institution C)*

Attending university for Niamh was simply a way in which to progress onto her chosen career path, the commute just a vehicle in which accessing university could be accomplished. Whilst this reason for attending university is likely to feature in other students' reasons for higher education (HE) participation irrespective of their residential status, for Niamh it was directly intertwined with her reason for why she lived at home and commuted to university. Niamh was therefore rejecting not just the normative experience of living in student accommodation, but more vehemently the concept of university-based higher education in and of itself.

Zoe (Institution C) had lived in university-maintained accommodation for her

first year of university, however when changing her degree course for the following academic year she was informed that she would be required to live again in university accommodation as this was an expectation of all first year students. In the second year of her new course, Zoe had begun renting privately-owned student accommodation in another North East city. However, due to feeling uncomfortable with illicit activity happening in her student house Zoe had decided to move back to her parents' house for the remainder of the academic year.

Zoe's fluctuation between accommodation types across her university degree(s) raises a couple of key issues pertinent to this thesis. Firstly, it reaffirms how the act of living in student accommodation can cause students to commute to university (Christie et al., 2005; Clayton et al., 2009; Finn & Holton, 2019). Zoe for example, had found living with other students unsatisfactory and had defaulted to living back in the family home. Zoe did not, however, speak poorly of her university-maintained student accommodation experiences, commuting only following her experience in privately-owned student accommodation and thus highlighting the heterogeneity present within individual commuter students' experiences. Furthermore, whilst Zoe was living with her parents at the time of the research she had already signed a contract for the following academic year for private student accommodation in the city of Institution C; Zoe's commuting student status was temporary. A further discussion regarding the theoretical implications of this change in accommodation status will be discussed in Section 5.6, with further implications this suggests for policy and practice noted in Chapter Eight.

5.2. Financing the commute

> I wait at our agreed meeting point on campus to meet Carmen after her class to accompany her on her commute home. This is our first commute together so as we walk to the train station in Institution A city, weaving in and out of the slower walkers on the street pavement, conversation turns to how she financed her commute and broader student lifestyle. Carmen stated that commuting had enabled her to avoid taking out a student maintenance loan. Instead she was able to shoulder her transport expenditure by using the money earned from her part-time employment in

> a care home and was not charged rent by her parents for living in the family home. Carmen's mum had been particularly happy that she was studying in Institution A city, stating on family day trips to the city during Carmen's childhood how she wanted Carmen to study in the city.
> *(Carmen, Institution A, Vignette)*

One way in which a couple of commuter students in the study financed their commute was through part-time employment. It is increasingly common for undergraduate students to be working part-time to fund their studies as a consequence of the contemporary cost of living crisis in the UK [see Chapter One]. Niamh (Institution C) like Carmen used her part-time employment earnings to cover her travel expenses (Davies et al., 2008; Dickinson, 2024; Reay et al., 2005). General sector recommendations suggest up to 15 hours a week as an acceptable amount of part-time work to undertake alongside full-time undergraduate studies (UCAS, 2024a) however both students did significantly more hours than this per week on average and referred to the amount they undertook as necessary in order to afford the cost of their commute and other associated costs of university.

For commuter students like Carmen, using part-time work to finance her commute was interlinked with a broader desire to avoid accruing debt from student loans. Carmen had not taken out a maintenance loan for her university studies which she initially suggested was through it being unnecessary; Carmen could pay for her travel to campus through her part-time employment with minimal additional living costs to pay due to living in the family home. However, on a later commute together Carmen hinted that this was not the only reason why she had not taken out a student maintenance loan:

> C: I think [the university] should do more bursaries, rather than student loans. So like bursaries that you don't have to pay back. Student loans is stressful if you've got to pay so much back. That's why I don't-, I never apply to that, I only applied for tuition [loan].
> Emma: Tuition fee loan?
> C: Yeah, I didn't apply for the full [loan] because it's pointless paying some of that, because you might-, because if you pay for it yourself, then you think twice. If you use that then it's like 'oh, it's not free money'. So you don't think... [pause].
> *(Carmen, Institution A)*

Carmen had actively avoided taking out a maintenance loan because of the requirement to pay it back with added interest, a factor she described as 'stressful'. Instead, Carmen preferred to pay for her daily living costs through money earned from her part-time employment as she felt this made her more mindful of her spending costs and thus enabled her to budget more effectively.

Despite Carmen's negative attitude towards maintenance loans and student debt, it is particularly interesting that Carmen still took out a tuition fee loan; a loan which accrued interest and required repayment just like the maintenance loans which she had previously expressed disliking. Chapter One highlighted how since 2017 majority of UK higher education institutions (HEIs) charge £9250 per year for tuition fees (UCAS, 2024b). It is arguably likely therefore that taking out a tuition fee loan was simply a necessity for Carmen in order to pay the required fees for her to access a university education. Whilst Carmen was still debt-adverse in so far as she viewed student loans negatively and something to be avoided where possible, the benefits of accessing university in this instance outweighed the negative connotations associated with the debt she would incur. Consequently, this led Carmen to take out a loan for tuition fees but not for her living costs.

Carmen's narrative of how she financed university demonstrates a complexity where it is not possible to disentangle and/or order the composite factors, both in terms of influence or importance, that affect how a student finances their commute. Carmen's desire to avoid student debt may have fuelled her to work part-time to make up the financial shortfall from self-funding her living costs, yet it could equally be coincidental that her part-time earnings were substantial enough to cover her commuting expenditure and other living costs. This is impossible to untangle, given that Carmen had worked in the same job from her application to university to her current status as a second year at university. These factors were instead messily interwoven in a way which in this set of circumstances meant Carmen was able to finance her commute without a maintenance loan.

Like Carmen, Lucy (Institution C) linked commuting to avoiding taking out a maintenance loan, although for different reasons to debt-avoidance:

> Lucy: So I got in for a foundation this year. It's a continuous process. And they gone and charged me for international student fees for the whole three years. I was like, 'Nah!', because I was quite sure I'm gonna pay for myself. I have to pay in advance though. I'm not gonna get any loans or anything from anywhere-
> Emma: -okay, so you haven't got any kind of student-, UK student loans or anything like that?
> Lucy: No. Currently I don't because I waited the three years I got the [home fees].
> E: But if you'd gone the year before, you wouldn't have got any of the loans and then you would have had to pay more.
> Lucy: I was like 'nah' [inaudible] it's why I'm here and try to save up a bit.
> *(Lucy, Institution C)*

Lucy was originally from oversees but had lived in the Northeast of England since 2020, resulting in her only recently being eligible for UK home tuition fees. International fees vary depending on institution and course (British Council, 2024) but for Lucy this meant her tuition fees were roughly a third of the amount she would have had to pay if she had gone to university in the years prior. Unlike Carmen, Lucy could afford to pay the home tuition fee upfront to her university whilst also paying for her associated living costs and therefore had not needed to take out any form of student loan, an outcome she framed positively.

Collectively Lucy and Carmen's experiences provide greater nuance to two key themes in relation to commuter student finances which have been identified in previous research. Chapter One highlighted how commuter students are often linked to being from a low-income family, with the commute a way in which students could reduce the financial cost of university study (Maguire & Morris, 2018; Morris, 2018; Thomas & Jones, 2017). Whilst Lucy did not detail the specificities of her family's financial situation, arguably her ability to pay large sums of money upfront demonstrates that students who commute may not necessarily be from a low-income household, nor that commuting as a way to reduce the financial cost of university study is the preserve of students from low-income backgrounds.

Lucy and Carmen's combined dismissal of student loans also echo how commuting can be used by students as a way to minimise their spending on the anticipated costs of HE (Callender & Melis, 2022). Specifically, Lucy's statement 'it's why I'm here' refers to her commuting to university in order to put the money she would have used to pay for student accommodation and associated living costs towards her savings. Saving money was also highlighted by Carmen in a remark that she was not spending 'as much' on tickets by commuting, a silent comparison to the student accommodation costs she avoided incurring from living in the parental home (Bowl et al., 2008; Hussain & Bagguley, 2007; Morris, 2018). However, for both students their saving money relied on living in the parental home with neither responsible for paying rent, food or household bills. Other commuters who lived independently, with a spouse and/or children would therefore be unlikely to have access to this particular financial resource. Equally, Lucy's ability to pay her tuition fees upfront would not easily be phrased as saving money given that she would have been eligible for a student loan; Lucy could have saved further on her outgoing expenses through taking out a student loan, yet had chosen not to. Any links to commuting as a way to save money at university therefore must take into account the wider networks in which the commuter is situated and the resources that exist within this in order for this saving to occur.

5.2.1. Cost of commuting

Type of transport used impacted the type of expenditure involved in participants' commutes; car users needed to pay for petrol, parking and the upkeep of their car whereas for public transport users train and/or bus tickets were their main expense. Table 6 outlines the types of transport used by participants in the study.

Pseudonym	**Institution**	**Transport used during commute**
Carmen	A	Bus/Walk – Train(s) - Walk
Ethan	A	Car **OR** Walk – Bus – Train(s) - Walk
Lyla	A	Walk/Car – Train - Walk
Violet	B	Car **OR** Taxi
Rahmatullah	B	Walk – Bus – Walk – Train – Walk/Bus
Zayn	B	Walk/Bus/Cycle
Sam	B	Walk – Bus(es)- Walk
Rita	B	Car
Maddie	C	Car - Walk
Niamh	C	Car - Walk
Oliver	C	Car - Walk
Zoe	C	Car - Walk
Penny	C	Walk – Bus - Walk
Lucy	C	Bus(es) – Walk – Train – Walk **OR** Bus – Train – Walk – Train - Walk

Table 6 - Transport mode taken by participants.

For car users, parking costs predicated where students parked. Specifically, whether students were eligible for parking permits or needing to pay for costly on-street car parking. Similarly, fuel costs depended on the type of fuel used and distance travelled to campus:

> Rita explains it only costs her husband £7-8 for the return drive to [Institution B] from their home because of their electric car.
> *(Rita, Institution B, Fieldnote)*
>
> I'm getting through 150 to 200 pounds a month depending on... I mean, obviously it's not all just university [travel] but because my car's a diesel accessible vehicle, it just eats money.
> *(Violet, Institution B, Interview[1])*
>
> I've got a hybrid [car] so [fuel]'s less expensive. At the minute I'm probably paying about 40 quid a week for petrol.
> *(Niamh, Institution C, Interview)*
>
> It's a big ass car! It's expensive [to run] (…) but I made a secret alliance with my mam. If I take her shopping, because she's an anxious driver, so I take her places she wants to go, she'll use dad's card to fill it up.
> *(Zoe, Institution C, Interview)*

Whilst the participants above differ in how they measured their costs in

[1] 'Interview' denotes where participants have been directly quoted from transcripts of the go-along interviews taken place on participant commutes [see Chapter Four for a detailed discussion of the data collection methods].

referring to cost by return journey, weekly or monthly outgoings, the difference in costs amongst participants when aggregated ranged between £0 to £50 a week on fuel. This depended on multiple factors: the type of fuel used, who paid for the fuel, the distance travelled and number of journeys made to and from campus within a given time period.

Heterogeneity of travel costs was also evident amongst train users, with cost of train travel in the UK not solely dependent on length or distance of travel but also the type of ticket and flexibility preferred (Anciaes et al., 2019). This is particularly illustrated through the costs of participant commutes in Institution A. Both Carmen and Lyla commuted to Institution A via train from different locations with journey costs of around £17 and £8 respectively one-way to campus. However, this cost predicated on a particular configuration of factors which if altered could affect participants' commuting costs. For example, Carmen's ticket costs increased to £24 when needing to travel before 9.30am, confirming previous findings regarding the increase in cost of travel when commuting in peak times (Chappell et al., 2020; Thomas, 2019). Similarly Lyla's train ticket could be cheaper by a couple of pounds each journey by changing the train company used, although this was less favourable for Lyla due to the added journey time and changing of trains this required.

The costs noted above highlight two key themes. Firstly, that there can be a heterogeneity of transport costs for commuters within an individual institution, as well as within individual travel experiences. Secondly, the experiences highlight how a particular temporal and spatial configuration of actors within a network can produce a given effect (Callon & Latour, 2015), in this case referring to the cost of a participant's journey. This is further illustrated through the travel costs of Ethan, the remaining participant at Institution A. Ethan swapped to commuting by train halfway through the fieldwork period. During this time, Ethan found travelling by train in morning commuter time meant his ticket was £8 cheaper than when travelling later in the day. Consequentially changing the temporal configuration of actors in Ethan's doing of his commute, where Ethan purchases a ticket that enables him to

board a particular early train at a specific time in the day, led to a reduction in Ethan's commuting costs. This rejects the arguably deterministic suggestion that commuting in peak hours is always more expensive (Chappell et al., 2020; Thomas, 2019), highlighting the individualistic nature of cost to the commuter and how this is predicated on a complex configuration of factors.

As is the case with all actors within a given network, there is potential for the network to break down. Carmen recounted a time when she had forgotten her railcard when travelling to campus:

> I remember when I started first term at uni, I left [my railcard] and I had to pay £30... and I was like, 'I'll remember it next time!"
> *(Carmen, Institution A, Interview)*

Anyone aged 16-25 or over 26 in full-time education are eligible for a 16-25 railcard which when purchased gives users a third off train travel (National Rail, 2024a). Carmen's railcard is a physical plastic card which must be on her person during her train commute as conductors often require users to display their railcard alongside their train ticket in order to validate the discount obtained (National Rail, 2024b). Forgetting her railcard meant that Carmen had to buy her train ticket at a non-discounted price, the amount being £10 more than her usual fare. Important to note here is that this increase in cost did not mean the network broke down. Carmen was still able to commute to university and attend university on time, but just with a higher expense than her usual train fayre.

Cost changes over time were not exclusive to public transport users. Ethan, a third year, remarked at how his petrol costs had increased since his first year of university, although this was partly due to starting his course during the COVID pandemic where travel to campus had been minimal.

> "I just looked at my tank, and that's ready for filling up with diesel again. So that's like £85... so I think the commuting costs have gone up considerably compared to my first and second year, so it's the most expensive it's ever been this year".
> *(Ethan, Institution A, voicenote[2])*

[2] 'Voicenote' denotes the participant sending an audio clip to the researcher via WhatsApp [see Chapter Four for a detailed discussion of the data collection methods].

Relatedly, cost of commuting could also be influenced by changes to personal circumstances. Violet (Institution B) drove to campus using a specially adapted vehicle to accommodate her accessibility needs. However, during the first term of the academic year her car broke down leaving her unable to drive. Whilst Violet could obtain a lift from her partner or family members to university, she had needed to get a taxi for the return home which cost around £45 for a single journey. Violet was told she could be waiting up to nine months for her car to be fixed, although this was fixed around two months later. Nevertheless, this change in expense for Violet similar to public transport users noted above had been both unexpected and costly.

Students' commuting costs to university have previously been acknowledged as expensive and unexpected (Stalmirska & Mellon, 2022; Thomas, 2020), although unexpected has been used primarily to refer to students' insufficient research into their future commuting costs during the university application process. The cost of travel noted above by commuter students in this research subsequentially extends this description of student travel costs to acknowledge increased costs due to rail fare increases or unforeseen personal circumstances.

5.3. Getting there: doing the commute

> I meet Lyla at 6.55am at her local train station where she is dropped off in the car by her mum. This is a common occurrence as the drive is only 5 minutes from her house as opposed to a 10-15 minute walk. As Lyla is observing Ramadan she has been awake since 4am to eat before fasting for the day, normally waking up at 5am outside of Ramadan when catching this train.
>
> We sit on seats at the train station opposite the station ticket barriers for a few minutes, then scan our train ticket located on our phones to enter through the station ticket barrier just as the train pulls up to the platform. I follow Lyla to where her booked seat is, located on a table of 4, and occupy a seat opposite her which is unreserved. The journey lasts 1hr 10 minutes incurring no delays, with the train fairly quiet as we chat during the journey. No other passenger joins us on our table of four for the duration of the journey, differing from our commute together the month before where the train had been much busier.
>
> Lyla points out to me a water treatment plant located a few minutes ride away from Institution A train station which, when this comes into view, she uses as her cue to gather her stuff together and leave her seat ready to leave the train. On

disembarking, we walk the short 15 minute walk around the outskirts of the city centre to Institution A. The total journey time from meeting Lyla at the station to arriving on campus takes 1hr 40 minutes.
(Lyla, Institution A, Vignette)

As outlined in Section 5.2.1, participants in the study commuted using a multitude of transport types with some participants changing transport modes within the fieldwork period [Table 6]. Journey times also varied across participants, with commutes ranging from 20 and 125 minutes one-way. Whilst acknowledging that this is partly governed by the different locations commuters travel from to their institution, car and bus users within the same institution spoke of longer commutes as a direct result of increased traffic on the roads during peak times.

Emma: So is an hour and a half like the average amount of time it would take you like door to [uni car park] I guess?
Zoe (Institution C): if I left-, left right now in my car it would take us like 15 minutes to get home, from walking to getting in the car to driving right back. But because of the 9am traffic-
E: -it just takes a lot longer.
Zoe: It takes a lot longer.
(Zoe, Institution C)

Normally it takes about 40 minutes [to drive between her home and the university]. This afternoon I can probably get home in half an hour. If I push it, maybe 35 [minutes] like I could probably get back in about 35 [minutes] but this morning, it takes an hour.
(Niamh, Institution C, Interview)

Emma: There's traffic along here... is this usual... for this time of day?
Penny: Normally it takes us about 35/40 minutes to get down this road... it's supposed to be an 11 minute journey [from her house to the bus stop she disembarks at].
(Penny, Institution C)

However, commute times could still vary even within peak hours. Ethan (Institution A) was a car driver whose journey time was also heavily dependent on the traffic he encountered when travelling in peak hours:

Ethan: I set off at twenty past 7.
Emma: That's like an hour and 25 minutes?
Ethan: Whereas going home, I can do it in under an hour.
(Ethan, Institution A, November 2022).

So I came in-, (…) midway through the day and it took 45 minutes, nice easy journey, loads of parking, and it just shows the difference in rush hour traffic, how much it impacts your day.
(Ethan, Institution A, voicenote, February 2023).

Ethan's experiences initially suggest that his travel times were simply dependent on the time of day; travelling in peak hours took him longer to reach campus than when commuting outside these periods. However, Ethan's commute time was also changeable when travelling in peak time:

> I set off quite early this morning thinking that traffic would be really bad. (…) my sat nav's taken me on a different route every day this week, because when I came in on Tuesday, there was a lot of traffic going up to the [motorway] (…) so it took me on a different route that day and took me ages and ages and ages to get in. Whereas I've set off earlier this morning, thinking it would be the same, but I ended up getting [to the university car park] really early. So I think it just shows that every day seems to be different... every day, you've no idea what the traffic's going to be like. It's very hard to sort of estimate what time to set off to get [to university] on time, because it seems to vary every day.
> *(Ethan, Institution A, voicenote, November 2022).*

Ethan had anticipated longer journey times due to the time of day he was travelling to campus, yet in this instance and others during our time together his morning commute was quicker than expected. Consequentially, Ethan's experiences highlight a greater complexity than that outlined by Chappell et al. (2020) stating that travelling in peak hours increases commute lengths for students. Rather, Ethan's journeys emphasise the changeability, and in some cases contradictory, experiences of an individual commute that has been less acknowledged in previous research.

It is commonly suggested that commuting to university is a 'time-consuming' endeavour (Alsop et al., 2008; Forsyth & Furlong, 2003; Holley et al., 2014; Southall et al., 2016; Thomas, 2020). Arguably this could accurately describe the journeys of participants at Institution A, all with one-way journeys over 90 minutes between their home and institution. Carmen's commute, for example, ranged between 80 and 125 minutes one-way which was one of the longest journey times of participants in the study. However she did not necessarily describe her commute as time-consuming:

> I mean, at first it is quite hard but when you get used to it, you're just more-, you know your times and what you're doing. [inaudible] it's quite fast.
> *(Carmen, Institution A, Interview).*

Whilst Carmen mentioned that it was initially 'hard' to work out which trains to catch, she describes her journeys to campus as 'quite fast' whereby her

increased familiarity with the journey and route to campus meant that her commute felt quicker and less time-consuming. As a result, the description of 'time-consuming' would arguably not adequately reflect Carmen's own perception of her travel time to campus.

Increased familiarity with the commute and its journey time led to multiple participants stating they were now 'used' to commuting to university, irrespective of institution attended or mode of travel.

> You get used to [the commute].
> *(Ethan, Institution A, Interview).*

> I'm kind of used to [the commute] now.
> *(Sam, Institution B, Interview).*

> I'm not feeling like-, [the travel is] not too much now. When you get used to it.
> *(Lucy, Institution C, Interview).*

Over time participants' commutes had become routinised due to their familiarity with their journey to campus; travel habits which they concluded made their commutes easier as a result. This was not just referenced by those in their second or third years of commuting. Lucy, in her first year of studies at Institution C, had only been commuting for a few months at the time of the research yet had retrospectively compared her feelings regarding commuting now to when she had first started commuting a few months prior. These experiences thus suggest that describing a commute to university as 'time-consuming' ignores a complexity of reflective practice carried out by participants. Rather than just acknowledging the length of their commute, the label given of 'time-consuming' by the commuter student encompassed a broader range of factors weighed up by the commuter that could also incorporate such as the familiarity of the journey and the frequency of the commute undertaken.

Heterogeneity is further evident across commuter experiences within the theme of commute familiarity. Maddie, whilst in her second year of commuting to university at Institution C, found the journey no easier than when she had first started:

> Maddie: I'm quite a nervous driver as well, so at like, it got to about two o'clock, and I start to feel anxious about the drive through to [Institution C city centre].
> Emma: Yeah. Has that gotten any easier? Obviously, cause you've been doing it for a year, or do you still feel like the same in terms of driving?
> Maddie: I think because they had such a big gap, like finishing in May til October, I just don't drive that much, I don't need to really, so this is like me first time driving back into [Institution C city].
> *(Maddie, Institution C)*

For Maddie, the long vacation period between her first and second year of university not requiring her to travel to university meant she continued to feel anxious about driving to campus; Maddie was 'not used' to the commute. Even Lucy (Institution C) who had previously stated she was 'used to' the commute lacked confidence when needing to work out alternative travel due to train line repairs.

> I don't know if there is any bus services. I think I have to change too to get to [Institution C city] so it's really a bit of-, you know… and I've not-, like from the start of September, from the start of term, like I've never used a bus to reach [Institution C city] so it's bit like scary, to do it.
> *(Lucy, Institution C, voicenote).*

Whilst Lucy had originally said she was 'used' to her normal commute, Lucy's voicenote a month later shows she is less confident when faced with unfamiliar travel options. Despite the disruption, the effect of 'commuting to university' still occurs for Lucy, in that she boards a bus to get to the institution instead of her normal train as instructed by a temporary timetable. However, she is nervous and less confident than usual. Lucy's experience thus demonstrates that there can be heterogeneity present within individual commuter student experiences, in that opposing and even contradictory feelings regarding their commute can co-exist.

5.3.1. Disruptions to doing the commute

> The train we plan to get between [Institution B city] and [Institution A city] is cancelled so we wait an extra 30 minutes at [Institution B city] in order to get the next one at 12:08. This train is packed and we have to stand in the vestibule with eight or so other people as there are no seats available in the carriage. People keep coming to use the loo and we keep having to move in order to let them through, getting squeezed closer and closer towards the train vestibule door.
> *(Carmen, Institution A, Fieldnote).*

The experience of doing the commute differed widely between participants, particularly during delays and cancellations during their commute. For public

transport users, travel time was often dependent on the occurrence of delays and/or cancellations to transport services. On two of my commutes with Carmen, the connecting train for our outbound journey to Institution A city was cancelled resulting in an extra wait time of 25 and 40 minutes respectively at the connecting train station. For Rahmatullah (Institution B), delays and cancellations of his bus and train services he described as a regular occurrence:

> Emma: How often do you say, on an average week, would you say [the buses] are delayed?
> Rahmatullah: 4 out of 5, at least four out of five.
> Emma: So it's more common that they're delayed?
> Rahmatullah: it's either too early that you miss it, or too late... like it's very rare and amazing that I can walk to my bus, get here [to the bus stop], the bus is here in like two minutes, and then I get to the station and the train's in like 3 minutes. It's very unlikely.
> *(Rahmatullah, Institution B)*

This was further evident in our first commute together when the bus failed to arrive, meaning we missed our subsequent train connection to Institution B city and added approximately 45 minutes onto our original journey time.

Delays and cancellations could also impact the physical sensory experience of the commute. For public transport users busy services from train and bus cancellations became unpleasant due to cramped conditions, noted particularly in my second commute with Rahmatullah.

Figure 1 – Researcher picture of crowds waiting for the train

(Rahmatullah, Institution B).

Figure 2 – Researcher picture of crowds boarding the train

(Rahmatullah, Institution B).

> Delays and cancellations to trains on his route earlier in the day, combined with it being rush hour around the time we were commuting, meant that the platform was crowded with fellow train passengers waiting for the next service [Figure 1]. When the train we were waiting for arrived, only three carriages long, the crowd surged and swelled towards the train doors [Figure 2], resulting in users squeezing into any available space they could stand in along the vehicle including down the train aisles and in the vestibule. At this point neither Rahmatullah nor I had been able to board the train, but as the train conductor asked people to step behind the platform safety lines for the train to depart, Rahmatullah spotted a small space near the vestibule doors and managed to jump onto the train just before the doors closed. *(Rahmatullah, Institution B, Vignette).*

Rahmatullah sent a follow-up WhatsApp message about the rest of this particular journey which I had been unable to accompany him on due to train overcrowding, describing it as ‘uncomfortable and almost claustrophobic’ and experiencing a further delay of 8 minutes to his journey due to the busyness of the service.

Delays and cancellations have been previously highlighted as making the commute to and from campus an unpleasant and difficult experience (Chappell et al., 2020; Stalmirska & Mellon, 2022; Thomas, 2019), further evident in Rahmatullah’s experience. Tracing the connections of the commuting network that Rahmatullah is enrolled in, delays to train services

can be further understood as a disruption to the temporal configuration of the assemblage of actors present in the commuting network. A delay in a physical train, operated by a train driver whose route and journey time is dictated by the train timetable [see Chapter Three], in this instance resulted in an alternate effect; Rahmatullah's commute took longer than expected.

Other disruptions were noted during participant commutes in relation to seasonal weather conditions. Carmen (Institution A) and Rahmatullah (Institution B) both told me that snowfall the previous academic year had resulted in train cancellations which had stopped them attending university on these days, an effect that they anticipated would happen again this coming academic year. Other participants, however, spoke of minimal weather-related disruptions to their journeys to campus:

> I've never had any problems when it has snowed [inaudible] which hasn't been that many times.
> *(Sam, Institution B, Interview)*

> The snow, yeah I didn't have any trouble getting onto campus or anything with that. I guess because like, while it's just only a short-, relatively short journey. And then by the time I-, on the snow day like I was waiting to see if my lecturer was cancelling. I only had one lecture that day so it was okay, but he didn't cancel so I ended up going on campus, and by the time I finished, a lot of the snow had melted.
> *(Zayn, Institution B, Interview)*

> Emma: did you get impacted by the snow last week?
> Zoe: no! no I'm-, but [the car] has a snow mode.
> E: A snow mode! But did you have to come in when it was sn-
> Zoe: -yeah I did but I'm a pretty confident driver, so I can tackle anything.
> *(Zoe, Institution C)*

Just as the weather could negatively impact certain commuter students' routes to campus, other participants like Zoe and Sam stated that poor weather conditions had minimal or no impact on their travel. Similarly, other participants noted that whilst the weather had potential to impact their travel experiences, a particular set of circumstances had resulted in minimal disruption to their journeys:

> Ethan lives in an area where it gets regular snowfall. Ethan had managed to get in okay, and there was no snow at Institution A. But when he got home, there was more snowfall. Ethan would not have been able to travel the following day due to this snowfall, but because he didn't have a class that day it was okay and did not pose any problems for him for commuting to campus.
> *(Ethan, Institution A, Fieldnote).*

> Oliver: so if it snows, it's only happened once so far, um, you just can't get out! The whole hill turns into... just an avalanche really.
> Emma: Yeah. Has it happened-, so obviously you're in your first year now, so presumably it hasn't happened for uni yet?
> Oliver: It happened once just like-, um just before the start of the year (…) so I walked [my son] round to the nursery [inaudible] instead of driving in the snow, and then by the time it got to the time where I needed to come here, it was just passible. *(Oliver, Institution C).*

For Ethan and Oliver, the particular configuration of their academic timetables had meant they had not needed to travel, or could travel later when experiencing particularly poor weather, resulting in minimal disruption to their physical commute.

The heterogenous effects as a result of disruption to commuting student practices was further noted in relation to train strikes. At the time of the research train drivers and workers were engaged in strike action which resulted in trains either being cancelled or operating at a reduced service (Austin & Race, 2022). Those travelling by train thus spoke of the disruption strike action had caused in their commute to campus. For Rahmatullah (Institution B) the reduced number of trains running between his hometown and Institution B city on strike days had meant leaving class early in order to get the last train home. Whilst this had restricted Rahmatullah's time on campus on these days, for Lucy (Institution C) the train strikes had stopped her attending class entirely. On a couple of the days she was due to attend university for her academic classes, Lucy was unsure as to how she would get home should she miss the last train back to her home city, consequently resolving not to attend class.

The existence of train strikes did not always, however, necessitate disruption to students' commuting practice. Lyla (Institution A) and I had cancelled our first scheduled commute together because of train strike action. This was because, unlike Rahmatullah and Lucy where strike action had reduced the number of trains travelling between their hometown and institution's city, strike action meant no trains running on Lyla's route to university. However during our rescheduled commute together, Lyla said this outcome was infrequent:

> Emma: Do you have to deal with like cancellations and delays often?
> Lyla: Not often actually, because I know that there's obviously been like, numerous strikes and stuff but ironically they've all been happening-, most of them have been happening when I'm not at uni...
> *(Lyla, Institution A)*

Lyla's classes had generally fallen on non-strike days which meant she was not needing to travel to campus on the days strike action took place.

Evident across this section is the heterogeneous effect disruptions could have on an individual's commute. Whilst the presence of inclement weather or a train strike could mean a commuter student was unable to attend class on a particular day, for others this did not occur. Furthermore these disruptions were, for the most part, temporary in nature; effects lasted for as long as the train strike or inclement weather occurred. When normal train timetables resumed, improved weather conditions arrived or trains ran to time, normal commuting practice resumed. Therefore, whilst acknowledging the disruptions present in students' commuting practice, it is equally important to reframe this deficit lens of analysis where only negative experiences regarding commuter students' experiences are illuminated. Importantly, commuter students in this study continued to make the journeys necessary for their attendance at university *in spite of* any experienced disruption.

5.4. Being on the commute

> Boarding the bus that will take us into the city centre of Lucy's hometown, Lucy logs into her class online using her smartphone where the seminar is being conducted via Microsoft Teams. Lucy briefly unmutes herself at the start to say 'hello' to her seminar leaders before muting herself once more and listening using wired headphones. The bus is busy, with all seats full and a couple of people standing in the aisle. The journey takes around 15 minutes, where we disembark the bus at the city bus station and walk to Lucy's café of choice with a small seating area, a journey which takes around five minutes on foot. Lucy remains on her seminar as we walk which proves a little dangerous as when crossing the road just as the traffic lights turn red, a bus waiting starts to move and threatens to run us both over.
>
> The café is located within the city where Lucy lives, a pitstop on her commute which will later involve us boarding a train to Institution C city centre and a further 15 to 20 minute walk to her academic classes. As we arrive at the café, I offer to get us both a hot drink which I order and take over to a table which Lucy has secured for us both. Lucy remains on her Teams call for a further hour, during which time she often

> taps comments or replies in the chat box function of the Teams application. At no point does Lucy turn her camera on, nor does she unmute herself again aside from the initial 'hello' at the start of the call. Normally her class lasts two hours, although in this instance it finishes around half an hour earlier than planned as they have recently completed an assignment for the module and therefore the seminar leaders feel they do not have as much to cover in class.
> *(Lucy, Institution C, Vignette).*

A few participants used their commute to university to complete academic work (Finn, 2019; Smith, 2018; Thomas, 2019). The type of work undertaken during commutes varied; Rahmatullah (Institution B) used his commute to look at the slides for his upcoming lecture, whereas Ethan (Institution A) spoke of using his car journey to listen to academic audio books. Previous research on commuter student experience has acknowledged that certain transport types and conditions are less conducive for completing academic work mid-commute (Forsyth & Furlong, 2003; Stalmirska & Mellon, 2022; Thomas & Jones, 2017), yet Ethan overcame this through connecting his phone app to his car stereo in order to engage with academic material whilst driving.

Repurposing the commute for academic benefit was of particular note in Lucy's commuting experience. For Lucy (Institution C), her commute became another space in which to attend online academic tutorials. Once a fortnight Lucy had an online-only seminar on Microsoft Teams at 9am, followed later in the day by in-person academic lectures and seminars on campus. To accommodate her commute within this academic schedule Lucy attended her Teams seminar online whilst commuting to Institution C. Lucy logged into her seminar during her bus journey to her local city centre for the start of her tutorial, transitioning into a chain coffee shop near the train station until the end of her session. Once the tutorial had ended, she then left the café in order to board the train to Institution C city.

Chapter Six will follow more substantially commuter students' navigation of their academic studies once on campus. However, above demonstrates the complexity present in specifically commuting practices and highlights in particular some of the non-human actors present within these networks. For example, the Microsoft Teams application is a technological tool present in

the actor-network of doing the commute that Lucy is enrolled in. Lucy uses the bus rather than the train for this section of her journey on the day once a fortnight that her timetable has both online and in-person classes for a better internet connection in which to attend class using the Microsoft Teams app on her smartphone. The bus Lucy uses is part of these network practices of commuting, as is the WiFi connection and phone that enables the Microsoft Teams app to stream Lucy's attendance in class. The Microsoft Teams app is thus an additional technological tool within these network practices where its specific temporal and spatial configuration within the network generates particular effects, in this case the type of transport Lucy uses on a particular day of the week.

Not all students used the commute for the purposes of academic study. For a number of participants in my research, the commute instead was a time in which they could relax and listen to music. As Microsoft Teams was a technological tool used for Lucy to attend her studies remotely, the employment of music streaming apps by commuter students enabled them to listen to music whilst on the move. How these were operationalised varied; some students had created their own playlist on music app Spotify, whereas others used the video streaming app Youtube to watch music videos. This practice could also change over time. For instance, Carmen and Lyla (Institution A) were both observing Ramadan during one of our commutes together and therefore in order to observe appropriate religious practices during this period consequently did not listen to music on their commute:

> Carmen: -I can't listen to music because of Ramadan. It's the month where you get closer to God so you get rid of the bad things. (…) So, like messaging people, and stuff like that [inaudible] (…)
> Emma: (…) So when you're on your commutes during Ramadan then how does that differ? (…)
> Carmen: I'd probably just be on my phone and just looking outside... listen to you.
> *(Carmen, Institution A)*

Carmen's experience, in addition to highlighting the change in her commuting practice due to the time of year, also hints to the impact of researcher influence on the subject of study. Chapter Four highlighted the epistemological foundations of the research acknowledging that knowledge

cannot be objectively measured, with the act of travelling alongside commuter students naturally changing the dynamics and experiences of that particular commute experience (Kusenbach, 2003). This is particularly evident here with Carmen when she includes our conversations when listing her regular commute activities.

Nonetheless, in the cases where these non-human technological tools have been identified as existing within the network, the effects from their spatial and temporal existence are temporary. For instance, outside of Ramadan both Lyla and Carmen regularly listen to music and podcasts via applications on their smartphone during their commute. The identification of technological tools like those noted above thus highlights how commuting practice is not always routinised, but instead in a constant state of (re)ordering where the practice of commuting continues. The actors and subsequent connections between actors simply change and adapt to this state of flux. Furthermore, the presence of Microsoft Teams demonstrates how the network can also extend and overlap into that of 'doing a degree', the experiences of which shall be further explored in Chapter Six.

Continuing to trace technological tools highlights other ways in which commuter students spend time on their commute. In some cases, social connections between the commuter student and their peers were mediated through the textual form of social networking apps specifically whilst on their commute. Here technical tools such as WhatsApp and Snapchat were used by Rahmatullah and Carmen respectively to keep in touch with their university peers:

> Rahmatullah: So my course friends, the ones who have the early session, they've got the car today.
> Emma: Oh did one of them drive?
> R: No they got a taxi - 'don't ever trust buses!' [shows me his group chat on Snapchat on his phone, one person has put 'don't ever trust buses!' in response to him telling them about our journey so far].
> E: [laughter] Is this you messaging your group [of friends]? Your commuting group yeah?
> R: yeah.
> *(Rahmatullah, Institution B)*

> “[course friends are] asking ’you coming in, you coming in?’ and like ’yeah I am coming’ [referring to her replying back on WhatsApp to her course friends to let them know she is attending class that day].
> *(Carmen, Institution A)*

Carmen used WhatsApp as a way to communicate with her peers to inform them of her attendance in class, whereas the group chat Rahmatullah was a member of on Snapchat was used to share experiences of difficult commutes and/or to update each other on any issues pertaining to the commute, such as delayed and cancelled trains. For both students, technological tools were therefore used to maintain these social connections with peers.

Whether students were completing academic work, listening to music or talking to peers, these activities demonstrate how being on the commute often involves more than just travel to or from campus. Chapter Two acknowledged briefly the heterogeneity of commute experiences and the positive benefits the commute could provide (Finn & Holton, 2019). Findings from this study further emphasise this heterogeneity of experience by highlighting that individuals can differ in their commute activities depending on a multitude of temporal and spatial factors. In some cases this led to additional effects that would not necessarily be expected as occurring from commuting practice. For example, aside from simply enabling communication between peers, Rahmatullah’s enrolment into a group chat on Snapchat mediated friendship and solidarity on lengthy and congested commutes.

These findings offer two key implications to understanding commuter students’ experiences of the commute. Firstly, it further illuminates commuting practices that do not easily prescribe to previous deficit narratives, specifically here in terms of the commute being a space in which commuter students could form social connections with their peers. Secondly, it demonstrates that ‘being at university’, mediated through technological tool use, is not necessarily limited to a particular physical space located on campus. Lucy for example was able to attend her academic class whilst on her commute to campus rather than in a particular classroom on site, whereas Rahmatullah was able to maintain friendships with his course

friends without needing to be in the same physical space with them on campus, on the commute or elsewhere. ‘Being at university’ for the commuter student could therefore, through the mediation of technological tools, be a flexible process in which they were able to enter into the sociocultural space of university at a distance, such as on the commute itself. How commuter students maintained friendships outside the context of their physical commute will be further explored in Chapter Seven.

5.5. Arrival & parking on campus

> I meet Oliver for the first time next to his parked car in an on-street car parking bay positioned opposite the building where his first academic class is located in 40 minutes time from now. Oliver has parked here because he does not yet have a car parking permit, although he tells me this is in the process of being granted and will last for the remainder of the academic year (it is currently February and therefore half-way through his second term of his first year at university). In the meantime, Oliver has been parking through a combination of paid on-street parking, where I find him today, in addition to parking in his college on an informal agreement with college staff and parking illicitly in other university car parks.
>
> Oliver had wanted to apply for a parking permit for use from the start of the academic year,but following communication with staff prior to his arrival he was under the impression he did not need to fill in the application form until after he enrolled onto his course. However, on enrolment he was informed that permit applications had closed. Whilst an academic staff member had tried to intervene on his behalf, Oliver was told by staff to wait until the following term whereby his previous application would be taken into consideration. Oliver later double-checked this information with staff responsible for permit allocations two days before the new January deadline, only to find out that he did in fact need to reapply, requiring him to hastily obtain paperwork from his child’s nursery in order to prove his parental status to aid his parking permit application.
>
> I meet Oliver a couple of times in the next two months following this first meeting and despite having now received a car parking permit, this has only allowed him to park in one car park owned by the institution located between five and thirty minutes walk away from his scheduled classes. On querying this restriction Oliver was informed by staff that, whilst he had received a permit on the understanding that as a parent he needed to have his car close by in case he had to leave for a child-based emergency, ‘the decision is made by a panel who don’t receive that information’ and therefore the reasons he had applied for a permit had not been factored into their decision-making as to how many car parks he could use with the permit he had been provided.
> *(Oliver, Institution C, Vignette)*

A common discussion point with the car users in the study was where they parked their car during their time at university. Parking permits were discussed by car users across the study, although how these were allocated

varied by Institution. The car parking permit policy at each institution in the study are outlined below as understood through the institutions' webpages:

Institution	Permit allocation process	Criteria for parking eligibility on campus
A	Points-based system. No physical permit required if successful (automatic number plate recognition system in action). Applications open all year round.	- Number of miles travelled from home to campus in a single journey, with the greatest number of points available for those living more than 25 miles away from campus. - Blue badge holders - Placement students
B	Only blue badge holders able to apply for a car parking permit. *Students are allowed to park free of charge outside core hours (weekdays, 7am-5pm), although still required to register vehicle.*	- Blue badge holders only
C	Criteria-based system. If successful, a physical paper permit is issued to be hung in the car windscreen. Permit applications open termly.	- Students living more than 75 minutes away by public transport from campus - Students with caring or childcare responsibilities - Students participating in ECA that would benefit from having a vehicle to participate - Blue badge holders

Table 7 - Car parking permit policies

Table 7 highlights heterogeneity within the application, eligibility criteria and administration of parking permits across the three institutions within the study. Institution A and C include criteria for obtaining parking permits which refer to commuter students, although with different measurements as to what constitutes a permit application on the grounds of commuting. Institution B Student Union (2024) refer to mileage and Institution C (2023b) the time taken to campus via public transport, a difference which arguably reflects the variation in measurement of commuter students in the sector [see Chapter One]. In comparison, Institution B (2024b) offer no car parking permits to students unless they are blue badge holders. The diversity within how parking permits are distributed across the institutions within this study alone thus demonstrates the importance of acknowledging the wider institutional context when discussing commuter student experience, in this case in relation to permit policy.

This diversity remained in regards to the ease in which participants were able to obtain a permit to park in institutional car parks. For Ethan at Institution A, applying for a permit had been a fairly easy process.

> Emma: was it easy for you to get a parking permit?
> Ethan: Yeah. So it's just an online form that you fill out with what car you drive, where you live, the reason for needing it and I think it was £40, or £45 pounds? This year it's all on ANPR. So you don't even need like a disc either.
> *(Ethan, Institution A).*

However, for those at Institution C applying for and/or receiving their car parking permit had been less straightforward. Oliver's vignette at the beginning of the section highlights how miscommunication and misinformation from staff at the institution had delayed his permit application, leaving him to find parking alternatives for the first four to five months of his course. Niamh, also at Institution C, spoke of how staff responsible for distributing the car parking passes had lost her contact details on multiple occasions. Consequently, Niamh did not receive her physical permit necessary for parking at the institution for a further month following her successful application outcome.

Such experiences demonstrate a complexity within the permit application process that existed irrespective of a commuter students' permit eligibility. In these instances it was the mismanagement of the permit application process by the staff involved, through miscommunicating to the students the application timeline and/or through administrative processing errors, that meant a breakdown in the distribution of car parking permits occurred for both Oliver and Niamh. In both cases this had been resolved; both students received a parking permit. However both students spoke of the negative impact this had had on their commuting experiences up until this point, namely in their having to risk parking in institutional car parks with potential to receive a monetary fine, and/or having to pay for expensive on-street car parking alternatives.

Permit holders' arrival on campus was further mediated by their permit in respect to where they parked, particularly for those with parking permits at Institution C. Oliver and Zoe had both obtained a car parking permit from the institution, however this did not automatically enable them to park in car parks located on campus. Both students were instead restricted to parking in a single car park located on the outskirts of the city. This was not however, the case for all permit holders. Niamh for example had both an institutional car parking permit and also a blue badge, the latter part of an English government scheme which allows drivers with a registered disability to park in accessible car parking spaces across the country (DfT, 2020). Consequently, Niamh was able to park in any car park on campus plus in any public accessible parking bays located close to her located classes.

In addition to influencing where students parked, the parking permit could also influence the time in which commuters arrived to campus. Violet (Institution B) was a blue badge holder like Niamh, but spoke of needing to factor extra time into her commute for the common occurrence of there being no empty accessible spaces near her classes on campus and therefore needing to park further away; having a blue badge did not automatically equal a car parking space in her desired location. Ethan (Institution A) on the other hand, whilst not limited by his parking permit to a particular car park like Oliver and Zoe, struggled to park at the university at all if arriving after a certain time of day. This was particularly apparent during a commute together where Ethan had parked in a public car park near the university rather than a university car park despite having a university car parking permit due to there being no available spaces on his arrival to campus.

The experiences highlighted above thus offer a more nuanced understanding of the effect that specifically a parking permit can have on commuter students' experiences. A parking permit at Institution C for example did not mean all holders were given the same options in where to park on campus. Similarly the experiences of Violet and Ethan highlight how a parking permit did not automatically equate to availability of car parking spaces. Any discussion of commuter student experiences in obtaining and using car

parking permits at their respective institutions therefore must acknowledge this diversity, and thus complexity, of experience.

5.6. ANT and the commute

In tracing the becoming of a commuter student, this chapter has reaffirmed the 'wicked problem' around defining this student group [see Chapter One]. Students like Zoe highlight how a definition may not adequately accommodate changes to their commuting status during the course of their degree, a situation which ANT would suggest inevitable in any attempts to set parameters around a certain phenomenon. Latour (1999) argued that 'black boxing' phenomena in this way ignored the detail and complexity that existed within. This was not however to argue "self-enclosure" as impossible (Latour, 1999, p. 70). Rather, that putting up references of definition could potentially eradicate a wealth of complexity, multiplicity and materiality that lay underneath. This was particularly notable in Zoe's commuting practices. Zoe was recruited to the study during the time she was residing in the parental home. Yet when living in shared accommodation a few months prior Zoe would not have met the study's commuter student criteria [see Chapter Four], despite travelling a reasonable distance from a different city in the region to Institution C; Zoe was doing 'a commute' to campus that under other definitions of this student group would have deemed her a 'commuting student' [see Section 1.2.4].

I set out in Chapter One that my working definition of commuter student would be critically analysed throughout this thesis to stretch and challenge my own construction of this student group and its appropriateness for understanding their experiences in HE. Using ANT to illuminate commuter student practices has thus demonstrated how any kind of attempt to define the commuter student is always in danger of eradicating the complexity nominally belonging to this student group can engender. Instead, I acknowledge that the 'commuter student' can exist in some form, but argue it is unable to have a fixed definition given this wealth of complexity in

experience.

This chapter has explored the becoming of a commuter student, tracing the commuting practices of students to explore the complex network of human and non-human actants that mediate the commute in a way that particular effects occur. The financing and subsequent cost of the commute to university is one such effect, with the cost of Carmen's commute [Section 5.2] mediated by a particular spatial, geographical and temporal configuration of actors (train timetable, academic timetable, railcard, Carmen, train, train driver). The heterogeneity of networks is exemplified in exploring the cost of students' commutes within and across the institutions; commute costs are subject to the unique and specific configuration of actors (such as type of transport used, time of day travelled) located in each individual commuting practice.

Tracing the commuting practices of students had additional implications for our understanding of their durability. The temporary absence of Carmen's railcard did not stop her from commuting to campus, but rather increased the cost of her travel until she was able to locate her railcard again [Section 5.2.1]; the network stretched and reorientated itself to accommodate the absence of this actor and the commuting practice thus continued. This accommodation of changes to the temporal and spatial organisation of actants was similarly noticeable in respect to other disruptions experienced by participants. Public transport delays or poor weather conditions could impact commuting practice, with such as Rahmatullah (Institution B) consequently experiencing an increase in travel time and busyness of service following train delays and cancellations [Section 5.3.1]. In most cases however this was often a temporary disruption. Whilst Rahmatullah (Institution B) had to leave his class early to get the last train home on a day where there were train strikes, this did not stop him from commuting to and from campus on this day. For commuters like Lyla (Institution A) and Lucy (Institution C) where there was more significant disruption, in that there were no train services running during train strike days on their particular route, this only lasted for as long as the strike day; students could resume their normal

commuting practice the next time they were needing to travel on campus.

Experiences like those noted above offer two key ways in which to illuminate the understanding of commuter student practices. Firstly that disruptions to commuting practices were often temporary and resolved in a way that did not often impact their commuting practices beyond a particular day or journey; students were for the most part able to continue their commute to campus despite any disruptions to their journeys. Secondly, that the effect of disruption on individual commuting practices was heterogeneous. Wintery weather conditions whilst for students like Carmen (Institution A) and Rahmatullah (Institution B) could influence the length of their commute to campus, for Zoe (Institution C) it made little difference to their journey. This reaffirms the complexity and multiplicitous nature of these network assemblages and the commuting experiences these affect.

Section 5.5 highlighted how for car users an institutional car parking permit could mediate their doing of the commute in multiple and distinct ways. A car parking permit is not solely a piece of paper hung in a car windscreen. Rather, it is part of a wider network of human and non-human actors (a paper permit, CCTV cameras, institutional car parks, lined parking spaces, parking attendants, permit administrative staff) which enable these effects can occur. The permit carries agency through this network; the agency that enables the driver of the vehicle to park in particular institutional spaces. Nevertheless this agency differs depending on the institution and network of actors in which it is enacted. Ethan for example was able to park in any car park at Institution A as accorded by the institutional car parking policy and reaffirmed through parking wardens and the ANPR system not flagging his car as illicitly parked. This is in comparison to Zoe and Oliver who were limited to parking in one car park managed by Institution C. The agency in which parking permits provided for students to park on campus therefore is not homogenous but stretches to accommodate the individual networks in which it is situated.

Whilst the parking permit carries agency, in that it affords the possibility of parking in a particular location, this does not automatically necessitate a particular effect occurring; permit holders were not always able to park in a car park at their institution. Ethan (Institution A) had needed to park in a public car park on one commute after arriving to find no spare car parking spaces in the institutional car park he normally used [Section 5.5]. Whilst Ethan could have driven to the other car parks included in his permit allowance, the time of his arrival meant he was unable to do so without being late to his academic class. Ethan thus needed to arrive at his chosen car park before a certain time of day in order to secure a parking place and have sufficient time for the short walk to class. This is in addition to the enrolment of the car parking permit into Ethan's commuting practice which legitimised Ethan parking in this specific institutional car park without penalisation. Consequently, Ethan's experience reaffirms the necessity of the spatial, geographical and temporal configuration of the network in order for particular effects to occur.

5.7. Conclusion

This chapter has traced commuter students' experiences in respect to their travel to campus. The act of commuting to university could be attributed by students as debt avoidance, a product of the familiar or rejection of the unfamiliar in respect to accommodation modes, further acknowledging how commuting status could change for participants over time and thus interrogating this thesis' working definition of 'commuter student'. Considerable variation of costs existed across participant experiences including types of transport used, number of journeys required to campus and time of day travelled, with further heterogeneity displayed across individual experiences.

The physical act of getting to campus was subject to an array of factors. Journey time and routes to campus significantly varied amongst participants, as did the effects of seasonal weather conditions and train strikes. The experience of being on the commute varied amongst participants, completing

academic work or listening to music two examples of activities highlighted. Many used a technological tool which enabled both expected and unexpected effects to occur. Exploring particularly car users' arrival on campus continued to highlight how other actors, like a car parking permit, could have wide-reaching effects on such as where students parked and the length of their walk to class. How students who commute frame their experiences could also change over time, with many students minimising any disruptions experienced during their commute due to the routinisation of their everyday commuting habits. Collectively, these experiences highlight the heterogeneity and multiplicity present within commuter students' reasons for, and experiences of, commuting to campus.

Chapter Six: Being there: commuter students and their academic experiences

This second analysis chapter follows how commuter students navigate their academic studies whilst at university. It will begin with tracing the connections through the academic timetable and the ways in which it can frame commuters' attendance in class and their interaction with staff. It will then consider how commuter students use lecture capture before exploring how students manage disruption to their academic experiences, the example provided here in relation to university strike action. This will be followed by an analysis of where and how commuter students spend their time outside of their academic classes, before ending with a discussion on how this can be understood through the lens of actor-network theory (ANT). In all sections, I will consider how these themes interact with commuter students' perceptions of 'being there' in respect to their academic experiences which I broadly take to mean their physical presence in class. I will also discuss how 'being there' is more generally conceptualised by participants and referred to in their academic experiences where appropriate.

6.1. Timetabling & the commuter student

> I wait in a café near where Rita has her class for her to arrive, although Rita sends me a WhatsApp message to let me know that she is going to be a few minutes later than planned due to traffic on her car journey. When Rita arrives we sit with five of her classmates around a circular table in the café and whilst the wider group continue their conversation, we discuss her academic timetable for the day. Rita has a class between 10am and 12pm, and then a further two hour session from 1 until 3pm. We meet later in this hour gap between her classes, eating lunch with her course friends in a common room that is dedicated for mature students at the university.
> *(Rita, Institution B, Fieldnote).*

For commuter students, their 'doing' of their commute revolves in part around their academic timetable. The academic timetable is a non-human actor that specifies when students are required to be present in their academic classes in order to 'do a degree'. Like any actor it exists within a wider web of connections; the actor-network of the 'university' [see Chapter Three]. The academic timetable has a function of placing particular human actors (students, lecturers) within a particular space at a particular time on a

university campus, relying on its configuration with other actors within the network. For example, students must first be enrolled onto a set number of modules which must also be relevant to their university degree. This enrolment process then informs the type and size of room required for the teaching of the module (lecture halls, computer rooms, laboratories) which the academic timetable configures alongside the human actors aforementioned to ensure they are available at a certain time and within a particular space on campus.

Chapter Five has already discussed how the doing of the commute can revolve around a public transport timetable should a student take a bus or train to reach class. However a commuter students' academic timetable specifies the specific days and times in which they are expected to be on campus to attend their academic classes, thus influencing the days and times they commute to campus. The 'academic timetable' thus has the potential to make students turn up to class, an effect that could be assumed outside of what would be ordinarily out of its reach as a documented form.

The key word here is 'potential'; other concentrations of network activity will be needed to make people come to class. Getting to campus with minimal disruption to their commute, as discussed in Chapter Five, could greatly impact whether participants could attend class. Similarly, not all commuter students in the study attended all the classes into which they were enrolled. Maddie and Niamh (Institution C) were two students who linked the arrangement of their academic timetable specifically to their non-attendance in class:

> I mean this year, my timetables' a lot better (…) things are closer together. Last year, I really really struggled because I think some of the times I could have like three and four [hour], sometimes longer hour gaps, between something and something and sometimes it will get two to three hours of just-, there's nothing in [Institution C city], wandering round, there's only so much coffee you can drink (…) that I would just get to two/three hours [of waiting] and think 'oh, you know what, I'm off home'.
> *(Maddie, Institution C, Interview)*

Emma: So you've got like an hour gap.
Niamh: I do... but normally I chin off the one at [lecture block in Institution C city centre].
Emma: Fair enough. Do you think you'll chin it off today?
Niamh: I don't know I'm undecided (…) I should probably go because I think it's the last one of the module.
(Niamh, Institution C)

Commuter students with gaps between academic commitments are positioned as less likely to attend their academic classes (Chappell et al., 2020; Finn & Holton, 2019; Holley et al., 2014). Whilst Maddie and Niamh usually attended their first scheduled class, a large gap of time between this and their next class could result in their non-attendance at subsequent sessions.

Nevertheless this was a theme noted by only some commuter students in this particular research; commuter students mostly attended class on the particular days and times as stated by their academic timetable. These experiences do not fit neatly within the deficit narrative of the academic timetable as negatively impacting the commuter student generally purported in relation to commuters' academic experiences (Thomas, 2019; University of Edinburgh, 2018). Furthermore, whilst both Maddie and Niamh had highlighted instances of their non-attendance in class, on other weeks with the same configuration of their academic timetable they also spoke of having attended their scheduled classes.

The experiences of Maddie and Niamh highlighted above thus begin to unravel a much more complex web of actors influencing commuter students' 'being there' in their academic classes. Attending the same class on one week but not another Maddie attributed to wanting to improve her overall attendance record. Being physically present in class meant Maddie could sign the register. This would thus translate into her being marked as present on her institutional attendance record as legitimised through their institutional attendance policy. For Niamh 'being in class' was influenced by the time of year in combination with it being the last class of the module and feeling a sense of duty to attend because of this. In both instances both commuter students had attended class not just because their academic timetable stated

the dates and times they were required on campus. Instead it was a web of actors (register, module, time of year, institutional attendance policy) that influenced their being in their academic classes in these particular instances noted above.

The complexity of actors involved in a commuter student 'being there' was further evident when Niamh and Maddie were able to have their academic timetable altered during the fieldwork period. Both students contacted their academic departments and had an administrative staff member change them to alternative seminar groups for certain course modules to fill the gaps they had between scheduled classes.

> I sent [the department] an email, I explained that I had been working on a Thursday to afford petrol to come to uni, and now we're on placement I really need a day to work. And they were alright about it (…) and now [the seminar is] on a Friday, on a day where I've already got stuff. So on the Friday, I was already there at 10 to 11, and now I've got this seminar 12 til 1 and I've got another one, 2 til 3. So it's worked out a lot better, because it's bridged that gap, which has made me actually stay for the other seminars, whereas last term because I'd had that big gap, I pretty much chinned off the other seminar.
> *(Niamh, Institution C, Interview)*

> That [seminar] that I swapped to 11, I had it at something like three til four? And again, it was like this huge gap between there and then I was like, 'No' (…) [the form she filled out to request to change groups], it was like, 'can you put a reason why?' And I was like, 'I work, childcare...' (…) they were like, 'we'll just give her it!' (…) I know like a lot of students don't like [seminars] on first thing in the morning but I'm like it's getting it out the way, then I'm not travelling back in rush hour traffic.
> *(Maddie, Institution C, Interview)*

Niamh in particular felt that swapping seminars had increased her attendance in her Friday classes. This change however rested on numerous institutional factors, like her course being large enough to have alternative classes that she could swap to, that these classes did not clash with any of the other scheduled classes within her current timetable, and also that the institutional policy allowed for amendments to be made to her original academic timetable. Consequently 'being there' in academic classes for these commuter students was more than just something that occurred from observing an academic timetable. Instead, the academic timetable was situated within a much broader network of factors (e.g. academic timetable, seminar rooms, institutional timetable policy, administrative staff) that mediated and negotiated with each other in a way that could affect the

commuter student experience.

Tracing the networks of individual participants further demonstrated how 'being there' could be constrained by other factors intersecting with students commuting to university in the study such as parental responsibilities. Their 'being there' in class was often reliant on another individual such as a family member, childminder or education establishment to look after their child in order for them to travel to university to attend their classes. As with all connections in a given network, the connection between the commuter student and their childcare provider could temporarily breakdown when such as illness meant childcare was no longer available for when they were due to attend university.

> Emma: Have you had many instances where you've had to take the day off because your kids aren't well, and like not come in to [uni]?
> Ethan: (…) yeah. Last year and the year before the children went to a nursery, so if any of the staff that-, just on about the staff, if any of the staff are ill, obviously they just get a replacement in or someone else covers. Now we've got a childminder, who's got three children, if any of her children are ill, and she cancels, we have to cancel. So we don't have any childcare that day. Or yeah, if either my little boy or my little girl are ill, then we took the day off as well. But I'd say this year, I've probably only two days off.
> *(Ethan, Institution A)*
>
> I've missed a few lectures for childcare things on an evening, cause I have a late one on Monday and I've missed one or two of those like, when my mum's been ill, or if [child's] been ill, and I've just caught up on the-, with the recording and then gone to an office hours to just clarify I've understood.
> *(Oliver, Institution C, Interview)*

The above is more a consequence of parental responsibilities rather than an experience solely derived from a students' commuting status, although the two can be relational [see Chapter One]. However, there were other instances where the intersection between students' commuting status and demographic characteristics was more prominent in their academic experiences. Violet's additional accessibility needs intersected with her commute in a way that could disrupt her 'being there' in relation to her academic studies.

> The stairlift is broken, with orange tape stuck in a cross formation over the top of the stairlift controls and accompanied by a typed note that states to ring the Estates team for any queries. The stairlift when working has space for one wheelchair user to drive onto a small platform and travel down three small steps to enter a seminar room which has no other entrance, meaning it is currently inaccessible to wheelchair

users.

Today is the first day of a new academic term at Institution B. Violet has a new academic timetable for this semester, which is why she was not aware of this problem beforehand as this is the first time her class for this module has met this term. Violet queries the inaccessibility of the room with the university disability services team as their office happens to be next door to the inaccessible classroom in question. However, the team say it's not their issue but the Estates team and Violet should contact them. Furthermore, they were not aware that the room Violet was referring to as inaccessible was in fact a room right next door to their office. Meanwhile, Violet's seminar leader comes out of the classroom and suggests that Violet try to get on the lift anyway, despite the tape over the controls. Violet politely declines, stating she would feel uncomfortable and it would risk her getting stuck with her wheelchair halfway down the stairs. Following this, the seminar leader finds the lecture room next door unoccupied and accessible, allowing the entire class to move rooms.
(Violet, Institution B, Vignette)

In Chapter Five, it was discussed how Violet had been unable to attend classes in-person at Institution B for two months due to an issue with her accessible vehicle. The vignette above highlights how a change in academic timetable because of a change in academic modules that Violet is enrolled upon had meant one of Violet's new timetabled classes had been scheduled into a room that she was currently unable to access. The inaccessibility of the room would have been a disruption to any student with a physical disability irrespective of their accommodation status. However, Violet specifically referenced being a commuter as contributing to the frustration she felt regarding this particular experience:

Imagine if I came all the way today and that-, and I'd had two seminars, (…) if I'd come all the way for those two hours, and there wasn't another room available for the second one that was inaccessible, I would have been livid! I would have been upset but then it would have turned to anger because it's a waste of my time. *(Violet, Institution B, Interview).*

The situation was resolved in around ten minutes with Violet's lecturer sourcing an alternative accessible room for the lesson to take place next door. This was therefore a temporary interruption with minimal disruption to her overall studies; the doing of a degree continued for Violet. The temporary nature of disruption was also the case for the commuter student parents previously discussed; even if having to miss an academic class due to childcare responsibilities they were able to continue with their academic studies and remain on their degree course. Collectively the experiences of Violet, Ethan and Oliver demonstrate the durability of the network and its

ability to withstand temporary breakdowns and disruptions in connection.

So far this section has discussed ‘being there’ for commuter students in their academic practices as mediated by the academic timetable, although it has begun to introduce how this is situated in a web of actors that cannot be easily separated from the effects that the network engenders. This was further noted in Rahmatullah’s (Institution B) experiences of navigating his arrival to class alongside his commute. Rahmatullah regularly experienced delays and cancellations during his commute which would often result in his late arrival to class [see Chapter Five]. This also occurred during one of our commutes together where due to a delayed bus and subsequent train delay Rahmatullah arrived around 45 minutes late to his compulsory group work session. Rahmatullah had communicated that he would be late to his tutor via email during the commute:

> If it’s [a tutor leading the session], they’re pretty understanding about timetables. I think the cutoff was like 15 minutes-, if you arrive after 15 minutes you can’t basically-, they don’t let you in, you can’t sign the register. But that’s sort of procedure, but it’s not always as strict as that. So like, I’ve messaged my tutor, because this happened (…) two weeks ago, same tutor! same day aswell, and I didn’t make it.... so I was about 20 minutes late so I sent an email and he acknowledged it and he was like ’okay that’s fine’ and I went in and signed the register and it was fine. It just depends on how your tutor is, and if they’re understanding.
> *(Rahmatullah, Institution B, Interview).*

The course that Rahmatullah is enrolled into is one in which attendance in class is monitored because of the type of course he undertakes; a course with a professional qualification where attendance in class and on placements is an awarding component. This is similar to where international students’ academic attendance is monitored because of study visa requirements currently in operation in England (UKCISA, 2024). In this case Rahmatullah must not only be physically present in class to sign the register, but arrive to class within a particular timeframe as denoted by institutional policy in order for him to be marked as having attended class. If this does not occur, for example if Rahmatullah arrives in class after the specified timeframe, whilst he may be physically present this is not translated into his having ‘attended’ where he is subsequently marked as absent on the register. In other words, for the effect of ‘attendance’ to occur, a particular

spatial and temporal assemblage of actors (register, student, seminar room, institutional policy document, professional body policy document, teaching staff) is required.

Above uncovers a complex web of actors that constitute Rahmatullah as ‘being’ in class, and how he could be physically present in class yet this not automatically equate to his attendance in accordance with his particular institutions’ attendance policy. Further nuance existed within this in how staff members at Institution B navigated the attendance procedure. The staff member above had previously allowed Rahmatullah to sign the register even though he had arrived later than the specified cut off time on the attendance policy. On our journey together this particular staff member had also replied to Rahmatullah to say that his late arrival would not be a problem; he would still be able to have his attendance in class recorded. Rahmatullah compared this to his experience with another staff member who had reacted differently to his repeated late arrivals to class.

> Rahmatullah: the worst is like when you’ve had a horrible commute and you get to like, your session, and [staff are] just not understanding at all. Like last year we were told (…) if you’re two minutes late the doors close. If the doors close, that means you don’t walk into session... because that was just my tutor’s sort of policy. (…) Some of the problems with the commute last year, so there was like often where the 9am sessions I may have come late sometimes, and she was like ’okay, it’s fine’. Sometimes it was probably my fault, but there was a time that it wasn’t my fault. So-, and I said to my tutor ’I’m sat at the bus stop, literally waiting for the bus to come and take me but it hasn’t come’ and then she goes ’okay that’s fine, but in future you have to sort of plan advance, like if you know that it’s going to be late, or if you know that, it’s likely that it’s going to be late, then make sure you take-, plan one journey ahead?’ (…) So I did that, and then two weeks later, I did that and like something, something similar happened today, where I’ve planned two journeys in advance and it’s still not [worked]... and I turned up and my tutor was like ’But that’s just not acceptable’ and I was like, ’there’s pretty much nothing I could do’. (…) I said, I’m not going to get out my house two hours early just to get into uni when I know that I can get there-, it shouldn’t take that long.
> Emma: No. What was the outcome on that?
> Rahmatullah: Um... so that day I got logged down as absent. But it didn’t sort of affect me too much in that sense, but I did get logged down as absent for that day.
> *(Rahmatullah, Institution B)*

There are two areas of interest here regarding Rahmatullah’s experience. Firstly, that this particular academic staff member is arguably conflating Rahmatullah’s late or intermittent attendance with his general attitude towards his studies (Thomas, 2019). Secondly that a disparity between the two staff member responses to Rahmatullah’s late attendance following his

commute could impact how his academic attendance was recorded and thus whether he was considered as ‘being there’ by the class register and by extension the institution. In the case noted in the vignette above, Rahmatullah’s late arrival to class had meant he had been marked as absent on the class register which, if this was to happen more regularly as denoted by university policy, he would be subject to an academic sanction.

I do not suggest here that there is a right or wrong approach in how these staff members treated Rahmatullah’s attendance in class, but simply consider this a useful way to highlight how an institutional academic policy could be sufficiently permissive to accommodate these divergent approaches from academic staff in enacting the policy. Regardless of outcome this experience had minimal disruption to Rahmatullah’s doing of his degree. Similar to the noted childcare issues prohibiting commuter students attending class, Rahmatullah was able to continue on his course irrespective of this marked absence for this particular class.

6.2. Using lecture capture

As previously established in Section 6.1, the academic timetable dictates the times and days in which the commuter student should be in attendance in a particular class. One of the types of classes a student is likely to be enrolled into is the ‘lecture’. A lecture is comprised of a network of non-human and human actors that mean the delivery of a lecture can occur. A projector will often be used to beam a digital PowerPoint presentation onto a whiteboard, the former of which has been created in advance by an academic staff member. The projection requires a computer, the access of which is predicated on the input of a university computer account and password. The deliverer of the lecture, perhaps the module convenor or a guest speaker, may read off the slides, have a script they read out which has been prepared in advance or speak freely. They may stand at a lectern with a microphone in which to project to the back of an airy lecture theatre, or move around a small classroom as they speak. Tracing lecture practice in this way

demonstrates the interconnectedness of non-human and human actors that enable the delivery of the lecture to occur (Tummons, 2023).

The 'lecture' is simultaneously located as an actor within a larger array of networks in which the commuter student is also situated. Like the academic timetable the lecture is part of the wider assemblage of actors that can form a university, a university itself the product of interactions from being made up of a network of things with all manner of messy connections that link in a multiplicitous number of ways [see Chapter Three]. Particular effects are produced from its presence in the network, for example knowledge being imparted on a particular subject in a particular format. However the lecture as an actor is also part of a much larger suite of classes (seminars, individual tutorials, laboratory sessions) that students may undertake as part of a degree course; the doing of a degree being an effect from enrolment into the actor-network of the university.

Table 8 provides an overview of the broader online provision relating to academic studies used across the institutions in the study as documented by participants.

Institution	Online provision
Institution A	• No use of lecture capture • Video conferencing software used for tutorials only • Online learning platform for resources
Institution B	• Lecture capture employed across institution • Video conferencing software used for some meetings • Online learning platform for resources and lecture recordings
Institution C	• Lecture capture employed across institution • Video conferencing software used for some seminars and tutorials • Online learning platform for resources and lecture recordings

Table 8 – Institutional academic online provision

Lecture capture was a facility in operation at both Institution B and C. At Institution B and C when a lecture is delivered by a particular staff member, the computer system located in the room automatically records the audio during the session and uploads this file to the university learning platform.

The network of the lecture exists irrespective of a students' attendance as they are able to access the recording at a later date. This temporally and spatially extends the lecture in such a way that allows students to access the lecture delivery at a different time and location to the one in which it was delivered 'live'; students can access a lecture without being there.

In Section 6.1 commuters' physical (non)attendance in class was highlighted as a possible network effect that could occur from the configuration of the 'academic timetable' within academic practices. Tracing the network demonstrates how (non)attendance in class was also an effect produced from the existence of lecture capture within the network of the university.

> Emma: How was your lecture? (…)
> Maddie: It was all right... I still question whether I'll be turning up to in person lectures though... I don't know if I get much from it, like when we were talking before. The way I'm kind of looking at it, probably about 50 minutes each of a lecture, I can literally get like three lectures watched at home in the time-, by the time I travel in, wait, do one lecture, travel back, so I'm kind of weighing up whether...
> Emma: Cuz yeah, because that-, that will be recorded and sent/put online won't it?
> Maddie: Mmhmm...and like you say I mean-, six and two threes whether... if it's like-, if you just listen it's the same. It's not sort of interactive like a seminar where you do just get a little more from then, depending on who's in the group and stuff like that... so... and I'm quite open and honest where I would say that-, like it's not always worth me coming through for an hour when I get-, that's how I look at it time wise.
> Emma: Timewise, like what can you do in the time that you are spending commuting?
> Maddie: I guess like I say, for the one lecture I've just listened to, been in, I can get three done online.
> *(Maddie, Institution C)*

Maddie here is weighing up the benefits she perceives from attending class against factors like timetable gaps and the time spent travelling that her commute required (Chappell et al., 2020; Hill et al., 2024; Kenyon, 2024; Southall et al., 2016; Thomas, 2020). However, Maddie's physical (non)attendance in class rests also on the availability of lecture capture. Having automatic access to voice recordings of her lectures, along with lecture attendance not being compulsory are other factors that Maddie references in addition to those above as influencing her decision three weeks later to stop attending lectures in-person. Consequently it was a complexity of factors (timetable gaps, the availability of lecture capture, the length of her commute) noted here that resulted in this particular network effect of non-attendance in class to occur.

In contrast Oliver, also at Institution C and therefore with the same access to lecture capture as Maddie, only accessed lecture capture as a way of attending his lectures when experiencing difficulties in obtaining childcare or due to his own illness; lecture capture was used as a temporary substitution when attending in-person was not possible. Violet shared similar sentiments to Oliver about using lecture capture available at Institution B in lieu of in-person attendance.

> Violet: So again, like I'm gonna have to haul myself-... so I'm gonna have to come from home to uni on a Wednesday for 5pm. So I've got drive through rush hour traffic and then finish at six, so it's one hour, and drive back through rush hour traffic. What a pain! and that to me-
> Rita: -you'd have to use lecture capture-
> Violet: -And then on the-, well on the Thursday it's then 10 to 12 we've got the workshop for the [Department], this should have been the Monday and then the Friday I've got a seminar. So I've got to come in Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday [that week].
> *(Violet and Rita, Institution B)*

As Violet was highlighting her travel logistic difficulties, Rita reminded her that these could be resolved through using lecture capture; Violet could listen to the recording of her lecture online and therefore not attend in-person. Nevertheless, Violet did not consider this as a valid way of attending class, considering in-person attendance at the lecture essential to her learning. Whilst both Violet and Oliver had used lecture capture in lieu of physically attending in-person, this was only ever as a temporary substitute due to specific situational constraints.

The experiences highlighted above thus present a more complex notion of what 'being there' means in regards to commuter students' attendance in lectures and use of lecture capture. The lack of lecture capture at Institution A meant that students could only 'be there' in their academic studies through lectures from attending in-person. In contrast, the existence of lecture capture in Institutions B and C gave students the option to forego attending lectures in-person whilst still having access to the learning material and accompanying audio online yet the extent to which this was utilised by participants, and also for what purpose, differed amongst participants. Maddie (Institution C) regularly used lecture capture as the sole way in which

to access her lectures due to not valuing physically ‘being there’ in-person for this particular type of class. Nevertheless, whilst Maddie’s approach echoes staff fears regarding the negative effect the implementation lecture capture can have on student attendance (Dommett et al., 2020), other commuter students like Violet and Oliver demonstrate this is not always so; they preferred to be in-person at their lectures. Consequently, this further cements the heterogeneity of commuter students’ experiences in relation to their academic practices and specifically the ways in which the existence of lecture capture could influence different commuter students to attend or not attend class.

6.3. Disruptions to the academic timetable

Tracing the network of doing a degree through the documented form of the academic timetable, I am able to observe disruptions that take place also within the academic practices of commuter students given that any given network is in a constant process of (re)ordering in which disruptions are common and have potential to generate temporary network effects. This is not to argue that the disruptions noted in this section regarding university staff strike action are more significant than other disruptions previously explored in Chapter Five, such as from inclement weather or train staff strike action [Section 5.3.1]. Rather, it is simply to acknowledge that these exist in commuter students’ academic experiences and mediate their ‘being there’ in this setting in specific ways which will be further outlined below.

6.3.1. University staff strike action

> Hai Emma, (…) Because of the strike there won’t be any lectures tomorrow. I just got the update from [university learning platform] now.
> *(Lucy, Institution C, WhatsApp message[3])*

> Emma: so when the strikes were on, I’m presuming you weren’t coming in?
> Sam: No... there was-, they completely cancelled everything.
> *(Sam, Institution B)*

[3] WhatsApp message’ refers to where the participant sent a message to myself regarding their commute using WhatsApp [see Chapter Four for a detailed section on the data collection methods used within the research].

> "I came last week-, they were on strike last week so I only came in on the Monday."
> *(Carmen, Institution A, Interview)*

Industrial strike action was taking place by both academic and professional services staff at all three of the institutions in the study at the time of data collection, consequently featuring heavily in students' academic experiences during this time. Like with Violet's room accessibility issue [see Section 6.1], staff strike action threatened to break down the network of academic practice. Specifically if a large proportion of academic staff in an institution participated in strike action, a significant number of classes would have been cancelled and marking incomplete, risking final year students as unable to graduate. However, students in this study reported only temporary changes to their academic timetable during strike periods; classes were only temporarily cancelled and resumed when the strike period had ceased. Lack of marking was also not raised a concern by students, although this could be partly given that the fieldwork finished before the summer term when courses are largely assessed. Consequently, the network of doing a degree remained durable enough for the commuter students in the study to withstand such temporary effects in place.

Cancelled classes due to strike action had a specific effect on commuter students, often reducing the days required for them to travel to campus. Niamh and Zoe (Institution C) stated they were supportive of strike action for this influence on their commute.

> Niamh: I hope that they do [strike] (…) I wouldn't have to drive to [Institution C city]. I could just chill. I could go swimming! (…) I could just have a day off.
> Emma: So that would be like quite a positive outcome for you?
> Niamh: Yeah course. I don't really understand the point of lectures, so yeah, they can go on strike all I want as far as I'm concerned.
> *(Niamh, Institution C)*

> Emma: So for the [university staff] strikes are you not having to come in?
> Zoe: Yeah, it's great [laughs] (…) I support [the people striking]. I'm not gonna-, I fully support them, and it's also great for me because I save a lot of money from this cause I can like do my work at home without having to come in... and it's a great excuse as well to like... do nothing all day apart from like sitting in my room. I enjoy it... I enjoy it. It's good for me to do like work.
> *(Zoe, Institution C)*

For Zoe strikes saved her money by not having to commute into campus as often and gave her more time at home, her preferred place to complete

university work. Similarly not needing to attend her lecture re-emphasised Niamh's general perspective that attendance was neither necessary nor useful for her academic studies. For both students, strike action not only reduced their time travelling but legitimised their physical absence from campus, not requiring them to 'be' on campus and in class. Consequently, strike action reducing their requirement to be on campus was considered a positive outcome for both students.

Other commuter students were more conflicted in their views of strike action. Like Zoe and Niamh, Lyla (Institution A) acknowledged that strike action had reduced the number of days she was on campus which resulted in her buying fewer costly train tickets and spending more time at home. Whilst she spoke of these effects positively, Lyla simultaneously spoke of the way in which strike action was causing her to miss out on the academic teaching that she had 'paid for' through her tuition fees. Furthermore, Lyla shared her concern that strike action meant she was missing academic content that would have been useful to receive in order to complete her upcoming academic assignments.

Whilst strike action had legitimised the reduction of time Lyla was spending on campus for her academic studies like Zoe and Niamh, she still connected being physically present on campus with having a positive impact on her academic studies and therefore was concerned that strike action would negatively impact her assignment performance. Whilst it is interesting to consider Lyla's outlook on her studies, Lyla's concerns around missing academic content because of academic strike action shared above is arguably an opinion not specific to being a commuter; wanting to save money and complete academic assignments well is likely be true of many university students irrespective of their accommodation status.

Violet and Rita (Institution B) were two other commuters who placed high value in being physically present on campus for their academic studies. This was particularly notable during university staff strike action where they collectively organised an in-person study group session at the university to

encourage their peers to maintain their commuting routine and work on their assignments together. I planned to join their study group on the next strike day, however the night before I received a WhatsApp message from Violet saying that it would now only be her on campus. Violet and Rita's study group comprised mostly of commuter students and ultimately not needing to be physically present on campus, along with the voluntary nature of the study group, had resulted in all but Violet deciding to remain at home.

The heterogenous nature of commuters' academic experiences is notable here in their attitudes to strike action and by extension how as commuters they viewed 'being there' on campus. Violet valued being on campus for academic purposes and the benefits she considered this provided; access to the library, peer discussions and upkeeping the routine of commuting. Whilst Rita and the rest of the group may also place value in this, in this instance this was outweighed against the travel to campus echoing Violet's claim that commuters often consider coming onto campus of low importance. In this instance, this was also mirrored in her own experiences on this occasion, choosing to stay at home rather than commuting to campus on strike days.

6.4. Spending time on campus

The academic timetable, along with the days and times commuter students are expected at university, specifies the location of a students' academic classes on campus. It does not, however, dictate where students should occupy themselves on campus outside of these times. Chapter Five discussed commuter students' journeys *to* campus, whereas in this section I am interested in their journeys *on and around* campus. Specifically where students spend time before or in-between classes, and the reasons for occupying these spaces; what 'being' at university for the commuter student is like outside of their academic classes. In this section this will be explored in relation to university spaces, such as the library, common room spaces and university cafes, but also in spaces that lie outside the institution.

6.4.1. The library

> I am due to meet Zayn at 12pm after his one hour tutorial, but this is cancelled so he sends me a WhatsApp message to request we meet earlier. Zayn's next class is at 2pm, and therefore during this time in-between classes he plans to work on his assignments due the following term. I ask where is best to meet him, and it transpires we are both currently in the same library on campus. We agree to meet in the foyer, sitting down on a small sofa situated towards the back of the foyer area near a printing station for a short conversation about his plans for his day at university before he leaves to find a study space in which to complete his work.
> *(Zayn, Institution B, Fieldnote)*

A library is a facility common within a university space, housing the physical academic texts that are required for the courses studied across the institution. It is also a building designed for independent academic study; a space which students can use either individually or in groups to complete their academic work.

Physically visiting the university library is not a requirement for a degree, and some students will use it yet others will not. This is also true of the commuter students in this study, with heterogeneric library usage of participants noted across the three institutions. In Institution A all three participants regularly visited the university library before, after or in-between their academic classes. Ethan often worked on the silent study floor for independent study as he found this aided his concentration, whilst also using the communal space on the ground floor to wait before his class in the same building. Ethan's choice of study space however directly contrasted with Lyla who found the same space 'too quiet' for independent study, preferring the communal spaces on the ground floor. Carmen again used the library facilities for different means; using the computer facilities and the flexible spaces in which to study with friends or work on her own between or after class.

The experiences of students at Institution A in respect to their library usage highlights commuter students repurposing their timetable gaps for study (Smith, 2018; Stalmirska & Mellon, 2022; Thomas, 2019). However this was not the only reason for why students could choose to occupy space within the library; commuter students in Institution A also used the space as a place to wait before class or socialise with peers. These uses outside of studying

begin to highlight how use of the library was therefore more complex than their ‘being’ or not being in the space, but rather their utilisation of the space dependent on their personal preferences.

Whilst Institution A had one university library, Institution B had five spread across campus that students could choose between. A library’s proximity to their classes on campus was one deciding factor for commuter students’ library choice at this institution. Rahmatullah (Institution B) for instance only spoke of using the faculty library located in the building where all of his classes were located. Zayn (Institution B) also directly linked his choice of library to its proximity to classes.

> Emma: So, which is your library of choice, obviously, at [Institution B], there’s quite a few.
> Zayn: Most of the time I go to the [Donald] library. It’s like... the closest I guess, to everywhere I go (,..) it was like the first library that I went to when I started so I’ve just always used it...
> *(Zayn, Institution B)*

The ‘Donald’ Library was the first library that Zayn had visited on enrolling at university. Whilst its close proximity to his classes along with the bicycle rack where he parked his bike on campus was influential in his library usage, it was also his familiarity with the space that resulted in this being his chosen place to work on campus.

What can be gleaned from reasoning provided above by students in respect to their ‘being there’ in the university library is arguably unspecific to their commuting status. For example, residential students may also prefer to work in the quiet area of a library, or to pick a library that is close to their other classes. These are instead individualised self-study preferences that signify more generally the heterogeneity and flexibility of student life that lies outside of timetabled academic classes. However, all commuter students discussed so far had used the library before, in-between or after a timetabled class; their library usage predicated on when they were already timetabled to be in class and thus on campus. Whilst the reasoning for frequenting a library space use may individually differ, a commuter students’ physical presence in the university library was underpinned by their travel to campus.

Nonetheless, this was not the case for all commuter students in the study. For one of my commutes with Penny, a third year student at Institution C, we travelled to campus during the university vacation period for Penny to work on her university assignments and dissertation in the university library.

> Penny is commuting to university today specifically to use the university library facilities rather than to attend academic classes as we are currently in the university vacation period. This type of journey is fairly common for Penny, who says she often comes into the city to use the library facilities outside of term-time. On this particular commute, Penny's journey took 35 minutes, around 20 minutes less than the time our first commute had taken to campus during rush-hour and in term-time.
>
> At Institution C there is one main university library with a couple of smaller, specialised university libraries in addition to college and departmental study spaces dotted around the city centre campus. Entry to this library requires the scanning of a university campus card in order to proceed through the barriers into the main building. Directly opposite the barriers is a computer screen which informs library visitors how many study spaces are currently available for users across the four floors of the building. At the time of our visit, the screens state there are 1637 seats available which Penny says is automatically calculated by the number of users that have entered and exited the barriers we have just passed through.
>
> We bear left on this floor into the library café where I buy us both a coffee. The café is quieter than usual given that it is during the university vacation period, with a couple of students sat individually or in small groups at long benches working. Library signs state that during busy periods students are not allowed to work in these areas to ensure café users can find a seat to eat and drink their purchased products. We return to the foyer prior to parting ways. Penny says she plans to sit at a desk on the ground floor to work on her university dissertation. Penny has previously told me this is her preferred floor to work on in the library because she can chat to her friend on this floor whilst they are both working. Penny plans to continue visiting the library during the vacation period as she finds the environment conducive to work compared to when working at home.
> *(Penny, Institution C, Vignette)*

Unlike the other commuters previously highlighted, Penny was not commuting to university on this day in order to follow her prescribed academic timetable. Penny valued her visits to the library for the study space and conducive work environment and was happy to commute into campus specifically to use these facilities. This was further complimented by the fact that she could travel in at a time of her choice during the university vacation period, therefore able to travel in after rush hour and thus reduce her commute time to campus. Consequently, Penny's use of the library highlights how 'being there' at university for the commuter student in terms of their academic studies was not always inextricably linked to their academic timetable. Instead, their presence on campus could involve a more complex

set of factors including their home set-up for independent study and the length of their commute to campus that, when combined, influence a commuter students' library usage on campus.

Other participants in the study were notably absent in this particular space; university libraries were not places certain commuter students frequented whilst on campus. Four students in the study across Institution B and C explicitly stated they did not use their university's library facilities. In some instances the reasons provided for their non-use were directly opposing the reasons noted above for library usage, such as the library's (lack of) geographical proximity to their academic classes.

> Lucy: so [main university library], I wish I'd go there but I don't. It's a long walk up, and I don't think I'd get any work done there. There's too many people.
> Emma: So do you work at-
> Lucy: -[inaudible] I'd probably will use it once I move to [Institution C city].
> Emma: Yeah. Do you work in the [study space in departmental building] at all or just nowhere?
> Lucy: Nowhere. I think I've only visited [the university library] once or twice.
> *(Lucy, Institution C)*

> I don't like going to the library anyway to be honest, like it's a little bit out the way, but I don't really feel like that comfortable there like... [pause].
> *(Maddie, Institution C, Interview)*

Whilst geographical proximity was a contributing factor, for Maddie and Lucy there was an additional theme of feeling uncomfortable as to why they did not frequent the space. For Lucy 'being there' in respect to the university library was uncomfortable because of the library's popularity, finding the busyness too distracting for using the space to complete her academic work. However, for Maddie her feelings of 'uncomfortableness' in this space she directly linked to being a mature student. Maddie felt that as she was visibly older than her peers, this made her stand out in spaces predominantly occupied by students and therefore was a reason why she avoided frequenting spaces like the university library.

Chapter One highlighted the relationship between being mature and commuting to university and the interconnectedness of demographic characteristics in commuter's experiences of the wider university. Here I do not argue that being a mature student held more or less importance as to

why Maddie did or did not use the library space. Rather, I acknowledge that for a commuter student like Maddie her 'being' in the university space was a result of a complexity of factors, here noted to include spaces' geographical proximity to her classes and the demographic characteristics of her university peers.

6.4.2. Common rooms, cafes and commuter-specific facilities

Institution A offered commuter student accommodation, a facility which allowed commuter students to stay overnight in university-maintained student accommodation for up to three nights a week for a reduced fee. Of the three participants, only Lyla showed an awareness of the existence of this facility:

> Lyla: if you have to stay overnight and you don't have any place to stay over with, you can stay over at the uni, but you pay £20 a night so... that's [inaudible].
> Emma: Would you ever use that? It doesn't sound like you've used it [Lyla shakes her head] is that because you've got friends [to stay over at]? Is there any other reason?
> Lyla: Yes, it's because I've got friends like, so most of the time I stay over with them.
> Emma: for free I'm presuming?
> Lyla: For free! [laughs] but also, like... I only really would stay over if I needed to. It's not something that I'd do (…) because I find more comfort being at home.
> *(Lyla, Institution A)*

Whilst aware of the accommodation, Lyla had not used this nor did she plan to. Lyla did not see the value of 'being' in the university accommodation temporarily as she preferred to be in her home surroundings, but also saw the cost of £20 per night to be too expensive.

Chapter Five problematised the common conception of travel as 'expensive' for the commuter student, and this can be further extended in relation to facility usage and the commuter student. Lyla saw the accommodation offering as expensive in relation to the alternate accommodation offering she had available to her; Lyla was able to stay for free with friends from home that were also studying at the university and living in student accommodation. This is not to suggest that other commuter students would also view this as expensive, but rather acknowledges that given Lyla's particular network of people available to her this was expensive because she had a cheaper alternative she could use.

At Institution B, a commuter students' lounge had been established by Yasmin, a previous commuter student at the institution and now staff member. As a student, Yasmin had applied to a university-wide funding scheme that was designed for students to bid for money in order to enact an idea on campus. The facility was still fairly new at the time of the research having opened early 2021, and was to be piloted as a campus facility for two years. At the time of writing it is still advertised on the student union website as a facility available to students (Institution B Student Union, 2024).

Figure 3 – Researcher picture of commuters' lounge kitchenette at Institution B

Figure 4 – Researcher picture of commuters' lounge at Institution B

Figure 5 – Researcher picture of commuters' lounge lockers at Institution B

The commuter's lounge is located in the Theo building around three quarters down an extremely long corridor, the longest corridor in Europe so I am told by a staff member. To enter the room there is a button labelled 'Reception' which it appears you must press in order to gain access, yet on both occasions I visit the room the door is unlocked, with no need to press this button in order to gain access. There is a short 'L' shaped corridor with three rooms leading off. The first room on the left is a room of lockers which commuter students are able to use to store their belongings. The second straight ahead is a small kitchenette with a few chairs, as well as a sink and microwave. The room at the end of the 'L' is the main lounge, comprising of circular tables with three to four chairs around each, as well as tables along the edge of the room fitted with plug sockets for independent study. On the left of the entrance to the lounge there is also a whiteboard which on my first visit has a tally chart for visitors to the lounge to mark against the area they are commuting from, along with asking students to contribute about what they do or do not like about commuting. On my second visit two months later this has changed to a more general advertisement of the commuter student society, the upcoming events and its social media handles. On neither occasion during my visits did I encounter anyone else using the space, although the first time I visited was during a university vacation period.
(Fieldnote, Institution B)

Previous research has recommended free common room spaces to be available for commuter students to provide a social space which students can use without the expectation for students to purchase food and drink in order to use (Finn & Holton, 2019). The dedicated lounge for commuter students at Institution B meets this recommendation, yet its use by commuter students within the study differed.

Emma: Would you stay in the library to eat your lunch, is there like a space to eat lunch?
Zayn: I go to-, in the commuters lounge?
Emma: Oh, yeah. Great (…) do you use it often or-
Zayn: I do, yeah.
(Zayn, Institution B)

Sam is aware of the commuter student lounge but does not use it due to its location on campus. Furthermore, due to university strikes the building in which it is situated has been closed which has made the lounge inaccessible for students. Sam feels there are other places in which he can visit when on campus which are more appropriate for his needs.
(Sam, Institution B, Fieldnote)

Emma: Have you ever been to the [commuters lounge]? Have you ever been to the lounge?
Violet: Yeah! I actually went yesterday! (…) Only to get some water. [inaudible] I don't really have a need for though. I thought it was a really good idea, but it's-, because [Theo building]'s where it is, it doesn't really serve my needs.
(Violet, Institution B)

Like the university libraries, the lounge could be used or not used by commuter students for any number of reasons. Zayn often used the space to meet with friends during lunch whereas Sam and Violet whilst aware of the

facility they rarely used the space. Both students attributed their non-use of the space primarily to its geographical location on campus and distance from their academic classes.

Just as the library at Institution C was considered by Lyla and Maddie as in an inconvenient location, so too was the commuter lounge for Sam and Violet. Also similar to Lyla and Maddie, Sam and Violet's non-use of this space was part of a much more complex set of factors that influenced where they spent time on campus. Both Sam and Violet felt that the facilities the lounge provided, such as a quiet space with seating and kitchenette, they could access elsewhere in a more convenient location. For Sam, this was his departmental common room space and for Violet a mature student common room. The non-use of the commuter lounge was therefore in part a reflection of the wider facilities available to students at Institution B. For instance, both common rooms that Sam and Violet used also fit the common room recommendations previously highlighted by Finn and Holton (2019); spaces without expectation to purchase food and drink nor designed exclusively for academic study. Arguably therefore the commuter students were making use of the choice of spaces available to them when on campus. For students like Zayn, this led them to the use the commuter student common room space yet for others, it did not; a space designated as 'commuter student specific' did not necessarily factor in where students chose to be on campus.

Cafes were another popular space amongst commuter students, particularly with those at Institution B. On each occasion with Violet and Rita (Institution B) we visited at least one café on campus, frequenting four different campus cafes on multiple occasions during our time together. These were frequented independently, in pairs and with friends during their breaks between classes as well as the time before their classes after their arrival on campus. Similarly Sam (Institution B), in ensuring that he left plenty of time for his commute to campus to accommodate any travel delays, often visited a chain café located on the university campus to buy a coffee in the time between his arrival on to campus and his scheduled class. I accompanied him on one such visit after a mid-morning commute to campus together.

> On getting our coffee, we look round the café but it is lunchtime and extremely busy, with no visible empty seats. When I ask what Sam does in this situation, he replies 'I normally sit outside to be honest'. Today it is raining, not heavily but enough to require a coat hood or umbrella. When I ask if he would sit outside with his coffee even in weather such as this, he replies 'yeah usually'. We move out of the café and take a short walk across the foyer before stopping just outside the main entrance of the building. On our way we pass an empty table and chairs, but Sam continues to walk past this before we stand outside chatting for the 35 minutes before his class. *(Sam, Institution B, Vignette)*

Whilst Sam would often purchase a coffee from a university café, he would usually take his coffee elsewhere rather than residing in the coffee shop seating areas. Before and after our café visit Sam had described the campus as 'isolating' which he partly attributed to being twenty years older than the majority of his peers and commuting in from the local area. Arguably then it was this intersectionality between his commuting status and his being a mature student that was influencing Sam's experiences on campus, here in relation to where he chose to occupy space.

The heterogeneity of café use illuminates the diverse ways in which participants used a single space. Whilst Violet and Rita regularly used university cafes as a space to socialise with peers, for Sam it was used for a purely functional purpose of buying coffee and filling time before class. Therefore whilst all three students frequented the space, the ways in which this was frequented was underpinned with far more nuance than evident in their (non)use of a facility.

Chapter Four outlined this thesis' approach in that combining ANT and multi-sited ethnography would enable an exploration of phenomena and the complexities underpinning these, rather than providing an account of commuter students' experiences reduced to a series of causal relationships. This is particularly evident in relation to commuter students' café use as any attempt to explain the reasons why students used these particular spaces arguably ignores a wealth of complexity in commuter student experiences. For example, Sam's navigation of campus spaces like Maddie's could be linked to his being a mature student; being visibly older than other café users thus made him less likely to use this space. Yet Violet and Rita are also

‘visibly’ mature; being a mature commuter did not necessarily mean automatic discomfort when frequenting university spaces. Furthermore, it is likely that other non-commuters could feel the same way about social spaces on campus, mature or otherwise. By exploring commuter student experiences using this theoretical and methodological approach, this has thus enabled the exploration of commuter students’ café use, and subsequently the different ways in which these cafes spaces were enrolled into the network of doing a degree for the commuter student.

6.4.3. In and around the institution

University campuses, particularly those like Institution A and B which are largely on one campus, also comprise outside areas connecting university building and facilities together: green spaces, statues, campus maps, pedestrianised walkways, benches and so on. On commutes with participants I travelled through these spaces, on arrival or departure of campus and in-between classes, often without comment; being in these spaces were routinised within students’ travel to, from and across campus. Whilst I acknowledge these spaces are likely also to feature in non-commuter students’ time spent on campus in travelling in and around campus from their student accommodation, I was interested to understand how these featured specifically in commuter students’ experiences. For instance Sam (Institution B), highlighted in the previous section, used the space outside of the café as a place to wait before his class. A small pavemented area with park benches next to the main road and located on the edge of campus, this outside area was therefore another space enrolled into the network of Sam’s commuting practice.

For certain commuter students it was common for them to frequent spaces before, between or after class which were independent to their HEI; spaces that exist off-campus.

On our walk between the train station and Institution A campus, Lyla points out a couple of cafes that she frequents in-between her classes. A mixture of independent and chain cafes and restaurants, Lyla would use these to sample their food, sometimes meeting a friend or do independent work. Lyla likes to try different food cuisines, and therefore uses the gaps in-between her scheduled classes to try the variety of food on offer in the city.
(Lyla, Institution A, Fieldnote)

"I love shopping in [Institution A city]! (…) it's nice sometimes on a Thursday, because I've got a big four hour gap between lecture and practical I just sort of wander into town and go for a bite for lunch. (…) absorb some of the scenery. It's much different to back home, so yes, it's nice having a change, and somewhere different to eat... some different things to see. I remember the first time I walked up and [Institution A city cathedral] and everything, it was like so much to look at!"
(Ethan, Institution A, Interview)

Emma: Do you have times when you've got like an hour between classes or a few hours between classes?
Lucy: Yeah on Thursdays. Thursday's a long day, so 9 to 11, then it's 2 to 4[pm]. So I got 3 hours-
Emma: -three hours. So what do you do in those-
Lucy: Waterstones!
Emma: Oh, you go to Waterstones. Do you like browse and-
Lucy: -well yeah! (…)
Emma: So do you spend like three hours in Waterstones? or-, do you? [Lucy nods] That is impressive.
(Lucy, Institution C)

The three students highlighted above used gaps between their scheduled classes to explore the city in which their respective institutions were located. For Ethan and Lyla, this enabled them to try new foods and cuisines they did not have the opportunity in trying in their hometowns and was therefore considered by them a positive consequence of the particular arrangement of their academic timetable. Heterogeneity of space use which has so far been highlighted in relation to institutional café use amongst commuters was further evident in individual commuter experiences of spaces outside the institution. Lyla, for example visited different cafes across the city for different purposes, choosing certain cafes to do academic work and others for socialisation purposes based on the general café atmosphere. Consequently for commuter students like Lyla and Ethan, 'being there' for their academic studies as afforded by their academic timetable also enabled them to experience the wider city.

For other commuters like Maddie however, spending time outside of the institution was a choice directly born out of feeling uncomfortable in university spaces. In Section 6.4.1 it was highlighted how Maddie (Institution

C) felt uncomfortable in the university library. This contributed to her reasoning for why she exclusively frequented city cafes during any gaps between her scheduled classes.

> Emma: It is nice! So why have you changed? Like what made you change [coffee shops]?
> Maddie: I think it's just cause I've been going [to the chain coffee shop] all the time and it's quite busy (…) but [other coffee shop] is quite near where all the seminars are! And it's not very busy, so you can kind of... you're guaranteed a seat really... and I feel like the people in there are that bit more personable (…) and there's no difference in price neither.
> Emma: Had you like, been before? What made you pick that-, like was-, did you like, look on Google maps to find it? Or did you just know about it? Or...
> Maddie: I met [name of lecturer], one of the lecturers in there.
> Emma: And then you went after that?
> Maddie: Yeah. (…) when [lecturer] said 'Oh, do you want to go for coffee there?' I'd never-, I was like 'ooh!' and I thought 'oh that's really handy!' Because by the time (…) well one, I don't want to walk up to the library. (…) Two, I mean I don't really feel comfortable in the library. So that's the kind of place where I thought well, I can go if I had like a gap but them gaps are still hard to fill like really, like a two hour gap between [seminars].
> *(Maddie, Institution C)*

Maddie's reasoning is partly underpinned by themes that have already been discussed in relation to where students choose to spend time on campus, such as the proximity to their academic classes and busyness of space. Interestingly, Maddie does not reference any other spaces in the institution that she could reside in such as college libraries, student union, cafes located on the university campus, department common rooms. Instead, Maddie considers her choice of where to be during times in which she is not scheduled in class to constitute solely of the library or cafes in the city. As she does not feel comfortable in the former, she therefore frequents the latter only during these times.

6.5. ANTish perspectives on academic experiences

This chapter began by exploring commuter students' academic experiences through the navigation of their academic timetable. The academic timetable was identified as part of a wider complex web of non-human and human actants that existed together in a way that certain effects could occur. For example, attendance at academic classes for students like Oliver (Institution C) and Ethan (Institution A) was subject to the geographical, spatial and

temporal assemblage of actors present in the network of doing a degree to which they were enrolled.

The constant ordering and re-ordering of actors in a given network could also contribute to why different effects occurred within commuter students' academic experiences. Niamh (Institution C) for example spoke of waiting for her class due to it being the final one in a module when in previous weeks she had not [Section 6.1]; the temporal extension of the network contributed to Niamh's presence in class. Similarly Rahmatullah's (Institution B) 'being there' in his academic studies rested on a complexity of factors: physical attendance in a particular space for a specific duration of time as mediated by the academic timetable, reaffirmed by the documented form of the institutional academic attendance policy and mediated by an individual staff member. When a process of reordering occurred, such as Rahmatullah being taught by a different staff member for a particular module [Section 6.1], this could contribute to a different network effect taking place; Rahmatullah being marked as absent in class. Whilst the institutional policy was an actor present on both occasions, in the former it was capable of being ignored which resulted in the occurrence of this counter-network effect.

In section 6.2 the assemblage of actors that constitute 'lecture capture' (projector, PowerPoint, computer, whiteboard, lecturer, university learning platform) demonstrated how a lecture can be stretched and continue irrespective of geographical boundaries. A student enrolled at a university where lecture capture is employed does not need to be physically present in the room at the time an academic lecture is taking place in order to 'be there' in relation to accessing this academic content. This does not however mean that lecture capture was utilised by all commuter students. The differing uses of lecture capture amongst commuter students in this study [see Section 6.2] demonstrated how the effect of attendance was subject to more complex reasoning than simply the presence or absence of lecture capture within the network of doing a degree to which students were enrolled. Time spent commuting, personal preference of course delivery and childcare availability were all contributing factors to commuter students' use of this facility, linking

once more to a complex web of actors that influence and mediate commuter students' academic experiences.

The assemblages present in which individual commuter students are enrolled into where the effects of doing a degree may occur have been outlined throughout this chapter as heterogenous and complex. This was further noted in commuters' use of space on their institutional campuses. A single space, such as the commuter student common room at Institution B, was enrolled into the network of doing a degree for some commuter students yet not others. Importantly, the commuter's lounge did not stop existing simply because certain students like Sam and Violet did not frequent the facility [Section 6.4.2]; the network continued to operate with other commuters like Zayn using the facilities. Similarly, Violet had previously frequented the facility and stated that she may use it at a later date, if for example her other classes were located closer to the lounge. The network is thus full of possibilities in which connections could be rekindled and maintained to later enrol within the wider academic practices of the commuter student.

I do not aim to provide an exhaustive articulation of the actors involved in these networks, the effects that occur following these connections nor the other networks that mediate the actor-network of doing a degree as these are multiple and complex. Rather through tracing the networks in this study highlight some of the actors and effects that exist in commuter students' academic practices which further demonstrate the complexity, multiplicity and materiality of their experiences.

6.6. Conclusion

This chapter has explored the academic experiences of commuter students and consequently what it means to 'be there' within this context. The academic timetable underpins the academic experience of commuters in that it suggests where students should be on campus at a given date and time,

which in some instances resulted in commuter students attending their academic classes. However for other commuter students their (non)attendance in class was influenced by a much wider web of human and non-human actors such as the class register, staff, childcare providers. Similarly temporal and geographical extensions of particular academic practices, such as time of academic year and the availability of lecture capture, could influence whether or not a student could attend class.

Disruptions to commuter students' academic practices in the form of university strike action had limited impact on commuter students' academic experiences as for the most part the network was durable enough that academic practices could continue; commuter students continued on their degree course irrespective of the disruptions faced. This was made possible in part through the enrolment of other actors into the network, such as online conferencing software, that enabled a spatial and geographical extension of the network for students to continue their studies outside of campus. In a few instances the disruptions were considered by commuter students as positively benefiting their academic experiences, such as legitimising their physical absence from campus.

Where students chose to spend time on campus rested on the spatial, temporal and geographical assemblage of actors present in the wider network of doing a degree. Where commuter students spent time on campus between class differed across and within institutions, as well as within individual experiences in a way that cannot be easily grouped. Whilst proximity to class and familiarity with the space were highlighted as space use indicators for some commuters, this was not for all. Similarly whilst the arrangement of the academic timetable continued to mediate and govern the times in which commuter students needed to be on campus for some participants this was not so; they visited campus outside the days in which they were expected for class. All this further emphasised how commuter students' academic experiences are heterogenous and complex.

Chapter Seven: Being there: the wider university experience

This chapter explores commuter students' experiences and interactions with the wider university experience. The chapter will first explore how social connections were made and maintained between the commuter student and their peers. It will then identify the ways in which commuter students did, or did not, participate in extra-curricular activities (ECA) and the heterogeneity of practice that existed within this. The chapter ends by illuminating these practices using actor-network theory (ANT). Whilst 'being there' was broadly taken in the previous chapter to refer to being physically present in respect to their academic classes, 'being there' in this chapter refers to students participating in activities that lie outside of their academic studies. As a result, this chapter is interested in the ways in which commuter students consider themselves as 'being there' within this context and thus what can be constituted as the wider university experience.

7.1. Making and maintaining friendships as commuter students

> I meet Violet at our agreed meeting point on campus at around 9.15am which is a short minute or so walk from the café where Violet has arranged to meet some friends before class. This group of students met whilst studying on their course and including Violet there are seven students meeting up this morning. All the students have class at 10am together, coming in earlier especially to talk about a group project some of the students have recently been assigned for a module. As many of the students in the group are also commuters, this spare time was also considered as useful to accommodate their commutes to ensure their prompt arrival to class.
>
> Talk in the group centres around their group work assignment, with Violet leading on the administrative tasks using her laptop to check the assignment brief and task questions on the university learning platform. After around twenty minutes, the conversation moves to more general topics of conversations, to the weather and social activities with family and friends the previous weekend. At 9.55am, the group travel to their class together which is located in a room just down the corridor from the café in which we are sat.
>
> I meet Violet and four of her friends from the morning group after their class has finished and accompany them to a café on campus for their lunch break, located around a five minute walk across campus from where we are currently. This café is different to the one frequented this morning and chosen because it is the closest café to their next class at 1pm. Conversation at lunch was exclusively non-work related, with conversations mostly about their respective partners and children, as well as sharing childhood memories.

> I meet variations of this group of students a couple of times during the fieldwork period with Violet and Rita, who is also part of this group. This is mostly during breaks over the lunch period where both students would meet with their peers during gaps in their timetable to eat lunch and socialise with each other.
> *(Violet, Institution B, Vignette)*

This research found that the majority of participants had established social connections with their university peers. For many students these social connections were formed through their degree course. Violet, noted in the vignette above, had numerous friends on her course and regularly met them for coffee, over lunch and to do group work during our time together. Other participants also spoke of the friends they had made through their academic studies:

> Emma: Do you know any people outside of your-, because you do the course rep stuff, do you know many people outside your course? Or is it mostly people that are on your course?
> Carmen: Well mostly in the course (…) we don't really see anyone out of our course.
> *(Carmen, Institution A)*

> Emma: when you're sat in lectures do you have people that you sit with? Are they like your pals? are they just people you know from the module like-
> Penny: -No they're my friends. (…) I've got [name] who's probably my closest friend at uni so like she comes round my house (…)
> Emma: (…) How did you meet her?
> Penny: Uni.
> Emma: through like the course?
> Penny: Yeah yeah! Cause-, well she's doing the BSc, I'm on the BA, but obviously we're both mature students as well.
> *(Penny, Institution C)*

The friendships that participants note above mirror previous suggestions that commuter students' friendships at university are predominantly course-based (Abrahams & Ingram, 2013; Currant, 2020; NUS, 2015; Thomas, 2012, 2019). However, tracing the network of commuting also uncovers a greater complexity in how friendships were formed by commuter students within an academic setting.

Penny attributes her friendship with a peer to their both being mature students, in addition to studying courses in the same department. Just over half of students in the study were mature, one of the underrepresented groups in HE that has been linked to also being likely to commute to university in previous research (Artess et al., 2014; Reay, 2003). Being a mature student was a characteristic which mature participants often noted in

relation to how they made friends at university. Like Penny, Violet and Rita (Institution B) had made friends on their course who were also mature students. Their degree course was situated in a wider department that had dual purpose as both an academic department and professional support service. The academic department delivered the degree course studied by Violet and Rita which both students had previously told me had been specifically designed for mature students. For example, Violet stated her academic classes did not start before 10am and finished at 3pm to enable mature students, who were more likely to be parents and caregivers, to complete school pick-ups and commute to campus for class. As a university-wide support service for mature and part-time students, the department also ran mature-specific social events including a coffee morning and a book club, as well as running a common room specifically for mature students on campus.

To describe Rita and Violet as commuter students that made friends exclusively through their course arguably ignores the wider context regarding the demographic make-up of the student body on their degree. Whilst Violet had previously noted that not all students on the course were commuters, the majority of students on her course were mature students like herself. Previous research has found mature students often befriend other mature students at university partly due to a shared commonality in age and life experiences (O'Boyle, 2014). Violet also spoke of being fortunate in having a predominantly mature class cohort; Violet considered this shared characteristic important in building social connections with her peers. Consequently, Violet’s friendships at university were made not just on the basis of a shared course but also on the similarity in age to her course peers.

The influence of being a mature student on participants’ social connections with their university peers was also referenced by other mature commuter experiences in the study. Sam (Institution B) and Maddie (Institution C) were two students who considered themselves as lacking social connections at university, both attributing this predominantly to being older than their class peers.

> Emma: so when you go into like lectures or seminars and stuff, do you sit-, like do you have people that you sit with? Or do you just kind of go in and-
> Sam: -just sit down. I'm usually the first one there because I'm here so early. I usually just first thing, sit down. A lot of the time, it's like I stink so nobody wants to sit near but... it's just because I'm the weird old guy-, the weird working-class old guy. That's the feeling. I'm not sure if that's true. I do get some people coming and having a chat in the library (…) they realise how old-, they see you're not-, you're not 18/19/20 and they're like asking you questions and stuff (…) I'm here to get a degree at the end of the day, I'm not here to-, I've got friends already.
> *(Sam, Institution B)*

> It's quite sad, really like-, it's going to sound really pathetic but I don't actually have any friends on my course at all... and it's not because-, I don't-, I know it's not me, I'm not like 'oh, it's me' because I'm quite personable, I'm happy, I'm quite confident meeting new people and I don't actually think it's a class thing the way sometimes people think it is? At first of all, I thought 'oh is it that?' but I think it's the age thing.
> *(Maddie, Institution C, Interview)*

Unlike Violet and Rita, Maddie was enrolled onto a course where she was one of a few mature students whereas Sam was the only mature student studying his course in his year. Both students consequently attributed their minority status as an older university student partly as to why they did not have friends both on their course or more generally in a university setting.

The experiences highlighted above provide two areas of note when exploring commuter students' experiences of wider university life. Firstly, it highlights how being a commuter student can also intersect with other characteristics, noted here in relation to being a mature student. Chapter One highlighted the relationship between students from underrepresented groups and commuter students, but how this thesis sought to focus primarily on the commuter student experience whilst acknowledging these connections existed. However in the case of Violet, Rita, Sam and Penny, the intersection of being a mature commuter was consequently identified as influencing how they did or did not make friends at university.

Secondly, it demonstrates how the formation of friendships at university for commuters could be down to more than a single explanatory factor, such as shared enrolment on a course. The course in which Violet was enrolled into was made up of other mature students who Violet felt she could connect with more because of being similar in age. This is not to say however that being a mature student was any greater indicator for friendship formation; Violet may

not have met her friends had they not been enrolled on the same course. Violet's friendships therefore can be considered as effects that occur following a complex assemblage of individual characteristics: being a mature student, a commuter student and studying on a specific degree course. Interestingly, Violet's commuter status is not as emphasised by Violet as contributing to her friendships unlike other factors like her shared course enrolment or mature status. This finding is important as it allows us to take into account the complexity of commuter student experience, in that whilst a student may be commuting, this is not necessarily always the sole contributing factor that impacts their experiences of the wider university life.

Doing the commute was another space where social connections were formed and/or maintained for commuter students. Whilst majority of the commuter students in the study commuted to campus on their own, Carmen and Lyla (Institution A) as well as Rahmatullah (Institution B) spoke of travelling to and from campus with peers (Finn, 2019; Thomas, 2019). Indeed on one occasion with Carmen, I accompanied her and her friend on their commute in to campus.

> As we wait for the train at Carmen's hometown train station, we are joined by Carmen's friend who is also commuting to Institution A. Carmen's friend is also on her course, with both students previously having studied a similar college course and encouraged by their teacher to apply to Institution A so they could attend university together. They do not, however, exclusively commute together; over the four times I accompany Carmen her friend is present only once, and Carmen also refers to commuting independently from her friend. On reaching the train station in Institution A city, Carmen and her friend wait for another friend who they had since met on their course and who is commuting into the train station from a different location. They plan to go to McDonalds for lunch located in the city centre and then onto the institution ready for their academic classes this afternoon.
> *(Carmen, Institution A, Vignette)*

For Carmen and Lyla these were pre-existing connections with peers that had existed from their previous schooling and had continued into their university experience, now commuting together from their respective hometowns to Institution A. Rahmatullah, on the other hand, had met his commuting peers through his degree course.

Emma: Oh is there a few of you that get [the train together on his course]?
Rahmatullah: Yeah yeah yeah, there's about five of us from [Rahmatullah's home town] so...
Emma: Oh nice! Are they getting the same train this morning or-
Rahmatullah: No two have-, three have gone early, so you may-, we might just meet one person in the station (…) So yeah usually there's five of us.
Emma: Oh, that's nice, it's nice that you've got a group that commute together.
Rahmatullah: Yeah so I did a foundation year last year. So I was the only one [commuting] and then this year, we started the first year proper yeah, and there's so many of us.
Emma: How did you find out about them, like did you happen to bump into them in the train station?
Rahmatullah: I only just saw them in the train station, and then we walked into our intro lectures and I was like 'I swear I saw you [inaudible]'
(Rahmatullah, Institution B)

As noted in regards to the intersection between mature commuters and friendships made on course it was a combination of factors, in this instance being on the same course and commuting the same route to university, that Rahmatullah highlights here as to how he made friends with this group of students. In Chapter Five I conceptualised the travel to campus as an extension of the network of commuting and for some students a space in which social connections between the commuter student and their peers could be mediated through technological tools. Rahmatullah's experience as noted above thus further extends this understanding to also include a space in which friendships are made and extended across these numerous geographical spaces in which the commute took place for participants.

So far this section has traced commuters' making of social connections in academic and commuting practices. For a couple of the commuter students attending Institution C, a university where all students irrespective of residential status are enrolled into a college, the college was an additional network where friendships were formed.

Emma: so would you say that the people you know from uni, or they like mostly course-based then? if you don't interact with college?
Penny: yeah... yeah most are course-based. I had a friend-, she decided-, she graduated, she was in [a different department] but I knew her from college cause she's a mature student from [same college], we're more or less the same age.
(Penny, Institution C)

So I know people from my first year [living in halls], first year in business as well. (…) [The person who had left the coffee shop as I arrived] (…) she was in my college and-, but she didn't live with me or anything.
(Zoe, Institution C, Interview)

For Zoe and Penny, making friends had revolved partly around their enrolment into their respective colleges; they had made friends with peers due to their shared college membership. However the way in which these had occurred could be much more complex than college membership automatically creating social connections, speaking again to individual students' characteristics and divergent histories. Penny's friendship with her fellow college member was attributed by Penny also to their shared mature student status, a characteristic she had previously highlighted in contributing to her course friendships. In contrast, Zoe's social connections with her college peers had been formed from her time living in college student accommodation during her first and second years of university [see Chapter Five]. 'Being there' as a residential student at Institution C had thus contributed to the formation of these friendships Zoe highlighted with her college peers.

It has been previously suggested that living in student accommodation facilitates the creation of social connections between university students and is therefore framed as something that commuter students lack because of their non-residential status (Holdsworth, 2006). Such a link however ignores the complexity of student histories of participation. In Zoe's experience, this included the development of friendship made as a residential student yet which continued to be maintained as a commuter student. Consequently it is the latter that is of particular interest to this thesis; how Zoe is able to maintain the social connections as a commuter student given that this is not the same context in which these connections were made. Zoe scheduled to see her university friends socially at particular times of the week when she was already in Institution C city to attend her academic classes.

> I meet Zoe in the upstairs of a coffee shop located in the city centre, crossing paths briefly with a friend of hers who leaves just as I arrive. Every Monday during term-time Zoe sits in this coffee shop for three hours between her lecture and seminars, drinking coffee whilst catching up with friends and/or doing independent work. Zoe's friends know that she will be in this particular coffee shop at this particular time every Monday, which Zoe likes as she says it's a good way for her to see her university friends without having to come into the city on days outside of the days she travels to campus.
> *(Zoe, Institution C, Fieldnote)*

Zoe regularly met friends on a Monday where she had a large gap between her scheduled academic classes so that she could catch up with friends without having to travel to and from the city especially for this purpose. Lyla (Institution A) employed a similar tactic in maintaining her friendships with her university peers, visiting cafes with friends in-between classes scheduled on campus.

Tracing these particular experiences highlights how maintaining friendships with peers for the commuter student can be wrapped up in their 'being there' at the institution. For example, both Zoe and Lyla preferred to organise their social time with university friends in a way that was compatible with their commutes to and from campus as coordinated by their academic timetable [see Chapter Six]. This is not to suggest that this always occurred; Zoe for instance noted how on special occasions like birthdays she would travel to Institution C city especially to celebrate with her peers. However, for the most part their being at the institution for their academic studies was used as a way to structure their wider university life, in this case their social connections with peers.

For other commuter students maintaining social connections with their peers was more difficult. Lucy (Institution C) and Ethan (Institution A) both highlighted the difficulties they had faced in maintaining friendships with their university peers directly because of their commute to campus.

> Emma: do you have friends on your course?
> Lucy: I do have friends on the course, but... classmates probably? (…)
> Emma: So would you do stuff outside of class with them?
> Lucy: No. (…) I didn't develop a friendship with them like that because I commute and they live-, most of them live inside the uni, like in the [name of college] or-
> Emma: -in a [Institution C] college-
> Lucy: -yeah, so they do the stuff together more often. Not like me because they could go out for coffee after class or anything, but I know I have to catch the train and get back home.
> *(Lucy, Institution C)*

> One thing about commuting, I think I certainly suffer on the social side of it because you generally find where a lot of other people sort of walk back (…) to where ever they live (…) , I'm usually straight back in the car commuting back thinking you know, I've got an hour and a half back sort of thing. So yeah, I suppose that's a big side socially (…) a lot of people staying in student accommodation generally do a lot of social things outside of university. Whereas I don't.
> *(Ethan, Institution A)*

Both Lucy and Ethan had found it difficult to both create and maintain friendships with peers because of the spatial configuration that their commuting practices necessitated; travelling to and from campus meant they would not be present in the same spaces as their peers in which to socialise. Specifically, their physical absence from the university spaces due to their commute had resulted in an inability to form connections with peers.

Nevertheless, Lucy and Ethan's experience was for the most part in the minority of participants in the study. Whilst both students viewed their commute as influencing their physical absence from campus and thus negatively impacting their ability to form social connections with peers, other commuter students as highlighted in this section harnessed the commute as an additional space where friendship formation could occur and/or be maintained. Chapter Five also highlighted how other commuters had used technological tools as a way to further mediate their friendships over differing spatial and geographical spaces; being in the same physical space was not necessary for social connections to continue between the commuter student and their university peers. Consequently this further highlights the heterogeneity of commuter student experiences in how they were able to make and maintain friendships.

7.2. Being in extra-curricular activities

Understanding commuter students 'being there' in relation to the wider student experience includes their interaction with extra-curricular activities (ECA), defined in Chapter Two as a university-related activity not required as part of their academic studies (Thompson et al., 2013). Half of the students in the study, spread across the three institutions, participated in an ECA at university (Table 9).

Pseudonym	**Institution**	**Participation in ECA?**	**If yes, details of ECA given** *Denoted * where student held a leadership role*
Carmen	A	Yes	Course rep
Ethan	A	No	
Lyla	A	No	
Violet	B	Yes	Course rep; WP rep
Rahmatullah	B	Yes	Course rep; WP scheme rep; Cultural society*
Zayn	B	Yes	Rowing; Commuter society*
Sam	B	No	
Rita	B	Yes	Course rep
Maddie	C	No	
Niamh	C	No	
Oliver	C	Yes	WP student network
Zoe	C	Yes	Dr Who society
Penny	C	No	
Lucy	C	Yes	Badminton

Table 9- Student participation in ECA

This mixed picture of ECA participation amongst commuter students echoes that offered by previous research in this area which has suggested both that commuter students are less likely to participate in ECA than their live-in peers (Artess et al., 2014; Christie et al., 2005; Thomas, 2020; Thomas & Jones, 2017) and also that commuter students can be active members of ECA irrespective of their residential status (Bowl et al., 2008; Holton, 2015b). This section will thus reemphasise this heterogeneity of commuter student ECA participation, offering more nuance to our understanding of these diverse practices within this student group.

Firstly, in this research ECA participation amongst commuter students was noted in that it could change over time.

> Emma: Are you part of any like sports or societies or anything like that?
> Penny: [shakes her head] I keep telling myself I'm gonna go on a [subject society] day out but we'll see.
> *(Penny, Institution C)*
>
> Zoe: as you kind of go through uni, I feel like you don't participate as much. It's kind of harder, like you have stuff-
> Emma: -do you think that's cause of you being further in the years [of uni]? Or do you think it's because of commute? Or both? Or something else?
> Zoe: Both. (…) It's like, okay, I think I'd rather just do this with my friends. I think it's good to have if you are a very social person, or if you struggle and you can find your people better... and then I think once you've found your people, it's like... 'I'm just gonna hang out with my friends doing whatever we want to do instead of in a group of people that we barely know'. But I do think it's a little bit commute.
> *(Zoe, Institution C)*

> Emma: Are you part of any other sports and societies?
> Oliver: No, I was planning on joining a couple... [university academic] timetables have been a bit-, that made a bit of a difficult so-, so I was planning on doing is just settling in this year, and then next year joining-, I'd like to join the debating society (…) there's a few others that I was looking at... (…) but yeah, that's definitely something I'd like to do. But I'll do that next year, and then perhaps next year or the year after, I'd like to get involved in like the college politics.
> *(Oliver, Institution C)*

Zoe had participated in ECA earlier in her university degree although had since ceased participation which she attributed partly to the commute. In comparison, Oliver and Penny whilst not currently participating in ECA intended on participating later in their degree. Whilst this temporal element to ECA participation is unlikely to be exclusive to commuter students in that residential students' participation in ECA might also change over time, it does highlight that commuter students' participation in ECA is always temporally situated and therefore may not reflect the entirety of their university experience and thus ECA participation.

Another area of interest was the type of ECA participated in by commuter students. Being a course rep was the most popular type of ECA participated in by commuter students in the study (Smith, 2018; Stalmirska & Mellon, 2022; Thomas, 2020). However, participants did not necessarily place higher importance in participating in this type of ECA over others. This was particularly evident when tracing Rahmatullah's (Institution B) participation in ECA. Rahmatullah held two voluntary representative positions for his course and the university WP scheme, in addition to participating in a university cultural society in which he held a leadership position. However, Rahmatullah had also wanted to participate in the hiking society yet spoke of being unable to do so.

> I really wanted to start hiking this year (…) usually they run their events on Sunday, which is completely fine, not a problem, but the problem is that the earliest trains [from Rahmatullah's home town to Institution B city] start at 10am and they want everyone to come by the [Thomas] building for, I dunno lets say 8 o'clock? Yeah 8 o'clock (…) So there's no way I could get there unless I take a really expensive taxi, which I can't do cause it's gonna cost more than the actual trip itself. So, that's one of the biggest parts cause I'm really, really interested in hiking but I just can't physically join the society (…) So last year, I didn't really do much in terms of joining societies and stuff, but this year, it was like-, I really wanted to join uni societies, but I just can't.
> *(Rahmatullah, Institution B, Interview)*

In order to participate in the hikes ran by the hiking society, society members were required to be present at an agreed meeting point at the university campus on a Saturday morning whereby a hired coach would drive the group to the chosen location for the day's hike. Rahmatullah was unable to commute to campus on a weekend in time for the coach departure time and therefore had been unable to participate in the society. Whilst Rahmatullah acknowledges that this in theory could be overcome, in that he could get a taxi to Institution B in order to catch the coach, this was considered too expensive an alternative by Rahmatullah for him to see this as a viable option for his participation in this particular ECA.

Rahmatullah's experience has key implications for understanding how participation in ECA can differ even within an individual commuters' university experience. Firstly, it highlights how commuter students' participation in ECA activities may not always derive from a prioritisation exercise based on the type of activity. In this instance, Rahmatullah was keen to participate in this ECA as well as the other academic representative role he held in his department. Rather, his non-participation in this ECA was due to his location in a town which, whilst in the same region as Institution B, lacked financially viable transport that could allow him to reach campus at the necessary day and time in order to participate. His prioritisation between ECA type was therefore based primarily on the logistical and financial undertaking that 'being there' for this ECA required which, in this case, outweighed any perceived benefits from attending the society.

Above highlights the complexity that can underline an individual commuters' participation in ECA, a complexity that was further evident from tracing other participants' experiences in the study. Lucy regularly participated in the university badminton society, travelling to Institution C on a weekend solely to attend the society training sessions. Her participation continued even when experiencing complications in her commute to campus.

> Lucy: So there's not actually trains on Sundays, weekends sometimes. [Here Lucy is referencing that for 6-7 weekends in Jan/Feb 2023, there has been no trains going between Institution C city & her home city due to works on the line] (…) So I take [the rail replacement] bus-, I've taken proper train tickets but for the. So I have to get here in time because the weekend-
> Emma: -to get the replacement service. Yeah.
> Lucy: Yeah. All the public transport is [inaudible] mid-week, but it's fine. But like-, everyone's like, people [inaudible] 'you come from [home city] right?!' 'Yeah. Sadly I'm from [home city]'. 'How did you get here?!' it's like, 'I take a bus, then a train, then a replacement bus' They're like 'wow!' (…) they're really surprised that I'm coming from [home city] and still managed to come.
> *(Lucy, Institution C)*

Temporary weekend train line repairs required Lucy to use a replacement bus to Institution C city rather than her usual train, a journey which took between 15 and 30 minutes longer than her usual journey which already took well over an hour to reach campus. Lucy's experience here thus paints a more nuanced picture than previous research suggesting commuter students are less likely to participate in ECA on evenings and weekends and/or because of long commutes of over an hour or more to campus (Chappell et al., 2020). In this case, Lucy was willing to undertake long travel times in order to participate in ECA. Chapter Five highlighted how disruptions to the commute did not stop the commute from happening, a finding also applicable here in relation to ECA participation. A disruption in the length of time it took for Lucy to commute to Institution C did not cease her attendance at badminton; Lucy continued to attend despite these disruptions.

This has further implications for our understanding of commuter students as 'being there' in relation to the wider student experience. Firstly, that a commuter students' participation in ECA does not always predicate on when they are already on campus, in that commuters can travel to campus especially for ECA participation. Secondly, that whilst 'being there' at the institution may be more complicated because of the commute this necessitates, this is not to say that it will always stop a commuter students' participation in ECA. Rather, commuter students can still participate *in spite of* their commute.

Nuance in ECA participation was further evident when considering commuter student attitudes and participation in a specific extra-curricular activity.

Institution B was the only institution in the study to have a specific ‘commuter student society’, enrolment into which predicated on a student self-identifying with the term ‘commuter student’ as defined by the student society and wider institution. Created by previous student and now staff member Yasmin who was also responsible for the creation of the commuter student common room [see Chapter Six], the society offered social activities such as movie nights and restaurant visits run during lunchtimes and early evening specifically to provide commuter students the opportunity to socialise with other commuter students at times when they were likely to already be on campus.

The existence of this society within the university network of Institution B did not, however, necessitate that commuter students be automatically enrolled into the society. This was particularly evident from the mixed participation in the society amongst commuter students in the study. Whilst Zayn was an active participant holding a leadership position, Violet highlighted her non-participation in the society.

> I know like we’re lucky to have the commuter student society. I joined that this year and I haven’t been to anything because all of the things they’ve put on, pretty much, have been inaccessible to wheelchair users.
> *(Violet, Institution B, Interview)*

Whilst Violet had enrolled into the society, she was yet to actively participate in society events primarily because of the inaccessibility of the event rooms for wheelchair users.

Violet’s non-participation in the commuter student society further highlights the complexity of commuter student participation in ECA. Even within an individual ECA that has been designed with commuter students as the core participatory student group, in this case in regards to scheduling social activities taking place at times commuter students would likely be on campus (Smith, 2018), this does not automatically mean commuter students will enrol and/or participate. Like with the commuter student common room at Institution B [see Chapter Six], there is instead a much wider network of competing priorities and considerations for the commuter student that contribute to their ‘being there’ in an individual ECA, even if designed with

commuter students in mind.

This wider network of actors was particularly noticeable in other participants' non-participation in ECA. Whereas Violet was participating in a couple of other ECAs at university, half of students in the study did not participate in any ECAs at the time of the research [Table 9]. Non-participation in ECA is arguably not an effect that only occurs amongst commuter students; students irrespective of residential status may choose not to participate in ECA for any number of reasons, for example not being interested in the societies on offer or prioritising part-time work (Stevenson & Clegg, 2011). Nevertheless, a couple of students directly linked their non-participation to their commute. Niamh (Institution C) for example found that the ECAs she had initially been interested in enrolling into would require travelling to campus either very early in the morning or very late at night, travel she did not wish to undertake.

> I really wanted to join an orchestra. I really wanted to do rowing, I wanted to do like the netball, I wanted to get involved in loads of stuff. But all of the things are either like 7am, where it's not feasible, like half seven to half nine at night... and again either that means I sacrifice my tutorial, which is what pays for my petrol, which I can't really do (…) I don't want to be driving home at 10 o'clock at night. So it just basically means that I'm now completely unable to join anything. At all. And I don't know any commuters that have. Which is a shame because we all came here. Right when I did the interview, they're like, 'Oh well at [Institution C] it's like how many things can you NOT try?' And it's like, well pigging none of them! not through choice, which is a shame.
> *(Niamh, Institution C, Interview)*

However, Niamh also directly linked her part-time employment as a private tutor to why she did not participate in ECA. The ECAs Niamh refers to often occurred at the same time as Niamh's scheduled part-time work. Should Niamh wish to participate in these it would be necessary for her to forego her part-time tutoring job, an action she considered unfeasible because of her earnings supporting her travel costs [see Chapter Five]. Rather than an unwillingness to participate in ECA it was the combination of the part-time job and her commute that Niamh articulated as meaning she was unable to 'be there' in ECAs at Institution C.

Whilst Lyla (Institution A) similarly referenced the influence of her commute in her non-participation in ECA, she also attributed this to her preference to spend time in Institution A city or her home surroundings.

> Lyla doesn't attend any university sport groups or societies. Whilst she had originally wanted to, she had so far not participated in ECA due to the time it required spending on campus and the consequential impact this had on her commute; requiring later travel home in an evening or travel to the city on days she was not currently needed on campus for her studies. Lyla also preferred to 'immerse' herself in her work and Institution A city itself when her academic timetable dictated she should be on campus.
> *(Lyla, Institution A, Fieldnote)*

Chapter Two previously highlighted that a reframing of commuter students' experiences was required to avoid purveying a deficit narrative regarding this student group. Lyla's non-participation in ECA could be framed as due to logistical challenges associated with her commute (Chappell et al., 2020) or because she did not value ECA participation (Thomas & Jones, 2017). Instead, I reframe this to suggest that Lyla has instead undertaken a prioritisation exercise in which she has simply placed higher value on other activities, in this case spending time at home or in Institution A city, over participating in ECA. This highlights how ECA is just one of multiple factors and activities (the commute, ECA, academic studies, part-time employment, parental responsibilities) that exists which commuter students may undertake alongside the doing of their degree.

7.3. ANT and being in the wider student experience

This chapter has demonstrated how commuter students can form and maintain social ties that are sometimes located within their chosen degree courses, yet also can be on their commute or through extra-curricular activities. These social ties can similarly intersect across multiple networks. Penny for example had friendships that were not just because of a shared college membership, but also a shared degree course and age. I do not suggest any of these connections were more or less necessary for the effect of friendship between Penny and this individual to occur. Rather, that this demonstrates the complexity and uniqueness of assemblages of actors and

the connections that these create that can influence friendship to exist for a commuter student amongst their peers.

Throughout this thesis I have highlighted how any given network assemblage undergoes a constant process of ordering and re-ordering of actors which can affect the stability of both connections between actors within the wider network and the effects these produce. This re-ordering was illuminated first in Chapter Five from tracing the commuting practices of Zoe and how this had changed over time during her university degree. This change in accommodation status did not automatically mean a breakdown occurred in her social ties with her university peers [Section 7.1]; the effect of friendship did not predicate on shared enrolment into living in student accommodation. The effect of friendship continued to occur, with actors in the network simply stretching and adapting to accommodate for this change. In this case, the enrolment of the café into the wider network of doing a degree for Zoe enabled an alternate space in which her friendships could be maintained between her and her peers.

Section 7.2, through tracing participants' experiences in their wider university experience, highlighted the heterogeneity in commuter student participation in ECA. Commuter student participation in ECA is an effect that is produced by, and thus dependent on, a complex temporal, spatial and geographical configuration of non-human and human actors. Temporal, in that particular configurations of actors could change over time and consequently affect whether or not a student participated in ECA. This, in combination with a geographical configuration of actors, could also influence how commuter students could 'be there' in extra-curricular activities. This could differ between ECAs and thus mean different effects occurred. For example, Rahmatullah (Institution B) participated in voluntary representative roles as these often took place at times he was already on campus. This contrasted with the hiking society which took place on weekends and required a particular geographical and spatial configuration of actors (train timetable, train, coach, coach driver) to align in a way for his commute to campus and

consequently participation in this ECA to occur. An effect that in this instance was noted as not occurring at the time of the research.

Focusing on these assemblages of actors where connections may or may not extend to ECA for the commuter student provides a nuanced understanding of their interaction with wider university life that has not existed previously within the available research. This was particularly noted where disruptions to networks existed yet were mediated in a way by other actors within the assemblage so that particular effects could continue to occur. For example, weekend engineering works on the train line did not stop Lucy (Institution C) from attending her sports practice. Instead, new actors were enrolled into the network (bus, bus timetable, bus stops, bus drivers) which enabled the commute to continue and by extension her participation in the badminton society. Here the network of commuting practice simply stretched and adapted these new actors in a way that the effect of ECA participation could remain.

7.4. Conclusion

This chapter explored commuter students' wider university experience, specifically through tracing their connections with their university peers, and later with extra-curricular activities offered at their respective institutions. Making and maintaining social connections was common amongst commuter students in the study, yet the settings and ways in which these were formed were multiplicitous and complex. Whilst students identified friendships made through their course, on their commute or through wider university communities, social connections were often made through a combination of these, along with individual demographic characteristics and histories, that were unique to the individual in question.

Whether or not a commuter student participated in ECA was equally complex and the result of a wide and complex assemblage of actors present within the university network in which the commuter student was enrolled. The

temporal, spatial and geographical configuration of actors could often influence whether or not the commuter student participated in ECA, but also students' own agency and preference for other activities outside of the university sphere. This consequently challenges previous deficit narratives of commuter students' (non)ECA participation, as well as illuminating the complexity present within commuter students' wider university experience.

Chapter Eight: Conclusion

Across the three previous analysis chapters, I have followed the commuter student journey to explore their experiences across their commute, their academic studies and interaction with the wider student experience. This chapter thus brings together my key findings in relation to my two research questions, as well as my contributions to knowledge, policy and practice following this analysis. This thesis ends with reflections on limitations of the study and how further work can build on this research to better our understanding of this student group.

8.1. Research questions

8.1.1. What is being a commuter student like?

Research question one sought to gain a rich understanding of how it feels to be a commuter student. The empirical research demonstrated that being a commuter student encompassed more than simply the doing of a commute. Instead, their commuting practices could impact their being in class, socialising with peers, occupying space on campus and taking part in wider university life. Students' doing of their commute was subject to an array of factors (cost, travel disruptions, mode of transport taken) that characterised and influenced their day-to-day experiences in ways specific to each individual commuter in the study. The academic timetable temporally underpinned commuter students' travel to campus and whether they attended class, although attendance in class was also subject to disruptions to their travel, academic teaching from university strike action and seasonal weather conditions. Being a commuter student involved navigating university spaces, often choosing where to occupy space on campus based on their proximity to class or familiarity with the space. Making and maintaining friendships was often influenced by a students' commute to campus, with some making friends on their commute as well as their academic course. Similarly, taking part in extra-curricular activities could be influenced by whether students saw these as compatible with their commute to campus, in

addition to any family or employment responsibilities and personal desire to participate.

This research highlighted how the deficit narrative of commuter student experiences often purveyed in research in this area [see Chapter Two] fails to account for alternate experiences that do not neatly fit within this school of thought. For commuters in this study, their journey to campus could vary in time taken and thus not always be a time-consuming endeavour for students. More broadly, the doing of the commute was not always negatively described by the commuter student but rather an experience part of their routinized commuting practice. Similarly, commuter students could be involved in extra-curricular activities (ECA) irrespective of their commuting status. On occasion during this research the deficit narrative could have been applied to the commuter students in this study. This was particularly notable where participants experienced disruptions to their journeys which could lengthen their commute time. For some students, this could negatively impact their academic attendance record and in part depended on individual academic staff interpretations of the institutional attendance policy. However, I argue that rather than these experiences conforming to the deficit narrative of commuter student experiences, this instead reaffirms my argument that understanding what being a commuter student is like cannot be adequately addressed through a singular narrative. Instead, commuter students' lived experiences of higher education are diverse and complex, following different trajectories in a way that speak more to the individualised nature of experiences.

By rejecting a uniform discourse of the commuter student experience I have brought together accounts of being a commuter student that acknowledge the complexity and multiplicitous nature that these experiences manifest. I further these understandings to argue that this diversity of experiences can be discussed in three key areas: 1) between institutions, 2) between individuals and 3) within individual experiences.

Commuter student experiences are often influenced by the institution in which they attended. In this study the criteria in which participants were eligible to obtain a car parking permit, the employment of lecture capture and the different facilities for commuter students that were offered on campus were all examples that were subject to the institution they attended. Institutional practices thus framed commuter student experiences in very specific ways. Eligibility for parking permits for example differed per institution depending on individual institutions' criteria; in this study this meant that certain commuters could obtain a parking permit at their institution but others could not. A car parking permit also dictated where students could and could not park at their institution, with potential for causing their late attendance in class if a student encountered difficulties on their arrival onto campus. This was again dependent on the car parking permit policy specific to the institution; diversity in commuter student experiences influenced by the institutional network in which they were enrolled.

Nevertheless, commuter students studying at the same institution can have vastly different experiences. Whilst Institutions A and B offered facilities tailored to the commuter student, these were not utilised by all the commuter students in the study due to their location on campus or students stating they did not need the facilities in question. This particularly highlights how commuter students as a wider student group, due to the individuality of their personal circumstances and experiences in addition to other contributing institutional factors, often have a diverse set of experiences even if studying at the same institution.

In many cases, an individual's own experience of commuting to university can differ across their university degree. The journey to or from campus could run smoothly on one day and yet be disrupted on the next day due to the weather, a train strike or another unforeseeable disruption. Similarly participants had participated in ECA in previous academic years but was no longer doing so, or spoke of their future plans in which they planned to participate. Opposing and contradictory commuting experiences also co-

existed within an individual's experience. Participants spoke of being 'used to' commuting to campus in a way that suggested a level of comfortability with their commuting practice, yet also spoke of being nervous when faced with journey disruptions [Chapter Five]. Similarly, others framed their non-participation in ECA simultaneously as a result of logistical challenges associated with their commute and also because they placed more value on other activities like spending time in home surroundings [Chapter Seven]. Neither of these experiences can be encapsulated through a singular narrative; a commute was not always comfortable for the commuter student and non-participation in ECA was not only because of complications linked to a student's commuting status. Consequently, these experiences highlight the ways in which being on the commute, in their university studies and in the wider student experience could change within individual commuter students' experiences of higher education.

In summary, any understanding of what being a commuter student is like must take into account the complexity and multiplicitous nature of commuting practices between institutions, between individuals and within individual experiences. I do not take this approach as a way to impose strict categorisations of thought for understanding commuter students' experiences. Instead, I argue that these are useful ways in which to understand what being a commuter student is like, which also account for the heterogeneity of experience I have presented in this research.

8.1.2. What are the networks within which commuter students are situated?

My second research question sought to identify the wider networks in which commuter students are situated and the human and non-human actors consequently enrolled in accordance with actor-network theory (ANT). Through 'following the actors' [see Chapter Four], I have traced the network practices that encompass the doing of a commute, as well as the doing of an academic degree and participation in wider university activities.

Illuminated through my operationalisation of ANT, commuter students have been identified as enrolled in any number of networks. These networks are made up of an array of actors that constitute both people and objects, but also routines and spaces. Buses and trains are mediated by a public transport timetable which in turn influences when students arrive on campus. Similarly where students can park is often mediated through the presence of an institution car parking permit within the network; a permit legitimises and enables students to park in specific spaces on campus. Libraries and cafes on campus offer places where students can wait, socialise and/or study before, between or after lectures and seminars.

Given that I am only able to trace a finite number of networks and for a finite period of time, my research instead aimed to trace in-depth the networks of commuting. For the sake of creating a linear text, I separated commuter students' experiences into three main areas: commute to campus, academic experiences and the wider student experience. However given the commuter students' practices across multiple networks, I have demonstrated how these networks often interlink. The commute, whilst being a process which commuters undertake in order to reach campus, was also identified as a space in which students could 'be' in their academic classes. The latter being mediated by technological tools that span geographical, spatial and temporal boundaries. Equally, commuter students could use this same space to make and maintain friendships at university. This highlights the un-boundaried nature of networks, consequently reaffirming the complexity of the interrelating networks and connections in which the commuter student is enrolled.

The ANTish perspective of this research [see Chapter Three] allowed for exploration of the agential behaviours undertaken by students from their connections between actors that existed within these networks in which they were enrolled. The cost of commuting was an effect mediated through such as the existence of transport discount cards, type of transport used and time of day travelled. Similarly, whether commuter students participated in ECA could be conditional to the geographical and temporal placement of the

activity and/or the presence of dependent family members within the network. Agential behaviours were also explored of non-human actors present in the network. An institutional car parking permit carried agency, in that it afforded the possibility of a student to park in a particular location should it be spatially, geographically and temporally located within the network of commuting. These are all examples of network effects that occurred following a specific configuration of connections within network practices.

Through tracing commuting to university, I have highlighted how the network of human and non-human actors can mediate commuting, academic and social practices in such a way that particular effects can occur. Such as attendance of the commuter student in class was subject to a specific configuration of actors: the academic timetable, institutional policy on academic attendance, academic staff members, train, train timetable and so on. This research also demonstrated where disruptions to the network of commuting practice influenced a network effect; disruptions to travel threatened commuter students' attendance in class. Disruptions to commuting, academic and social practices were common in this research and could extend across multiple networks. For example, disruptions to public transport services could impact the length of travel, but also attendance in extra-curricular activities as well as academic classes aforementioned. Nevertheless the network did not necessarily break down nor did effects cease to occur. For example a travel disruption did not always mean a commuter student failed to attend class or their ECA. Another train arrived, an alternative means of transport was used and/or the student left home earlier to accommodate the disruption whilst still attending class or an ECA. These practices are just some of the ways that highlight the durability of network practices; how disruptions to the network can alter but not always result in a network collapse. Instead, the network simply extends and accommodates these new configurations of an assemblage so the network effects can continue to occur. It is this durability and elasticity of the network that further emphasises how the previous deficit narrative does not adequately address what it is like to be a commuter student in the ways in

which commuter practices can adapt and change to accommodate disruptions and deviations.

8.2. Reflections

8.2.1. Contribution to knowledge

I offer an original contribution to knowledge firstly through this thesis' treatment of what is meant by 'the commuter student'. By taking an ANTish approach to defining the 'commuter student' in this research, the working definition employed was stretched and challenged in order to explore the ways in which it could adequately encompass the commuter student experience. The empirical work shows how students' divergent commuting history demonstrates the difficulty in 'black-boxing' commuting to university and specifically how a boundaried definition is unlikely to encapsulate all understandings of 'a commuter student' [see Section 5.6]. Rather than advocating for a particular definition, I instead demonstrate the critical awareness needed for any practical application of the term 'commuter student' whilst the wider sector employs discretion when using this term. This continues to cement the defining of a commuter student as a 'wicked problem' (Trowler, 2012).

The empirical data gathered on commuting practices noted in my thesis was made possible through my methodological approach. At the time of writing, this was the first MSE and indeed ethnography to investigate this topic area. Operating across multiple field sites, in this case three institutions across the North of England which differed in size, type of institution and provision offered to commuters [Section 4.4] meant I was able to examine the experiences of commuter students within their specific institution's context. This offered an enlightened understanding of the impact of the local context on the individual and how this can differ across institutions.

Using participant observation across the ethnography enabled me to build up a rich picture of the experiences of this student group, through observing

students’ routinised commuting practices and the ways in which students navigate university spaces. These are elements that are less likely to be articulated by the commuter student yet, when combined with ANT, offer us much insight into students’ interaction with people, objects and things. Similarly go-along interviews allowed me to not only ask students directly about what being a commuter student is like, as stated in research question one, but also accompany the student myself on such as their commute or time in-between their classes. This opened up a way of understanding commuter students’ experiences through my own practices; I was able to some degree sensorially experience life as a commuter student.

The ethnographic nature of the research, the methods that were utilised and the theoretical approach combined offers insight into commuter student experiences that would have not been possible if using other approaches. Namely, the rich understanding I present of commuter student experiences that highlights a diversity of commuter student’s experiences of higher education, something that has been less understood in previous research in this area [see Chapter Two]. This is further strengthened through the way in which I conceptualise this diversity as outlined in Section 8.1.1; across and within institutions, as well as within individuals’ own personal histories.

8.2.2. Contribution to policy & practice

A considerable contribution to practice is my interrogation of the ‘commuter student’ definition(s) previously used by scholars, policymakers and practitioners, as well as the working definition used in this thesis. I have highlighted through my research that the commuter student is not easy to define and a paradigmatic example of a ‘wicked problem’ (Trowler, 2012). Nevertheless the critical review of definitions and terminology referring to the ‘commuter student’ provided in Section 1.2 will be useful for policymakers. Primarily in that it will help them reflect on the competing terminology used currently to refer to commuter students before undertaking any further conceptualisation of this student group for employment across the wider higher education sector.

I acknowledge that approximating this student group remains necessary for practitioners required to identify and design interventions for commuter students. At the time of writing, the absence of a sector definition in operation means it remains for individual institutions to define and quantify this student group (Maslin, 2024). In the short term, practitioners in a specific institutional context who are wanting to understand their commuter student population further and need a way in which to define and measure this student group in the absence of a sector definition will find the definition and terminology overview useful to support them in this task. Furthermore, given how in this research it was demonstrated how commuter status could fluctuate across the student lifecycle, practitioners can use this key finding to evaluate how responsive their chosen definition and subsequent way of measuring the commuter student at their institution would be for effectively recording changes to students' commuter status throughout their time at university.

This thesis highlighted spaces across the three university campuses which were frequented by participants and thus contributed to their 'being' at university [Section 6.4]. Commuters often used facilities when they were already on campus for their academic classes, although a few commuter students came on to campus during weekends and vacation periods to use university facilities. Libraries and cafes were used by participants with dual purpose; students could use these spaces to work and/or to socialise and relax with peers. The reasons commuter students chose to frequent (or not frequent) particular spaces were not however always specific to their commuter status; students could have personal preferences for where they liked to study on campus, or cite feeling uncomfortable as a mature student on campus [Section 6.4.1]. This key finding of the diversity of space use by commuter students will therefore be of particular interest to university staff responsible for student engagement on campus who are interested in how particular student groups do or do not use campus facilities and how this may intersect with other demographic characteristics.

This research also highlights how commuter students use even commuter student specific facilities in multiplicitous ways. The commuter common room at Institution B for example was used regularly by one commuter in the study, yet rarely (if at all) by others because of the location of the room and availability of other common room spaces across the university. Similarly whilst Institution A had a commuter student accommodation offer, only one student in the study made reference to this and did not use it. Such findings can thus offer key insight for university practitioners designing and implementing facilities for commuter students. Namely, that the existence of a dedicated facility for commuter students does not automatically translate into it being used by this student group. Acknowledging that this is a diverse student group which is likely to have differing needs and requirements specific to their individual situations, university practitioners still need to consider such as the location of the facility or the expense it could require as to maximise the usability of the space.

For long term impact I advocate for the sector to develop a taskforce with the remit of developing a national approach into defining and supporting commuter students in the UK. The taskforce should first review what is currently known about commuter student experiences in the UK including the diverse nature of their experiences. This should be considered in relation to how these findings map onto the contemporary context of UK higher education. The taskforce should involve key stakeholders in the UK higher education sector such as:

- governmental policymakers, for example the Department of Education and devolved nation equivalents.
- representatives from higher education regulatory bodies, such as the Office for Students and Medr.
- Interested parties from membership organisations, such as UUK, GuildHE and AMOSSHE, the Student Services Organisation.
- Student representative bodies, such as the National Union of Students.

- Academics conducting research into commuter students.
- Practitioners at specific institutions with examples of current work to support commuter students.
- Current students who self-identify as commuters.

Having stakeholders like those listed above would ensure that any outputs from this taskforce would have potential to influence national policy but also institutional practice in this space. Furthermore, this configuration of stakeholders would ensure that any definitions and consequential practice implications from the working group were co-created with those holding lived experience.

8.2.3. Research limitations

My research was small-scale, qualitative multi-sited ethnographic research. As I have stated throughout this thesis and particularly when highlighting my methodological approach, I do not claim that my research is generalisable to all commuter student experiences within the UK. Rather than aiming for generalisability, my research instead illuminates some of the ways commuter student experiences manifest within specifically situated institutional contexts in the North of England. This is a strength of my ethnographic research in that it enables a rich understanding of the diversity of this student groups' HE experiences. This research has demonstrated how the practices of commuter students are diverse in all manner of practices; across institutions, within institutions and also within individual practices. As I have established from my empirical research, any attempt to homogenise understandings of the commuting practices of the commuter student and the wider impact this has on their experiences of higher education would ignore this diversity of experience.

8.2.4. Scope for future research

The nature of my small-scale empirical research is that I could only explore what being a commuter student was like in a small number of institutions

situated within a specific region of the North of England. I therefore suggest that additional qualitative research should be conducted in a range of regions and institutions across the UK as this would further contribute to the knowledge base of commuter students' experiences of HE in a way that would extend understandings of this phenomena to uncover institutional and regional differences within a UK context.

The influence of demographic characteristics such as being a mature student or having a physical disability was noted in my research in how these intersected with commuting practices. Specifically, the ways in which they could influence where commuter students spent time on campus and the people they spent time with. Future research should explore this intersection between being a commuter student and holding particular demographic characteristics not discussed in this thesis to add further richness to our understanding of commuter student practices.

A key finding in this research has been how network practices of a commuter student can alter over time; the type of transport used, the length and cost of commutes to campus, the frequency and number of classes and the spaces commuter students waited in and around campus. The length of my fieldwork allowed for exploration into the ways in which these practices changed over a six-month period, a natural restriction due to the temporal scope of doctoral research. I urge future researchers in this field to undertake ethnographic research in this area for an extended period of time, such as a full academic year or an entire academic degree course as this would offer further insight into the complexity, materiality and multiplicity of commuter student experiences and the ways in which these can change over their university degree.

Appendices

Appendix 1: Participant advertisement (email blurb)

Participants required for study on experiences of UG commuter students.
I am currently looking for UG students who commute to university in order to understand the lived experiences of commuter students and their networks.
To be eligible, students must:

- Be enrolled onto a full-time undergraduate degree course
- Be enrolled as a student at XXX University
- Be living in either the **parental home or own residence** (owned or privately rented). This does not include private student halls of residence or renting with other students.

The study involves a short online interview, followed by a researcher accompanying the participant on their inbound/outbound commute, on multiple occasions and at a time of their choosing, and time on their university campus. You will also have the option to use WhatsApp to send messages, pictures and/or voice notes about your commuting experience.
If you are interested in taking part in this research or would like to query whether you are eligible for the research, please email e.l.maslin@durham.ac.uk for more information.

Appendix 2: Participant advertisement (poster picture)

Are you a commuting student in Yorkshire or the North East?

I'm looking for UG commuter students to take part in research to understand their HE experiences.

Participant criteria:

- Be a full-time, UG student
- Living in either parental home or own residence (owned or privately rented).

This does not include private student halls of residence/renting with other students.

What would it involve?

- a short online interview
- a researcher accompanying you on your commute to university/time on campus on multiple occasions
- Option to use WhatsApp for sharing photos/messages/voice notes about commuting experience

Interested?

If you fit the criteria and are interested in taking part in this research, please email

e.l.maslin@durham.ac.uk

Appendix 3: Participant information sheet (student)

1st April 2022
Participant Information Sheet
Title: Commuter students' experiences of Higher Education
Researcher: Miss Emma Maslin
Department: School of Education, Durham University
Contact details: e.l.maslin@durham.ac.uk
Supervisor name: Dr Jonathan Tummons
Supervisor contact details: jonathan.tummons@durham.ac.uk

You are invited to take part in a study that I am conducting as part of my PhD at Durham University. The study has received ethical approval from the School of Education Ethics Sub-Committee of Durham University.
Before you decide whether to agree to take part it is important for you to understand the purpose of the research and what is involved as a participant. Please read the following information carefully. Please get in contact if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. The rights and responsibilities of anyone taking part in Durham University research are set out in our 'Participants Charter':
https://www.dur.ac.uk/research.innovation/governance/ethics/considerations/people/charter/

The purpose of this study is to understand the experiences of commuter students in three universities in the North of England. Specifically, it will be researching the lived experiences of commuter students, the networks of which they are part of and how they navigate through these networks.
You have been invited to take part in this study because you identify as a commuter student, where this is defined as living in the parental home or own residence (either owned or privately rented). This does not include living in private halls of residence or renting with other students. **For the purposes of this research, you will need to meet the following criteria in order to take part in the study.**

- Be living in the parental home or in own residence (which can be privately rented or owned)
- Enrolled onto a full-time undergraduate degree course at XXXX University

Your participation is voluntary and you do not have to agree to take part. If you do agree to take part, you can withdraw at any time, without giving a reason. Your rights in relation to withdrawing any data that is identifiable to you are explained in the accompanying Privacy Notice.

If you agree to be in this study, you will first be asked to take part in short interview on Microsoft Teams lasting no more than 30 minutes to introduce the study and discuss the logistics of the research. You will then be accompanied on multiple days of your choosing on your inbound and outbound commute to university (not always on the same day), including the day at your university campus. These will be go-along interviews where the researcher will ask you questions about your experiences throughout the day, along with participant observation. During the go-along interviews you

are able to omit any questions you do not wish to answer. The interviews will be recorded using a Dictaphone and notes will also be made during this time. You will also have the option to send messages, photos and/or voicenotes regarding your commute to the researcher using WhatsApp.
All information obtained during the study will be kept confidential and participants will be given a pseudonym so there is no way to connect them to the study. If the data is published it will be entirely anonymous and will not be identifiable as yours. All files containing any information you give are password protected. For the use of direct quotes within the research, permission will be obtained through the consent form. No personal data will be shared, however anonymised (i.e. not identifiable) data may be used in later publications, reports, presentations, web pages and other research outputs. At the end of the project, anonymised data will be archived in the UK Data Services Repository and shared with others for legitimate research purposes. Full details are included in the accompanying Privacy Notice, including information on how your data will be stored in WhatsApp.

All research data and records needed to validate the research findings will be stored for 10 years after publication of the results. Durham University is committed to sharing the results of its world-class research for public benefit. As part of this commitment the University has established an online repository for all Durham University Higher Degree theses which provides access to the full text of freely available theses. The study in which you are invited to participate will be written up as a thesis. On successful submission of the thesis, it will be deposited both in print and online in the University archives, to facilitate its use in future research. The thesis will be published open access.

If you have any further questions or concerns about this study, please speak to the researcher or their supervisor. If you remain unhappy or wish to make a formal complaint, please submit a complaint via the University's Complaints Process.

Thank you for reading this information and considering taking part in this study.

Miss Emma Louise Maslin

Leazes Road
Durham City, DH1 1TA
Telephone +44 (0)191 334 2000 Fax +44 (0)191 334 8311
www.durham.ac.uk
Durham University is the trading name of the University of Durham

Appendix 4: Participant privacy notice (student)

PART 1 – GENERIC PRIVACY NOTICE

Durham University has a responsibility under data protection legislation to provide individuals with information about how we process their personal data. We do this in a number of ways, one of which is the publication of privacy notices. Organisations variously call them a privacy statement, a fair processing notice or a privacy policy

To ensure that we process your personal data fairly and lawfully we are required to inform you:

- Why we collect your data
- How it will be used
- Who it will be shared with

We will also explain what rights you have to control how we use your information and how to inform us about your wishes. Durham University will make the Privacy Notice available via the website and at the point we request personal data.

Our privacy notices comprise two parts – a generic part (ie common to all of our privacy notices) and a part tailored to the specific processing activity being undertaken

Data Controller

The Data Controller is Durham University. If you would like more information about how the University uses your personal data, please see the University's Information Governance webpages or contact Information Governance Unit:

Telephone: (0191 33) 46246 or 4610

E-mail: information.governance@durham.ac.uk

Information Governance Unit also coordinate response to individuals asserting their rights under the legislation. Please contact the Unit in the first instance.

Data Protection Officer

The Data Protection Officer is responsible for advising the University on compliance with Data Protection legislation and monitoring its performance against it. If you have any concerns regarding the way in which the University is processing your personal data, please contact the Data Protection Officer:

Jennifer Sewel

University Secretary

Telephone: (0191 33) 46144

E-mail: university.secretary@durham.ac.uk

Your rights in relation to your personal data

Privacy notices and/or consent

You have the right to be provided with information about how and why we process your personal data. Where you have the choice to determine how your personal data will be used, we will ask you for consent. Where you do not have a choice (for example, where we have a legal obligation to process

the personal data), we will provide you with a privacy notice. A privacy notice is a verbal or written statement that explains how we use personal data. Whenever you give your consent for the processing of your personal data, you receive the right to withdraw that consent at any time. Where withdrawal of consent will have an impact on the services we are able to provide, this will be explained to you, so that you can determine whether it is the right decision for you.

Accessing your personal data
You have the right to be told whether we are processing your personal data and, if so, to be given a copy of it. This is known as the right of subject access. You can find out more about this right on the University's Subject Access Requests webpage.

Right to rectification
If you believe that personal data we hold about you is inaccurate, please contact us and we will investigate. You can also request that we complete any incomplete data.
Once we have determined what we are going to do, we will contact you to let you know.

Right to erasure
You can ask us to erase your personal data in any of the following circumstances:

- We no longer need the personal data for the purpose it was originally collected
- You withdraw your consent and there is no other legal basis for the processing
- You object to the processing and there are no overriding legitimate grounds for the processing
- The personal data have been unlawfully processed
- The personal data have to be erased for compliance with a legal obligation
- The personal data have been collected in relation to the offer of information society services (information society services are online services such as banking or social media sites).

Once we have determined whether we will erase the personal data, we will contact you to let you know.

Right to restriction of processing
You can ask us to restrict the processing of your personal data in the following circumstances:

- You believe that the data is inaccurate and you want us to restrict processing until we determine whether it is indeed inaccurate
- The processing is unlawful and you want us to restrict processing rather than erase it

- We no longer need the data for the purpose we originally collected it but you need it in order to establish, exercise or defend a legal claim and
- You have objected to the processing and you want us to restrict processing until we determine whether our legitimate interests in processing the data override your objection.

Once we have determined how we propose to restrict processing of the data, we will contact you to discuss and, where possible, agree this with you.

Retention
The University keeps personal data for as long as it is needed for the purpose for which it was originally collected. Most of these time periods are set out in the University Records Retention Schedule.

Making a complaint
If you are unsatisfied with the way in which we process your personal data, we ask that you let us know so that we can try and put things right. If we are not able to resolve issues to your satisfaction, you can refer the matter to the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO). The ICO can be contacted at:
Information Commissioner's Office Wycliffe House Water Lane Wilmslow Cheshire SK9 5AF
Telephone: 0303 123 1113
Website: Information Commissioner's Office

PART 2 – TAILORED PRIVACY NOTICE
This section of the Privacy Notice provides you with the privacy information that you need to know before you provide personal data to the University for the particular purpose(s) stated below.

Project Title
Commuter students' experiences of Higher Education
Type(s) of personal data collected and held by the researcher and method of collection:

Personal data will be collected through interviews, observations and document analysis. This will include name, home location (not specified), age, university attended, course and year of study. It will also describe other data sought on your experiences of commuting to university. Audio recordings and notes will be taken during interviews and participant observation. Participants will also have an optional opportunity to send photos and messages on their experiences of commuting through WhatsApp.

Lawful Basis
Under data protection legislation, we need to tell you the lawful basis we are relying on to process your data. The lawful basis we are relying on is public task: the processing is necessary for an activity being carried out as part of the University's public task, which is defined as teaching, learning and research. For further information see

https://durham.ac.uk/research.innovation/governance/ethics/governance/dp/legalbasis/

How personal data is stored:
All personal data will be held securely and strictly confidential to the research team. You will be given the option to choose a pseudonym which will not be connected to your name or identity. Signed consent forms will be stored separately to project data. All personal data in electronic form will be stored on a password protected computer, and any hardcopies will be kept in locked storage. Data will not be available to anyone outside the research team. The conversation will be recorded and stored on an encrypted device until it has been transcribed by the researcher. No-one else will have access to the recording, and it will be erased once the transcript has been completed. WhatsApp uses end-to-end encryption which means that your messages and photos will only be viewable by yourself and the researcher. The chat will be automatically backed up on your personal device, and at the end of the research the chat history will be exported by the researcher only. This will be stored on a password protected computer. For more information regarding Meta privacy rules and what data WhatsApp shares with Meta, please visit https://faq.whatsapp.com/general/security-and-privacy/what-information-does-whatsapp-share-with-the-facebook-companies/?lang=en

How personal data is processed:
Your personal data (as outlined previously) is being collected in order to analyse responses according to certain criteria.
Participant data will be anonymised at the point of transcription. The recorded conversation will be transcribed by the researcher, and personal information will be coded and anonymized. Only the research team will have access to the recording. Transcripts of any conversations between participant and researcher will be entered into N-Vivo for analysis. After six months the data will be completely anonymised and the original records, including any information which can identify you personally (e.g. audio), will be destroyed after the PhD is completed. Transcripts of interviews will be retained to validate the research findings.

Withdrawal of data
You can request withdrawal of your data at any time during the research up until research analysis commences. Before this point, if you no longer wish to take part in the study during data collection, your role in the research would cease immediately and all of the data pertaining to your involvement will be deleted.

Who the researcher shares personal data with:
Personal data will only be shared with those involved in the research project (namely the lead researcher and supervisory team). Personal data may be included in relevant research publications or other project outputs, however please note that permission will be obtained through the consent form.
Please be aware that if you disclose information which indicates the potential for serious and immediate harm to yourself or others, the research team may be obliged to breach confidentiality and report this to relevant authorities. This includes disclosure of child protection offences such as the physical or

sexual abuse of minors, the physical abuse of vulnerable adults, money laundering, or other crimes covered by prevention of terrorism legislation. Where you disclose behaviour (by yourself or others) that is potentially illegal but does not present serious and immediate danger to others, the researcher will, where appropriate, signpost you to relevant services, but the information you provide will be kept confidential (unless you explicitly request otherwise).

How long personal data is held by the researcher:
We will hold personal data for six months. All data will be anonymised at the point of data collection and will be securely stored with password protection. Any/all personal data will be deleted no later than 18 months after the period of research (the PhD). The exception to this is consent forms, which will be kept for the length of the research project (3 years) before being anonymised. Anonymised transcripts of interviews and media shared through WhatsApp (transcripts of voicenotes, photos and anonymised messages) will be retained to validate the research findings and will be made available in the UK Data Services repository. All data shared through the repository will not allow participants to be traced back to it and the data will only be submitted for re-use if researchers conclude that no identifying features are present in that data set.

How to object to the processing of your personal data for this project:
If you have any concerns regarding the processing of your personal data, or you wish to withdraw your data from the project, contact Emma Maslin via email on e.l.maslin@durham.ac.uk. If you would prefer to contact the lead supervisor, this is Dr Jonathan Tummons who can be contacted on Jonathan.tummons@durham.ac.uk.

Further information:
For further information, please contact Emma Maslin via email on e.l.maslin@durham.ac.uk. If you would prefer to contact the lead supervisor, this is Dr Jonathan Tummons who can be contacted on Jonathan.tummons@durham.ac.uk.

Appendix 5: Participant consent form (students and staff)

Project title: Commuter students' experiences of Higher Education
Researcher: Miss Emma Maslin
Department: School of Education, Durham University
Contact details: e.l.maslin@durham.ac.uk
Supervisor name: Dr Jonathan Tummons
Supervisor contact details: Jonathan.tummons@durham.ac.uk
This form is to confirm that you understand what the purposes of the project, what is involved and that you are happy to take part. Please initial each box to indicate your agreement:

I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet dated [01/04/22] and the privacy notice for the above project.	
I have had sufficient time to consider the information and ask any questions I might have, and I am satisfied with the answers I have been given.	
I consent to being audio recorded and understand how recordings will be used in research outputs.	
I understand who will have access to personal data provided, how the data will be stored and what will happen to the data at the end of the project. I agree to joint copyright to the researcher (Miss Emma Maslin) of any shared text/audio/photography given via WhatsApp.	
I understand that anonymised (i.e. not identifiable) versions of my data may be archived and shared with others for legitimate research purposes.	
I understand and agree that my information can be quoted in publications, reports, and other research outputs.	
Please choose one of the following options:	
I am happy for the researcher to choose my pseudonym	
I would like to choose my pseudonym Preferred pseudonym: ____	
I agree to take part in the above project.	
I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving a reason.	

Participant's Signature______________________________
Date_____________

(NAME IN BLOCK LETTERS)____

Researcher's Signature_____________________ Date_____________

(NAME IN BLOCK LETTERS)____

Appendix 6: Interview schedule

Pre-research interview schedule

Student will have received, read and signed forms in advance.
Student has received indicator of when the research may take place.

During the pre-interview:
Run through participant information sheet. Check:

- Participant self-identifies with commuter criteria (i.e. not living in halls of residence)
- Enrolled on FT UG course
- Show students the microphone that will be used (the big fluff one)
- Any questions?

Run through (briefly) privacy notice

- Any questions?

Run through the consent form & check consent/request consent form completed
Student to complete consent form before I collect next information

Demographic information collected (Pseudonym preference, mode of transport(s), general home location, university attended, course and year of study, age (can be approximate!))
Happy for WhatsApp? Exchange phone numbers for WhatsApp
Organise and/or confirm first date to accompany student
Decide on type of meeting (e.g. meeting them one morning pre-commute, just meeting them on campus for a few hours?)
Decide on meeting place to start commute
Will visit open spaces with students (e.g. libraries, study spaces, cafes) but not academic subjects (e.g. lectures, seminars) or closed spaces (e.g. libraries where you need a campus card)

Go-along interview prompt sheet and observation schedule

Yellow = if need to do virtually/ if meeting participants after their commute because they travel by car.
Potential WhatsApp questions

Start of commute
How are you feeling?
Tell me about your morning. What have you done this morning before we've met?
Potential observations: Student behaviour/demeanour. Is the student early/late/on time for meeting? Location of meeting, wider context.
WhatsApp: How are you feeling? Tell me about your morning/afternoon/day. A reminder that you can send photos/voice notes/messages with comments regarding your experience as a commuting student.

During commute
Is this a typical commute for you?

How do you feel about your commute? How do you feel about your commute today?
Describe your commute to me this morning. How did you feel? Was it usual/unusual in any way?
Potential observations: Student behaviour/demeanour. Type of transport used, people around us & how student does/does not interact with human/non-human entities around them e.g. people, facilities on public transport. Have there been delays/platform changes?
WhatsApp: How are you feeling? Tell me about your commute. A reminder that you can send photos/voice notes/messages with comments regarding your experience as a commuting student.

<u>During the day</u>
How are you feeling?
In free time – is this normally what you would do in your free time?
Do you think commuting has any impact on your academic studies?
Do you take part in any extra-curricular and social activities?
Does commuting have any impact on this?
Do you know many people on your course/at your college/at the university?
Do you know any other commuters?
How did you meet those friends/How did you make those connections?

Does your university offer any support to you as a commuter student? This could be support with your academic studies, specific policies or facilities for commuters or even help with getting involved with social/extra-curricular activities.
How would you describe your relationship with the university?

Do you think your university could, or should, do anything to support commuter students? If yes, do you have any examples?

Potential observations: Student behaviour/demeanour. Where does the student go when on campus? What activities do they/do not take part in? People around us & how student does/does not interact with human/non-human entities around them e.g. people, university facilities. What do they do in free time?
WhatsApp: How are you feeling? Tell me about your morning/afternoon/day. A reminder that you can send photos/voice notes/messages with comments regarding your experience as a commuting student.

<u>Going back on the commute</u>
How are you feeling?
Is this a typical commute for you?
How do you feel about your commute? How do you feel about your commute today?
Describe your commute to me this afternoon/evening. How did you feel? Was it usual/unusual in any way?
Potential observations: Student behaviour/demeanour. Is the student early/late/on time for meeting? Location of meeting, wider context.

WhatsApp: How are you feeling? How was your day? A reminder that you can send photos/voice notes/messages with comments regarding your experience as a commuting student.

End of the day

How are you feeling?
Has this been a typical day for you?
What will you do when you are home?
Potential observations: Student behaviour/demeanour. Is the student early/late/on time for meeting? Location of meeting, wider context.
WhatsApp: How are you feeling? How was your day? A reminder that you can send photos/voice notes/messages with comments regarding your experience as a commuting student.
Next day: Organise another time for accompanying the student.

Appendix 7: Participant information sheet (staff)

1st April 2022
Participant Information Sheet
Title: Commuter students' experiences of Higher Education
Researcher: Miss Emma Maslin
Department: School of Education, Durham University
Contact details: e.l.maslin@durham.ac.uk

Supervisor name: Dr Jonathan Tummons
Supervisor contact details: jonathan.tummons@durham.ac.uk

You are invited to take part in a study that I am conducting as part of my PhD at Durham University. The study has received ethical approval from the School of Education Ethics Sub-Committee of Durham University.
Before you decide whether to agree to take part it is important for you to understand the purpose of the research and what is involved as a participant. Please read the following information carefully. Please get in contact if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. The rights and responsibilities of anyone taking part in Durham University research are set out in our 'Participants Charter':
https://www.dur.ac.uk/research.innovation/governance/ethics/considerations/people/charter/

The purpose of this study is to understand the experiences of commuter students in three universities in the North of England. Specifically, it will be researching the lived experiences of commuter students, the networks of which they are part of and how they navigate through these networks.

You have been invited to take part in this study because you identify as a member of academic or professional student support staff at XXX University with a responsibility for supporting either commuter students directly, or indirectly (e.g. general student support, support for part-time/distance students). **In this study a commuter student is defined as living in the parental home or own residence (either owned or privately rented).** This does not include living in private halls of residence or renting with other students.

Your participation is voluntary and you do not have to agree to take part. If you do agree to take part, you can withdraw at any time, without giving a reason. Your rights in relation to withdrawing any data that is identifiable to you are explained in the accompanying Privacy Notice.

If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to take part in an interview, either in-person or virtually through Microsoft Teams/Zoom, lasting no more than 1 hour. In this interview you will be asked about how your institution defines 'commuter student', the experiences of commuter students at your institution and any policies and/or support in place for this cohort of students. During the interview you are able to omit any questions you do not wish to answer. The interviews will be recorded using a Dictaphone and notes will also be made during this time.

All information obtained during the study will be kept confidential and participants will be given a pseudonym so there is no way to connect them to the study. If the data is published it will be entirely anonymous and will not be identifiable as yours. All files containing any information you give are password protected. For the use of direct quotes within the research, permission will be obtained through the consent form. No personal data will be shared, however anonymised (i.e. not identifiable) data may be used in later publications, reports, presentations, web pages and other research outputs. At the end of the project, anonymised data will be archived in the UK Data Services Repository and shared with others for legitimate research purposes. Full details are included in the accompanying Privacy Notice.
All research data and records needed to validate the research findings will be stored for 10 years after publication of the results. Durham University is committed to sharing the results of its world-class research for public benefit. As part of this commitment the University has established an online repository for all Durham University Higher Degree theses which provides access to the full text of freely available theses. The study in which you are invited to participate will be written up as a thesis. On successful submission of the thesis, it will be deposited both in print and online in the University archives, to facilitate its use in future research. The thesis will be published open access.

If you have any further questions or concerns about this study, please speak to the researcher or their supervisor. If you remain unhappy or wish to make a formal complaint, please submit a complaint via the University's Complaints Process.
Thank you for reading this information and considering taking part in this study.
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Durham City, DH1 1TA
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Durham University is the trading name of the University of Durham

Appendix 8: Participant privacy notice (staff)

PART 1 – GENERIC PRIVACY NOTICE

Durham University has a responsibility under data protection legislation to provide individuals with information about how we process their personal data. We do this in a number of ways, one of which is the publication of privacy notices. Organisations variously call them a privacy statement, a fair processing notice or a privacy policy.

To ensure that we process your personal data fairly and lawfully we are required to inform you:

- Why we collect your data
- How it will be used
- Who it will be shared with

We will also explain what rights you have to control how we use your information and how to inform us about your wishes. Durham University will make the Privacy Notice available via the website and at the point we request personal data.

Our privacy notices comprise two parts – a generic part (ie common to all of our privacy notices) and a part tailored to the specific processing activity being undertaken.

Data Controller

The Data Controller is Durham University. If you would like more information about how the University uses your personal data, please see the University's Information Governance webpages or contact Information Governance Unit:

Telephone: (0191 33) 46246 or 46103

E-mail: information.governance@durham.ac.uk

Information Governance Unit also coordinate response to individuals asserting their rights under the legislation. Please contact the Unit in the first instance.

Data Protection Officer

The Data Protection Officer is responsible for advising the University on compliance with Data Protection legislation and monitoring its performance against it. If you have any concerns regarding the way in which the University is processing your personal data, please contact the Data Protection Officer:

Jennifer Sewel
University Secretary
Telephone: (0191 33) 46144
E-mail: university.secretary@durham.ac.uk

Your rights in relation to your personal data

Privacy notices and/or consent

You have the right to be provided with information about how and why we process your personal data. Where you have the choice to determine how

your personal data will be used, we will ask you for consent. Where you do not have a choice (for example, where we have a legal obligation to process the personal data), we will provide you with a privacy notice. A privacy notice is a verbal or written statement that explains how we use personal data. Whenever you give your consent for the processing of your personal data, you receive the right to withdraw that consent at any time. Where withdrawal of consent will have an impact on the services we are able to provide, this will be explained to you, so that you can determine whether it is the right decision for you.

Accessing your personal data
You have the right to be told whether we are processing your personal data and, if so, to be given a copy of it. This is known as the right of subject access. You can find out more about this right on the University's Subject Access Requests webpage.

Right to rectification
If you believe that personal data we hold about you is inaccurate, please contact us and we will investigate. You can also request that we complete any incomplete data
Once we have determined what we are going to do, we will contact you to let you know.

Right to erasure
You can ask us to erase your personal data in any of the following circumstances:

- We no longer need the personal data for the purpose it was originally collected
- You withdraw your consent and there is no other legal basis for the processing
- You object to the processing and there are no overriding legitimate grounds for the processing
- The personal data have been unlawfully processed
- The personal data have to be erased for compliance with a legal obligation
- The personal data have been collected in relation to the offer of information society services (information society services are online services such as banking or social media sites).

Once we have determined whether we will erase the personal data, we will contact you to let you know.

Right to restriction of processing
You can ask us to restrict the processing of your personal data in the following circumstances:

- You believe that the data is inaccurate and you want us to restrict processing until we determine whether it is indeed inaccurate
- The processing is unlawful and you want us to restrict processing rather than erase it

- We no longer need the data for the purpose we originally collected it but you need it in order to establish, exercise or defend a legal claim and
- You have objected to the processing and you want us to restrict processing until we determine whether our legitimate interests in processing the data override your objection.

Once we have determined how we propose to restrict processing of the data, we will contact you to discuss and, where possible, agree this with you.

Retention
The University keeps personal data for as long as it is needed for the purpose for which it was originally collected. Most of these time periods are set out in the University Records Retention Schedule.

Making a complaint
If you are unsatisfied with the way in which we process your personal data, we ask that you let us know so that we can try and put things right. If we are not able to resolve issues to your satisfaction, you can refer the matter to the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO). The ICO can be contacted at Information Commissioner's Office Wycliffe House Water Lane Wilmslow Cheshire SK9 5AF
Telephone: 0303 123 1113
Website: Information Commissioner's Office

PART 2 – TAILORED PRIVACY NOTICE

This section of the Privacy Notice provides you with the privacy information that you need to know before you provide personal data to the University for the particular purpose(s) stated below.

Project Title:
Commuter students' experiences of Higher Education

Type(s) of personal data collected and held by the researcher and method of collection:
Personal data will be collected through interview and university document analysis. This will include name and university of employment. Audio recordings and notes will be taken during the interview.

Lawful Basis
Under data protection legislation, we need to tell you the lawful basis we are relying on to process your data. The lawful basis we are relying on is public task: the processing is necessary for an activity being carried out as part of the University's public task, which is defined as teaching, learning and research. For further information see
https://durham.ac.uk/research.innovation/governance/ethics/governance/dp/legalbasis/

How personal data is stored:

All personal data will be held securely and strictly confidential to the research team. You will be given the option to choose a pseudonym which will not be connected to your name or identity. Signed consent forms will be stored separately to project data. All personal data in electronic form will be stored on a password protected computer, and any hardcopies will be kept in locked storage. Data will not be available to anyone outside the research team. The conversation will be recorded and stored on an encrypted device until it has been transcribed by the researcher. No-one else will have access to the recording, and it will be erased once the transcript has been completed.

How personal data is processed:
Your personal data (as outlined previously) is being collected in order to analyse responses according to certain criteria.
Participant data will be anonymised at the point of transcription. The recorded conversation will be transcribed by the researcher, and personal information will be coded and anonymized. Only the research team will have access to the recording. Transcripts of any conversations between participant and researcher will be entered into N-Vivo for analysis. After six months the data will be completely anonymised and the original records, including any information which can identify you personally (e.g. audio), will be destroyed after the PhD is completed. Transcripts of interviews will be retained to validate the research findings.

Withdrawal of data
You can request withdrawal of your data at any time during the research up until research analysis commences. Before this point, if you no longer wish to take part in the study during data collection, your role in the research would cease immediately and all of the data pertaining to your involvement will be deleted.

Who the researcher shares personal data with:
Personal data will only be shared with those involved in the research project (namely the lead researcher and supervisory team). Personal data may be included in relevant research publications or other project outputs, however please note that permission will be obtained through the consent form.
Please be aware that if you disclose information which indicates the potential for serious and immediate harm to yourself or others, the research team may be obliged to breach confidentiality and report this to relevant authorities. This includes disclosure of child protection offences such as the physical or sexual abuse of minors, the physical abuse of vulnerable adults, money laundering, or other crimes covered by prevention of terrorism legislation. Where you disclose behaviour (by yourself or others) that is potentially illegal but does not present serious and immediate danger to others, the researcher will, where appropriate, signpost you to relevant services, but the information you provide will be kept confidential (unless you explicitly request otherwise).

How long personal data is held by the researcher:
We will hold personal data for six months. All data will be anonymised at the point of data collection and will be securely stored with password protection. Any/all personal data will be deleted no later than 18 months after the period

of research (the PhD). The exception to this is consent forms, which will be kept for the length of the research project (3 years) before being anonymised. Anonymised transcripts of interviews will be retained to validate the research findings and will be made available in the UK Data Services repository. All data shared through the repository will not allow participants to be traced back to it and the data will only be submitted for re-use if researchers conclude that no identifying features are present in that data set.

How to object to the processing of your personal data for this project:
If you have any concerns regarding the processing of your personal data, or you wish to withdraw your data from the project, contact Emma Maslin via email on e.l.maslin@durham.ac.uk. If you would prefer to contact the lead supervisor, this is Dr Jonathan Tummons who can be contacted on Jonathan.tummons@durham.ac.uk.

Further information:
For further information, please contact Emma Maslin via email on e.l.maslin@durham.ac.uk. If you would prefer to contact the lead supervisor, this is Dr Jonathan Tummons who can be contacted on Jonathan.tummons@durham.ac.uk.

Appendix 9: Interview schedule (staff)

Thank you for agreeing to this interview. I'll first be asking you about how you and/or your institution defines a 'commuter student'.
In your own words, how would you and/or your institution define a 'commuter student'? Do you use any other terminology to describe this?
Do you feel like this definition is appropriate to describe 'commuter students'? If no, do you have an alternative definition? Why do you think this is a better definition than the one your institution uses?

Next I'm going to be asking you some questions about the issues faced by commuter students.
In your own words, I'm going to ask you to highlight any issues which you think commuter students face in their experience of higher education across the student lifecycle. This can be both generally and/or specific to the experiences of your commuter students at your particular institution.
So firstly, do you think commuter students face any issues in access & admissions?
Thank you. Next, do you think that commuter students face any issues in the access and/or experience of their academic studies? This can include academic resources (e.g. library) as well as academic contact time.
Thank you. Next, do you think that commuter students face any issues in the access and/or experience of the wider university? This is anything that is not related to academic study, so for example extra-curricular or social activities.
Thank you. Lastly, how do you think commuter students make friends at your institution? Do you think this is different to their non-commuting peers?

Next, I'm going to be asking you some questions about your institutions' policy regarding commuting students.
So far we've talked about your institutions' definition of commuter students. Next I'm going to ask about the specific institutional support (if any) available to commuter students.
Do you have any **academic** support that is offered to commuter students in addition to the general student population? This may be things like priority slots with academic tutors or flexibility with their timetable.

Do you have any **social** support that is offered in addition to the general student population? This may be things like a dedicated contact for commuting students or priority wellbeing slots.
Do you have any other policies or facilities in place for commuting students that you'd like to talk about?
Do you think the institution does, or should, have a role to play in supporting commuter students in your institution? If yes, how could this be done?

Thank you. Is there anything else you would like to add about the experiences of commuter students that we haven't already discussed?

Appendix 10: Initial coding (June 2023)

Name	Description	Files	References
Academic	Top level code, all codes underneath relate to academic experience of commuter students	0	0
Academic material		4	11
Assignments	Anything relating to completing and submitting university assignments	4	4
Attendance	Anything related to commuter student attendance at uni, including whether they do or do not attend classes	12	28
Group work		1	1
Online classes		4	5
Lecture capture	Anything related to student experience of watching lectures online (recorded through a a version of lecture capture)	6	12
Timetables	Anything related to a commuter students' timetable	11	38
Cancellation of classes		3	3
Time spent before or after commute		8	12
Time spent between classes		12	37
UCU strikes		6	6
Working at home		4	6
Working in other spaces in City		4	5
Working in other spaces in Institution		4	5
Access and admissions		9	19
Induction Week		2	2
ANT		10	24
Baggage carried		5	7
Caring responsibilities		2	3
Changing commuting status	Anything related to a student talking about changing from commuting to living with other students and/or in student accommodation, or vice versa.	4	5
COVID		1	2

Name	Description	Files	References
COVID impact on access and admissions		1	1
Dropping out		1	5
Facilities on campus		5	9
Feelings towards commuting 2		0	0
Anxious		3	8
Commuting preferred option		1	1
Confident		1	1
Cost of commuting		7	11
Easy		2	3
Getting used to it		1	1
Justifying travel		4	5
Likes the commute		1	1
not used to it		2	2
Time-consuming		2	3
Tiring		4	5
Unexpected		2	3
Food		3	9
Heterogeneity	Anything displaying different in a commuter students' experience.	12	23
Inaccuracies reported by commuter		3	3
Interactions with staff	Anything related to commuter students' interactions with staff at the university	9	37
Interactions with the researcher	Anything that demonstrates influence of researcher on participant.	16	62
Intersectionality		7	12
Listening to music		5	6
Mature student		6	19
Part-time work		10	19
Place		0	0
Choosing where to occupy space		4	7
Knowing the place		2	2
Library usage		8	16

Name	Description	Files	References
Not knowing the place		2	2
Placement		1	2
Social	Top level code. Anything related to social lives of commuter students	0	0
Commuting alone		4	4
Experience of college		7	22
College non-participation		3	4
Extra-curricular activities		5	11
Commuting impact on extra-curricular		4	7
No participation in extra-curricular		3	6
Friendships		9	14
Classmates v friends		9	17
Commuting impacting friendships		4	6
Home friendships		4	4
Knowing other commuters		3	7
Social impact from commuting		5	7
Social impact from part-time work		1	1
Socialising outside of uni		1	1
Student parent and childcare		5	10
Suggestions to improve commuter experience		1	1
Technology and app usage		9	23
Transport		5	5
Busyness		3	3
Busy public transport		2	2

Name	Description	Files	References
Car parking		10	22
Choosing transport		3	7
Different transport types		4	5
Doing uni work on transport		1	1
Impact of delays and cancellations		4	9
Preference of route		9	27
Preference of seating		1	3
Public transport precarity		2	3
Railcard		1	1
Time spent on commutes		6	7
Traffic		6	7
Train strikes		3	4
Travel time		4	7
Type of ticket used		1	2
Using transport apps		1	2
Uni not their entire life		1	1
Use of spaces on campus		4	7
Weather		12	21

Appendix 11: Revised coding (November 2023)

Name	Description	Files	References
Academic	Top level code, all codes underneath relate to academic experience of commuter students	3	3
Academic material		9	17
Assignments	Anything relating to completing and submitting university assignments	7	7
Attendance	Anything related to commuter student attendance at uni, including whether they do or do not attend classes	19	45
Group work		9	13
Online classes		13	17
Lecture capture	Anything related to student experience of watching lectures online (recorded through a a version of lecture capture)	12	18
Placement and fieldwork		5	7
Timetables	Anything related to a commuter students' timetable	35	91
Cancellation of classes		4	4
Time spent before or after commute		24	36
Time spent between classes		27	62
UCU strikes		21	32
Access and admissions		16	32
Induction Week		2	2
ANT		38	124
Baggage carried		8	10
Changing commuting status	Anything related to a student talking about changing from commuting to living with other students and/or in student accommodation, or vice versa.	4	5
Coming onto campus on a day with no lectures		3	4
COVID		8	13
COVID impact on access and admissions		4	4

Name	Description	Files	References
Dropping out		2	6
Facilities on campus		32	74
Feelings towards commuting 2		7	7
Anxious		4	10
Commuting is the norm		2	3
Commuting preferred option		3	4
Confident		1	1
Cost of commuting		24	50
Easy		3	4
Getting used to it		5	7
Hate commuting		2	6
Justifying travel		5	6
Likes the commute		1	1
not used to it		2	2
Stressful		1	2
Time-consuming		7	9
Tiring		9	12
Unexpected		3	5
Waste of time		2	2
Food		29	54
Heterogeneity	Anything displaying different in a commuter students' experience.	47	128
Illness		3	3
Inaccuracies reported by commuter		5	10
Interactions with staff	Anything related to commuter students' interactions with staff at the university	25	82
Interactions with the researcher	Anything that demonstrates influence of researcher on participant.	38	124
knowing the rules of the game		2	2
Listening to music		11	13
Part-time work		18	39
Place		1	1
Choosing where to occupy space		19	28

Name	Description	Files	References
Knowing the place		3	3
Library usage		25	47
Not knowing the place		2	2
Working at home		12	14
Working in other spaces in City		8	11
Working in other spaces in Institution		8	10
Ramadan		2	6
Social	Top level code. Anything related to social lives of commuter students	0	0
Commuting alone		5	6
Commuting with others		4	5
Experience of college		7	22
College non-participation		3	4
Extra-curricular activities		20	38
Commuting impact on extra-curricular		9	14
No participation in extra-curricular		8	12
Friendships		21	44
Classmates v friends		13	21
Commuting impacting friendships		6	8
Home friendships		6	6
Knowing other commuters		14	24
Social impact from commuting		8	11
Social impact from part-time work		1	1
Socialising at uni		4	13
Socialising outside of uni		3	5
Suggestions to improve commuter experience		8	9

Name	Description	Files	References
Technology and app usage		30	105
tension between commuter v non-commuters		2	2
time of day		1	1
Transport		16	24
Busyness		8	12
Busy public transport		17	36
not busy public transport		4	7
Car parking		24	42
Choosing transport		21	34
Different transport types		9	14
Doing uni work on transport		4	4
Impact of delays and cancellations		22	43
Preference of route		26	71
Preference of seating		11	18
Public transport precarity		8	18
Railcard		7	10
Regularity of public transport		3	3
Time spent on commutes		28	47
Traffic		20	30
Train strikes		12	18
Travel time		5	8
Type of ticket used		5	6
Using transport apps		10	19
Uni not their entire life		1	1
Use of spaces on campus		8	11
Weather		30	54
WP & Commuting		0	0
Caring responsibilities		3	4

Name	Description	Files	References
Disability		9	22
Intersectionality		9	19
Mature student		12	32
Student parent and childcare		11	19

Appendix 12: Participant vignettes

Institution A

Ethan is a third-year mature student in the Faculty of Social Sciences, admitted to his program through Institution A's mature student access scheme. Having started his degree during the COVID pandemic, his on-campus academic commitments had increased periodically throughout his degree, his third year being the first year he had classes on the main campus. His time at university was split between the main campus and separate sports campus around a mile apart. Ethan predominantly commuted via car from his home in Yorkshire which he shared with his partner and children. His journey which could take him between an hour and two hours to campus one way due to traffic and speed restrictions on his route, and was bookended by dropping off and picking up his children from their childminder. Halfway through the fieldwork period, Ethan began experimenting with travelling via public transport (bus and train) to reach Institution A due to frustration with the unpredictability of his journeys.

Lyla a first-year student in the Faculty of Social Sciences, travelled to Institution A via train from the North East to Yorkshire region. Lyla always planned to commute to university and live in her family home, but chose Institution A through clearing. This was from missing her grades for her firm university choice (also in Institution A city) and rejecting her NE-based insurance choice. She has friends from her previous school at Institution A, both those who live in the city and commute, although she does not always commute with them due to different class timetabling. Lyla's classes take place two days a week on campus, which allows her to undertake part-time work in her hometown in addition to odd shifts as a university student ambassador.

Carmen is a second-year student in the Faculty of Social Sciences. Commuting via train within the wider Yorkshire region, her route requires her to use two trains from her hometown to Institution A, in addition to the bus from her house to her hometown's train station and the walk from Institution A city train station to campus. During the fieldwork, Carmen's commute took between an hour and two hours one way. Carmen chose to commute to Institution A due to a strong childhood affection for the wider city from day trips with her mother and continues to live in the family home for her studies. Carmen initially commuted to campus twice a week although this changed to three times a week during the start of the fieldwork period. This complimented her part-time work which was necessary for her to be able to afford university as she had not taken out a student loan, working up to 42 hours a week on top of her studies.

Institution B

Violet is a second-year mature student in the Faculty of Social Sciences at Institution B, commuting by car within the Yorkshire region from her home she shares with her partner with her commute taking roughly 30 to 50 minutes. Violet is a wheelchair user which means she is able to park in the accessible bays on campus with her blue badge, although these are operationalised on a first-come, first-serve basis. During the fieldwork period, Violet's car malfunctioned which left her unable to attend university for a large portion of the university term. In the second term she was able to use taxis to get to and from campus, although these were expensive and not always available due to her accessibility requirements. Whilst commuting independently, Violet had a large group of course friends she socialised with when on campus, including Rita who also took part in the study.

Rita is a second-year mature student in the Faculty of Social Sciences at Institution B. Rita, who commutes within the wider Yorkshire region to reach Institution B, had previously commuted using public bus. However, due to a combination of concerns around COVID transmission, mental health and the inconvenience of bus timings Rita's husband now routinely drove her to and from campus. Rita's adult daughter lives in Institution C city and works at Institution B, so she would regularly meet her when they were on campus together, in addition to socialising with course friends including Violet.

Rahmatullah is a first-year student in the Faculty of Science at Institution B, having studied for a Foundation degree the year previous. Rahmatullah commutes within the Yorkshire region from his family home and uses multiple methods of public transport to attend university, namely a combination of public buses and train. On one of our commutes together he had stayed at his grandparent's house nearby his home to look after his grandad whilst his grandma was away. Rahmatullah's course required him to attend campus for class five days a week. His journey time varied from between an hour and two and a half hours one way which he attributed to problems with his initial bus journey from his house to the town train station; his bus was often delayed or didn't show up, which then led him to miss his train connection. Rahmatullah knows other commuters on his route from his course, and they have a group chat which they use to communicate together.

Zayn is a second-year student in the Faculty of Science at Institution B. Zayn is the closest of my participants to his university, both in terms of time and distance, commuting from the outskirts of Institution B city. He commutes either by public bus, bike, or walking, with his choice of transport largely depending on the weather. Zayn lives in the family home and mostly commutes independently, although talks regularly about socialising with students on campus, either in the library, during his academic commitments and/or at extra-curricular activities.

Sam is a second-year mature student in the Faculty of Science at Institution B. Sam commutes from his own home in the region he shares with his wife using a public bus from his hometown to the university, a bus he previously

used to travel to work pre-pandemic. Whilst his town also has a train station, the bus stop is closer to his home and drops him closer to campus than if he was to travel by train. He sometimes gets an additional bus in Institution B city to get him closer to campus, particularly on his morning commute and/or during inclement weather. His journey to campus can largely vary due to the time of day he is travelling as a result of rush-hour traffic and traffic accidents.

Institution C

Maddie is a second-year mature student in the Faculty of Social Sciences in Institution C, commuting via car within the North East region from her home she shares with her children and partner. Maddie drives to university and parks in one of the city's multistorey car parks, paying for parking each time she travels to campus. Whilst it would be cheaper for her to park at one of the city's park and ride services, Maddie chooses to park in the city centre for the closeness to lectures and familiarity of the car park. Maddie is an anxious driver so travels via quieter cross country roads to reach the city rather than the motorway. Maddie works part-time alongside her studies doing night shifts at weekends which particularly impacts her attendance at Monday morning classes. During the fieldwork period, Maddie made the decision not to attend any non-compulsory classes as she could watch these at home using lecture capture.

Oliver is a first-year mature student in the Faculty of Social Science in Institution C, having competed an access course at a local sixth from college the year previously. Oliver commutes via car from a small town in the North East region, a commute that roughly took 30 minutes but could be lengthened due to country roads and farm traffic. Oliver commuting by car supported the flexibility required for him to pick up his child from nursery and family members who lived nearby. During the fieldwork period, he was having to park in a mixture of on-street parking bays and risking parking in university car parks without a permit as there had been issues in obtaining one from university staff. He was later issued a permit, although this restricted him to parking in a singular university car park.

Niamh is a first-year mature student in the Faculty of Social Science in Institution C, living with her parents in the North East region. Niamh commuted by car, a journey which took between 35 to 50 minutes depending on traffic. As a blue badge holder she was able to park in a mixture of university and public blue badge spaces across the city, although this only arrived during the fieldwork period. As a result, she parked in a college car park at the start of the academic year which she had been told by college staff was not checked by wardens. Niamh applied for her course after leaving the armed forces, although during the fieldwork period expressed strong doubts as to whether she would continue with her degree. This was largely due to not enjoying the course (and the impact of commuting on this), in addition to wanting to live with her fiancé who was still serving.

Zoe is a second-year student in the Faculty of Social Sciences in Institution C, although she had attended Institution C for three years having switched courses at the end of her first year. Zoe currently lives with her parents in the region, a journey which takes between 15 and 45 minutes by car depending on traffic. Zoe had a university car parking permit which, like Oliver, specified she could park in a singular car park in the city. During her first year of both her previous and current course, she lived in college accommodation. At the start of her second year she commuted from another North East city with undergraduate and postgraduate students, however she was unhappy with this living arrangement and moved back into the family home. For the following academic year, Zoe had already signed a rental agreement to live in private student accommodation in Institution C city with a friend.

Lucy is a foundation-year student in the Faculty of Arts & Humanities in Institution C. Lucy is international but had lived in the UK with her parents for the past 4 years, commuting from the family home in a North-East city for her course. Lucy uses multiple forms of public transport to reach the institution (a bus and two trains), maximising her commute time by attending online classes whilst on the move. For example on one of our commutes together, we visited a café part way through so she could listen to her online seminar. Lucy was hoping to live in student accommodation in Institution C city the next academic year, although during the fieldwork period had not yet managed to secure accommodation.

Penny is a third-year mature student in the Faculty of Arts & Humanities in Institution C. Penny commutes by public bus from her home she shared with her partner and dogs in a village on the outskirts of Institution C city, a journey which took between 30 and 60 minutes depending on rush hour traffic. Periodically she was picked up or dropped off at university by her partner when he was on leave from the armed forces. Penny had always commuted, commuting from another village in the vicinity at the start of her degree before moving in with her partner. She also commuted to campus outside of term-time to use university study facilities and meet with her course peers. Penny hoped to do a Masters in the department the following academic year.

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