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**Non-traditional students as field outsiders: a case study of  
the institutional sub-field of an 'elite' university and its role  
in social reproduction**

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Submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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## **Abstract**

This thesis explores the perceptions and experiences of non-traditional students at a high-tariff, prestigious and so-called ‘elite’ university in the UK. The premise of this research is that universities that sit at the top of UK league tables constitute a distinct segment of the higher education field, characterised by a homogenous demographic intake of middle-class and advantaged students and the relative security it provides its graduates in accessing professional employment. Existing research indicates that there is a significant pool of qualified non-traditional students who opt to study elsewhere (Sutton Trust and HEFCE, 2004; Boliver, 2013), and government and institutional interventions primarily aim to change this through raising the aspirations of these students (Byrom, 2009). In response to these findings, this PhD research contributes to updating the evidence base through three novel approaches. Firstly, it moves beyond deficit approaches to the changes that universities themselves can make to become inclusive environments. To do so, it adopts a qualitative case study of one ‘elite’ HEI - Durham University - to explore the culture of a university holistically and the processes and practices that underpin it. Secondly, it employs an immersive research design - including a longitudinal interviews - with first year students who self-define as coming from a background where going to university was not common. This produces detailed insight into their prior perceptions of the university and their social experiences whilst at it – in relation to the institutional culture - at a level of detail unmatched by other studies. Thirdly, the research conceptualises the university as a “social field” (Bourdieu, 1966). My Bourdieusian analysis of data shows how students who may be seen to have “won” the “game” of the UK Higher Education field by entering an ‘elite’ institution, and who take up objectively similar positions to each other in the HE field once they do so, actually face very different experiences,

opportunities and likely outcomes due to their social background, associated habitus and levels of capital. I find that the University draws on its historical position as a “field outsider” to position itself as “distinct” (Bourdieu, 1984) in today’s marketized HE field. Internally, the institutional field of the collegiate university is still structured around the habitus of the elite and “invented traditions” (Hosbawm and Ranger, 1983) are used to claim the legitimacy of this field structure. Initially, participants were attracted to these practices and saw them as markers of the institution’s high quality, which they sought in order to gain the symbolic capital of a Durham degree to become upwardly socially mobile. In reality, however, the internal social structure of the collegiate system requires a fitting habitus and extremely high levels of economic capital for participation, excluding those without. It is on these grounds that I make recommendations for change to make the social and cultural environment of this ‘elite’ university a more inclusive space.

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## **Declaration**

I confirm that no part of the material presented in this thesis has been previously submitted by me or any other person for a degree in this or any other university. In all cases, where it is relevant, material from the work of others has been acknowledged.

## **Statement of Copyright**

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# Chapter One: Introduction

## 1.1 Introduction

Research within the Sociology of Education in the UK and other national contexts has pointed to the fact that opportunities in accessing higher education (HE) are unfairly distributed amongst social class groups. In the past, the focus of literature was on the comparative chances of young people from different socioeconomic backgrounds accessing any place at a university. However, as the HE system – both at home and globally – has become increasingly more hierarchical through marketisation, privatisation and differentiation, the attention has necessarily shifted to also look at *who* participates *where*. Recently, studies in the UK context have found that these differential access opportunities are accompanied by inequalities within the student experience whilst at university and graduate prospects upon completion of degree. This body of research as a whole tells us that both school-leavers and mature students from working-class backgrounds, state schools, ethnic-minority backgrounds, and homes where they are the first generation to go on to HE, are less likely to apply to university in the first instance (Reay, 1998; Hutchings and Archer, 2001; Reay, 2001) and are less likely to consider going to a Russell Group (RG) institution when they do so (Reay et al., 2001a; 2001b; Ball et al., 2002; Modood, 2004; Voigt, 2007; Boliver, 2013; 2015; Shiner and Noden, 2015). Moreover, they receive fewer offers from such places when they do apply (Zimdars et al., 2009; Boliver, 2013; 2015), and then face more difficult journeys to graduation than their more privileged peers, as they balance studying with additional commitments and deal with identity troubles as a working-class person in a middle-class environment (Reay et al., 2009; Reay et al., 2010; Byrom and Lightfoot, 2012; Abrahams and Ingram, 2013; Bathmaker et al., 2013; Reay, 2017; Hordósy and Clark, 2018; Hordósy et al., 2018; Rare Recruitment, 2018;

Clark and Hordósy, 2019). These students are also less likely to secure graduate-level employment and are more likely to be in a lower social class grouping in the years after university (Byrom, 2009; Wakeling and Savage, 2015; Bradley and Waller, 2018; Tholen and Brown, 2018). Therefore, despite widened participation, the HE system actively contributes to social reproduction as the majority of students are filtered into universities, and then occupations and social positions, that reflect their starting position in life.

This thesis seeks to contribute to the literature that addresses how this can be changed. It employs a case-study research design to explore the processes that contribute to unequal application rates in the first instance by looking at how self-defined non-traditional students view a university that tops UK league tables. It then investigates how these students who do apply and enter the university experience it whilst they are there by focusing on institutional practices. In so doing, it highlights how the *institution*, in addition to the HE sector as a whole, contributes to maintaining and creating social inequalities. It ends by examining how this could be rectified to create a more diverse student body that reflects the society in which the institution is placed. The purpose of this introductory chapter is to provide a short rationale as to why I have undertaken this research.

## **1.2 Expansion of Higher Education**

Historically, the HE sector within the UK has reflected the British class system by providing a distinguished education for the sons of elite and professional families. The ancient universities of Aberdeen, Cambridge, Glasgow, Oxford and St Andrews catered for upper-middle class men pursuing careers as the “clergy, doctors and lawyers” (Robbins, 1963:6). Although the universities of the 1800s and early 1900s

widened beyond this demographic slightly, it was still the case that the numbers of young people obtaining a university degree was under the 10,000 mark in 1938 (Bolton, 2012) and this reflected the fact that secondary education was out of the reach of the majority of middle- and low-income children, with eighty per cent of children ending their formal education at fourteen (Barber, 1994:1). However, in line with the post-War creation of the welfare state and the raising of the compulsory secondary schooling age to fifteen, from 1944 maintenance grants were introduced to fund those from poorer backgrounds to go to university (Boliver, 2018) and the numbers obtaining a degree had almost doubled by 1950 (Bolton, 2012).

On the principle that “courses of [higher] education should be available for all those who are qualified by ability and attainment to pursue them and who wish to do so” (Robbins, 1963:8), the Robbins Report was published in 1963. This established that practical training and specialised degree courses were to take place in universities to create a skilled workforce to solve the country’s “pressing problems”, as well as to produce graduates generally “cultivated” in addition to being specially trained in one discipline (ibid.:6). Moreover, higher education would work in turn to ensure the “transmission of common culture and common standards of citizenship” (ibid.:7) among young people. Consequently, the HE sector saw expansion post-Robbins - with an increase from 33 universities in 1960 to 44 in 1970 (Mayhew et al., 2004:66) and the creation of thirty polytechnic institutions (Boliver, 2018:37) - and the number of school-leavers progressing to university doubled in the decade following the report (Forsyth and Furlong, 2003). It remained a public service, with students facing no or very low cost to participate in higher education (Brown and Carasso, 2013), funded by an additional £20,500,000 in Government grants (HC Deb, 1964; *The Times*, 1964) – approximately £350 million in today’s purchasing power.



This was followed by the dismantling of the binary HE system in 1992. The polytechnic institutions, which were originally created to be a “distinctive sector of higher education” and to “complement the universities” (DfES, 1966), were absorbed into the university sector, adding a further thirty-five HEIs to the unified system. Subsequently, participation levels rose to 32% by the midpoint of the decade (Boliver, 2018:37), and numbers of universities continued to increase in the new millennium. Today, students have a choice of 217 HE providers (HESA, 2020) and in 2017-8, just over 50% of those aged between 17 and 30 participated in higher education (Department for Education, 2019) - a forty-five percentage point increase since pre-Robbins (Boliver, 2013). Now the UK, as with many other countries, can be characterised as a “high participation system” (Marginson, 2016).

Since Robbins, widening - rather than just increasing - participation in higher education beyond the small pool of those traditionally deemed eligible for university - the middle and upper-class, predominantly male, children of the elite educated in public schools - has been a central concern for UK education policy-makers. From the introduction of the neoliberal agenda into British government by the Thatcher administration in the 1970s, this has been framed increasingly in terms of it enabling meritocratic social mobility – that is, that disadvantaged children who have the supposed requisite aptitude and hard-working mentality to fill the top professional positions in society, do so. “Who gets into university, and how they get on once they have left” is seen as to play a “critical role” in achieving these social mobility objectives (IRSMCP, 2012:1), as one’s eligibility for a professional occupation “overwhelmingly depends” on obtaining a university degree (ibid.:13).

This meritocratic ideal has long been critiqued on the grounds that it assumes a level playing field among students to achieve the educational credentials needed to gain entry to HE. Private school pupils receive significantly more resource than those in the state sector -16.67% of all school expenditure and 14.3% of all teachers are in private schools, despite just 7% of children attending them (Green and Kynaston, 2019:15). This translates into one in seven educators teaching in the private sector, whereas only one in 16 children attend them (ibid:15). Grammar schools receive more funding than the secondary modern schools in their local authorities (Gorard and Siddiqui, 2018), and some of these and other selective schools adopt private school orientations and rituals and challenge the top private schools in elite university places (Gamsu, 2018a; 2018b). House prices within the catchment area of a “good” state school are up to 12% higher than the average (Jarvis and Alvanides, 2008:385). Burgess et al. (2009) found that, on average, schools available to all parents have 16% of pupils receiving free school meals, yet this is 22% for those in lowest socio-economic status quintile and 11% for those in the highest. Consequently, of the 200 best performing state schools only 3% of students were receiving free school meals, compared to the national average of 14.3% (Wilby, 2006:219). This translates in widely disparate grades achieved by the most advantaged and most disadvantaged in the UK, detail of which is provided in chapter two. The point here is that school qualifications have become “institutionalised cultural capital” (Brown et al, 2016:192; Hardy, 2012a:135) in that they enable those who have it to take up university places that then, in turn, provide them with more of this form of capital that allow them to gain more stable positions in the field of employment. However, as demonstrated, this type of capital is necessarily interdependent on levels of other forms of cultural and economic capital, and grades become proxies for other variables.

In recognition of this fact that a pupil's schooling and background has implications for whether or not they will go on to attend university, widening participation (WP) initiatives, such as Aimhigher (2004), were introduced with the aim of including traditionally under-represented groups within these objectives (Harrison, 2018). The monitoring body of the Office For Students (OFFA) was created to hold universities accountable to fair access, encouraging institutions to deal with differences in economic capital by providing maintenance bursaries and in cultural capital through outreach schemes that sought to "raise the aspirations" of pupils from non-traditional backgrounds. The number of females entering higher education has now increased to the extent that they now outnumber males (Department for Education, 2019) and there is increasingly more participation from most ethnic minority groups (Weekes-Bernard, 2010:4). Now, higher education is now frequently termed not only "high" but a "mass" system in political and academic discourse (Nash, 2019).

However, although the level of participation in higher education has increased for all social groups since the 1960s, HE participation remains starkly unequal, as the sector changes primarily benefited the middle class (Blanden and Machin, 2004; Blanden et al., 2005). The participation gap between the top three and bottom three social classes actually increased from 17 percentage points in 1950 to 22 percentage points in 1960 (Connor et al., 2001:6). *The Times* reported in 1969 that research indicated that the Robbins universities had done "little to redress inequalities of opportunity" for the working class (*The Times*, 1969:2) and the free expanded university provision was seen as a "social-welfare service for the upper-middle classes" (Brown and Carasso, 2013:xii). By the 1990s the participation gap between professional and intermediate

and the working classes had hit over 60% and then increased a further four percentage points over the course of this decade (Ball et al., 2002:53).

Moreover, by remaining committed to neoliberal principles, policies since then have directly contradicted the governmental emphasis on widening participation and any attempt to level the playing field in university access: they have moved to frame the purpose of higher education as a private investment, rather than a public good (Boliver, 2018; Harrison, 2018). Despite its acknowledgment of persistent participation inequalities, the Dearing Report in 1997 was used by the Blair Government to justify the introduction of tuition fees at £1,000 per annum and the replacement of grants by a means-tested maintenance loan (ibid.). New Labour then tripled the fee-rate in 2004. Schemes such as Aimhigher, and the creation of OFFA, actually came about due to the explicit recognition of the fact that this policy change would likely have significant negative consequences for applications from disadvantaged students. However, the limit of OFFA's powers was to a "largely monitoring and dissemination role" (ibid.:56) and in reality, this was never used (Coulson et al., 2018:6). In 2005 Callender and Jackson wrote that "dramatic changes" would be necessary to "alter radically who goes to university in England", without which, "universities will remain the preserve of the middle classes (Callender and Jackson, 2005:19).

Yet since Callender and Jackson's time of writing, the momentum towards a HE system in which the individual student bears the burden of cost for their education has accelerated over a very short time period (Raaper, 2020). Following the Browne Report of 2010, the government block grant was replaced by raised tuition fees for English and Welsh students in 2012, with most university courses funded by students

alone (Coulson et al, 2018; Harrison, 2018), coming into policy just 18 months after being announced by the Coalition government (Clark et al., 2019:714). These changes are justified on the basis of “human capital” economic thinking that students themselves benefit individually from university education and should therefore bear the costs (James, 2018:232), even for courses like nursing where the vast majority of graduates go on to work in the public sector. For students graduating in the 2019 cohort, the average initial debt was £40,000 (Bolton, 2020). Research has found that working-class young people are more debt averse (Callendar and Jackson, 2005) and since the replacement of National Scholarship Programme bursaries for students from disadvantaged backgrounds with a higher maintenance loan (Hordósy et al., 2018), they will be leaving university with an even higher debt than a more advantaged student. The £9,000 per annum fee cap was then lifted for students entering higher education in 2017/18 and institutions began charging £9,250.

Unsurprisingly, then, data from the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) indicates that there still remains a large gap between the numbers of the most advantaged and most disadvantaged young people applying to university in the first instance and then entering HE in the autumn. In 2019, there were 59,050 fewer 18-year old applicants from POLAR4 quintile 1 than quintile 5 (UCAS, 2019b) and a 26.4 percentage-point difference between these quintiles in terms of entrants (UCAS, 2019a). Inequalities in who does and does not go to university remain persistent in the mass system, which is expected given regressive policy which has transferred the cost of participation from state to student and burdens the disadvantaged the most significantly.

### **1.3 Qualitative Inequalities in the Stratified Sector**

These long-standing inequalities in access to HE in general have been well-documented within Sociology of Education literature. However, they are also accompanied by newer qualitative inequalities in access to different *types* of university. As I will go on to argue in more depth in the next chapter, the expansion of universities that I have outlined above has been accompanied by diversification and stratification, as the sector has developed into a “diverse market” (Jo Johnson quoted in Bathmaker, 2015). Neoliberal thinking and application of market logic has impacted the structure of the HE sector, as competition between providers has intensified. This is exemplified by the existence of university league tables, which rank HE providers according to numerous quality measures, and the lifting of the student numbers cap, meaning that institutions now compete for students. This means that despite constituting a unified sector since the absorption of polytechnics into the HE sector in 1992, some universities hold significantly more prestige than others. As I will explain in the next chapter, these divisions along prestige lines effectively replicate and fine-tune the pre-1992 distinctions.

This stratification of institutions is matched by the stratification of students by background: the universities that top HE league tables have consistently high over-representations of school leavers from high-income backgrounds and private schools and very low numbers of students coming from low-income households and low participation neighbourhoods (LPNs) (*Complete University Guide*, 2020; HESA, 2020). The percentage of applications to RG universities from state-educated students remained stagnant at 75% from 2002/2003 to 2012/2013 and fell for students from

low-participation neighbourhoods following the tuition fee increase to 5.3% in the 2006/07 academic year (Boliver, 2015:31-32). This is recovering at an extremely slow rate – hitting 7.8% in 2014/15– and represents over a twelve percentage-point negative difference to the population (Boliver, 2018:39). It is unsurprising then, that 2016 research found that just ten post-1992 universities located outside of London were responsible for 32% of WP within the whole sector (Mian and Richards, 2016:13). A year later saw the replacement of OFFA with the Office for Students (OfS). This sought to bring about a “streamline[d]” regulatory approach to widening participation, integrating the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) within this also (BIS, 2016). OfS (2018) wanted to encourage universities to take a more radical approach to widening participation through setting “ambitious long-term objectives for change” (p.3) in order to “eliminate the gap in entry rates at higher-tariff providers between the most and least represented groups” (p.4). To do so, they established “challenging outcomes-focused targets” for high-tariff institutions (p.21).

However, still in the latest application cycle, gaps in participation at ‘elite’ universities remain persistent, with some actually increasing. Detail and statistics on this are presented in the next chapter but here it is important to note that, still, universities at the bottom and top of league tables remain “synonymous with particular social demographics” (Byrom and Lightfoot, 2012:126) with ‘elite’ institutions being by and the large the preserve of the middle classes. Professional and graduate employers have been found to recruit primarily from these high-ranking universities (Byrom, 2009; Bradley and Waller, 2018), which means that these access inequalities in the HE sector have consequences for equality of opportunity in the employment market and potential

earnings over the lifetime. In looking at HE inequalities, we must now look at “whose bum [is] on *which* seat” (Waller et al., 2018: xvi, emphasis added).

A significant contributing factor to this inequality is the extremely high entry tariffs demanded by these universities and the unequal distribution of pre-requisite grades amongst young people, which result from the widely disparate educational opportunities outlined in section 1.2 that begin years before the point of university application (Adnett and Tlpova, 2008). However, research has established that there exists a significant body of students who do have the relevant qualifications to enter a high-tariff university who do not do so (Sutton Trust and HEFCE, 2004; Boliver, 2013; Jerrim, 2013). Literature indicates that this is in part due to the “push factor” (Pásztor and Wakeling, 2018) of lower offer rates for non-traditional students, even when controlling for grades (Zimdars et al., 2009; Boliver, 2013; 2016), which in itself warrants further research. However, it is also due to the “pull factor” (Pásztor and Wakeling, 2018) of a lower application rate in the first instance (Boliver, 2013). Existing research has established that this is because non-traditional students often deem ‘elite’ HE institutions (HEIs) as places not appropriate for people like themselves, due to perceptions about the ‘typical’ student being middle class and privately educated and having concerns that they would not fit in because of this (Reay, 1998; Reay et al., 2001a; 2001b; Ball et al., 2002; Shiner and Noden, 2015).

In recognition of the fact that HE inequalities do not exist only at the level of access, and that students from non-traditional backgrounds have higher attrition rates than advantaged groups (Christie et al., 2004; Jerrim, 2013), prior research has also focused on the HE experience of these minority groups at ‘elite’ universities. This has found



that these students often feel excluded from the student body due to a range of factors, including being surrounded by signifiers of wealth among their student peers (Power et al., 2003; Aries and Seider, 2005; King and Smith, 2018; Mountford, 2018) and experiencing direct forms of class-based stigmatisation from traditional students (Reay, 2017). Some of these studies have compared this to the experience of traditional students, who do not face such difficulties, as they are like a “fish in water” (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992:127) due to having the economic, cultural and social capital to fit in within such an environment.

However, instead of seeking to change the bias certain groups experience in the admissions process or encouraging more applications and improving student experience and retention rates by changing and diversifying the culture of ‘elite’ universities themselves, currently policy at both the government and institutional level takes a deficit approach. Within ‘aspiration raising’ strategies such as the aforementioned Aimhigher and its successors, the under-represented student is conceptualised as the problem for having supposedly incorrect ideas about what their own future should look like. This approach encourages students to take “a normative view, not just about the importance of choice but about the social world” (Bridges, 2006:26) and to make decisions that are in line with the values of the middle class, ignoring both the real reasons for which they are originally put off from doing so, and the problems they face when they pursue a ‘correct’ future pathway into an ‘elite’ HEI. This is true in how student experience and success at university is conceived of too – as Christie et al. (2005) wrote, “in the past, the difficulty of such students in succeeding at university has largely been ascribed to the students themselves: that they fail to ‘fit

in' to the university environment, and do not access the support or develop the competencies needed for social and academic success" (p.23).

However, as Clark et al. (2019) argue, there is currently "a paucity of literature that specifically seeks to examine the inherent challenges and contradictions within the rhetoric and the everyday realities of the policy as they are experienced by undergraduates across the 'whole student lifecycle'" (p.711). Evidence shows that non-traditional students perform better academically than their more advantaged peers in their degree (Hoare and Johnston, 2011; HEFCE, 2014; Moore et al., 2013; Verkaik, 2018; Rare Recruitment, 2018). This demonstrates that it is social and cultural matters, over and above academic, that needs to be explored. Although previous research has made a significant contribution to pointing out some of the problems faced by students whilst in the HE field, this has mainly focused on newer, post-1992 institutions (Leathwood and O'Connor, 2003; Read et al., 2003; Byrom and Lightfoot, 2012) and those that do focus on social and cultural matters within the 'elite' environment in the UK context (Crozier et al., 2008; Reay et al., 2009; 2010; Reay, 2017; the work of Hordósy and colleagues) do not explore the culture of the institution holistically. The need to focus on this is exemplified by a quote from one of my participants, Tony, who says "people talk about elite universities and how the stress comes from the pressure to do well and all the exams are harder and stuff like that. But you know what I'm not bad academically, I do alright, I can hold my own in an exam. The stress from the academia is a thing but it is nothing in comparison to the stress of trying to live here. I think that's something we definitely don't talk about enough". Rectifying this gap - and "getting to grips with what goes on inside the hallowed grounds" (Crozier et al., 2008:176) - is the rationale on which this research is based.

## 1.4 Contribution of Thesis

This PhD research seeks to add to the evidence base by taking the institution as the point of departure and the primary unit of analysis to explore an ‘elite’ university’s culture, and the implications this has for non-traditional student experience, at a level of detail unmatched by existing studies. To do so, I employ a case study of one ‘elite’, collegiate university – Durham University - that is both typical of institutions that top league tables and unique in its institution-specific traditions and rituals that arise from its college system. My data collection strategy centres around a series of repeat interviews with self-defined non-traditional first-year students, in which I explored their perceptions of Durham University prior to application, and the individual pathways that led them to entering the institution, despite differing to the student demographic norm. The aim of this is to shed light on factors that contribute to both self-exclusion at the point of application for their class peers and those that encouraged the entry of these students. The main focus, however, is on the positives and negatives that these participants experience on a daily basis through micro-encounters during their time at the university. I investigate both the barriers to and facilitators of belonging by looking at the specific *processes* and *practices* by which students come to feel at home or are alienated by the institution. This is important given the collegiate structure of the institution. As Eamon (2016) points out, a collegiate structure has been seen as “unchanging and inherently flawed dinosaur, embodying an antiquated, elitist legacy of education and representative of an inherently unjust colonial system” (p.67). To assess whether this is the case in reality and “to deal with both critics and complacency”, it is necessary to explore “what traditions reinforce positive outcomes and what practices, constructed under the cultural influences of another time, should

be altered, reinvigorated or even ended” (ibid.). By looking at the workings of such collegiate structures, practices, traditions and rituals, this study does just that.

Throughout this chapter, I have alluded to the Bourdieusian terms of “capital” and “social field” to explain the current state of play within the education system from school through to university access (which I shall define in the next chapter). I employ these terms, along with “habitus”, to conceptualise inequalities in university experience. I conceive of the university as an ‘institutional sub-field’ within the broader HE field and ‘elite’ sub-field of research-intensive, high-tariff universities. This allows me to explore how non-traditional students who have been seen to have ‘won’ the game of HE by making the ‘correct’ university choice can face extreme challenges once they do enter this field, as they have to take qualitatively lower positions in the field’s hierarchy throughout their first year at the institution. These research aims translate into the following specific research questions:

1. How does Durham University position itself in relation to the HE field and HE elite sub-field?
2. Whose habituses structure the institutional sub-field of Durham University? What implications does this have for students’ positions within the field and their experiences?
3. To what extent can students with non-traditional habituses engage in the institutional sub-field?
4. What processes and practices sustain the continuity of the field from year to year, across staff and student cohorts?

Therefore, this research is based on the premise that widening participation at the ‘elite’ universities is necessary for both social mobility and wider social justice. This does not preclude its ability to argue for a more radical transformation of the HE system: it recognises and agrees with the body of literature that argues for the work

towards a total removal of a hierarchy of universities, rather than just greater equity work by those institutions at the top. This research shows how embodying ‘elitism’ hurts even those students who are successful in gaining access to the ‘top’ universities. By diversifying all universities to reflect the population’s social mix, we can have universities with cultures that are more welcoming, equitable in who can actively take part and have a stake in, and that are more realistic reflection of the world upon which graduates will enter.

## **1.5 Structure of Thesis**

This chapter has provided a short overview of the state of play within the wider educational field that is characterised by inequality. I have demonstrated how there are still inequalities in access to universities in general but that this is accompanied by new inequalities in access to and experience at the ‘elite’ university sub-field specifically. The next chapter (Literature Review) reviews policy change and existing literature to outline in more depth how these new inequalities have emerged, in sections 2.2 and 2.3. I explore in greater detail how the HE sector as a whole can be conceptualised as “social field” that is typified by the increasing importance of relativity between field positions. In section 2.4 I draw on Bourdieu’s concept of “habitus” to explain how the university-choice process is not a rational action, as is typically conceived by policy-makers who design WP initiatives. I also use it to demonstrate how non-traditional students can have extremely challenges experiences once within the ‘elite’ sub-field. Next, in section 2.5, I outline the novel approach of this research that focuses on the institution as the unit of analysis. I argue that there is dearth of existing studies that have done this, and those that have done so focus primarily on the unifying forces within universities. Here, I introduce my term of the ‘institutional sub-field’ which can address the gap in the literature by looking at how there can be a hierarchy of students

within the field of an ‘elite’ university, based on actor’s capital and habitus. I explain how this concept is of more analytic utility than the previously employed term of “institutional habitus”. In section 2.6 I engage with critiques of Bourdieu’s concepts and defend my use of them by explaining how the supposed “determinism” within these is justified on the grounds of existing evidence. I also outline how I address concerns that Bourdieusian theory fails to shed light on *how* inequalities emerge (Naidoo, 2004) in my research, which I do by focusing explicitly on processes and practices.

Chapter three (Methods) then discusses the research design of this study. I begin, in section 3.2, by outlining the research aims and questions that underpin what follows. Following this, I explain the philosophical orientations of this study – of both its ontological and epistemological underpinnings – that led me to opt for a qualitative study in the first instance, and a case-study methodology that comprises numerous different research strategies in the second. Ultimately, I argue that prioritising participants’ experiences is the most valid and reliable way to explore the research aims, and that a pragmatic approach was employed to ensure that this could be investigated from numerous angles, which was prioritised over and above a commitment to a specific philosophical orientation. In section 3.4 I explain my choice of case-study institution, stating why Durham University is an excellent research site to conduct this research – in terms of its entry requirements, unrepresentative demographics and archaic institutional practices. In section 3.5 I describe the sampling strategies that I employed in order to gain a group of participants, who although self-selected, are diverse enough to compare and contrast non-traditional student experiences. Section 3.6 then outlines and reflects on the different methodologies that

I used – from document analysis in 3.6.1 to the repeat interview design (which comprised a focus group, photo interview and semi-structured interviews) in sections 3.6.2 to 3.6.5. Section 3.6.6 then describes the supplementary one-off interviews with participants who could not commit to a longitudinal study. I then explain my process of data analysis for the data generated from these different methods in 3.7. In 3.8 I reflect on the process of conducting ‘insider’ research – that is, being a member of the institution which I am studying. This is followed by a reflection of my positionality as a researcher and an explanation of how I dealt with this in all stages of the research. In the final substantive section of 3.10 I state how I ensured that this research was conducted as ethically as possible.

Chapter four (the Case Study) is the first empirical chapter and uses findings from the document analysis strand of data collection. It is shorter in length than the following two, and its primary purpose is to provide the context for chapters five and six that are built around interview data. I use this chapter to explore the structure of the case study university. Section 4.2 uses archival material to provide a chronological history of the institution. Next, in section 4.3, I outline the present-day traditions, rituals and practices that stem from its unique history and are specific to the collegiate structure of the university. This is followed by 4.4 which investigates how the university presents itself and argues that this self-presentation is based on the idea of ‘excellence’ in all areas of university life, rather than just the academic arena. I analyse this by employing Bourdieusian theory and the concepts of “emulation” (Veblen, 1899) and “invented traditions” (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983), to discuss how the university seeks to establish and maintain “distinction” (Bourdieu, 1984) to the rest of the ‘elite’ sub-field.

Chapter five (Perceptions and Induction Week Realities) uses analysis of data from the focus group and first individual interview with the repeat sample, along with the results from interviews with the one-off sample, to explore participants' prior perceptions of the university and how these compared to their initial experiences in induction week. It begins, in section 5.2, by exploring how participants decided to go to university in general. Here, I argue that these students had developed "highly developed academic dispositions" (Reay, 2009:1115) whilst at school. This worked in conjunction with the doxa that characterises the wider educational field and idealises the leaving behind of class background in the pursuit of social mobility, to make it seem to these participants that the only valuable option for them was to apply their high academic performance in another social field. Section 5.3 then outlines how the participants chose to apply, and then attend, Durham University specifically. I propose that it was the combination of league-table positioning and other symbolic indicators – such as traditional practices and the collegiate system – that led participants to believe that this institution in particular would offer them the most secure path to the professional jobs that they sought. However, other factors "pulled" them to firm their choice of Durham in the UCAS process – namely, the perception that the collegiate system would improve their chances of feeling like they belonged in the university, and the importance of a summer school intervention in breaking down the structural barriers that would have prevented them from being able to achieve this "dream". Section 5.4 then explores participants' expectations in the run-up to coming to the university, which centred around concerns to do with attending Durham University specifically, over and above university in general. These were to do with worries about the cost of collegiate accommodation (5.4.1) and the expectation that they would feel out of place due to their social background (5.4.2). However, these negative thoughts



were mitigated by the pull of the collegiate system (5.4.3) and the weighing up of cost-benefits, whereby participants accepted that these concerns would translate into negative realities but viewed them as worth it for the longer-term benefits that would result from attaining a Durham degree (5.4.4). Next, in section 5.5, I compare these expectations with their realities during the first week at the institution. 5.5.1 outlines the shock participants felt on day one due to being surrounded by students so different from themselves. I explain how this translated into feelings of academic inadequacy in section 5.5.2, which was accompanied by experiencing direct classism from these students (5.5.3). Following this, 5.5.4 describes how, despite being extremely excited to participate in traditional college events, such as formal dinners, many participants found these repelling. The chapter ends more positively in 5.5.5 by explaining how some participants started to form great friendships with fellow students at this early stage, although this was not the case for all participants.

In the final empirical chapter, six (First-Year Experiences), I analyse participants' experiences as they developed across the full year. I begin in 6.2 by explaining how interviewee's initial feelings of being out of place continued past induction week. I explain in 6.2.1 and 6.2.2 that participants began to "acclimatise" to this and increasingly saw it as a positive in that they were excited to meet and engage with a variety of people. However, in 6.2.3 I demonstrate that this optimism was often cut short by more experiences of class-based stigmatisation, coping with which was significantly eased by the support of other non-traditional students (6.2.4). 6.3 focuses on the opportunities that participants could engage with due to the university's collegiate structure. It was clear that there were many positives associated with this in that many participants reported rich engagement with extra-curricular activities (6.3.1)

but the sheer number of opportunities available, combined with the institutional pressure to live up to the Durham norm of participating in anything and everything, resulted in anxiety (6.3.2). This was exacerbated by financial stress, as I argue in section 6.4. This stress was a direct result of the cost of college accommodation which is extremely high relative to the cost of other university accommodation and resulted in participants having to undertake many hours of paid work (6.4.2) and strictly budget (6.4.3), which negatively impacted on their ability to participate in the social and cultural life of the institution in comparison to their wealthier counterparts. This section ends by outlining the cases of extreme financial hardship experienced by Gwyn and Tony. Section 6.6 then discusses the unique student social calendar that characterises the Durham collegiate system. I begin by highlighting the positives associated with this in 6.6.1, before explaining how, despite this, the social structure as a whole works to preclude the full participation of non-traditional students by demanding high levels of economic capital. This section ends by explaining how the “democratic” structure of the college system means that, currently, change is unlikely due to the dominance of students from financially elite backgrounds in both the wider university and the individual colleges. This chapter ends with section 6.7 that explains how despite extremely challenging experiences, all but one participant completed their first year at the university. I argue that this is not due to the strong pastoral support system within the university, but rather is a result of the participants’ commitment to pursuing a better life for themselves and their families. This commitment often resulted in severe anxiety to perform the best they could academically, as they viewed a Durham degree as their “one shot” at securing a career outside of the manual and service sectors and a more financially stable future. This explains how they persevered in adversity and is demonstrated in the fact that they were often reluctant to tell their

families about the reality of their experiences for fear of lessening their parents' pride and hope for the future that had resulted from their acceptance and attendance at the university.

Finally, I conclude this thesis by reflecting on the findings and my contributions to existing research, as well as re-visiting my over-arching argument. In this concluding chapter I also provide suggestions for future research and recommendations for institutional policy change that will improve the experience of non-traditional students, and in turn, encourage a greater number of applications from a greater diversity of students.

## **Chapter Two: Literature Review**

### **2.1 Introduction**

This thesis seeks to explore the culture of a high-tariff, so-called ‘elite’ university in the UK and the experiences of non-traditional students in relation to this. Specifically, it seeks to determine the processes and practices that underpin this dominant culture and to understand who is eligible to partake effectively in it, with the aim of generating recommendations to improve non-traditional student experience. In the introductory chapter I argued that despite a commitment to social mobility through university expansion and widened HE participation being a popular trope across recent governments, this was accompanied by regressive changes to policy. Although the expanded university sector has created a system that is “by definition” less exclusive than the elitist system of previous decades (Marginson, 2016:421), the class gap remains, and inequalities persist. As outlined in chapter one, this research is responding to the calls for more research into the new inequalities in the sector.

### **2.2 The Higher Education Field**

#### **2.2.1 Conceptualising the Diverse and Competitive UK HE Sector**

The expanded UK HE sector can be usefully conceptualised as a Bourdieusian “social field” (Bourdieu, 1966). Bourdieu proposed that social space comprises a multitude of these fields (Rawolle and Lingard, 2008), which are “arena[s] of production, circulation and appropriation of goods, services, knowledge or status” (Swartz 1997:117). Essentially, any area of social life can be conceptualized as a social field if the effects of life within it are to some extent bounded: a field is at least semi-autonomous from other arenas of social life, even to politics and the economy (Bourdieu, 1993b). It has the ability to “insulate from external influences and to uphold

its own criteria of evaluation over and against those of neighbouring or intruding fields” (Wacquant, 2007:269 cited in Bathmaker, 2015:66). A field therefore has its own “logic of practice” (Bourdieu, 1990) or “laws of functioning” (Marginson, 2008:304) that produce a field’s own values and “markers of achievement” (Maton, 2005:689) and influences the behaviour of the agents within it (Thomson, 2012:65). Also key to a field is its relationality: field denotes the positions of actors within a particular social context in relation to one another (Bathmaker, 2015), over and above its objective function of, for instance, producing, circulating or appropriating goods and services. Fields are “profoundly hierarchized” (Thomson, 2012:71), with agents occupying dominate and subordinate positions within these fields. Position-takings within the field depend on the varying amounts of assets relevant to the field that an actor holds, which Bourdieu termed “capital”. The use of field, as a concept with its focus on boundedness and relationality, can therefore help to explore the orderings of social life and associated inequalities and power differences within social spheres that are particular to that sector or arena (although these may be connected to or correlated with the situation in other fields, such as the overall field of power).

Bourdieu himself identified the French university system, along with the housing sector (Bourdieu, 2005), as examples of a such a “field” (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990). The French HE sector was, at the time when he was writing, highly autonomous, relatively free from government intervention and managed and run by academics themselves (Raaper and Olssen, 2016), although this autonomy was reserved mainly for institutions within the “high academic sub-field” (Marginson, 2008:314). It was characterised by the unique characteristics of “credentialing of knowledge-intensive labour, and basic research” (ibid.:303) with “norms and targets”

being set from within (Raaper and Olssen, 2016:148). In terms of the university sector's relativity, the positions taken by agents within it are structured around amounts of "scholastic" and "academic" capital (Maton, 2005:690), with the status differences between the prestigious *grandes écoles* and other universities being a key example of how this plays out in practice (Bourdieu, 1996). Beyond Bourdieu himself, the use of field to explore empirical data has been less popular than "habitus" among educational sociologists (Gamsu, 2018a). Exceptions to this began with Naidoo's (2004) analysis of the position taking of South African universities in a period of instability and Maton's (2005) application of field to debates within the UK HE system around the "new student" of the 1960s. This was followed by Marginson's (2008) conceptualisation of the position-takings and power differences of national university sectors within the global HE system and Bathmaker's (2015) empirical study of the position of further education (FE) colleges and vocational post-16 routes in relation in HE in England. These studies share in common that they demonstrate the use of the concept in exploring the relative positions of *institutions*, in addition to individual agents, within these fields.

In all of these applications of Bourdieu's work, the authors have emphasised how the high level of boundedness that Bourdieu wrote about is no longer a key feature of most national HE systems. Increasing government intervention within the HE system in the UK, in other national contexts and in the global system, means that the autonomy has increasingly been replaced by heteronomy, as "power has shifted away from the academics to a new group of external policy managers" (Raaper and Olssen, 2016:151). Within the UK, this can be tracked back to the expansion trends beginning in the 1960s (Maton, 2005) and the absorption of HE into the national education system, as outlined in the previous chapter. I will go on to argue in the next section

that some universities have retained more autonomy than others. However, as I noted, the government placed pressure on all universities to expand, whereas previously universities had been “managed, staffed, funded and administered by agents located firmly within the field” (ibid.:698).

This field infiltration by government can also be seen in the differentiation within the UK system (Bathmaker, 2015). The UK government abolished the binary divide between universities and polytechnics in 1992, which created - in theory - a single field of HE as the latter were absorbed into the university sector and removed from the control of local government (Maton, 2005). However, policy since then has increasingly worked to encourage greater diversification within the single field. As I outlined in the previous chapter, students are increasingly being framed as consumers, as tuition fees have rocketed, and social risk has been privatised (Clark et al., 2019). Institutions have increasingly been encouraged to cater for the different needs and wants of a variety of these student-purchasers (Archer, 2007), to put them at “the heart of the system” (BIS, 2011). The diversity of HE options was expected to play a part in the New Labour government reaching their 50% participation target (Bathmaker, 2015:62), and the former Universities and Science Minister, Jo Johnson, stated that a “diverse, competitive system” opens up “real choice” for today’s students and reflects their “diverse needs” (Johnson, 2015). Today’s HEIs offer different courses, specialize in different disciplines, require a range of grades for entry, and place differing amounts of emphases on research and teaching (Briggs, 2006). For instance, former Education Secretary Charles Clarke spoke in parliament of “the great research universities, the outstanding teaching universities and those that make dynamic dramatic contribution to their regional and local economies” (quoted in Archer, 2007:638). Students are in

turn encouraged to “shop’ for a university based on various factors such as price, degrees offered, location, services provided and reputation” (Raaper, 2020:247).

As evident in the treatment of students as consumers, market principles are also increasingly structuring the field of HE. This is seen in the fact that this momentum towards diversification within the HE field is increasingly underpinned by the drive to privatisation. Not only has the cost of a university education been transferred to individuals, but private companies are now generating profit from their debt. In the last ten years, the government has increasingly allowed specialist private providers to offer HE courses and award degrees, the first being BPP Holdings Plc, which changed its name to “BPP University College” in 2010 (UCU, 2011). A policy change in 2012 then meant that private for-profit providers were permitted to seek university status, with the first being the University of Law in the same year (Harrison, 2018:58). Three years later, Jo Johnson announced that FE colleges could offer foundation courses and degree apprenticeships (Bathmaker, 2015), which, along with HE, began to establish joint ventures with private providers and run private finance initiative (PFI) projects (UCU, 2008). From 2018 more alternative HE providers were “actively encouraged” to position themselves within the HE field (Raaper, 2020:248).

In line with the HE field being moulded into a “market”, it is not only “diverse” but competitive too. The lifting of the student numbers cap in 2014 now allows universities to expand their intakes to as many high-tariff applicants as they wish (Harrison, 2018:58) and the market to increasingly dictate how many students they recruit. Moreover, as fees for international students are unregulated, success in the competition for students means financial gain. This stems from the infiltration of New Public Management ideologies, borrowed from the private sector, into the HE field, whereby



“strategic management (i.e. outcomes, indicator measures)” rules (Raaper and Olssen, 2016:151). This has the “paradoxical effect” of “working to standardise some university missions and activities” (Amsler and Bolsmann, 2012:287), with league tables ultimately operating as neoliberal frameworks which pressure institutions to conform to market demand (Brown et al., 2013:687). However, the government advocates competition between institutions on the grounds that “competition between providers in any market incentivizes them to raise their game, offering consumers a greater choice of more innovative and better-quality products and services at lower cost”, with HE being “no exception” (BIS, 2016:8).

### **2.2.2 The Hierarchical Field: Rankings and Social Prestige**

Universities now deliberately play up to this differentiation themselves to attract student-consumers (and their tuition fees) and use mission statements to market their unique purpose in this expanded, diverse sector (Sauntson and Morrish, 2010:75). It was universities themselves that established mission groups within the sector, which represent these different types of universities that Clarke alludes to, such as the Russell Group which market themselves as “research-intensive, world-class universities” (Russell Group, 2020), University Alliance which represents “professional and technical universities” that offer “innovative applied research and practical skills-based learning” (University Alliance, 2020) and Million+ for “modern” (i.e. post-1992) universities (Million+, 2020). As I go on to argue further in section 2.2.3, the impetus for this emanated from the research-intensive and prestigious institutions, to which newer institutions had to respond defensively. The point here is that pre-1992 distinctions between universities persist (Boliver, 2011). It is on the whole post-1992 universities and former Polytechnics that advertise their links to industry over their research quality or prestige (Coulson et al., 2018) and emphasise students and learning

in their mission statements. This is in contrast to the global competitiveness in student recruitment and research emphasised by the Russell Group (Sauntson and Morrish, 2010).

Competition has also resulted in the prevalence of league tables, which rank universities according to a range of measures of ‘quality’ (Archer, 2007), and have become “the de facto gauge of excellence” (Hazelkorn, 2014:14) since they were introduced into the UK by *The Times* in 1992 (Amsler and Bolsmann, 2012:284). Now there are three annual league tables for UK universities, as well as a growing number of global rankings (ibid.; Marginson, 2016). These operate on the basis that they improve information available to student-consumers, allowing them to make the ‘informed’ choices, a factor that is so important to the government (BIS, 2016). Yet they have also necessarily encouraged competition between universities as they emphasize “relative position over substantive function” (David 2016:186). This demonstrates that the importance of relativity between field positions – the second of the key characteristics of a “social field” – is increasing.

### **2.2.3 A Vicious Cycle: the Role of Capital and Frozen Field Hierarchies**

As aforementioned, field positions depend on an agent’s capital. Capital comes in the forms of economic (financial assets), social (personal networks and connections), cultural (exposure to, knowledge of and engagement with high-brow cultural forms such as classical music) and symbolic (other forms that are seen as valuable within the field and can stand in place for the other three types of capital). Key to the hierarchy within social fields is that “there is no level playing field” as “players who begin with a particular form of capital are advantaged at the outset because the field depends on, as well as produces more of, that capital” (Thomson, 2012:67). This leads to social

reproduction, as the position of an actor at the beginning defines the plausible range of position-takings for them in the future.

The key way that this operates in the UK HE field is through the apparatus of these league tables. University rankings are seen to be a legitimate and objective measure of institutional quality, as they are based on supposedly stringent statistical methods (Hazelkorn, 2011; David, 2016) and incorporate a range of metrics – important given that the BIS (2016) said “if we place too much emphasis on whether a provider has a long-established track record, this by definition will favour incumbents, and risks shutting out high quality and credible new institutions” (p.8). Yet in practice it is clear that the position-takings of universities are very much dependent on their accumulated capital and, as such, fluctuate little from year to year. Research dating from their inception has critiqued the metrics for being flawed as they are based on “narrow, selective criteria” (Beech, 2019:118), with the Higher Education Statistics Agency warning against ranking according to one year’s worth of data alone (Boliver, 2015). Universities drastically differ in economic capital (assets and endowments) and their consequential ability to attract and invest in staff with esteemed research profiles (Blackman, 2017), which can be seen as social capital. This then feeds into scoring highly on the research metrics (Leathwood and O’Connell, 2003:613), which act as a form of symbolic capital. The government then concentrates more economic capital in the form of research funding in these high-ranking universities (Pásztor and Wakeling, 2018:995), making these institutions likely to dominate again on this metric in the following year. The reliance of teaching quality metrics on poor proxy measures such as student-staff ratio (Beech, 2019), means that the teaching-focused universities remain lower in the rankings. Generally, the higher in the league table, the higher level

of applications, which in turn means the institution can be more selective and demand higher grades for entry, which feeds back into the rankings as tariffs are used as metrics in multiple league tables (Coulson et al., 2018:4) and are an intuitive indicator of prestige to the prospective applicant (Blackman, 2017:14). The league tables are highly correlated with each other, meaning that despite their proliferation, they produce very similar outputs (Boliver, 2015).

As a consequence, there is a clear and consistent prestige hierarchy within the UK university field that confers greater amounts of symbolic capital on those at the top. The mission group of the Russell Group, which was founded by the largest, research-intensive universities in 1994 to capitalise on this symbolic capital, claims to represent not only universities that are similar in terms of focus and function but also the “leading” (Russell Group, 2020) universities. Its membership is restricted and - besides periods of expansion to incorporate smaller but equally prestigious universities - does not allow for other universities to rise through into its ranks. The clear social prestige attached to older institutions is also evident in popular culture and the media representations of them as the ‘best’ or the ‘elite’. For instance, Amsler and Bolsmann (2012) point out that spokespeople from the high-ranking universities dominate media coverage of the HE sector, which in return reinforces the narrative of their superiority and their status as the most legitimate members of the field (p.187). Post-1992, teaching-focused universities have been ridiculed for offering “mickey mouse” courses (Leathwood and O’Connell, 2003; Davey, 2012). The introduction of the Teaching Excellence Framework in 2017 represented a possibility for change in this sense, given that newer universities are more teaching-focused. Indeed, in the initial 2017 ratings only 38% of RG universities achieved the highest rating of “gold”, and a

significant proportion of those that did achieve it were post-1992 universities (OfS, 2020). Yet as Blackman (2017) points out, this is unlikely to affect the prestige hierarchy of universities, as the class system within which our universities are situated is “is far more resilient, insidious and nuanced” (p.14) than the newly-created TEF, which in itself is significantly flawed. It strives to summarise the quality of teaching within all departments in a university using a single ‘medal’-rating, by using irrelevant variables – such as graduate employment rates – to measure overall teaching quality, ignoring factors such as student wellbeing (Derounian, 2017).

As I alluded to in the previous section, this means that institutions that top league tables retain more autonomy within the HE field than their newer counterparts – they typically enjoy a consistently high application rate, whereas newer universities are often engaged in a constant battle to survive (Raaper and Olssen, 2016). This means that ‘elite’ universities have more power to resist regulations and to influence the design of policy to function in their favour (ibid.). By contrast, it is the newer institutions that have to work in line with the policies from government and these older institutions to ensure they have ‘bums on seats’. Mateos-González and Boliver (2018) conceptualise performance-based university funding in Italy as part of a drive towards “institutional meritocracy”. Like its individual counterpart, this meritocratic narrative assumes a level playing field and “naturalises” inequalities between institutions by redefining them “as objective indicators of intrinsic merit or worth” (ibid.). This can be applied to the ranking system in the UK: despite the odd fluctuation engineered by a slight change in metrics in order to create headlines, rankings create a vicious circle.

In sum, there has been a clear move away from the principle in the Robbins report that “there should be no freezing of institutions into established hierarchies” (1963:9), and enduring divisions in the unified system effectively replicate and fine-tune the pre-1992 distinctions. Those universities that rank highly have a high volume of economic capital (research funding, endowments) which buys them symbolic capital (social prestige), which then buys them more economic capital in the form of students and their tuition fees (Fumasoli and Huisman, 2013). As a result of this portfolio of capital, their position at the top of the field is maintained. Those who rank lower lack the field-specific capital to contest the positions of the winners. Rather than encouraging equality of provision through raising standards, the ranking game played on the field of the HE sector results in the constant reproduction of inequalities. The dominant institutions already have conditions working in their favour, and metrics and rankings operate as field structures that keep this existing hierarchy intact.

#### **2.2.4 Winners and Losers**

A social field has been compared to a “game” (Hardy, 2012b), as fields are characterized by “permanent conflict” (Naidoo, 2004: 459) and within them agents act to “strategically improve in their quest to maximise positions” (Maton, 2012:53). Despite all agents’ strategies, there are clear winners and losers – different position-takings result in different outcomes, with “dominant agents and institutions having considerable power to determine what happens within it” (Thomson, 2012:71). This is the case for institutions as mentioned above, with winners gaining more economic, social and symbolic capital. It is also the case for the students who attend these universities. As HE participation has risen, and credentials have subsequently been inflated, participation in HE is no longer guarantee of financially stable employment. The proportion of graduates in the population has increased well beyond the proportion

of jobs that are graduate-level, which has led to over-qualification at between 20 and 30 per cent (Tholen and Brown, 2018). The salary difference among graduates increased more than between graduates and non-graduates between 1994 and 2011, with significant overlap between the two groups (ibid.) and Mayhew and Holmes (2013 in ibid.:159) found that it was only the top 15% of graduates who were able to retain their salary premium.

Employers often use league tables as a tool to differentiate between the growing pool of candidates and to inform their graduate intakes (Brooks, 2003). It is the name of the institution, rather than the discipline of degree, that has been shown to predominantly influence professional recruitment (Read et al., 2003:264). Certain graduate employers only visit only the prestigious universities on their “milk rounds” (Boliver and Byrne, 2013). Consequently, it is generally the graduates of RG and other prestigious universities that secure the graduate-level jobs (Bradley and Waller, 2018). This is particularly the case “in politics, the judiciary, the BBC, the Civil Service and the traditional professions” (Bradley, 2018:81) and the most highly paid positions in elite financial firms (Donnelly and Gamsu, 2019), and graduates from RG universities see the highest financial returns from their degree on average (Byrom, 2009:210). It is not surprising, therefore, that Wakeling and Savage (2015) find that among respondents to the Great British Class survey, RG graduates were “considerably more likely to found in the elite class” (p.303) and obtained better outcomes than those who had attended a university in the Million+ group.

Blind graduate hires have been found to decrease the recruitment of RG graduates in favour of other universities (Blackman, 2017:42; Rare Recruitment, 2018), which

indicates that these inequalities are primarily due to recruiters favouring certain institutional names rather than the differential quality of graduates. Degrees have therefore become positional goods (Marginson, 2016), and the importance of relativity between institutions in the HE quasi-market is matched by their graduates in the labour market, the significance of which is inversely correlated with labour market conditions (James, 2018:239). Bourdieu himself highlighted in *State Nobility* (1996) that a higher education in a prestigious university can function as cultural capital for agents to use to take up dominant positions in politics, finance and the sectors named above for their colonisation by RG graduates (Thomson, 2012). Thus, the stratification of universities not only favours dominant institutions but also serves “the interests of the global elite, [whilst being] represented as equality of opportunity for all” (Amsler and Bolsmann, 2012:288), as the HE field lays a clear path to follow for those who are aiming for positions of power. Those without this form of cultural capital lose the zero-sum game of graduate employment.

### **2.2.5 Explaining Social Segregation through “Hysteresis”**

For Bourdieu, even when a situation in, or characteristic of, a field changes, it remains the case that the agents with high levels of capital are most likely to take the top positions within the newly changed field. This occurs due to the different habituses of agents. Habituses are how Bourdieu conceptualised the impact of social fields at the agent level– it is the “social game embodied and turned into second nature” (Bourdieu, 1994:63) by actors who inhabit the field environments. Habituses are a product of experiences accumulated by an individual from different social fields across a life time and expressed in their ways of “standing, speaking, walking and thereby feeling and thinking” (Bourdieu, 1990:70). This is the key mechanism by which structure is reproduced on a day-to-day basis and informs an individual’s behaviour. Although,



habitus “changes constantly in response to new experiences” (Bourdieu, 2000:161), sometimes field structures can change more quickly than the habituses of the agents within it, such as when a sudden policy intervention is introduced (Hardy, 2012a). When this happens, a “hysteresis effect” occurs and the agent with the ill-fitting habitus faces negative sanctions (Bourdieu, 1977:78). He posits that despite field changes, it is still those with high levels of appropriate capital that are able to prevent negative consequences, or indeed make positive results, from these changes, as they are able to use their capital and knowledge of how to “play the game” of the field to fill the newly created dominant positions in the field (Hardy, 2012b).

Expansion and growing stratification within the HE sector are examples of field changes. Although non-traditional students (i.e. those lacking in the forms of capital traditionally required to participate in HE at all) have benefitted from expansion, as evidenced in their increasing numbers going to university, data indicates that it is the students with high levels of economic, social and cultural capital (i.e. the same students who dominated universities pre-expansion) who are able to make the most of stratification in the expanded HE field. Non-traditional students in terms of both social class and ethnicity are concentrated more densely in post-1992 institutions than in older and more prestigious institutions (Modood, 2004; Voigt, 2007; Byrom, 2009; Boliver, 2013, 2015; Shiner and Noden, 2015). Privately educated students, middle-class students and white students are all greatly over-represented at RG and high-ranking universities.

7% of pupils in the UK are educated privately under the age of 16, which rises to 15% at sixth-form level (ISC, 2020), and to 9.8% of students entering university in the

2018-19 academic year (HESA, 2020). Yet 22.57% of entrants to RG universities and 29.67% to Sutton Trust 13 universities in the same year were privately educated. 54% of privately educated students go on to a RG university (Green and Kynaston, 2019:11-12) and they are twice as likely as state educated students to do so (ibid.). They are five times as likely to go to Oxbridge (ibid.), with some private schools having Oxbridge admissions rates of 40% (Verkaik, 2018:5). The legally established link between some schools and Oxbridge colleges (Joyce, 2013) may have been disrupted but there is still a clear trajectory from one of these schools to a high-ranking university. Combined with the high levels of applications coming from the 4% of pupils in grammar schools nationally, it means that 35% of students in RG universities have been to a school that is selective either on income or ability – a more than threefold over-representation (Boliver and Byrne, 2013).

In terms of class, Blackman (2017) finds that over 30,000 university entrants from the top 3 social classes would have to move university in order to match the distribution of those in the bottom four social class groups (p.13). In the absence of data collected around class, other proxy measures - such whether a student comes from a low-participation neighbourhood - are used. Although throughout the sector as a whole 11.4% of young entrants in the 2018/19 academic year came from low-participation neighbourhoods (HESA, 2020), of the four highest ranking institutions in the Complete University Guide league tables with data on low-participation neighbourhood entrants (Cambridge, Oxford, the London School of Economics (LSE) and Imperial College), all had proportions of between 3.7% and 5.1% of their entrants coming from LPNs in the same year – an average under-representation of 6.9 percentage points (Complete University Guide 2020; HESA, 2020). Moreover, 90.2%

of entrants to the UK HE sector in the same year came from state schools (ibid.). Yet all these HEIs fell significantly short of this, with their average percentage standing at 65.98% (ibid.). Conversely, the average percentage of LPN entrants for the institutions in the bottom four of the same league table (Bolton, Glyndwr, Suffolk and London Ravensbourne) was 18.13% and all have over-representations of state school students (average: 97.65%) (HESA, 2020).

This demonstrates that middle-class students and students in selective schools are able to capitalise on the field changes and have effectively maintained their positional advantage, despite widened participation, through the positions they take. More detail on the process by which this happens follows in section 2.3 but this trend demonstrates that the stratification of institutions is matched by stratification of students along social demographic lines. The inequality faced by graduates of different institutions in the labour market is therefore particularly concerning and it explains to a significant extent why it still remains the case that graduates originally from higher income backgrounds earn more than those from lower income backgrounds (Hordósy et al., 2018:356). This concept of field hysteresis helps to explore why expansion trends within the HE field have resulted in replicating earlier inequalities.

### **2.2.6 Legitimisation of Inequality through Doxa**

For Bourdieu, a social field is “typified” by “orthodox values, practices and beliefs” (Grenfell, 2012:83) or a “set of core values and discourses” (Burnard et al., 2016: 231), which he called a doxa. Doxas do not need to be articulated or “asserted in the form of an explicit, self-conscious dogma” (Bourdieu, 2000:16) as they are simply “what goes without saying” in that particular field. These supposed “natural” opinions and

perceptions intrinsic to the doxa tend to be those that favour those who are situated at the top of the field's hierarchy due to the close fit between their habituses and the field (ibid.) and their "feel for the game" (Hunter, 2004). They are essentially arbitrary but the doxa works to misrecognize this arbitrariness (p.114), and in turn they come to be seen as "inherently true and necessary" (Burnard et al., 2016) because those who are privileged by the doxa "are complicit in reproducing the doxa, the presuppositions of the game" (Hunter, 2004:178).

Connecting competition in the UK HE sector to increased quality of provision and increased choice for young people is one such doxa that characterises the HE field. It disguises the fact that the arbitrary ranking of universities according to a range of flawed metrics links the field of HE to the overall field of power (in that it is "a force that mediates, and at the same time reproduces, fundamental principles of social classification" (Naidoo, 2004:458) by advocating its supposed benefits. The effect of this doxa can be seen in the fact that despite the now-embeddedness of league tables and status differences in the sector, increasing participation *per se* is still seen as a synecdoche for social mobility. The alternative models of HE provision offered in newer institutions in the diverse HE quasi-market may indeed suit the needs and different commitments of students (e.g. part-time provision for students with children) and may facilitate the inclusion of these students in the system whereas otherwise they would be absent. However, while politicians advocate competition in the sector whilst also espousing a commitment to social mobility through mass participation, they effectively render the latter more and more unlikely:

*“it is the misrecognition of college rankings of ordinal quality or status that in turn allows reproduction of the power relations that contribute to the recognition of the arbitrariness on which they are based”* (Bourdieu, 1977:164).

Although the benefits of a university education are not limited to graduate prospects, and foster “maturity, increased confidence and a broader and enhanced understanding of the world” (Bradley, 2018:91), which participation of any kind is likely to bring, it remains the case that “after an extended school career, which often entails considerable sacrifice, the most culturally disadvantaged run the risk of ending up with a devalued degree” (Bourdieu, 1999:423 cited in Reay et al., 2010:121). The positions in the field most likely to bring financial security and a professional career are the preserve of the middle class in elite universities. Due to the strong link between specific institutions and professional jobs, this is clearly a problem on social equality grounds whether it is conceptualised in terms of the government’s social mobility framework or a “stronger” approach to social inclusion (Veit-Wilson, 2000). We can see historic and stubborn inequalities being borne out in the expanded HE sector: advantaged students access the higher-ranking institutions, which ultimately provide them with the prestige to access more competitive roles within the job marketplace. This, in turn, contributes to wider social reproduction, as providing the privileged with cultural capital in the form of a prestigious degree “endow[s] [them] with the properties of nature that legitimate them to rule” (Wacquant, 1993:28).

Yet social stratification in the HE system and the clustering of middle-class and privately educated students in high-ranking universities, and working-class students in

lower-tariff universities, result in loss for universities across the sector and students. Reay and colleagues (2009) point out that there has been “a failure of the widening access and participation debate to recognise that elite universities need non-traditional students just as much as the students need them” (p.1116). Blackman (2017) argues that there are “significant educational and productivity dividends” that could be seen as a result of de-segregation among universities (p.59). Evidence from schools suggests “selection reduces the average attainment from disadvantaged backgrounds” (ibid.: 37), and the proposed return of grammar schools has caused great controversy on these grounds. There is no reason that these findings should not apply to those over the age eighteen. Moreover, higher tariff universities themselves miss out on students “who would otherwise bring the different ways of seeing and thinking associated with for example working class experience or black ethnic identity” (ibid.:41). By selecting out diversity and accepting the doxa of exceptional talent, they lose “a resource for leaning” (ibid.:47).

Moreover, as part of the competitive market, it is now the responsibility of institutions to become “respected by employers” (BIS, 2011:5). The “radically improve[d] and expand[ed]” information about graduate employment prospects of different institutions is assumed to help students make an informed choice in opting for an institution that can give them the best footing into a career (ibid.:6). Inequalities in graduate prospects are inevitable when we have a highly hierarchical HE sector alongside vast income inequalities, yet these are now hidden under the second doxa that characterises the HE sector - that responsibility is placed with universities in terms of ensuring “employability” (Marginson, 2016; Tholen and Brown, 2018) and with students in terms of making the ‘correct’ university choice (James, 2018:241).

## **2.3 The Sub-Field of ‘Elite’ Universities**

Conceptualising elite universities as a field in themselves can help us to understand the reasons for this social segregation. As with the prestigious universities in France, the research-intensive, so-called ‘elite’ universities constitute “a fairly clearly defined sub-field” (Bourdieu, 1996:152) within the HE field as a whole. As outlined above, these universities are distinct from the rest of the sector in terms of perceived function, as evident in their membership of a mission group that self-defines them by their “world-class” approach mainly to research but also to education, which situates them in opposition to the teaching and technical-focussed Million+ and University Alliance universities. Secondly, the relative security they offer to their graduates in enabling access to the top positions in the fields of employment and power is an example of a “field effect” that isolates this sub-sector from other institutions, and “the existence of field effects is one of the chief indicators of the fact that a set of agents and institutions functions as a field” (ibid.:132). They are also a field in the sense that they house “the greatest possible number of individuals from the same sector of the field of power” (ibid.:141), whereas post-1992 institutions host a greater diversity of students, albeit these are a homogenous group to the extent that the privately educated middle classes are missing. They are therefore relatively autonomous to the wider HE field, with their own “laws of functioning” (Marginson, 2008).

### **2.3.1 Tariffs as Gatekeeper to Entry of the Field**

The reason for the social segregation is complex and a result of combined and overlapping inequalities at every point in the process. Boliver (2017) points out that getting to a RG university is a three-stage process, with the student needing to remain in education and choose the requisite qualifications, then to select a RG university as

an option to apply to, and then to receive an offer (p.40). It is often said by the universities that the problems lie with the first stage – that the issue is the unequal social distribution of pre-requisite grades necessary to succeed on the course. For instance, when confronted about the poor representation of state-school students in its entrants, Oxbridge often states it is not possible to admit more until state schools produce more qualified applicants (Green and Kynaston, 2019:169).

However, as Boliver et al. (2017b) point out, tariffs have risen across the HE field as whole in line with the increasing level of applications, as they are “proven way to cope with the administrative burden posed by a rise in the demand for university places” (p.25). Moreover, as I stated in the previous section, grades are used as metrics in league tables and, as Blackman (2017) states, an HEI being highly selective is often conflated with high quality in the public imagination, meaning that it is in universities’ interests to raise their entry requirements to as high a level as possible. However, universities that lack the forms of capital outlined in section 2.2.3, and receive fewer applications, will have to have more accessible tariffs so as to ensure places are filled. Prestigious, capital-rich universities, meanwhile, have more power to keep raising tariffs - as they are still guaranteed a steady stream of qualified, advantaged applicants - with the typical standard offer for some courses now being as high as A\*A\*A at some RG universities. These points indicate that the entry tariffs demanded by universities in the elite sub-field are not an accurate reflection of the grades necessary to perform well on a course; rather, they are decided on market terms with universities demanding as high as they are able to. Yet these tariffs go on to determine “both chances for access [...] and the limits within which choices can be made” (Bourdieu,



1996:163), thereby operating as a mechanism or gatekeeper to prevent some students from entering the field.

It is unsurprising, then, that the “main predictor in choosing high-status” choices and universities has been found to be high GCSE grades (Ball et al., 2002:54) and Boliver (2013) finds that having higher A level scores “significantly increases” the likelihood of applying to a RG university. Due to the school and background-level inequalities outlined in chapter one, school attainment is highly correlated with class, which is evident – in the absence of data on pupils’ class background – in the association between proxy variables and attainment. Disadvantaged students are less likely to enter for A Levels than their better-off counterparts (Sammons et al., 2015:1). When they do (or its equivalent), only 1 per cent of them (as measured in terms of free school meal (FSM) recipients) achieve three A’s or more, in contrast to 20% of their state-school counterparts who do not receive FSM (Boliver et al., 2017b:24). 40% of children receiving free school meals achieve five A\* to C GCSEs, 30 percentage points lower than non-FSM children (SMF, 2016). A Level results in 2017 revealed that that the proportion of private school students achieving A\* and As was 22 percentage points above the national average (Green and Kynaston, 2019:8), with the disparity for GCSEs being even more marked: private school students achieving an A or level 7 was 43 percentage points higher than average (ibid.). A state-educated child who is in recipient of FSM is significantly less likely than a more advantaged state applicant, and even less an advantaged private school applicant, to achieve the stellar results required by RG universities. It is for this reason that Bourdieu (1993b) believed that the “entire system of educational and cognitive classifications used in academia are euphemized versions of social classification” (p.178). Universities openly admitting

that the issue lies with working-class students being unable to achieve these results but placing the blame with the state school sector absolves the elite university sub-field from social responsibility and operates as a doxa to make these inequalities seem inevitable.

### **2.3.2 Widening Participation as Reinforcement of ‘Elite’**

In the face of pressure to widen participation from bodies such as the Office for Students, the ‘elite’ sub-field now has to be seen to be making efforts to expand their intake beyond those from a specific sector in the field of power. Existing research on conceptualizations of widening participation within such documentation has highlighted that there has been a shift with the ‘elite’ sub-field becoming increasingly more concerned with positioning themselves as welcoming a diverse student body. The post-1992 field is frequently emphasizing their quality over their diversity (Graham, 2013), indicating a move to the convergence of fields. However, a key difference remains, with Bowl and Hughes (2014) and McCaig and Adnett (2009) finding that the universities in the ‘elite’ field remain “selecting” in their approach to widening their intake and academic ‘talent’ remains a key pre-requisite for entry. They seek out the highest academic achievers by “cream-skimming” the non-traditional applicant pool (Adnett and Tlupova, 2008; McCaig, 2010; 2011; 2015; McCaig and Adnett, 2009). For instance, many institutions use bursaries to reward ‘merit’ in the form of high A-Level (or equivalent) grades (McCaig, 2015). This has the effect of reinforcing their image as places suitable only for the exceptionally talented young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, rather than widening access to become socially mixed on a larger scale. Greenbank (2006a) and James (2018) argue that universities fail to acknowledge class difference in their intakes, instead relying on labels such as “disadvantaged” or proxies such as “postcode”. This, combined with a

general lack of institutional clarity in who constitutes a “disadvantaged” applicant (Stevenson et al., 2010), means that institutions fail to recognize the social and economic structural factors that can affect educational attainment. Ultimately, then, the ‘elite’ field still “operate[s] in a context deeply marked by investment in high tariffs as a marker of institutional quality and reputation” (Coulson et al, 2018:5).

Moreover, Greenbank (2006b) points out how many WP policies, such as the introduction of foundation degrees, are done so for economic reasons rather than a genuine commitment to inclusion. Ahmed (2012) points out that “when equality becomes another performance indicator it cannot be treated as outside the disciplinary regimes whose ends might not be consistent with equality understood as a social aim or aspiration” (p.85), and diversity can become a “technology” in the pursuit of excellence (p.57). Taylor and Scurry (2011) find this to be the case with international students, as universities recruit those “who financially and culturally contribute and can ‘add’ to university ‘diversity’” (p.587). This ‘elite’ sub-field remains reluctant to alter their practices and does little to help tackle wider social disadvantage, expecting students to fit in within the rest of the “traditional” student body.

The introduction of contextualised offers – lowering standard academic entry requirements for a disadvantaged applicant to take into account the context in which they achieved their grades - by the ‘elite’ university field is seen as going some way to help with this disparity. However, these still remain on the conservative side. Currently, the most radical is a reduction of three grades by Edinburgh University (Boliver et al., 2017b:24) and it is not required for those who have received an expensive education to declare their contextual *advantage* (Coulson et al., 2018). The

commitment to judging candidates from different backgrounds by broadly the same academic criteria is unfounded, as when comparing state and privately educated university students who entered with the same grades, it is the state school student that is likely to achieve a better degree classification (Hoare and Johnston, 2011; HEFCE, 2014; Moore et al., 2013; Verkaik, 2018). For instance, a student who had achieved BBB in a state school is just as likely as a student who had achieved ABB in a private school to achieve a First or 2:1 (ibid.). Similarly, Rare Recruitment (2018) find that students from disadvantaged backgrounds perform better at degree level despite having lower A-Level grades. Unsurprisingly, therefore, students admitted with contextualised offers do just as well as those with standard offers (Boliver et al., 2017a). Therefore, selection for entry to the ‘elite’ university sub-field on academic grounds is ultimately a more socially legitimate way of selecting, and is not justified on grounds of evidence.

### **2.3.3 Under-Application**

Moreover, the issue is not completely due to disparities in attainment. It is useful at this point to return to the HESA data for those institutions in the top of the “Complete University Guide” league tables, but this time looking at their figures in comparison to their respective benchmarks set by HESA, which already take academic qualifications into account when calculating the proportions of social groups universities should be aiming to admit (HESA, 2020). Still, it is apparent that all of the top-ranking institutions, besides the LSE, fall significantly short of their respective benchmarks (ibid.). The same can be said of their recruitment of students from LPNs. Conversely, those in the bottom five of the same league table all have state school proportions higher than their respective benchmarks, and all but London

Ravensbourne have a higher representation of students from LPNs than their benchmarks. Thus, it can be confidently asserted that “even where young people from disadvantaged groups have obtained the appropriate qualifications for these universities, they are still less likely to attend” (Reay et al., 2010:108).

| <b>Position on</b> | <b>Name</b>                | <b>% point +- state school benchmark</b> | <b>% point +- POLAR3 benchmark</b> |
|--------------------|----------------------------|--|------------------------------------|
| 1                  | Cambridge                  | -7.8                                     | -1                                 |
| 2                  | Oxford                     | -12                                      | -1.4                               |
| 3                  | London School of Economics | -0.1                                     | -3.7                               |
| 4                  | Imperial College London    | -9.5                                     | -1.5                               |

**Figure 1:** Social composition of top four ranking universities in Complete University Guide in 2018-19 compared to HESA benchmarks. Data from HESA (2020)

The remaining explanations for the under-representation of qualified non-traditional students in the most prestigious institutions are, therefore, either that universities are biased in who they give offers to, or that non-traditional students choose not to apply or attend more prestigious universities. As Bourdieu (1996) wrote, the uneven distribution of students across universities “according to social origin and academic capital” is produced by “the countless “choices”” made by both selectors and the selected (p.141). Boliver (2013) found that the discrepancy in the intakes of students from lower social class groups, state school students and ethnic minority groups by RG universities is in part due to both of these reasons, although the extent varies according to the social group of the non-traditional student. Research has found that even when controlling for grades and facilitating subjects (those required by some universities to study certain degrees programmes - for instance, biology as a pre-

requisite for Medicine) at A-level, those from more advantaged backgrounds are more likely to be offered a place (James, 2018:236). Boliver (2013) found that “applying to a Russell Group university from a private school rather than a state school, or from a white ethnic background increases the odds of admission by about at least as much as having an A grade rather than B grade at A level” (p.355). This is unsurprising given the additional resource available to advantaged students to help them with stage three of the process: private and selective schools have been found to have dedicated careers and university guidance staff that help students with the UCAS personal statements, (Davey, 2012) and they are more likely to have gained cultural capital through their school career through music tuition and extracurricular activity due to “concerted cultivation” by both schools and parents (Maxwell and Aggleton, 2013; Vincent and Maxwell, 2016). Thus, a significant proportion of the problem lies with universities’ selection processes, as well as with disparities at school level. This in itself prompts further research.

This research, however, is focused on the issue of application rate differences between social class groups. Boliver (2013) also found that when controlling for grades, for lower social class groups and to some extent state educated, the main reason for their under-representation is barriers to application to RG university rather than any bias in admissions. Those from manual backgrounds are still only two-thirds as likely as those from higher professional/ managerial classes to apply, and the state educated half as likely to apply than privately educated. Sutton Trust and HEFCE (2004) research found that there are approximately 3,000 state-school students who are qualified to apply to a RG university but do not.

WP interventions at both government (e.g. Aimhigher), third sector (e.g. Making The Leap) and 'elite' sub-field level (e.g. Cardiff University's Step-Up Programme) often purport to tackle these inequalities at application level by "raising the aspirations" of high attaining working-class and first-generation students who could go a higher-ranking university but choose not to. Sutton Trust summer schools, which are an example of the second level of intervention and offer students a residential trip to RG institutions in the hope of capturing their interest and encouraging them to apply, share in common with other interventions the assumption that increasing a student's access to information or contact with an institution will increase the likelihood that they will choose to attend that institution. Although the support that these schemes offer may be helpful in part (in breaking down external barriers to universities through enabling students to visit universities for free, offering a contextualised grade requirement, and provision of a bursary for participation in scheme), high achievement is a condition for acceptance and so these again have the effect of concentrating resources and efforts on a small pool of disadvantaged, very high attaining students (Harrison, 2018:57). It has often been reported that the interventions do not capture those students they are intended to, with the Sutton Trust (2008) itself admitting that "often the very pupils in most need of support are the least likely to apply" (p.31). On the surface these programmes seem to be contributing to the social good, but it ultimately reinforces the image that the elite sub-field is for exceptional students.

Moreover, these interventions are underpinned by the idea that the cause of HE inequalities lies with the intervention-less student having the incorrect aspirations or a lack of information, and "attempt to compensate for perceived deficiencies within the social background of particular students" (Byrom, 2009:209). It is the under-

represented student “who must adapt and change, in order to fit it, and participate in, the (unchanged) HE institutional culture” (Archer and Leathwood, 2003:176). In so doing, they emphasise that “the benefits (of increased attainment and HE entry) are experienced by working-class applicants” (Archer, Hollingworth and Halsall, 2007:559-560) solely, failing to acknowledge that there are benefits to the institutions themselves that a diversity of students could bring. This fits with a weak version of social inclusion discourse, whereby the solution is seen to be in “altering these excluded people’s handicapping characteristics and enhancing their integration into the dominant society” (Veit-Wilson, 1998:45 in Byrne, 2005:5). Moreover, they are ultimately based on a deficit model which focuses on changing the student rather than the system. For Lynch et al. (2015) this amounts to symbolic violence, whereby meanings are imposed “as legitimate by concealing the power relations which are the basis of its force” (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990:4 in Harris et al., 2020:12), as the assumptions underpinning these interventions deem the aspirations unique to the student as incorrect by ruling what counts as a ‘good’ university choice.

## **2.4 The Importance of Habitus**

These deficit conceptualisations also ignore the fact that higher education is “an institutional environment that is generally characterized as essentially middle class” (Lehmann, 2009:634) and overlooks the fact that the problem does not lie with students having ‘incorrect’ aspirations but is instead due to the fact that the ‘elite’ field is off-putting to some applicants. Bourdieu (1996) proposed that in the context of the French *grandes écoles* field this was due to subjective cultural clash, in addition to the more objective structural barriers. This is what this research is seeking to explore in the context of universities in the ‘elite’ sub-field of the UK HE field.



### **2.4.1 Defining “Habitus”**

As briefly outlined in the earlier sections, habitus is how Bourdieu conceptualises the effect of social fields on an individual, as it posits that “all new experiences [are] to be mediated by perceptions laid down through past experience” (Abrahams and Ingram, 2013:2.2) which has been gained from time in social fields. The concept encompasses an agent’s “disposition” or outlook that is a result of a configuration of these experiences and also how they embody this through “standing, speaking, walking and thereby feeling and thinking” (Bourdieu 1990:70). In so doing, it highlights how individuals from similar backgrounds are likely to share aspirations and expectations, as well as more day-to-day characteristics such as cultural tastes in clothing and food. Depending on their habitus, agents are likely to feel comfortable in some future fields and not in others.

### **2.4.2 Habitus and University Choice**

Interventions based on a deficit approach are predicated on the idea that increasing a students’ access to information or contact with an institution will increase the likelihood that they will choose to attend that institution. They can be said to be rooted in rational choice or utility perspectives which assume an informed individual will act in strategic manner to maximise the success of their life-course (Lehmann, 2009; Voigt, 2007) - a notion of competitive individualism that neoliberal ideology has at its core. This rationalist approach has been highly critiqued in recent research, on the grounds that this overly simplistic argument also overlooks the fact that the capacity to exercise choice is distributed unfairly between classes (Archer, 2007; Reay, 1998). As Reay (1998) argues, “HE applicants can be seen to be engaged in highly differentiated, unequal processes” when choosing an institution (p.519).

To a significant extent, these inequalities in the choice process are due to structural factors. For instance, in acting “rationally” and individualistically in this way, it is assumed that the choice-maker is an “autonomous individual unencumbered by domestic responsibilities, poverty or self-doubt” (Leathwood and O’Connell, 2003:599). This is not the case for many working-class students, who have been found more likely to have caring responsibilities and lower levels of financial capital than traditional students (Reay et al., 2005). This is exemplified by the fact that a consequence of widening participation is recruitment of local students (Holdsworth, 2009a; 2009b). It is now the case that for some new students, “geography determines choice” (Reay, 1998:523) due to a need to live with relatives to save money or to keep local employment. As of 2014, 36% of full-time undergraduates were living with parents or independently (outside of student accommodation) (Holton, 2015:2373). Patiniotis and Holdsworth (2005) found that 78% of those living at home did so for economic reasons (p.88), which is unsurprising given that non-traditional students have been found to be more likely to be debt-averse (Callender and Jackson, 2005). Although as Abrahams and Ingram (2013) point out, “there is nothing inherently better about moving away to university – it is a “socially constructed, middle-class model” (section 1.5), many HEIs – particularly those with collegiate structures - expect a “total commitment” to university life (Reay et al., 2010:113), potentially rendering them an unfeasible choice for the student. This means that they are more likely to opt for a local institution, over and above a university within the ‘elite’ sub-field.

Yet even for students without these responsibilities, the choice of a newer institution over a more prestigious option by a student who holds the prerequisite qualifications

can be an active choice, rather than just a lack of knowledge or alternative options. HE choices are not made by an individual in isolation from others. There is a significant body of research that has shown that a young person's choice is affected by their environment – from their school's orientation to higher education (Reay et al., 2001a; Shiner and Noden, 2015), to the influence of individual teachers (Oliver and Kettley, 2010) and their peers (Brooks, 2003), their wider peer group identity and attitudes towards education in general (Archer et al., 2007), as well as parental attitudes (Brooks, 2004) and family outlook (Reay, 1998). As Bridges (2006) points out, 'choice' is not something engaged in the abstract; it is inexorably made in a particular context at a particular time and on the basis of a finite body of available knowledge and it is made by a person whose identity (and whose need to express and reinforce that identity) itself provides the sources of the choice which will be made" (p.23). Individual HE choices are therefore a product of many complex, over-lapping factors, developed from time spent in the fields of their family, friends and school. That these different environments or influences act as sources of influence on behaviour indicate that they can be conceptualised as varying social fields. Time in these fields shape students' habituses, which go on to "mediate" (Abrahams and Ingram, 2013:2.2) their university choices.

Using field and habitus as concepts also allows us to see how Patiniotis and Holdsworth (2005) found that some students stay at or near to their home in order to retain local networks to provide support when in an unfamiliar environment, as they perceive wide social risks to accompany entering the HE field that need to be mitigated. These social risks are seen to be particularly acute in the 'elite' sub-field, as research has found that potential applicants are highly aware of the dominant

demographics or 'normal' background of students that go to certain institutions. This is evident in the fact that Hutchings and Archer (2001) find that non-traditional students increasingly equate 'elite' universities with people who are different to them i.e. white and middle-class. It appears that Leathwood and O'Connell (2003) are correct when they suggest that "the hierarchy of institutions [...] contributes to students' own self-identity" (p.607).

Research has found that feeling different from the 'normal' type of student that attends such an institution repels high-attaining working-class applicants and attracts them to newer institutions. A study by Read et al. (2003) found that many students "can be seen to be actively taking an option they consider will "mitigate" their position as 'other'" (p.265), by selecting an institution with similar demographics to themselves. Research is filled with accounts of non-traditional students who describe how fitting in with the student community and being surrounded people they perceive to be "like them" is more important than positioning in the league table. Reay et al. (2001b) provide an example of a participant who chose Roehampton over King's College London because he wanted to be surrounded by students similar in social class to himself. Reay (2001) also quotes a participant who states "I didn't want to go to a really snobby university... I'm not interested in the best universities. It's more a case of what's the best university for me" (p.338). Similarly, Read et al. (2003) speak to a participant whose cousin had the grades for Oxbridge but "he just decided not to go there because he thought it was all snobbish and he wouldn't fit it" (p.267). This illustrates the way in which working-class students may deliberately choose to "occupy spaces in institutions that have failed to acquire the same perceived status as traditional universities" (Byrom and Lightfoot, 2012:127) in order to maximise

chances of their habitus “fitting in” and mitigate feelings of isolation that may come from moving into the unfamiliar and middle-class dominated territory of HE (see also Ball et al., 2002; Reay et al., 2005).

Bridges’ (2006) concept of “adaptive preference” is similar to habitus in this respect - it is based on the idea that “people come to adjust their aspirations, preferences and choices to the circumstances in which they find themselves, to the realistic possibilities which are open to them, to learned expectations about what their role and place is in society and what they may expect from life” (p.21). We can say that due to their background and habitus, it is likely that first-generation, working-class students are less likely to have “adaptive preferences” or “dispositions” oriented towards certain institutions. Similarly, writing from within the Australian context, Devlin (2011) offers the explanation that discrepancies in choice occur not because either institutions or students are in deficit; rather, there is “an existing socio-cultural incongruity between middle-class HEIs and students from LSES [lower socioeconomic status] backgrounds which needs to be bridged” (McKay and Devlin, 2014:951). In other words, there is a disjuncture or clash between the field of ‘elite’ universities and a working-class applicant’s habitus. As Bourdieu wrote, it used to be the case that non-participating students viewed university as “not for the likes of them” due to a habitus-field clash (Maton, 2012:57), it is now the case that students who want to go to university think this about certain institutions. Thus, these socio-cultural choice perspectives allow us to explore the complexities of HE choice in a more nuanced manner, shedding light on how many non-traditional university students resist conforming with the middle-class ways of doing university, by occupying “fractured spaces within higher education” (Archer and Leathwood, 2003:178).

This contrasts with the situation for middle-class students. Ball et al. (2002) find how students from middle-class groups construct university as the expected route – it becomes a “non-decision” (p.54), with Reay (2017) finding that “they did not even bother to articulate the divide between old and new universities because going to a new university is just not what someone like them does” (p.132). The smaller pool of eligible institutions due to constraints for certain groups of students indicates that “higher education choice serves to reproduce patterns of inequality” (Shiner and Noden, 2015:19). This points to the fact that conceptualising HE choices in rationalist terms does not do justice to the complexities of and inequalities within the HE choice-making process. However, as Lehmann (2009) points out, anyone whose choices appear to deviate from being the most “rational” is blamed for “poor decision-making, a lack of reflexivity and an inability to engage in strategic risk-taking” (p.632). Whilst it is important not to pathologize these decisions as is done in deficit approaches, they are symptomatic of a problem within the ‘elite’ university sub-field in which qualified applicants feel like they can never belong in certain institutions due to their class background or ethnicity. Ultimately, this construction of ‘elite’ universities as spaces for middle-class traditional students will only be broken if the student body becomes diverse.

To employ Bourdieu, we can again see how interventions fail to take into account the classed field structures that have facilitated the domination of already advantaged school students into qualitatively ‘better’ positions in the expanded field. For Schubert (2012), this “the lack of fit between lower- and working-class habitus and educational field, and the blaming of individuals for their poor performance is a form of symbolic

violence through which social class hierarchy is reproduced” (p.185). I would add to this that it can be seen as a form of symbolic violence to position the issue of the habitus-field mismatch as a result of the student (agent) rather than the university (field), and individualistic “raising aspiration” interventions will not work when this is not the issue. As Woodrow (2000) points out, WP interventions that fail to recognise their own “institutional change requirements” are problematic and should be a mandatory part of policy (Christie et al., 2005:5). It is on these grounds that this research seeks to explore the culture of an elite HEI to understand this perceived incongruence that affects application.

### **2.4.3 Habitus and Experience**

For working-class students who do not perceive themselves as too far from the ‘norm’ that they are put off in the first instance, or choose an elite sub-field university for another reason, research has found that the disjuncture between their habitus and the new field creates tension and difficulty during their time at university. Research has found that working-class students often find university in general particularly challenging (Crozier et al., 2008), which is reflected in the fact that they as a group are more likely to leave the university before completion of their degree (Christie et al., 2005). Universities in general and academic cultures are middle-class environments (Lehmann, 2009), meaning that entering the broader HE field is likely to result in some disjuncture between a working-class student’s habitus and the new field they find themselves in, as they are transitioning “from one social class to another” (Crozier et al., 2008:172). However, research has highlighted that although some students do face academic difficulties, as stated above, those from contextually disadvantaged backgrounds tend to perform just as well, if not better, than those from more

advantaged backgrounds (Boliver et al., 2017a). This points to the need for research to focus on matters of cultural and social fit over, or at least alongside, academic; and thus, this research is concerned with social integration and the development of a sense of belonging and legitimacy throughout university spaces.

Inequalities in full participation in university life according to social class background are likely to exist across the whole of the HE field. Research has found that the growing number of students remaining in their own or parental home may struggle to make friendships in a similar way to other students. Brooks (2007) shows how participants reported closer friendships due to sharing living space – she concluded that “it seems that it is the living arrangements rather than the university experience per se that is critical” (p.697). Similarly, Holdsworth (2006; 2009a; 2009b) found that students find it difficult to integrate with the student community if living outside shared student residences such as halls or rented flats. Krause (2005) found that “developing a sense of belonging and involvement in the life of the university is a critical feature of the successful first year experience” (p.61) and that the positive impact of social integration on retention rates is “widely accepted” (Brooman and Darwent, 2014:1525), meaning that students who have to, or choose to, live at home may be at a disadvantage.

Moreover, non-traditional students are more likely to experience time poverty (McKay and Devlin, 2014) due to the additional responsibilities they may have to combine with studying. It is therefore unsurprising that Hordósy and Clark (2018) found that low-income students at a UK ‘red-brick’ university were “reticent with respect to extra-curricular activities” (p.428). This is problematic, not only in terms of having the time to dedicate to study and enjoy a fulfilling social life, but as Bathmaker et al. (2013)



point out, “the game is no longer just about educational advantage based on quality of degree” (p.741). Employers are increasingly looking for evidence of applicants’ participation in extra-curricular activities at university in addition to their academic work (ibid.; Hordósy and Clark, 2018). Thus, not only are non-traditional students likely to find university harder to access and complete, but due to additional challenges they may be less able to maximise their time at the institution to their full advantage in employability terms.

However, Crozier et al. (2008) argue that crucial to whether non-traditional students “engage or at least cope” in the new middle-class field of HE is “the nature of/ conditions of the “field” or “fields” – the social and material arena” in which they are completing their degree (p.172). It is clear that these social and cultural issues are particularly apparent in the ‘elite’ university sub-field, and the concerns that put off prospective working-class students applying in the first instance are true in reality and come to affect working-class entrants’ time at the institution. Here, the majority of students do lead the normative student lifestyle, and those who are unable to do so are more likely to feel isolated or inferior. Jetten et al. (2008) found it was non-traditional students at older ‘elite’ institutions that faced a high number of identity troubles that their middle-class counterparts, as well as their class peers in newer institutions, were not forced to confront. Bufton (2003) reported students feeling like “impostors in the Old University environment” (p.219), a finding echoed by a 2018 study that found that low-income students described an initial feeling of shock when meeting their middle-class student peers (Clark and Hordósy, 2019). Power et al. (2003) found that this resulted in students regretting their choice to attend an ‘elite’ university, with one participant saying “I wouldn’t choose Durham again [...] it was full of people from private schools and it’s just completely different. They were amazing people. They all

had dads who were the head of maths and they'd all been through private school, and had their little cliques and not my thing really" (pp.97-98). Aries and Seider (2005) concluded that recognition is needed of "the importance of social context (i.e. the type of institution one attends) in shaping the class-based experience of identity for lower income students" (p.439): it is in the 'elite' subfield that non-traditional students are likely to "experience the greatest degree of inadequacy, inferiority and intimidation" (p.440) and "feel more of an identity mismatch than someone at another institution" (pp.421-422).

Previous literature has highlighted the existence of dominant student culture within 'elite' HEIs, referring to the shared embodied practices of students who share similar habituses in terms of leisure consumption, particularly nightlife activities (Hubbard, 2011; Cheeseman, 2018), dress (King and Smith, 2018; Mountford, 2018) and living arrangements (Holdsworth, 2006; 2009a; 2009b; Hubbard, 2009; Smith and Hubbard, 2014; Cheeseman, 2018). King and Smith (2018) have pointed out that now WP in the sector has disrupted the well-trodden route from elite public schools to Oxbridge, these specific type of school-leavers are dispersed in other elite universities, such as Bristol, Durham, Edinburgh and Exeter, which now also have a tangible "public school ethos" (p.46) as a consequence, sustained through particular brands of dress and invitation-only social events. Due to the financial, cultural and social capital that these performances and practices require, "some people, usually from more privileged social groups, are better able to survive institutional cultures than others" (Imperial College, 2020:2). Thus, these enactments created by individuals as a result of their habitus at the micro-level have been found to contribute to upholding an everyday embodiment of elitism within the 'elite' sub-field: university cultures can be exclusionary as

different members have differing opportunities to access and partake in cultural behaviours.

As Bridges (2006) writes, to intervene in the choice-making processes of non-traditional students and direct them to certain institutions, “we need to have some pretty confident reasons not just for viewing the principle of choice as desirable but regarding the substantive alternative which we are opening up to that individual as superior to whatever it is we are inviting him or her to leave behind” (p.26). Yet the current evidence suggests that even after gaining access to the ‘elite’ sub-field, working -class and first-generation students still have to “struggle” in the game of field culture, as the field structures work to negate their inclusion. We can be in agreement with Devlin (2010) that focusing on access without equal attention to ensuring a positive experience whilst they are there would be a “moral and economic tragedy” (unpaginated quoted in McKay and Devlin, 2014:959). However, as Clark et al. (2019) argue, there is currently “a paucity of literature that specifically seeks to examine the inherent challenges and contradictions within the rhetoric and the everyday realities of the policy as they are experienced by undergraduates across the ‘whole student lifecycle’” (p.711). Rectifying this gap - and “getting to grips with what goes on inside the hallowed grounds” (Crozier et al., 2008:176) - is the goal of this PhD research project.

This section has highlighted the importance of cultural and social context in the interplay between field and habitus, and the negative consequences that this can bring during a student’s time at university. Despite this, much of the research still remains focused the struggles of non-traditional students academically within newer institutions (Leathwood and O’Connell, 2003; Read et al., 2003; Byrom and Lightfoot,

2012) and on the difficulties of living outside of university accommodation (Holdsworth, 2006; 2009a; 2009b). Those that do focus on social and cultural fit within the ‘elite’ sub-field (Crozier et al., 2008; Reay et al., 2009; 2010; Reay, 2017) point to some of the problems faced by students but do not offer a sustained and holistic exploration of the culture of a university in the elite subfield. Hordósy and colleagues (Hordósy and Clark, 2018; Hordósy et al., 2018; Clark and Hordósy, 2019; Clark et al., 2019) are an exception to this and undertook a qualitative study that followed a cohort of 80 students – including low-income students who received a fee waiver and those who did not – at a red-brick university throughout their degrees. This study generated detailed insight into their participants’ lives by looking at the “interdependencies within, and across, key arenas of student experience” (Clark and Hordósy, 2019:356). However, this was conducted in the context of the now-defunct national scholarship programme where low-income participants received a fee waiver. The scrapping of this scheme means that the experience of today’s non-traditional students will likely considerably vary from their findings, as “the money they received allowed them to make sense of their experiences of difference that emerged in their interactions with their more affluent peers” (p.355).

Moreover, their study does not look at the culture of the university – the focus is on students’ experiences in relation to academic work, their financial situation, and interactions with peers, without explicitly drawing on the unique context of the institution to which these students belong. Rothblatt (1996) wrote in 1996 that despite being “inundated with information about nearly every aspect of HE, we lack sustained discussion of the changing inner culture of universities” (p.18) which can be said to be true still today. By employing a longitudinal approach to studying student participants’

social and cultural environment, this research explores the ways in which universities in the ‘elite’ sub-field arrange and position themselves in ways that alienate those with habituses different to that of the dominant, ‘elite’ students, who in turn contribute to sustaining their exclusionary field structures.

## **2.5 The University as a Social Field**

### **2.5.1 Conceptualising the University**

To rectify this literature gap, the research will employ a case study approach and explore the culture of one university in the ‘elite’ sub-field: Durham University. I will focus on one university as the primary unit of analysis and explore its institutional culture with respect to the experience of non-traditional students and barriers to their sense of belonging within the institution and among the student body. Ultimately, the research seeks to problematise the institution rather than the non-traditional student and to highlight ways in which elite HEIs can be more inclusive and welcoming environments to students from a broad range of social backgrounds. Brown et al. (2016) state that “new conceptual work is required to capture the educational, cultural and societal changes that are re-shaping the (re)production of educational and occupational elites” (p208). By focusing on the culture of a single high-tariff, old university, I will contribute to this.

In so doing, I will conceptualise individual ‘elite’ universities as fields in themselves. Although numerous authors have highlighted the fact that Bourdieu saw institutions as fields in themselves - as well as being a part of a broader social field, such as the sector in which they belong and the overall field of power (Thomson, 2012; Rawolle

and Lingard, 2008) - using it to empirically explore a single institution is particularly lacking in the literature base. Some authors have, however, alluded to the fact that a university is an example of what a Bourdieusian social field looks like in practice (Clarke, 2017:7). I agree with Lyke (2017) in that “theories of history and institutional cultures can be improved or re-examined with a Bourdieusian framework” (p. 171). The universities in the broader ‘elite’ sub-field share in common many characteristics, and “the parameters within which institutional policy can be developed are set at the macro-level” (Greenbank, 2006b:212) but in order to see how cultural matters come to affect application, it is useful to pin down the specifics to the individual institutional level. Focusing on the field of one specific institution will add to the literature by examining how the issues that play out across the wider field may be reinforced or “restructured, repelled, or even reversed” (Naidoo, 2004:466-467) within a smaller field, and how the issues that students face upon application and admission play out during their time at university too, as the literature indicates “that not every student has the weapons they need for this battlefield” (Clarke, 2017:18).

As demonstrated in my conceptualisation of the existing evidence, universities are not neutral spaces – they are, at all stages (application, admission and experience), characterized by inequality. Bourdieusian concepts of field, habitus and doxa work well in unpacking the issues at stake in the current literature. I will extend the use of these concepts to my empirical data to show in concrete terms how the culture of a university at the top of the field is produced and sustained, and how under-represented students who enter it feel about it and engage with it. Cultures of institutions are often seen as part of a broader “sociocultural” realm, in that culture is “meshed with”, and a reflection of, a wider social system, or a separate “ideational” realm that does not

necessarily establish itself in, or relate to, a broader societal sense (Allaire and Firsirotu 1984:197). A Bourdieusian approach to institutional analysis, by contrast, can capture the power of the institution to reproduce, rather than just reflect, social inequalities.

## **2.5.2 Importance of the Institution**

Since the 1970s a significant body of research dedicated to the studies of organisations and organisational theory has developed in sociologies of organizations, business schools and critical management studies (CMS) (Parker, 2000; 2015). This body of literature has pointed to the importance of research at the median level – that is, within institutions. This is in recognition of the fact that that an organization and its membership, as a collective body, shares characteristics that render it distinct from other organisations in the wider field, and which endure over time across the different intakes of members. Handel (2003) defines organisations as:

*“deliberately planned groups of goals, generally designed to outlive the participation of the particular individuals who participate at one time” with a “relatively fixed structure of authority, roles and responsibilities that is independent of characteristics of those fulfilling the roles at any particular time” (p.2).*

This conceptualisation privileges the enduring structures of organisations that are independent of the actors that constitute their membership. For Scott (2015), in the thirty years before the turn of the century, organisation studies in general took this stance - examining “macro structures with attendant ‘top-down’ processes shaping organization structures and actions” with “submissive participant subjects” (p.69).

This, along with stability and “fixed” nature inherent within this conceptualisation, ultimately finds its root in the Weberian rational systems approach in which the regularity of bureaucratic control is emphasized (Handel, 2003:5) - with bureaucratic organisations becoming a “giant human machine”, with each member playing a role in its maintenance (ibid.:7). For instance, for Weber (1971) “the tools within the factory, the state administration, the army and the university faculties are concentrated by means of a bureaucratically constructed human machine in the hands of him who controls the machine” (p.199). Weberian approaches have typically emphasised these structural matters at the expense of cultural processes that occur within organisations (Fumasoli and Stensaker, 2013).

Other organisational theories provide an alternative but equally deterministic picture of organisational life, with the environment within which organisations find themselves dictating the actions of the organisation at the expense of its own agency (Fumasoli and Stensaker, 2013:489). Institutional and ecological perspectives are two such examples, with the former emphasising that this is a result of institutions constantly seeking legitimacy and thereby adapting themselves to conform to the pressures they face from outside, and the latter positing that the environment distributes resources and any institution’s self-promotion, or positioning, is due to this resource distribution at the macro level, rather than its agency (Fumasoli and Huisman, 2013). Whether deterministic in terms of organisational management or wider macro-level structures, this body of literature favours causal structures in the wider field over internal cultural matters.



### **2.5.3 Organisational Studies and the University**

For Bastedo (2012), organisational theory is “built upon the study of colleges and universities” (p.3 cited in Scott, 2015:70). It is proposed here that this is an exaggeration: Silver (2003), along with Scott (2015), also points out that most of organizational studies literature within the educational context is focused within the secondary school system. The majority of institutional ethnography studies within the Sociology of Education have been focussed on schools (Willis, 1977; Ball, 1981; Mac an Ghail, 1994). There has, in fact, tended to be a direct contradiction between how institutions have been theorised in the organisational studies literature and in studies about higher education. In contrast to the emphasis on the influence of senior management or the wider field as just outlined, the theorisation of universities as organisations or institutions has focused on them as “loosely coupled systems where subunits are autonomous, where there is little co-ordination and control by central management” (Fumasoli and Stensaker, 2013:491-492). Due to the academic freedom from external pressures outlined in section 2.2 and departmental autonomy from university management, universities have been seen to “generate[d] [their] own values and behavioural imperatives that are relatively independent from forces emerging from the economic and political fields” (Naidoo, 2004:458), and have generally shielded themselves “from attempts of external influence” (Maassen and Stensaker, 2011:757). For instance, even in 2003 when - as argued earlier in this chapter - the field of HE was becoming more heteronomous, Silver (2003) states that “universities do not now have an organizational culture”, as “the university is a ‘collection’ of groups, all with their own touchstones of academic and professional behaviour, scholarly values and critical endeavour which are capable of opening up rifts with its real or perceived values and behaviours” (p.166). He adds that “this collection may amount to “sub-

cultures” but they are not cohesive enough to be able to speak of a unitary culture that encompasses them all (p.167). As such, studies of universities have tended to focus on sub-cultures within different sections of the university, over and above looking at it holistically.

#### **2.5.4 Culture and Saga**

Clark’s work (1970; 1972) represented the first in an empirical shift to a more holistic conceptual understanding of universities, paying attention to organisational cultures, cultural identity and “the characteristics, dynamics and needs of individual institutions”, in addition to external influences and structures that are absent in wider organisational studies (Fumasoli and Stensaker, 2013:489). In his case studies of three US colleges, he focussed on these “non-structural and non-rational dimensions of organisational life and achievement” (Clark, 1972:178) through his concept of “saga”. In contrast to theories of loose coupling with earlier studies of universities, saga is the “normative bonds” or “unified set of publicly expressed beliefs” about the organisation and its members that “claims unique accomplishment” (ibid: 179).

Like habitus as related to an individual, a saga is “rooted in history” (ibid.:179) and develops over the years as it becomes embodied through an organisation’s practices and “the values of dominant organisational cadres” (ibid.:178). It becomes expressed in a university’s “generalized tradition” or “air about the place” (ibid.:81). For Clark, the strength of a saga’s impact on an organisation’s members can range from weak to strong. At the weak end of the spectrum it is generated as a result of shared experience in that organisation which forms into a “plausible account of group uniqueness”. Towards the stronger end, the saga becomes “overwhelmingly valuable”, with the

outside world beyond the institution becoming distorted to the point of illusion (ibid.:179). Sagas also work through public image and can affect the outsider's view of an organisation too. Consequently, saga is useful for the organisation as believers can be “leverage[d] as economic capital”, and creating a strong saga is key for marketing and managers (Lyke, 2017).

For Lyke (2017) saga is “philosophically akin” to Bourdieu’s doxa in that the history of the institution becomes powerful “in shaping lived experiences and collective belief” (p.166). I would argue, however, that absent in Clark’s account is an analysis of inequalities. Saga is a highly positive concept and can be termed a functionalist consensus approach to theorizing organisations. This leaves the understanding of conflict absent, which causes two problems: this concept falls short of describing organisations that are not characterized solely, or even partially, by “warmth of sentiment”; and secondly it lacks a consideration for the power relations within these cultures, seeing them as primarily unifying – participants become “ideologues” that express “trust and extreme loyalty” to the organisation (p.183) and “happily accept their bond” (p.183) - rather than with the potential to become exclusionary. He does draw attention to “the fundamental capacities of organisations to enhance or diminish the lives of participants” (p.183) and to the different role institutional actors play in the saga according to their objective place in the university hierarchy (i.e. university management, academics, students). Ultimately though, the “air about the place” is still seen to have similar effects on those individuals who occupy the same objective rank, ignoring how those within these same strata may have very different experiences or roles within the saga due to differing habituses or capital. Doxa, by contrast, can – as outlined in previous sections – draw attention to how the institution plays a part in

creating distinction and separation between members, even when they may occupy the same objective category of 'student'.

### **2.5.5 Processes and Practices**

Although Clark (2004) stated that he sought to provide "specific exemplars of organizational transformation" with agents who can be seen and touched rather "than the wispy general norms of a larger organizational field that supposedly lock universities in iron changes of conformity" (cited in Fumasoli and Stensaker, 2013:492), for Lyke (2017) Clark's study still represents an objectivist approach to saga, as he neglects an understanding of practice and development and instead focuses on the result (p.166). He argues that Clark's concept needs to be reworked "through the lens of practice" (p.164). In line with Lyke (2017), I propose that focusing on processes and practices is important. Dacin et al (2011) point out that most institutions "require sustained institutional work to preserve them" and "meaning systems must be transmitted and norms communicated in plausible and authentic ways so as to be readily accepted and practised" (p.1393). This is particularly the case in the context of the perceived and experienced cultures that have been found to exist in previous research on universities in the 'elite' sub-field, as they endure across cohorts of students. This is somewhat surprising given the high turnover of the student body, with the typical length of an undergraduate course being three years in England and Wales and four in Scotland. This raises the question of what ensures continuity of the dominant student culture year to year and it points to the need for research into the processes and practices that *sustain* the cultures that continually dominate pre-1992 universities.

One notable exception that seeks to explore this is Dacin et al.'s (2011) study of the “daily practices” and “performance of rituals” (p.1393) of institutional members that maintain the culture and status quo of Cambridge University. They find that dining practices in formal hall reinforce structures of social class by naturalising and legitimising hierarchy through seating and serving arrangements, which in turn socialises their students for a life in the ‘elite’ class. They found that the identities of students from different class backgrounds tended to converge as a result of these daily dining practices, with those who resisted them not partaking rather than challenging the status quo, resonating with Clark’s (1970; 1972) notion of practices creating an idea of “unique accomplishment” among institutional members through its saga. Thus, although the importance of micro-practices like this means that institutions are “refracted through context and individual experience at a micro level” (p.1393) and individuals maintain the institution by enacting these practices, ultimately the institution is actively maintaining itself in a top-down manner: these practices are not spontaneously adopted by organisational actors, but traditions established at the organisational level which the student agents are then taught upon arrival.

Although this account uncovers the processes by which the institution is maintained, and gives more weight to students in their active role within this, it is similar to Clark’s (1970; 1972) emphasis on senior faculty and management rather than student sub-cultures (p.182). Tierney (1997) points out, it is “an organization's culture, then, teaches people how to behave, what to hope for, and what it means to succeed or fail. Some individuals become competent, and others do not. The new recruit's task is to learn the cultural processes in the organization and figure out how to use them” (p.4). For Reed (2000), writing from a critical realist perspective, organisations have

“structures by virtue of the fact that they have spatially, temporally and socially enduring institutional properties that are irreducible to the activities of contemporary agents” (p.57). Thus, although focusing on the embodiment and reproduction of organisational practices by individual actors is a welcome and needed addition to organisational studies literature, it seems as though, ultimately, the direction of influence in these processes and practices is still top to bottom, and that these primarily work to unify those at the bottom.

To re-cap, this research will seek to work towards resolving the gap in the literature by looking at socialisation and cultural behaviours that reproduce inequalities throughout the university. It will explore how this culture is perceived by students at the point of application, and how this compares to their reality. By looking at the processes and practices that underpin the exclusionary culture I will aim to highlight how they can be changed to make a welcoming environment for all. This research will incorporate Bourdieusian theory to work towards a greater understanding of the direction of influence. By examining how students’ habitus directly contribute to influencing the university and maintaining it, it will draw attention to how student actors from certain positions within the overall field of power are able to directly influence the university. To what extent is the institution shaped by traditional student actors, or are traditional student actors shaping the institution? In addressing this question, this research wants to draw attention to the responsibility of institutions to do more, and to tackle their exclusionary cultures, and argues that attention needs to be given to the ways in which the institution (being more enduring than the students and staff who make it up at any given moment) perpetuates the collective identity of

“who we are” and “what we do”, in ways that may alienate and exclude non-traditional students.

### **2.5.6 Field over Habitus**

In line with the popularity of “habitus” over and above other Bourdieusian concepts (Gamsu, 2018a), McDonough (1996), Reay (1998), Reay et al. (2001a), Thomas (2002), Ingram (2009) and Burke et al. (2013) have argued that the culture or status quo of an institution can be conceptualised as an “institutional habitus”. This is “the impact of a cultural group or social class on an individual’s behaviour as it is mediated through an organisation” (Reay et al., 2001a: para 1.3). They claim that “all universities and colleges have identifiable institutional habituses in which their organisational culture and ethos is linked to wider socio-economic and educational culture through processes in which universities and the different student constituencies they recruit mutually shape and reshape each other” (Reay et al., 2009:9). For instance, Thomas (2002) has applied the term “institutional habitus” to a post-1992 university characterised by “commitment to WP and student retention” (p.425), where it remained “strong” and was “not overshadowed or even captured by the habitus of the elite” (p.439). It was not clear whether Bourdieu felt a habitus could be a property of an institution but the use of the concept has received criticism (Atkinson, 2011; 2013; Maton, 2012). Burke et al. (2013) claim that institutional habitus is a concept suitable for research that “require[s] investigation at the median level” (p.166). This research is an example of such, yet as I detail below, I see field and doxa as being more suitable to such median-level analysis, for reasons including existing critiques of the concept.

Rawolle and Lingard (2008) point out that “Bourdieu’s use of social fields appears to be a nomenclature to name and refer to studies of institutions” (p.732) and Thomson (2012) proposes that, for Bourdieu, “institutions within fields also operated as sub-fields” (p.71). By contrast, for institutional habitus proponents, an institution is less a field and more so an entity that can have a habitus. For Bourdieu, habitus was a property of an agent and so, by extension, the plausibility of the concept of institutional habitus depends on how one conceives an institution’s ontological status. It is seen here that attributing a habitus to a university reifies it as an institution to the level of an agent. Although an institution is more than a collection of the individuals that make it up at any one moment, it does not have the basis in biology to be able to perform the practices that a habitus would – habitus is found “within the body” and “affects every aspect of human embodiment” (Shilling, 2003:113), such as eating, walking and general *doing* (Henry, 2013). For Atkinson (2011), attributing a habitus to an institutions amounts to anthropomorphism as the habitus and the practices it gives rise to are “necessarily corporeal” (p.337). Without the “automatic and fundamental corporeal functions” (Henry, 2013:4) to embody the habitus, it seems as though it is a mere culture.

Institutional habitus proponents would likely suggest in response to this that their concept “promotes the idea that institutions have an active socio-cultural effect on the habitus of those within them” (Burke et al, 2013:167), and that the habitus of the institution impacts on the habitus of the individuals in the form of “collectively coordinated practices” (ibid.:166), and that is how the institutional habitus becomes embodied on a day-to-day basis. Burke et al. (ibid.) suggest that identities, such as “mother”, “father” or “parent”, or being a member of an institution, are not merely a



position within social space but also a disposition within habitus” (p.176). Yet I see the habitus as a *configuration* of all of these different dispositions, gained by an individual across the life-course: it is “internalised social structures and dispositions that are unconsciously developed from a young age” (Bok 2010:165) that become “*durably* incorporated” (Bourdieu, 1993a:86, emphasis added) in the form of a single habitus per agent. This is in agreement with Maton (2012), who states that “we are each a unique configuration of social forces” (p.52). This sole habitus changes over time in response to the different experiences a person accumulates from their positions in different fields, with an educational institution of a school or university being just one of these.

Proponents of institutional habitus also argue that its utility is its ability to highlight the collective actions and interrelated practices that an institution’s *members* (rather than individuals who happen to share this field space) come to adopt, due to their membership within the institution (Burke et al, 2013:172). For instance, for McDonough (1996) the mediating influence of the different schools’ habitus means that children of a similar class have contrasting outcomes. James (2015) reminds us that “individuals are not the primary unit of analysis for Bourdieu” (p.107). Indeed, Bourdieu (1977) wrote that “the habitus could be considered as a subjective *but not individual* system of internalised structures, schemes of perception, conception and action common to all members of the same group or class and constituting the precondition for all objectification and apperception” (p.86, emphasis added).

However, it is seen here that habituses belonging to agents who occupy similar positions in a field tend to be similar due to similar *experiences* rather than an

institutional habitus. Entering a new institution can, and will, have an effect on an agent's habitus, but it seen here that this is what Bourdieu intended to capture with his concept of "field effect". For him, "negative sanctions" can arise for individuals who are not "objectively fitted" to the new field if they behave in ways not suitable to the novel environment (Bourdieu, 1977:78). By contrast, those whose habituses fit well with the new field feel like a "fish in water". As a consequence of these positive or negative sanctions, agents adopt their practices and as a result, "agents and groups of agents are thus defined by their relative positions within that space" of the field (Bourdieu, 1985:724). This explains how an institution can have an effect on the habituses of individuals from similar backgrounds who enter it, and who may as a result act in "socially regular ways" (Maton, 2012:52). This seems very similar to Ingram's (2009) description of a school's "habitus": "a school therefore inculcates a habitus (in its members) that reinforces its institutional habitus rather than transforms it" (p.424). Field effect therefore captures and explains how an institution is a "mediating" influence in producing dispositions, without the need to extrapolate habitus to the level of an institution.

Institutional habitus advocates would argue that institutional habitus captures just *how* this field comes to sanction some practices as good and others as bad. I would suggest that doxa does just that. As stated in section 2.2.6, doxa is the "orthodox values, practices and beliefs" that "typify" habitus and field" (Grenfell, 2012:83) and can shed light on the priorities that are particular to an institution and then inform agents' practice. For Reay (2004), institutional habitus is more than a culture because "it refers to relational issues and priorities, which are deeply embedded, and sub-consciously informing practice" (p.431). For Deer (2012), doxa is essentially the same: the "pre-

reflexive, shared but unquestioned opinions and perceptions conveyed within and by relatively autonomous social entities – fields” (p.115). Davey (2012) uses doxa to talk of how a fee-paying school influences its student to opt for prestigious universities and then establish them “as natural and obvious” (p.510). Gamsu (2018a) highlights the importance of history in Bourdieu’s work and finds that “student aspirations in two elite state schools in London are the product of institutional histories of struggles for position with the field, in which aspirations to attend elite universities have gradually become normalized” (p.5). This is what Reay and Ingram use institutional habitus for: Ingram (2009) states that a school’s habitus is a product of “history and experiences” (p.424). It seems Atkinson (2011) is correct when he says institutional habitus is “redundant” (p.232) – its supposed unique conceptual strengths can be captured with other, albeit so far under-exploited, Bourdieusian concepts.

In exploring these phenomena with “habitus” rather than the array of other tools that Bourdieu offers, institutional habitus proponents neglect the analysis of the field. The relationality between habitus and field is central to Bourdieu’s work (Rawolle and Lingard, 2003) - they “constitute a dialectic through which specific practices produce and reproduce the social world that at the same time is making them” (Thomson, 2012:73) and Maton (2012) argues that “to talk of habitus without field is to fetishize habitus, abstracting it from the very context which gives it meaning and in which it works” (p.60). By conceptualising institutional habitus as a property of an institution, some relationality with field is kept if the institution is contextualised within the field of the education sector as a whole, although this is problematic for the reasons of anthropomorphism stated above. Moreover, conceiving of the concept in the “adjectival” sense - that it is a property of actors and is a section of their overall habitus,

or one of many different habituses – we lose this aspect of relationality (Maton, 2012:60). For students as agents, situating them in the wider field of HE is not close enough analysis: any changes to their habitus need to be analysed in relation to their movement into a new institutional sub-field.

For Thomson (2012), agents in a field can be a field “in themselves” (p.77). This leaves room for confusion: if agents can be field and agents can have habituses, this implies a field can also have a habitus, indicating that both sides of the debate are correct. Yet, as I suggest, that as a habitus is a unique property of one agent resulting from the configuration of one’s own life history (Maton, 2012:52), it is not possible to pin down the properties that make up one single habitus for a collection of people. After all, “social membership in itself does not automatically translate into a habitus that confers symbolic capital in a uniform way for all members” (Moore, 2012:99).

## **2.6 Critiques of Bourdieu**

Although numerous critics have argued that his theories are deterministic (e.g. Shilling, 2004), with Willis (1983) arguing that his work leads to a “gloomy, enclosed Weberian world of no-escape” (p.189 cited in James, 2015:108), Bourdieu does account for what happens when field structures change through the concept of hysteresis (Crossley, 2012): “change is a necessary consequence of Bourdieu’s definition of habitus and field as interrelated and interpenetrating so that a change in one necessitates a change in the other” (p.86), especially since “field conditions vary over time” (p.126). Bourdieu does still emphasise the reproductive in this argument as he posits that it is those with most capital that are most likely to stay in the top field positions at times of change (ibid.). This has proven empirically to be the case in the

existing literature, as evidence consistently shows that the HE field is characterised by reproduced inequalities which *are* to a large extent determined according to an agent's habitus and capital – “social practices are characterized by regularities” (Maton, 2012:49). After all, as Crossley (2012) points out, “we can only talk legitimately of class when members of high-ranking occupational groups reproduce their advantage” (p.93). The ability to account for reproduction is therefore a strength that his concepts can bring to this research.

However, for Gale and Parker (2015), this means that Bourdieusian accounts lack reference to “how cultural groups pursue futures that are potentially at odds with their pasts and from other cultural groups” (p.85). As explained further in chapter three, the participants in this research are those from backgrounds where going to university is not the norm. That they have entered a high-ranking university indicates that they have chosen to enter fields that would be seen from Bourdieu's perspective to be incompatible with their habituses, which “tend to maintain separations, distances, and relations of ordering” (Bourdieu, 1996:3). Yet, this research demonstrates in chapter five how his emphasis on reproduction does not negate its use in explaining the pathways of the participants who have taken a different trajectory to their relatives and school and class peers, in line with James' (2015) view that there is “plenty of scope for agency” in Bourdieusian analysis.

Chapter five also shows, along with chapter six, how despite entry to an elite field which is “at odds” with the habitus, upon entry to the university these agents do take up subordinate positions within the field as a result of exclusionary field structures and lower amounts of economic and symbolic capital. As Lehmann (2007) says, “there are

young people whose decisions to study at university represent (at least initially) a break with the social-structural confines created by their habitus. Yet, they interpret their experiences and circumstances at university through the lens of their specific class habitus” (p.105-106) and this is where it “ultimately reinforce[s] itself” (ibid.). For Reay (2004), “it is not a lack of action that is problematic but rather the focus on pre-reflective dimension of action” (p.437), a critique that is also put forward by Sayer (2005). For some this amounts to patronising participants by “assuming that [it is] only the skilled sociologist that can detect and understand the conditions of exclusion and disadvantage” (Gale and Parker, 2015:85). As my data demonstrates, this is one of the flaws of Bourdieu’s approach, as although “class is not something that is always consciously considered in the everyday” (Mountford, 2018:139), participants in this research were highly reflexive and aware of the consequences of their decisions and actions, and the part that their class played in their experiences.

Naidoo (2004) argues that Bourdieu’s framework only allows us to access the “cinematic stills” of the dominant principles at the start, and the result at the end. This loses the view of “the series of steps by which the initial action relates to the final action”, and makes the “process by which social principles are produced and reproduced invisible to analysis” (p.468). By explicitly focusing on rituals, practices and processes that come to define the doxa of the field of one high-tariff university, I will seek to move past this limitation. Moreover, it is not seen that the emphasis on current social reproduction precludes the utility of the concepts to highlight areas where change should and could occur, which this thesis will aim to produce.

## **2.7 Summary**

This research, therefore, aims to work against dominant deficit conceptualisations of students to show how the field of ‘elite’ universities is characterized by qualities that do not fit with the habituses of working-class students. The research will rectify the gap in the literature by offering a novel approach in three ways: firstly, I will move beyond academic matters to focus on paying detailed attention to the social and cultural factors. I will employ a longitudinal research design to understand how this affects working-class and first-generation students’ likelihood of applying in the first instance and their experience once at university. Secondly, I will explore the culture of a university holistically, and look at the processes and practices that sustain and uphold this. Thirdly, I will employ the Bourdieusian concept of “social field” to understanding this culture, in order to draw attention to both how the institutional culture of the field is maintained via a top-down approach and in turn, how it is embodied and upheld by the agents “winning” in the field themselves.

## Chapter Three: Methods

### 3.1 Introduction

The previous chapter argued that there has been a qualitative shift in inequalities characterizing the UK HE field – from class differences in participation *per se* to participation in the smaller ‘elite’ sub-field. I argued that this, combined with the institutional and governmental narratives that lay the blame with working-class and first-generation students for lacking the aspirations they apply to this sub-field, results in a deficit conceptualization that is neither an accurate reflection of reality, nor a helpful way of framing the questions that need to be asked. I proposed that by re-framing the issue to examine the characteristics of the *universities* themselves that hinder or foster inclusion from students of all backgrounds, we can move to understanding the issues at stake in a way that can generate positive change for students, institutions and wider society. I argued that this research project would add to the literature base through this framing and by focusing on the notion of social and cultural fit, in contrast to academic concerns, at a level of detail unmatched by other studies. To do so, the research is structured around a case study design, focusing on the culture of one university and the processes and practices that contribute to its maintenance. In addition, it employs a longitudinal research design with first-generation student participants to explore how they engage with this culture - at a higher level of detail, and thereby generating richer insight into their experiences, than previous studies. This chapter provides a detailed rationale and reflection of these methods that I used to undertake this research.



## **3.2 Research Aims and Questions**

This research aims of this project focus on one university as the primary unit of analysis and explore its culture, with respect to the experience of non-traditional students and barriers to their sense of belonging within the institution and among the student body. Ultimately, it seeks to problematise the institution rather than the non-traditional student and to highlight ways in which elite HEIs can be more inclusive and welcoming environments to students from a broad range of social backgrounds.

These research aims are underpinned by five specific research questions:

- How does Durham University position itself in relation to the HE field and HE elite sub-field?
- Whose habituses structure the institutional sub-field of Durham University?
- What implications does this have for students' positions within the field and their experiences?
- To what extent can first-in-family students with working-class and/or non-traditional student habituses engage in the institutional sub-field?
- What processes and practices sustain the continuity of the field from year to year, across staff and student cohorts?

## **3.3 Research Philosophy**

This research therefore explores the culture of an institution and individuals' experiences, interpretations and perceptions relating to this. These research objectives, which were developed and refined as the research progressed, are underpinned by certain ontological assumptions related to how I conceptualise "institution". As I stated in the previous chapter, I conceive of institutions as social fields that position their members in line with their portfolios of capital, in response to which these members adopt strategies to fight to improve or maintain these. It is therefore seen here that an institution is produced over time by collective human agency, but the capacities for

different members to exert their agency are unequal due to wider structures at play in the field of power that contribute to differential amounts of capital in society. The fact that institutions have the capacity “to exist beyond particular times, places and people’s doing” (Smith, 2001:164), despite a high turnover of the actors within the institution, points to the power of the institution as an entity to maintain itself over time beyond the individual actors that make it up at any given moment. Moreover, as has been shown by previous research and is argued in the subsequent chapters of this thesis, the institution as an entity is characterised by a dominant culture that has structuring consequences on the experiences and habituses of the individuals within it (McDonough, 1996; Ingram, 2009), albeit I disagree to the extent that within the existing literature this culture is termed as a “habitus”.

In seeking to describe an overarching, dominant culture that characterises an institution as a whole, it could be said that on the surface the research is positioned at the realist end of the ontological scale. Realism proposes that reality is independent of human perception - even if this reality is formed over time by *social* processes and practices as is the case in this research - and is “out there” with a fixed and unitary nature that can be isolated and described objectively. Yet this research also gives primacy to participants’ interpretations of this culture when describing its nature and assessing its consequences, moving it more towards the idealist end of the spectrum, where reality is only seen to exist subjectively in the minds of individuals. The ontological assumptions of this research can therefore not be accurately described by either of these binary positions: it is seen here that individual participants will have unique and valid interpretations of events which are accurate descriptions of their realities but that they are also placed within an institution and broader social structure

that can limit the possibilities for action and constrain them in material ways beyond this.

Epistemologically, therefore, this research does not seek to establish encompassing views or generalisable ‘truths’, as numerous and conflicting knowledge claims from the participants can exist simultaneously and all be valid (Hutchings and Archer, 2001:71). As stated in chapter two, there have been a range of quantitative studies that have highlighted the state of play across the sector in terms of class inequalities in accessing pre-requisite grades for entry, application numbers, acceptance levels, and graduate outcomes. By contrast, this study is seeking to fill a gap in the literature by studying experiences of individual students at an intricate level of detail: its intention is “to generate knowledge grounded in human experience” (Nowell et al., 2017:2). Although researching this via quantitative surveys would have had reached a wider number of students, it was not seen as appropriate or effective to pin down the complexities of student experience using Likert scales or other survey techniques which could then be quantified. A qualitative research paradigm was therefore adopted, as it is more suited to producing data relating to experience and feelings due to the “interpersonal interaction in the interview” (Kvale and Brinkman, 2014:28) which is “sensitive to the qualitative differences and nuances of meanings” (ibid.:55). However, I recognise that data gained from an interview is not “uncovered” but co-constructed in the interview between the participant and interviewer (ibid.:54), with the interviewer having power to influence the data produced. My characteristics and the influence they had over the interview are therefore reflected on in the section 3.9 of this chapter.

A qualitative approach was also necessary for describing and exploring the institutional culture within which participants are placed. As stated in chapter two, cultures are diffuse, intangible and work through the micro-interactions of institutional actors as well as top-down processes. Therefore, quantifying this is impossible – exploring this through qualitative strategies is the only way to generate data pertaining to this that is insightful and valid. A case study design was adopted to privilege this depth of exploration (Flyvbjerg, 2006). As Flyvbjerg (2006) points out, these types of studies are often criticised for being “arbitrary and subjective” due to the lack of ability to generalise (p.241). The knowledge produced from this research may be institution-specific in that it “may not be quantifiable and commensurable across contexts and modalities” (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2014:55). Yet the insights generated through this study will have relevance to speak to the situation in similar institutional contexts and it is my theoretical framework and conceptual contributions that can be generalised more broadly. Although adding a second research site may have had the potential to make useful comparisons and contributions, it would have likely been unfeasible: Trowler (2016) points out that a multi-site institutional ethnography for a sole researcher is overly ambitious and unrealistic, even for extended research like that within a doctorate. The true benefit of this research is seen to come from focusing on one institution in depth to explore the micro-realities and processes that underpin it.

Of course, this broad methodological overview is true of the research as a whole but the different methods within it are attached to different philosophical assumptions. Document analysis gives primacy to texts in providing insight into the social world (Smith, 2001): they, rather than human agency, are what “co-ordinate people’s activity” (p.160). This contrasts with the other interview-based methods where human

interaction of some kind is seen as the primary way of developing knowledge (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2014). Even within this latter category, there are different epistemological commitments. It is often suggested that the focus group's collective basis is rooted in a commitment to interactionism, with the meanings produced between participants being the focus (Bryman, 2008). This contrasts with photo elicitation interviewing (PEI) which is based around the idea of the image mining "deeper shafts into a different part of human consciousness than words alone" (Harper, 2002:23), encouraging the *individual* to develop a "new view of their social existence" (ibid.) rather than developing this through interaction with others.

Again, the combination of these methods reflects the research's philosophical and theoretical commitments. Documents give insight to the top-down institutional practices that enable the institution to sustain itself over time, and interviewing provides insight into the social processes that form the culture at a more micro-level as well as the structuring effects on an individual's experiences upon entry to the institution (Ingram, 2009). Moreover, the variety of methods were seen *pragmatically* as producing the most valuable and rich data whilst making the interviewees at ease, and the rationale for incorporating each method is outlined in the sections below. In addition, despite their different assumptions, the triangulation of these different methods was mutually beneficial as they work together in building a complementary, well-rounded picture of the state of play and "expanding the learning opportunity by extension of perspectives on the studied subject" (Flick, 2011:111). This is important for a holistic case study research design that aims to shed light on the multiple ways and levels that the field of the university is structured and how it works to exclude or include non-traditional students.

| <b>Format</b>   | <b>When</b>  | <b>Quantity</b>   |
|---|--|---|
| Document analysis   | Throughout the academic year 2018-19 and 2019-2020 |   |
| Focus group with non-traditional student longitudinal research participants   | Mid-point of first term 2018-19                    | 3 with 11 in total  |
| One-to-one biographical semi-structured interviews with longitudinal participants   | End of first term 2018-19                          | 11  |
| Semi-structured interviews with non-traditional student participants who dropped out/ didn't reply at pre-focus group stage | Mid-point of second term 2018-19                   | 3   |
| PEI with longitudinal participants  | End of second term 2018-19                         | 11  |
| Semi-structured interview with longitudinal participants (and closure of research relationship)                             | End of third term 2018-19                          | 10 (one participant in the repeat sample had left the university) |

**Figure 2:** Data collection strategies

### **3.4 Selection of Research Site**

Durham University was selected as the case study institution in which to carry out these different research strategies. Its characteristics - in terms of its high social prestige and perceived status, entry requirements, socially unrepresentative student demographics, and the distinct cultural practices and institutional norms that come with the collegiate structure - provide a unique combination that provide a particularly interesting site to conduct research to explore cultural incongruence with students for

whom going to university was not common, as these issues are likely to be most acute here. This section provides an overview of these characteristics as a rationale to its selection. The information presented here is developed and unpacked to a greater detail in the next chapter, which presents the findings from the document analysis section to provide insight into the history of the case study university and the current rules of play or “logic of practice” (Bourdieu, 1990) that governs the institution.

Durham University is located in the small city of Durham in the north east of England. The university was founded in 1832, and it is often labelled as the third oldest university in England after Oxford and Cambridge. Today, in line with the other universities of its era, Durham University consistently ranks within the top ten in national league tables, and in the three that are published annually it sits at fourth (*The Guardian*, 2020), fifth (*Times Higher Education*, 2020) and seventh (*The Complete University Guide*, 2020) in the 2021 league tables. QS World Rankings (2020) position Durham University at 86th in the world. The University has been a member of the Russell Group since 2012 (prior to which it belonged to the now-disbanded 1994 Group) and in the most recent Research Excellence Framework cycle, 83% of its research outputs were classified as “internationally excellent” or “world leading” (Durham University, 2020k). This translates into high employment prospects for its graduates. *THE* (2019) places Durham sixteenth of all UK universities in terms of being favoured by employers but it is particularly favoured among the ‘elite’ professions of the City: Durham University graduates dominate the Supreme Court and magic circle law firms after Oxbridge (King, 2017), and it is the sixth most represented university in investment banks according to LinkedIn survey data (*The Telegraph*, 2015). A Durham degree can therefore be a stepping stone into the highest

earning professions, as the symbolic capital that the university possesses through its social prestige is conferred onto its members upon their graduation. This makes it a prime site to conduct this research, as the field of Durham University essentially acts as one of the gatekeepers to the field of power. Its accessibility and inclusivity is therefore of key importance for social mobility and wider social justice.

This symbolic capital in terms of both academic quality and its employment prospects results in high levels of applications from prospective undergraduates, with it receiving 29,890 in the 2018 admissions cycle (UCAS, 2018). These applications were in competition for only 4,390 accepted places, meaning the university was over-subscribed at the rate of almost 7 to 1. This was a higher over-subscription rate than both Cambridge (14,170 applications to 3,445 acceptances) and Oxford (21,905 applications to 3,445 acceptances), although this is a lower rate than some other RG universities, such as the LSE and Manchester (*ibid.*). The university can therefore be highly selective, with standard offers varying between A\*AA to AAB at A Level, and it has the seventh highest UCAS entry tariff of all UK universities (*The Guardian*, 2019). It has been named by the social mobility charity Sutton Trust as one of the Sutton Trust Thirteen - the UK institutions that are the most selective (Sutton Trust, 2008). It is therefore claimed, as stated by the then-Vice Chancellor Christopher Higgins in 2007 that the University is home to “more than 15,000 of the world’s most talented students” (Higgins, 2007:9).

It is clear that for these highly competitive places at the university, it is students from traditional backgrounds – in terms of class background and type of school attended – that are most likely to win them on grounds of ‘talent’. In the 2018/19 admissions



cycle, just 5.5% of the university's students came from LPNs – 0.7 percentage points lower than its benchmark (HESA, 2020). Despite arguably receiving less media attention for its lack of diversity than Oxbridge, the university also had an intake constituted of a similar proportion of privately educated students in 2018-19 to Cambridge (with only a 0.2 percentage point negative difference). Moreover, when adjusting for location, it is Durham that falls the furthest short with a gap of 11.3 percentage points in comparison to Cambridge's 5.2 (HESA, 2020). Thus, this University is a key example of a member of the elite sub-field in the sense that, as outlined in the previous chapter, it is these universities that are most off-putting to working-class and first-in-family students, and are arenas in which students of these backgrounds who do attend are most likely to feel out of place. In fact, as this University is at the more exclusive end of this smaller field in terms of these characteristics and it being less inclusive in demographic terms than other elite sub-field universities, it means that students who do not fit the institutional norm will be even more suited to critically reflecting on their experience due to their minority status. However, the reasoning for the selection of this University was also due to its unique characteristics that are not shared by other members of this elite sub-field, as explained in the next paragraphs.

Firstly, the university is collegiate in structure with sixteen different colleges located around Durham city. More detail and insight into the characteristics of collegiate life is provided in the next chapter. However, in short, this collegiate structure makes Durham University an ideal setting in which to conduct a study into students' feelings of belonging and senses of cultural and social fit using a Bourdieusian analysis of social fields and habitus. In the first instance, as Reay et al. (2010) point out, collegiate

universities often require a “total commitment” to university life (p.113), pushing out the influences of other social fields such as local employment, friends outside of the institution and the family, as they encourage their students to be actively engaged in the numerous opportunities available within their particular college. This means that first-in-family students who attend such institutions are likely to feel any negative emotions associated with a habitus-field clash to a more intense level, as they are unable to – or encouraged not to – seek support and refuge within more familiar social fields concurrently. Moreover, the colleges act as smaller, unique sub-fields within the overall institutional field of the University. For instance, some of the Durham colleges have actually decreased their state-educated intake - Hatfield College had 63% of its students coming from state schools in the 1960s (Watson, 2007), which has decreased to under 36% by the 2015-6 admissions cycle (Durham University, 2017a). This sits in contrast to the newer, self-catered colleges that tend to have much higher numbers of state-educated students (20% of Josephine Butler’s entrants in the same admissions cycle were privately educated (ibid.)). As I will explain in the next chapter, these newer colleges are positioned further out of the city centre and are known by university members as ‘Hill’ colleges, whereas those more exclusive and older colleges are located in the city centre and are referred to as ‘Bailey’ colleges. The individual characteristics and rituals adopted by the various colleges means that it is possible to compare and contrast the particular processes and practices within these different sub-fields that can negate or facilitate inclusion. Unlike the Oxbridge colleges, the majority of the colleges are listed bodies of the university, with St John’s and St Chad’s colleges being the only colleges with independent legal status, and no teaching occurs within the university’s colleges; they are solely for pastoral purposes. This is not seen as a

problematic, as, as outlined in the previous chapter, this research is focusing more so on social and cultural fit than academic issues.

Secondly, the University is located in the north east of the country, far removed from the other dominant players within the elite university sub-field in the South East and London. However, in the latest admission cycle in which data is available (2015/16), under 10% of entrants to the University were from the north east themselves (Durham University, 2017b). Although the region does have amongst the lowest progression rates to university in England (UCAS, 2019c), it has amongst the highest proportion of students choosing to study locally (Donnelly and Gamsu, 2018) and this low recruitment of local students is at odds with the other universities in the region, which have much higher proportions of north-east students, such as Newcastle with 23% in 2017 (Newcastle University, 2019), Northumbria with 54.1% in 2014-5 (Centre for Cities, 2017) and Teesside with 73% in 2018-9 (Teesside University, 2020). The ‘golden triangle’ of universities is an unofficial grouping of the seemingly most ‘elite’ universities in the UK – representing Cambridge and Oxford in the south east and the RG institutions in London (Ingram and Allen, 2018) – despite Durham being geographically isolated outside of this, the university similarly recruits a primarily southern and middle-class student intake. Students who fall outside of this very distinct demographic have always been, and still today are, very much a minority, and will be able to critically reflect on their university experience.

Thirdly, Durham University is a relatively small university with 18,707 students, making it the fifth smallest RG institution. Yet the university dominates the small city of Durham with students (of the FE college New College, as well as the University)

constituting over half its population in the 2011 census (NPF, 2019). Some streets in the city are approaching one hundred percent university student-dominated and in 2014 it was estimated that there were 400 resident households left in the city as a whole, down from 2,000 (Brown, 2014). This is set to change further with the university's plan to increase student numbers by 4,000 by 2027 (Durham University, 2016b). Any dominant student culture is likely to be present all over the city, meaning the tensions for those who cannot participate may be greater than in a larger city where the studenthood is not so dominant.

Therefore, Durham University captures many of the prevalent issues that are needing to be researched in terms of university cultures and student experiences - it is prestigious, highly socially unrepresentative, and the collegiate system will allow for comparisons within the one institution. It is a unique case due to its location in a small city in the north east that will make feelings of difference for any first-in-family students more acute than similarly prestigious universities also within the 'elite' sub-field. In researching this, this study will shed light on the elite university culture within the UK and the role of the collegiate system within this.

### **3.5 Sampling of Student Participants**

This section outlines the sampling strategies used to recruit student participants for the interview section of the research design. This comes before the rationale and reflections of the different interviewing strategies used, in section 3.6, as it provides both context to who participated in the study and an explanation as to why some strategies were particularly effective because of the circumstances of individual participants.

### **3.5.1 Classification of “Non-traditional” Student**

The terms ‘non-traditional’ and ‘traditional’ student are central to this research, yet there are often “fuzzy boundaries” around who constitutes each group, especially the former (Byrom and Lightfoot, 2012:132): research has indicated that certain HEIs are reluctant to label disadvantage of any kind due to not wanting to stigmatise students (Boliver et al., 2017); there is no completely reliable indicator of disadvantage, given accuracy problems with area-level data in assessing an individual, and the sparse availability of individual-level data (Gorard et al., 2017); and “traditional” is relative and “contextually contingent” (Trowler, 2016:312) - although across the sector it is possible to discuss “non-traditional” students in terms of those who previously would have been unlikely to attend university, the definition will likely vary according the HEI. In newer, post-1992 universities that have a greater diversity of students in terms of social background, ethnicity and age, “non-traditional” may differ in meaning to older, ‘elite’ universities where the majority of students come from middle-class, white and young backgrounds and have over- representations of students coming from independent schools.

Moreover, “non-traditional” is a phenomenological concept - it is “about self-definition, about feelings and perceptions” (Trowler, 2016:312). Therefore, recruitment was primarily based on self-identification with the term ‘non-traditional’ student. This was in part be due to practical reasons of relying on self-nomination in the recruitment process, but also in recognition of the fact that ‘non-traditional’ can be a fluid concept that cannot be pinned down by formal measurement. Once students had made contact expressing interest, I asked for some information about them and why they had volunteered for the study. I used criteria based broadly on WP indicators used by UCAS, HESA and other research, such as Bradley and Waller (2018) -

namely, identifying with being working-class or low-socioeconomic background, attending a state school, and being the first generation in their family to attend higher education - to determine whether students should be invited to the first focus group. I based this on information they chose to provide rather than asking explicitly for it as I felt probing for very detailed, specific information over email may put participants off.

### **3.5.2 Sample Size**

Given the longitudinal nature of these interviews, I wanted the sample size to be relatively small. The aim set out in my first-year progression review was to recruit roughly ten to twelve informants, which would constitute 31 to 37 interviews overall. A sample of this size is modest and has the potential to merely reflect the characteristics of individuals rather than exploring common experiences. Yet this number provides a significant amount of data due to the longitudinal design and thus any more would likely be unfeasible when combined with the other elements in this research design. Tracking students over time to get a valid and in-depth insight to their first-year experience was privileged over a greater quantity of participants. Christie (2007) warns that good social science should not get caught up with numbers in the sample, but “analyse the narratives of value and power” (p.2450). Moreover, previous research, such as Reay et al. (2010), have incorporated ten or fewer students into their research and found distinctive and interesting patterns across cases. I did not have a strict pre-defined quota for participation. Instead, I planned to use a more pragmatic and purposive approach, stopping when I felt I had a sample diverse along the lines of college and faculty in order to maximise the potential for points of comparison and contrast.

However, as a common line of advice in social science research is that “it is always necessary to over-recruit” (Wilkinson, 1998:188), which is especially the case in longitudinal research, a concern of mine was that not all of these focus group participants would want to progress to the next stage of the research. After the focus group I sent personalised emails thanking them for their contribution to the research and asking if they would like to be involved in the next part. All of my focus group participants quickly volunteered for the interviews.

### **3.5.3 Stage One: Purposive Sampling**

I began recruitment for student participants in November 2018, which is half way through the Autumn/ Winter term at Durham University. This was designed to be at the point when students had settled into university life in order to maximise chances of interest in the study, as well as subsequent retention, by pitching it at a point when potential participants would have a more established and stable everyday routine with time available for focus group and interview attendance. It was also to ensure that enough time had passed that they would be able to reflect on their feelings and experiences over the past weeks without being as overwhelmed by these, as they may have been soon after arrival. Emails were sent to undergraduate administrators in all departments within the university asking for an email to be circulated to all first-year students. A recruitment poster (appendix A) was attached to the email. This advertised for “home undergraduate students for whom going to university was not common/ the norm”. I left it to the discretion of the undergraduate administrator as how to best to advertise this in their respective departments, with some forwarding on the email, others putting up a hard copy poster in communal areas, and some doing both. I received a good amount of interest to this recruitment strategy, with 22 responses over six days. Four of these were from international students who were not part of my target

sample. I informed these individuals that I would just be looking for home undergraduate students at that stage but that I would be in touch if my sample subsequently extended to include international and Erasmus students.

The majority contacted me with a short section of demographic information to explain why they wanted to participate. I sent those who contacted me who were seen to be eligible a Participant Information (PI) sheet (appendix B), and asked them to confirm whether they would like to participate after reading this. Once they did so, I asked them to sign up for one of three focus groups. Of the remaining 18 home students, nine did not reply at either the stage after receiving the PI sheet or the following stage asking them to sign up to a focus group, or the subsequent chase-up emails. I took this as indication that they would no longer be interested. Of the remaining nine, there were three students studying humanities subjects; four Social Scientists and two Scientists. Six of these students were at Hill colleges and three were at the Bailey. Seven were female and two male.

### **3.5.4 Stage Two: Snowball Sampling**

As I was seeking an approximate balance between faculties and Hill/ Bailey colleges, I employed snowball sampling to recruit more students from Science departments and Bailey colleges participants by using my existing participants' networks to find other suitable individuals (Atkinson and Flint, 2004). I contacted those who had confirmed their attendance at a focus group and asked them to speak to students who might fit this criteria and forward the study information to them. This led to two students (one male and one female) who are both studying science subjects, one at a Bailey college and one at a Hill college to contact me, and to subsequently confirm their attendance at a focus group after receiving the PI sheet.



### **3.5.5 Stage Three: Follow-up Contact for Those Not in Longitudinal Group**

In the second term I re-contacted students who had expressed interest in the study but not replied to the email containing the PI sheet to confirm their attendance to ask if they would be interested in taking part in a one-off semi-structured interview. This was designed to capture the perspectives of students who for some reason or another did not have time to commit to the longitudinal research – for instance, Elizabeth has two young children and works part-time in addition to studying full-time. Of the nine I contacted, three replied and arranged an interview. Their characteristics are included in figure 4. They took part in stage two only: the semi-structured interview that took place at the end of term one for other participants, with some questions scheduled for the later longitudinal interviews also incorporated.

### **3.5.6 Participant Characteristics**

Therefore, overall, I had a longitudinal sample of eleven students, diverse in terms of faculty and college type. Figure 3 outlines the personal characteristics of these individuals. As shown in this table, I have more women (8) than men (3). Ideally, I would have liked to incorporate more males into the study, but many of these dropped out at the pre-focus group stage. This reflects broader trends in empirical studies where women are more likely to volunteer to participate in research than men (Boughner, 2012). Given that firstly, this study is not intended to be representative of a wider population and secondly, gender is not seen to be a primary characteristic for analytical purposes in this research, an over-representation of women is not considered to be too problematic. In any case, I employed an artificial focus group as one data collection strategy (outlined in section 3.6.4) and these comprising more women than men can be seen as beneficial and desirable given the evidence that men often dominate focus

group discussion (Krueger and Casey, 2015:67), and make women feel less able to contribute (Stewart et al., 2007:42-43).

All longitudinal participants were aged between the ages of eighteen and twenty at the beginning of the research. 95.97% of the undergraduate body in 2018/19 at Durham University had commenced their degree under the age of the twenty-one (Durham University, 2019b), and therefore that the purposive sampling strategy reached no mature students is not particularly surprising. Of the three who responded to follow-up emails in term 2, one was a mature student (Elizabeth). She was also the only participant to live outside of college accommodation, instead living with her children. This lack of representation of students who live out is a limitation of this research, as it was clear that Elizabeth's experiences of the institution were completely different to the younger students who live in college. However, as I go on to state in chapter six, Elizabeth said she felt like she is "never at uni", saying that "I literally come for my lectures and seminars and then I'm gone. Because I need to be back for my kids." This resonates with existing research that, as stated in chapter two, has found that students who live outside of student accommodation are "day students" who tend to remain on campus for academic purposes only (Christie et al., 2005). Therefore, Elizabeth and likely any other mature students or young students who opt to live off-site may have limited experiences of many of the social and cultural practices that take place within the wider university. Given that this is the focus of my research, and the problems faced by day students has been studied extensively, this was not seen as too problematic.

One participant within the repeat interview sample (Holly) was not within the target demographic of the study. In the short demographic information she provided before

signing up she stated that she was the first in her family to attend to university, so I invited her to be part of the study. I was surprised when she arrived at the initial focus group wearing a school-leavers jumper with emblem of a private boarding school on it and within the focus group she revealed she had attended this school since the age of eleven. I was curious as to why she had volunteered for the study given the criteria, so I decided to invite her to the first one-to-one interview, which she agreed to. During the subsequent interview it became apparent that she was from a family with high levels of cultural, social and financial capital. Her parents did not go to university, but were diplomats and she attended boarding school so as not to have to travel with them. The level of university application support provided to her by her school was hugely different to the rest of the sample, particularly the students who had attended comprehensive schools and colleges. She revealed she has not had to take out a student finance loan for either tuition fees or maintenance costs, as her parents pay for the former in cash and provide her with a weekly allowance for the latter, and she admitted that she often has to ask for more than she is initially given. Her accounts of her experiences at Durham that she spoke about in this initial interview were also very different to that of the rest of the group. I decided to keep her in the sample for the rest of the interviews the sample for comparison purposes, and to provide insight into the experiences of the dominant privileged demographic of the university.

| Pseudonym | Home   | School type                                 | Faculty | College   | F occ                           | M occ                        | First      | Income   | WP |
|-----------|--|---|---------|-----------|---------------------------------|------------------------------|------------|--|----|
| Belle     | Town, East Midlands                          | Grammar                                     | SSH     | Hill, SC  | Own and run a Bed and Breakfast |                              | In family  | Max. student loan, max grant   |    |
| Ben       | Town, North East                             | Comprehensive                               | Sci     | Bailey, C | Unknown                         | Unknown                      | In family  | Student loan, works 16-20 hours p/week in a bar                                |    |
| Chloe     | City, Yorkshire                              | Comprehensive; selective sixth form         | SSH     | Hill, SC  | Taxi driver                     | Catering assistant           | In family  | Max student loan, max grant  |    |
| Ewa       | Town, Yorkshire                              | Comprehensive                               | Sci     | Bailey, C | Welder                          | Manual work in warehouse     | In family  | Student loan, savings, works 40+hours p/week in holidays                       |    |
| Gwyn      | Town, North East                             | Comprehensive; FE/HE college                | Sci     | Hill, C   | Unemployed                      | School laboratory technician | Generation | Max student loan, max grant, borrowing from grandparents                       | SP |
| Joe       | Town, West Midlands                          | Comprehensive                               | Sci     | Hill, C   | Policeman                       | -                            | In family  | Student loan, inheritance, part-time self-employed work                        |    |
| Hannah    | Village, Wales                               | Comprehensive; HE/FE college                | AH      | Hill, SC  | -                               | Factory worker               | In family  | Max student loan, max grant  | ST |
| Holly     | No fixed home location, school in South East | Private                                     | SSH     | Hill, SC  | Diplomats                       |                              | In family  |  |    |
| Scarlett  | Town, South East                             | Comprehensive; selective sixth form college | SSH     | Bailey, C | -                               | Support worker for charity   | Generation | Student loan, savings, works 2 jobs in term-time, 40+ hours p/week in holidays | ST |
| Tony      | Town, North East                             | Comprehensive; sixth form college           | AH      | Hill, C   | Self-employed musician          | -                            | Generation | Max student loan, max bursary, looking for employment                          | SP |
| Rosie     | Village, North West                          | Grammar                                     | AH      | Bailey, C | Policeman                       | Support worker in hospital   | In family  | Student loan, parents taken out private bank loan                              |    |

**Figure 3:** Longitudinal participant characteristics (where WP indicates attendance at summer school intervention (SP = Supported Progression; ST = Sutton Trust) and C/SC indicates whether the college is catered or self-catered)

| Pseudonym | Home                 | School type(s)  | Faculty | College             | F occ                  | M occ      | First     | Income                        | WP |
|-----------|----------------------|---|---------|---------------------|------------------------|------------|-----------|-------------------------------|----|
| Alice     | District, South East | Comprehensive   | AH      | Hill, C             | Not known              | Not known  | In family | Max student loan, max bursary |    |
| Elizabeth | Town, North East     | Comprehensive; Sixth form college; FE college                           | SSH     | Hill, C (lives out) | Not known              | Not known  | In family | Works 6am-2pm Wed, Thurs      |    |
| Faye      | Town, West Midlands  | Comprehensive; travelled to take A Levels in college in another borough | SSH     | Bailey, C           | Manual work in company | Unemployed | In family | Max student loan, max bursary | ST |

**Figure 4:** One-off participant characteristics

## 3.6 Research Design

This section provides an overview and explanation of the different methods that I chose to explore my research questions within the setting of Durham University.

### 3.6.1 Document Analysis

The initial stage of the data collection, which continued throughout the year alongside the interviews, was engagement with organisational texts. These were extremely varied and included institutional site and policy documents such as “The 2017-2027 University Strategy”, “The Access Agreement” and “Estates and Facilities Masterplan”, quantitative data from the student registry, newspaper articles retrieved through archival research and more informal online social media webpages. The full list of documents is listed in appendix K. In the initial stages of the research, these as a collective were used to gather greater detail on the background of the research site, demographic information of institutional actors and relevant historical events (Eriksson and Kovalanien, 2014:158). These were helpful in discovering “general

issues which might affect the field site” (ibid.:158) and to design the data collection strategy. For example, analysing the demographic breakdown of undergraduate entrants at college level, as well as exploring the differences in traditions and rituals associated with each of the colleges, was useful in ensuring that students from a relevant variety were included in the sample in order to maximize points of contrast and comparison. This was also helpful for designing the questions and themes for the interview schedules, as “site documents are helpful in placing the participants of your study in a wider context” (ibid.:158), and “what kinds of demands are placed upon the people in your site, or what kind of privileges they have” (ibid.:158).

However, this approach of using institutional documents to provide mere context to the study “is not enough” (Smith, 2001:160). Rather, they should be used to explore “the ruling relations” of an organisation, as these “are essentially text-mediated” (p.160). The participants are entering an institution that is centuries old, with traditions that have continued across time and space. The institution, as a social field, is therefore governed by a certain “logic of practice” that has maintained this continuity, and is kept intact by field structures that work to “dominate and legitimate” different forms of capital (Oakes et al., 1998:260). Document analysis is therefore particularly suited to exploring the workings of institutional social fields, as they are “key devices in hooking people’s activities in particular local settings and at particular times into the transcending organisation of the ruling relations” (Smith, 2001:164).

As stated, in order to gain insight into the demographic breakdown of the university and the colleges, I used admissions and student registry data that is available to Durham University members. In terms of how I chose which documents to collate into

a corpus to then use as qualitative data in addition to this, I split these into three themes. First, those that related to the history of the institution in order to provide context of the historical purpose of the university and how it differed to its contemporary institutions. Second, those that related to the top-down university management decisions and strategic direction, in order to provide detail on how the university conceives of its purpose and mission in the modern day. Third, those that gave insight into the state-of-play in the student-run aspects of the colleges and the perceptions of students relating to this. In terms of the first theme, I employed archival research in the newspaper database *19<sup>th</sup> Century Newspapers Online*, using keyword searches of “Durham University”, the original names of the University’s 19<sup>th</sup> century colleges, as well as the names of the other universities of its era. For the second, I used publicly available documents on the university website. For the final theme, I undertook research of the *Palatinate* student newspaper archive which is available on their website, as well as key student-authored journalistic pieces in this newspaper, as well as *The Tab*, and more informal text within public Durham University student social media webpages, such as the “Overheard at Durham” and “DURFESS” Facebook pages. The full list of documents is included in appendix C. This resulted in a vast amount of data that I then analysed using thematic analysis, an overview of which is provided in section 3.7. The findings of this are presented in chapter four, which is short in length relative to chapters five and six in reflection of the fact that the main contribution of this research is the longitudinal interview data that provides rich insight into how students negotiate the social field of the university. Therefore, the document analysis findings that I chose to present are those that particularly highlight just which forms of capital, and whose habituses, the university has been, and is today, structured by.

### **3.6.2 Longitudinal Design: Repeat Interviews**

The central pillar of this thesis' research design is a series of repeat one-to-one interviews with non-traditional student participants, whereby each participant was interviewed at four points throughout the year. Interviews took place at the end of each term in the participants' first year at university. The design can therefore be labelled as a qualitative longitudinal approach, which can be defined as "qualitative enquiry that is conducted through or in relation to time" (Neale, 2012: unpaginated). The use of repeat rather than one-off interviews stems not only from the fact that re-visiting the same relatively small sample of participants generates findings that are "sensitively attuned to the detail of individual experience" (Miller, 2015:293) due to the greater volume of data, but also due to the fact that re-visiting participants throughout an important transition in their life-course can capture changes in their experiences, thoughts and even identities as they live through it. It can capture "critical moments" and "the processes by which this experience is created" (Calman et al., 2013: unpaginated), which is integral to this study's aim of exploring the processes and practices that contribute to a dominant institutional culture. Longitudinal research is therefore not just a research design but rather a "sensitivity and orientation" (Thomson and McLeod, 2015:245), with change being a central analytical focus (Calman et al., 2013; Thomson and McLeod, 2015; Thomson et al., 2003). Focusing on change can capture "the processes by which experience is created and illuminates the causes and consequences of change" (Calman et al., 2013: unpaginated). This method is therefore integral in achieving the study's aims of looking at the processes and practices that underpin the dominant state-of-play within the institution, the interaction of this with student habitus, and different experiences for students because of this. Therefore, as



McLeod (2003) points out, “longitudinal studies offer insight into the enactment of ‘ontological complicity’ and the formation of habitus over time” (p.203).

The sample of students in the first year of university only has been designed to maximise this focus on change. Beginning university and living through the first year of being a student is one of these key life transitions (Gale and Parker, 2014): it is one that inevitably involves change due to entering the new social field of an institution and meeting new people (Pásztor, 2014:para 4.8), as well as entering studenthood more generally which has a number of associated unique rituals in both discourse and practice (Cheeseman, 2018). As the research aims to explore the culture of the university field and how students engage with this, I wanted to track students from the mid-way point in their first term when they have just entered the university and are experiencing the institution and its norms and rituals as new and can most critically compare their time in this new social field with the ones they have left. As Carduff et al. (2015) point out, it is possible to track “the interaction of institutional and social context and the conditions of possibility these set up (or close down) and biographical projects and histories of individuals” (p.202). Continuing this through to the end of the first year when they have completed nine months at the institution and may have “acclimatised” to the university, enabled me to see how these initial reactions developed throughout the year, as the first year of university is an ongoing process characterised by ‘ups and downs’ and conflicting thoughts and experiences, something which cannot be adequately explored in a one-off interview. An example to exemplify this is that in his first interview, Tony described social isolation and having to budget strictly but could cope without working as he had built up a “nest egg” over the summer. However, by interview 2 he was contemplating getting a job, and by

interview 3 he was applying to any job he could find, as growing financial insecurity throughout the year built up over time. He said to me in his final interview, “I remember talking to you the first time like “we’re not there, it’s okay, we haven’t reached that point yet it’s all fine” and it just stopped being fine almost immediately.” Chloe was in a similar situation and was forced to take a job in her third term. A one-off interview would not have captured these changes. This would be problematic as firstly, it would not present accurate data about the participants’ first year experiences if had taken place too early on in the year, and secondly, would not have captured the specific processes that led to these changes for the participants, meaning that my recommendations for change would be too vague or invalid.

As Calman et al. (2013) point out, “the richness of the interview content and overwhelming amount of data made it difficult to analyse in-depth each interview before the next one”. I felt this was important to tailor the following interviews to the participant. Calman et al recommend “a preliminary analysis and summary of the interview is made so that the next interview can commence with a recap of what was previously discussed”. Due to time pressure, I opted for verbatim transcription where possible and detailed notes where not, as I felt it was better to have broad cover of all the interviews, rather than in-depth transcription and analysis of a select few, before commencing the next round of interviews. In the week(s) between the focus group and the interview, I listened to the recordings of the group sessions and made notes on what individuals had said. This then allowed me to make the interviews much more personalised and to mention details they had said – for example, siblings’ names and where they are from. As Calman et al. (2013) point out, the high volume of data produced by longitudinal studies can present logistical difficulties and require high

levels of organisation in “keeping up to date with participants, sending reminders and checking on a patient’s status”. They warn of the risk of participant fatigue in longitudinal studies, which can lead to increased rates of attrition or reluctance to engage fully with the interviews. To deal with this and to make the process as engaging for the participants as possible, I used several different interview strategies, an overview of which is provided in the following section.

### **3.6.3 Initial Focus Group**

The first interview took the form of an informal focus group to introduce the participants to the research; explain what the study is about in an in-depth manner and provide an opportunity to ask any questions in person; and most importantly, to gain insight into “the language and vernacular used by respondents” (Bers, 1987:27 cited in Wilkinson 1998:188-189) which was enabled through participants’ greater control of the direction of the discussion due to reduced researcher input. The focus groups took place in a teaching room in the Department of Sociology, where I arranged the chairs in a circle and provided pizzas. The focus groups all lasted approximately one hour.

Although Cronin (2001) uses “focus group” interchangeably with “group interview” (p.165), focus groups are generally seen as methodologically distinct from the latter. The former employ “collectives as the basic unit of analysis” (Curtis and Curtis 2011:102), as the collective environment makes them “uniquely suited for quickly identifying qualitative similarities and differences among people” (Stewart et al., 2007:590), whereas in group interviews several participants are interviewed in the same setting but their individual accounts are used for analysis as in a one-to-one interview (Litosseliti, 2003). This group interview design is therefore common where

resources or time is limited, as interviewing participants in the same group is an efficient use of resources (Tonkiss, 2004:198; Stewart et al., 2007:591). I use the term “focus group” throughout this thesis but my approach can be seen to straddle the two approaches: the focus groups were conducted for their methodological benefits of having a collective basis, rather than their efficiency, but the individual participant remained the unit of analysis as in a group interview.

The collective element of the focus group brought two benefits to this research: firstly, I felt that using an informal focus group would help build rapport between myself as researcher and the participants. The focus group environment can be seen as more towards the emic end of the social research spectrum in that is “more lifelike and natural” (Curtis and Curtis 2011:113-114), whereas an interview can be interpreted as more artificial due to the conversation occurring between researcher and participant only (ibid.). This can be seen as especially true in the case for the participants in the research, as Cameron (2005) draws parallels between focus groups and university tutorial group meetings (pp.116). Hopkins (2007) disagrees with this comparison on the grounds that seminar groups meet more than once, unlike a one-off focus group where individuals do not know each other. However, given that these students had just started their first term, they were still used to meeting with groups of students they had never met before, and thus the focus group – taking place in a university building but with space for informal chat and the provision of pizza – was likely much less formal than much of the encounters they were used to. Interviews are more formal and might be off-putting for the first contact with the researcher. The focus group was therefore an opportunity for students to get to know about the project in a more informal way before the individual interviews.

Moreover, the “relatively free flow of discussion and debate” that occurs between members of a focus group, stemming from the reduced input of the researcher and greater contribution of other participants in the discussion, provides an insight into the vocabulary used by the participants (Wilkinson, 1998:188). Thus it is possible to determine “the language people use when thinking and talking about specific issues and objects” (Stewart et al., 2007:590). I felt this would be a good way to learn the words used by the students – such as acronyms or nicknames - so that I could adopt them in the subsequent interviews, or to avoid using them if not used by the participant themselves, to convey familiarity with the university and similarity to the participants.

It also presented an opportunity to hear about how the participants framed their experience so far, so I could set the tone for the one-to-one interview. As evident in the focus group interview guide in appendix D, the first question I asked in the focus group was to ask them to describe their time at Durham University so far in three words. The combinations were very varied, from the very positive “fun, exciting, new” to “expensive, stressful, mixed”. Knowing the combination stated by the different participants enabled me to refine my questions for the subsequent interviews and be aware of which topics/questions might be more sensitive for the individual participant going forward. The individual remained the unit of analysis, as I did not want to assume any common experience among participants at this early stage. The methodological binary between focus groups and group interviews is therefore not helpful in classifying my approach, as my design incorporates elements of both into the research. Hence, I follow Wilkinson (1998) in seeing focus groups are epistemologically flexible (p.185), as the reasons for their employment here are more on pragmatic grounds than an epistemological commitment.

There is much discrepancy over the appropriate number of participants for a focus group, with Bedford and Burgess (2001) suggesting between four and eight; Cameron (2005) and Litosseliti suggesting six to ten; and Stewart et al. (2009) stating eight to twelve. Krueger and Casey (2015) point out that “mini focus groups” of between four to six participants are increasing in popularity as they provide a more comfortable environment for the participants. Litosseliti (2003) advocates the use of these mini focus groups for encouraging detail in responses or for “complex, controversial or emotional topics” (p.3). As well as seeking the detail and emotion that comes with describing thoughts and experiences, I wanted each participant to feel highly valued and listened to in these focus groups to encourage them to want to continue with the research and to know that their thoughts and experiences are important. Therefore, I decided to keep my groups small, with three to four students in each “mini” focus group.

As Tonkiss (2004) highlights, the traditional view is for the ideal focus group to comprise a group that is “homogeneous in terms of social characteristics but unfamiliar to each other” (p.202). For Wilkinson (1998) this is particularly important for “‘prestige’ or ‘status’ factors such as occupation, social class or age” (p.182). This is no longer seen as the case, as diversity in focus groups can add depth to the discussion by bringing contrasting opinions and experiences which can be negotiated in the group (Tonkiss, 2004). In this research, the composition was based practically on the participants’ preferences for times rather than a specific aim to achieve diversity or homogeneous groups. I asked students to express a preference for time and then allocated them a session accordingly to create balance in numbers across the groups. However, due to last minute change of plans, one focus group ended up with two instead of three, another with five instead of four, and the remaining having four.

The groups were relatively homogenous in that all participants had identified with being a student for who “going to university was not the norm nor common”. The groups can also be seen as pre-existing to the extent that they are members of the same university, currently live in the same city and were familiar with most of the topics and issues that the other participants spoke about. However, only the participants who had snowballed out to their contacts and those who were recruited via this method by another member knew one another before the focus group, and it turned out that neither of these pairs attended the same group. They were therefore more towards the end of the artificial spectrum than naturally-occurring. This was seen as a positive as it prevented private conversations between participants who knew each other from forming within the focus group, and there was a sense that every participant was “in the same boat”. Yet all groups were mixed in terms of faculty, gender and college attended. As colleges and faculty membership are key lines of comparison in this study, it was not seen as desirable to make them homogenous on these lines, as the differences could encourage the sharing of experiences between participants.

Wilkinson (1998) points out that some focus groups can feel like a meeting between friends. This was the case for all three of my focus groups as participants were joking with each other, laughing at funny or unbelievable events, and providing support when someone expressed something negative. I also felt that participants were being very open and honest with me and one another, thanks to the respectful environment that all participants created for one another. Tony subsequently invited Belle along to the working-class students' association, and Josie and Jack found out that they were in the same college as each other and walked back to dinner together. Scarlett told me in her final interview that she had seen one of the other participants from her focus group in the library and they had had a conversation about how they were doing – half a year

later. For Litosseliti (2003), “to ensure a flowing discussion and a diversity of perceptions it is useful to have at least six participants for the initial focus group” (p.3), yet I found that even my focus group of two worked well in creating natural, rich discussion that were supportive and enjoyable environments for participants.

### **3.6.4 Interview 1 and 3: Semi-Structured Interviews**

Although the background of participants meant that many of their experiences were similar, they were also different in important ways, and therefore to gain detailed and rich data about every participant required seeing them repeatedly on a one-to-one basis. These took a semi-structured form, with questions based around themes designed to address their sense of belonging at the university and to see whether they find particular practices and processes that characterise university life as exclusionary. Structured interviews would not produce data attuned to the experiences of individuals and unstructured interviews, although allowing for participants to frame the terms of the interview themselves, may have resulted in conversations going off-topic and not covering the themes I wanted to in enough detail to meet my research aims.

The first individual interview was “structured largely by the interviewees themselves” (West et al., 2014: 30) so that the subsequent interviews could be personalised and tailored to their particular current situation, history and thoughts/hopes about the future. Consequently, this interview was largely based around a biographical approach which “capture[s] past experiences through the person's perspective of a present understanding together with future expectations and potentials” (Bron and Thunborg, 2015:2). I used these in the first biographical interview to gain basic demographic data about the type of school(s) they attended and their familial situation, and to explore the pathway that lead them to coming to university in general and Durham in



particular. To do this, retrospective questions were incorporated within the interviews. For instance – and as shown in full in appendix E - I began the interview with “could you tell me a bit about your life before you came to university”. From this I then probed to find out about their primary and secondary schooling and their family. Given the theoretical engagement with Bourdieu’s “habitus” and exploring how the individual habitus intersects with the institutional habitus, the research needs to have a lens into the students’ pasts: habitus is “history turned into nature” (Bourdieu, 1977:78). From there we discussed university choices and their pathways that led them to coming to Durham in particular. As the conversation moved on to their reasoning for choosing Durham, I then asked about how these expectations or hopes of what the university would be like compared to the current reality, their first impressions of the university and freshers' week. Conversation then developed into discussing department and college life. I ended the interview by using prospective questions to capture their “imaginary futures” (Neale, 2012), to shed light on what their particular future aspirations were that led them to come to the university, as well as asking them how they were feeling about the remaining two years of their degree.

Re-visiting of interview content forms in an iterative manner is a key component of longitudinal research according to Carduff et al. (2015), in that researchers draw on “what was learnt previously to understand what has changed to tell a story over time” (p.2). Another central aspect of a longitudinal design is that it can encourage reflexivity on the part of the participants as well as the researcher (ibid.; Calman et al., 2013). In the second and third interviews with participants, I encouraged this reflexivity by drawing on the research design’s iterative nature, by asking the participants to reflect on changes in their accounts themselves. I re-visited statements made by participants

in the first time we had met and asked them to consider what key changes had occurred since then and why. Examples of these are “what does this set of photos tell me about your time at university in comparison to that in the two years before you came?” (interview 2, with all participants) and “I remember you saying that sometimes you think “I wish I’d gone to a normal university”. Why did you think you said that then?” and “how does that compare to what you think now?” (interview 3, with Tony). An example interview guide for this third interview is in appendix F.

### **3.6.5 Interview 2: Photo Interview**

The second individual interview took the form of a photo elicitation interview (PEI). PEI is based “around the simple idea of inserting a photograph into a research interview” (Harper, 2002:13). Here, the photograph “functions like a semi-structured interview schedule to create an ordered sequence of data elicitation”, becoming “a forum for the active construction of meaning” (Schwartz,1989:143). In this research, participants were asked to bring up to ten photographs that summarised their time at university so far - which could be taken purposefully for the research, or chosen retrospectively of naturally-occurring events that they thought captured a feeling or moment. The information sheet I gave to participants about this task and how they should prepare for it is included in appendix G. Participants brought between four and eleven photographs along with them (titles and descriptions of which are shown in appendix H). Examples varied from photographs of the participant and their friends on a night out in a club, to self-portrait photographs of their individual face to capture a particular emotion, to a picturesque landscape taken somewhere in Durham city. These then acted as the basis for discussion.

The principle that underpin the use of PEIs and visual methods in Social Science more generally is not just that they produce a greater volume of data than traditional interviewing techniques but that the data elicited is of a different qualitative kind (Harper, 2002:13), underpinned by the fact that “images evoke deeper elements of human consciousness than do words” (ibid.). Using images encourages participants to reflect on why they took the particular image and acts as visual stimuli to prompt memories of how they were feeling at the time. In this research the participant-produced photographs were highly personal to the individual, and focusing on an image they constructed themselves grounded the discussion in their personal experiences, thoughts and feelings, as “the photos themselves provide concrete points of reference as interviews proceed” (Schwartz, 2002:143). The images’ depictions of particular spaces, places and interactions triggered memories of the content of the photographs, encouraging them to discuss the micro-realities of their lives which “otherwise might have remained dormant in the face-to-face interview” (Clark-Ibáñez, 2004:1513). Indeed, I found that the level of detail in participants’ narratives relating to a particular photo was much more intricate than their responses to open-ended questions in interviews 1 and 3, as they were referring to particular moments that they could recall in greater detail than without the visual stimuli.

For Clark-Ibáñez (2004), participant-produced images incorporated as interview stimuli is a “more inductive” (p.1509) approach to qualitative research than a traditional semi-structured interview: it is the content of the photograph that sets the agenda for discussion (Emmel and Clark, 2001) which in this case was constructed by the participant themselves, as opposed to an interview schedule created by the researcher. Therefore, a PEI has been referred to as an “auto-driven” interview (Clark,

1999; Clark-Ibáñez, 2004) and Harper suggests that PEIs facilitate “postmodern dialogue based on the authority of the subject rather than the researcher” (p.15). By focusing on something they have produced themselves, it gives the clear message to the participant that is their personal experiences and thoughts that I want to hear about, empowering participants “to teach the researcher about aspects of their social world otherwise ignored or taken for granted” (Clark-Ibáñez, 2004:1524).

For Clark-Ibáñez (2004) photographs can “ease rapport between researcher and interviewee” as well as “lessen some of the awkwardness of interviews because there is something to focus on” p.1512. Although this was less of an issue here as I already knew the participants well, the approach helped deal with “participant fatigue” or boredom that can present itself in longitudinal research (Calman et al., 2013) through the incorporation of a creative activity. Given the prevalence of smartphones among young people - approximately 95% of 16-24-year olds in the UK own one (Statista, 2018a) - and the importance of photographs for social media in young people’s lives - 61% of male and 71% of female in the same age category use image-based app Instagram (Statista, 2018b) - asking participants to photograph naturally-occurring significant moments for them was seen to be a particularly apt method as it will be an almost natural act for them. I found that participants seemed to have really enjoyed the task of choosing the photos and talking me through them.

However, it is of course the case that “photos do not automatically elicit useful interviews” (Harper, 2002:20). Schwartz (1989) warns against the “tendency to treat photographs as objective evidence” (p.120), as do Bancroft et al. (2014) who state that images are often taken “to stand for the truth” (para 4.4). This is a problem given that

they are “inherently ambiguous” (Schwartz, 1989:122), with the meaning of the photograph not a given but subject to the interpretation of the participant: the value comes in the participant’s narrative surrounding a photograph and is constructed via their interpretation of it, rather than residing in the photograph itself. I told participants that the photographs they bring would not be used in the thesis and not be used beyond being a prompt for discussion. This was for both ethical purposes to ensure that friends/peers in the photographs were not included in the research without their consent, and also to keep the focus on their narratives rather than the images themselves. Still, Bancroft et al. (2014) state that a problem with using video visual methods is that “a gap opens up between their rich, nuanced, varied experiences and the snapshot that any video must end up being” (para 4.4). The same can be said for photos and the narratives they produce. However, as this aspect is just one part of a wider longitudinal approach, the potential for this is mitigated as these photographs and accounts can be contextualised within the participants’ wider narratives.

Another important point is the tendency for subjects to photograph only enjoyable experiences, as the purpose of photographs is to act as keepsakes or as reminders of earlier times. It was necessary to bear this in mind, as using participants’ photographs as the basis for discussion therefore had the potential to be biased towards the positive aspects of participants’ first years. This was particularly the case with photographs chosen retrospectively, rather than taken for the purposes of the research. I found that this was true in reality with the majority of photos being from special events with friends. However, some participants did bring photos of their academic work to capture the “stress” that they experience alongside the fun (Gwyn). However, it was only Tony – who, as described in the next chapters, had overwhelmingly negative

experiences throughout the year – who brought any photo of himself visually showing emotional distress.

This is exemplified by this section of the photo interview with Chloe:

Chloe: Sometimes we're not always happy [...] just as normal people, you get annoyed with other people, but you don't catch that in a photo. It's always the good side.

MW: it's hard to capture those sort of more negative events isn't it?

C: Yes, you just don't do that. When you look at social media, no one's capturing the bad bits, everyone wants to make sure it looks as happy as possible

In anticipation of this, I made sure to incorporate questions about what their collections of photos told me about their time at university, but also what was missing from it, as demonstrated in the interview guide included in appendix I. For instance, I asked "what does this set of photos tell us about your time at university so far?", as well as "are there any aspects of your life at university that these photos don't capture?" and "are there any emotions you've felt since starting university that these don't capture?". These questions worked well at getting participants to reflect on whether their interview narrative up until that point had been an accurate reflection of their year as a whole. For instance, in response to the last question mentioned above, Ben and I had the following conversation:

Ben: from when I first started?

MW: yeah

B: yeah definite, do you mean like the hardship?

MW: well I guess these are all sort of happy, aren't they?

B: yeah, I couldn't take a picture of me crying [laughs]

MW: that's a problem with photos isn't it?

B: yeah, it has been hard for me. Like I have enjoyed first term, but it's been a lot better this term

He then proceeded to tell me about his struggles with juggling an intense academic workload with working long hours and taking a while to find people he felt comfortable around. By contrast, Ewa said to me ““Durham isn't as bad a place as I've made it out to be” in our discussion of what was missing from the photos. Thus, the use of photo interviews worked well in producing data that was specific as well as wide-ranging, and encouraged participants to be honest about the positives and negatives within their day-to-day experiences, as well as talking me through particular “high” and “low” points throughout the year.

### **3.6.6 One-off Interviews**

The semi-structured interviews with the repeat sample incorporated questions from all the types of interviews used with the repeat sample, with the exception of asking them to bring along photos. For instance, with Faye, we began by discussing her childhood and family in the West Midlands, before moving on to her summer school experience, before then discussing her experiences at particular events, her budgeting and day-to-day schedule, as well as her hopes and aspirations for the future. My interview guide for these one-off interviews is in appendix J. In all three of these interviews with Alice, Elizabeth and Faye, I felt like I had got to know them well and, as will be demonstrated in chapters five and six, their narratives are invaluable to the research. Nevertheless, unsurprisingly, their data is less detailed than that in the repeat sample. This was, firstly, due to the sheer volume of data gathered from other participants in comparison. However, this was also because I felt the rapport that I had created with other

participants through meeting with them three more times meant that they were more open and honest with me as they saw me as a friend. These one-off interviews were key to incorporate within the research design, however, as it enabled those with less time available to participate in the research.

### **3.7 Data Analysis**

My data analysis began early on in the process of conducting this research, in that the document analysis arm of the research design commenced before I began the interview process. As stated in section 3.6.1, I began the process of this early on in the second year of my PhD, so I could gain greater detail into the research site which then went on to inform my sampling design and interview schedules. This necessarily involved both ‘informal’ analysis as my thoughts developed and ‘formal’ analysis techniques as I coded these thematically (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1997). I chose to undertake inductive thematic analyses of both documents and interview transcripts, a six-step process whereby a researcher looks for patterns across a dataset and generates themes and codes (Braun and Clarke, 2006; 2012). In the following sections I outline how I did this for each of the three strands of data: that from documents, one-off interviews and longitudinal interviews.

#### **3.7.1 Documents**

As stated in section 3.6.1, I had three strands of research within my document analysis: the history of the institution, the presentation of the university and its strategic direction, and the student-run aspects of the collegiate system. The first strand involved mainly archive research and description as I wanted to plot a chronological overview of the key moments for the University. The second two required a deeper



level of analysis. I chose to analyse the corpus of documents I had collated for these two strands via thematic analysis over the other commonly employed technique of content analysis for secondary data. Traditional content analysis involves counting the quantitative recurrence of a theme or word, usually deductively in line with the researcher's preconceptions or hypotheses based on existing data. This would not have been appropriate here due to, firstly, my exploratory approach and, secondly, needing to go beyond reporting number of incidences to provide detail and description. As stated in section 3.3, neither institutional cultures nor people's experiences are tangible or reducible to quantities or key words. Although I had done an extended literature review prior, I did not want to search for particular ideas or concepts that are common in existing literature, or work towards a specific theoretical framework, given that this is a holistic case study examining social and cultural aspects of universities that have not been done before. I therefore opted for an inductive "systematic process of coding, examining of meaning and provision of a description of the social reality through the creation of theme" (Vaismoradi et al., 2016:100-101). My aim was then to generate a theoretical framework once all data analysis had been complete.

I chose inductive thematic analysis over the other qualitative options of grounded theory and situational analyses to do this. The main differences between TA and these options is that the former "assumes that the recorded messages themselves (i.e. the texts) are the data" (Neuendorf, 2019:212), whereas the in situational analysis, "the situation itself becomes the unit of analysis" (Clarke, 2005). I chose to use a method that was more grounded in the data itself due to the fact that I was conducting analysis of all data strands separately. As I was taking a triangulated approach, whereby different forms of data would shed light on the same phenomenon, I wanted to take

these all into consideration. Therefore, I decided to extrapolate out beyond the data that was in front of me once I had generated codes and themes for all sections of the data as a collection, rather than doing this from the outset. Thematic analysis was seen to work well in this regard, as it is epistemologically flexible (Braun and Clarke, 2013) and emphasizes that the researcher should be flexible with their code generation and allow them to change and develop as the analytical process goes on (Neuendorf, 2019:212). I wanted to extrapolate out beyond the data that was in front of me once I had generated codes and themes for all sections of the data as a collection, rather than doing this from the outset.

As outlined by Braun and Clark (2013), the first of the six steps involved in TA is familiarization, which I completed through the initial search for data which is outlined in 3.6.1, and re-visiting these to read through as a whole once the search was complete. The second stage is to generate codes, which are “essence-capturing and/or evocative attribute[s]” (Saldana, 2016:4 in Neuendorf, 2019:212) that initially appear as prominent or significant to the researcher. I did this by writing up sections of documents into a computer file and then coding using different colours on a Microsoft Word file, rather than using a computer programme like Atlas.ti or Nvivo due to personal preference. Examples of these initial codes in my document analysis data set were, “proliferation of extra-curricular activities” and “privileging of student choice”. The third stage was to generate themes by identifying patterns between codes. To do this I compiled codes (which often overlapped or were in multiple different themes) into sections in a matrix in Excel. An example of a theme was “appealing to the commodified student”, which incorporates the codes named above alongside “soft credentials”, “community”, “enabling responsibility”, “value for money” and

“different to elsewhere”. In line with Braun and Clark’s suggestions, I then reviewed these themes twice over – editing and moving codes between where necessary, before deciding on the final naming of these themes. In total, I generated nine themes, which went on to inform my structure of chapter four.

### **3.7.2 One-off Interview**

I also undertook this six-step method with the interviews with the three participants in the one-off sample. In combination with the repeat sample, I had thirty-eight interview recordings to transcribe into computer files, of which nine were completed by a professional transcription service. In recognition of the fact that transcription can be a key step in the familiarisation stage of TA, I chose to keep the one-off sample for myself to transcribe, with the nine that were professionally transcribed being in the repeat sample that I had made detailed notes of prior to undertaking the next interview with the participant. This was in order to immerse myself in the data as much as possible, whilst also maximizing the time I had for data analysis. I repeated the coding and theme refinement stages with the interview data. I then compared these themes and their underpinning codes with the repeat interview data, which I outline next.

### **3.7.3 Longitudinal Interviews**

However, as Calman et al. (2013) point out, using TA for longitudinal data “can lead to cross-sectional descriptive accounts (what is happening at this time point) rather than focusing on causes and consequences of change.” It is therefore important “to ground longitudinal qualitative analysis in an exploration of processes and changes which look both backwards and forwards in time”. These authors draw on Holland (2007) to advise that to do this, the researcher asks questions of the data in terms of

the context and conditions that create changes for participants. I employed this with my data. As I stated in section 3.6.2, after each focus group or interview I transcribed the conversation verbatim or, in the absence of time, made detailed notes. Calman et al. (2013) state that the most effective way to do longitudinal qualitative analysis is to conduct analysis after each round of interviewing with contribution from the participant – this, they argue, will result in a focus on processes and changes rather than snapshots. However, I left all data analysis until data collection was complete. I felt that this was the most effective way in terms of my dataset, as I saw it as a collection. I wanted to draw out themes and topics that were important to all participants and any overlaps between them at varying points. This allowed me to chart change in participants' narratives via comparing them with each other as well as themselves, in turn highlighting the specific processes that resulted in change for some at a faster pace than others.

### **3.8 Insider Research**

As a member of my case study institution, I am conducting this research as an “insider” (Trowler, 2016:240). There is no consensus within the methodological literature as to whether being an insider or outsider is preferable when conducting institutional research. Research done by an outsider is often credited with greater neutrality and objectivity, which is seen to lead to increased reliability. For instance, Simmel (1950) noted that only a stranger is “able to survey conditions with less prejudice” (p.405 cited in Mercer, 2007:5), and it is seen that a risk with insiders is that they “will assume shared meanings due to contextual familiarity with the environment” (O’Shea and Stone, 2011:278) and lack the ability “to make the familiar strange” (Hawkins, 1990:417 cited in Atkinson, 2014). This can ultimately “compromise the researcher’s ability to engage critically with the data” (Drake, 2010:85). By contrast, others state

that this closeness to the research site and participant group is beneficial for the practicalities of conducting research as it may allow “privileged access to informants of participants” (Drake, 2010:85), which for Trowler (2016) is important given that this process is often harder than planned for (p.16). Insiders may also approach the research with greater understanding. For Merton (1972), an outsider “has a structurally imposed incapacity to comprehend alien groups, statuses, cultures and societies [...] and therefore cannot have the direct, intuitive sensitivity that alone makes empathic understanding possible” (p.15), which is crucial for relating to participants and sensitively interpreting qualitative data. The lack of agreement therefore indicates that being an insider or outsider can bring strengths and weaknesses to different stages of the research, and the perceived appropriateness of each strategy will vary according to the epistemological assumptions of the researcher.

Given the interpretivist stance of this research, objectivity and neutrality was not of key importance to me. As Drake (2010) reminds us, a research environment “is also a political environment” (p.86) and that a neutral researcher “is often not desirable and is always unachievable” (ibid.). In the initial focus groups with participants I introduced myself as having been at the university for undergraduate study between 2013 and 2016 and that I had lived in a college as a first-year student myself. I did this to encourage open and honest explanations of the micro-realities of their student lives, rather than explaining things at a broad and basic level as someone may with a listener who is new to a topic. I phrased questions in a non-leading and open way, inviting a range of possible responses. In line with Kvale’s (1996) recommendations, I tried to embody a “gentle disposition and openness” (Qu and Dumay, 2011:251 in Kvale, 1996).

However, at other times I asked for more detail to encourage the participant to explicate when I thought there was a risk I was assuming what they meant. For instance, in her first interview Holly told me that “because [students] know that their college has a particular stereotype, they’re like “right so now I have to be like that” and because they hang out with people who also think like that, they all become that”. I vaguely knew the stereotype of the college she was referring to, but asked her “so what are the stereotypes?”. Although I did not want to remain completely objective during the interviews, I did not want to imprint my own thoughts onto the views of the participants, and I was able to mobilise my insider/outsider status to aid this. Therefore, I follow Trowler (2016) in believing that a hard-line rule that one must only conduct a researcher as an insider or outsider is unhelpful “precisely because we rarely are ever completely an insider or an outsider” (p.240).

In my experience, my insider/outsider status also varied and evolved naturally throughout the research process. In designing this research, being an insider in terms of having been a student at the university for four years was important as I was aware of the quirks and specifics of undergraduate life of the university. Whilst presenting my work at conferences, peers have mentioned to me that they did not know that Durham University was like this: as an outsider, you would be unlikely to know the goings-on of the university at a micro level, and may be unlikely to choose it as a research site, instead favouring the more heavily-studied Oxbridge. I believe being an insider also aided entry to the site, as I knew the people to approach to disseminate recruitment material, and gatekeepers seemed eager to help after I introduced myself as a PhD student at the university. Out of interest, I asked participants in their final

interview why they had volunteered for the research. Many of them answered that they wanted to be involved with doctoral research to see what doing a PhD at the university was like.

Yet at other times I felt very much an outsider. It has been noted that “insiderness” can vary according to topic discussed (Mercer, 2007), and there were several instances when the five- to six-year age gap between my participants and me felt significant, as I did not understand references to popular culture or know who individuals deemed to be a “big name on campus” were. As mentioned above, this was not necessarily a problem as prompting for explanation encouraged participants to provide greater depth in their responses, but it highlighted to me that despite being part of the institution for five years, I would ultimately never be a complete insider, even within the student body.

Thus I follow Anderson and Jones (2000) in seeing the insider/outsider status as a continuum rather than a dichotomy (Mercer, 2007:4). Being positioned more towards the ‘insider’ end of the scale was highly beneficial in commencing this research but this did not extend across the whole process and varied according to the specific research encounter. Moreover, a researcher’s insider/outsider status depends on the researcher’s personal characteristics, as well as their formal membership of an institution, as “what counts as ‘inside’ also depends on one’s own identity positioning; how one sees oneself in relation to the university” (Trowler, 2016:240). I therefore reflect on the consequences of my personal characteristics and positionality in the following section.

### **3.9 Positionality and Reflexivity**

Although a member of the case study institution, in other ways I am an outsider in this research. My school years were spent at a mid-performing state primary school in a relatively affluent village in the south east, followed by the local high-performing comprehensive where progression to further education of some kind was highly encouraged and expected. This was followed by two years in a selective state sixth form college which sends as many of its students to Oxbridge as some private-sector schools, and where progression to a RG institution was considered the norm. From when I was a teenager both my parents have had professional jobs, and although coming from working-class families in the north west, they both took advantage of the post-Robbins era of expanded free higher education and went to university after leaving school, before moving to a well-off area in the south east of the country for work. I therefore consider myself as being brought up in the middle class for most, if not all, of my life and to have had a privileged upbringing in terms of education.

I entered my undergraduate studies aged 19, finished them at 22, and continued straight on to postgraduate study. Thus, there is nothing non-traditional about my route to university, and I very much fit the stereotype that characterises the students of RG institutions, although perhaps not quite so the upper middle-class character that can be said to be true of the demographic of my particular case study institution, as I found the culture of the university hard to negotiate as an undergraduate myself and feel that it fundamentally needs to change. It is due to studying Sociology that I have become reflexive about how my privileged educational background led me to this university.



Throughout this research I have grappled with the question of whether my privileged upbringing gives me the right to conduct this research. Moreover, as it has often been noted that meaning within an interview is constructed through the “shared lens” of social class (Drake, 2010:87), it was a worry that I would lack the critical approach that could be brought by someone who does not fit the bill of the institution’s norm and that I would not be able to move past “the standpoint of the privileged” (Trowler, 2016:29). Whether or not this was the case I am still not sure, and I do not think I will ever be. In this section I attempt to deal with this by reflecting on my characteristics, and consider the bearing this had on the design of the research and production and interpretation of the data. Ultimately, I hope that, despite being a traditional student in demographic terms, through this thesis I can contribute an understanding to the perpetuation of exclusionary cultures that characterise such institutions.

Choosing a research topic in Sociology is rarely apolitical and exempt from the researcher’s personal experience but in designing this research I was aware of my middle-class experiences of the university impacting on how I approached the research. As stated above, I felt that there were issues with social representation and exclusionary cultures at the university throughout my undergraduate studies. The unrepresentative demographics of the student body is evidenced in admissions data but the issue of culture I felt the university has is ultimately personal opinion developed through lived experience. This led me to want to research the matter in greater detail to see whether the issue is also seen as prevalent by students from less privileged backgrounds than myself, and how it could be changed if so. However, I was conscious that this negative framing of the issue would impact my research design and my opinions may not be shared by participants. I therefore dedicated a long time

to designing my interview schedules and ensuring that questions were open and non-leading. In the focus group I opened the discussion by asking “describe your time at Durham University in three words”. This was designed to capture how each participant felt about the university personally, meaning I was aware of whether the student was finding it negative or positive or somewhere in between at this initial stage. Every participant was different - some finding the university a lot more positive than I expected than I did personally, and others finding it a lot more traumatic.

I also was conscious that my own middle-class experience would lead me to focus on particular aspects of university life that I had found particularly challenging or positive, whereas for others it might not be the case, and other arenas may have been more so which I had not experienced. In the focus group and first interview I therefore designed the interview schedule to capture as many different aspects of university life as possible. I transcribed the interviews after each round and re-visited them before the following interview, so I could re-visit particular aspects that the participant had individually highlighted as being a problem. Throughout the data collection stages of this research, I was highly aware of the likelihood of being read as middle class and therefore being seen as different by my participants. I was particularly aware of my south-east accent, given its historical association with privilege (Donnelly et al., 2019) and recent research that shows that university students take it to signify wealth (Addison and Mountford, 2015). I was conscious that participants would read me as being part of the dominant demographic of the university and therefore would not be as open to me as they would from someone they considered to be of the same minority background. This is not something that could be changed or manipulated but again,

pointed to the need to not remain neutral in interviews but to treat them more like a conversation, responding with thought, empathy and humour.

In practice, participants seemed very open with me and did not hesitate to complain about the fact that at Durham University “everyone’s from the south” in the focus group. As the interviews progressed, there were times when I unexpectedly had things in common with participants, for instance one of the participants lives on the same road as my auntie. I felt that participants saw me as a friend as they often took interviews off-topic and spoke about dating, friendship fall-outs, and instances when they had been drunk, and some of them added me on social media websites. Two students commented that interviews were like a “therapy session” and some said they had actively looked forward to them. Here, my age (being aged between 24 and 25 throughout the data collection process) and gender were likely positive contributing factors, as being relatively close in age to the participants and still technically a student myself would have made me seem more relatable and less intimidating than a senior member of staff. I believe that identifying and presenting as a woman made female participants at ease and I found that these students were the more forthcoming about emotions and detailed in their initial responses than the cis-males, who required more prompting than others. Interestingly, I found the male participants to be noticeably more open with the photo elicitation interview than with the semi-structured, and they seemed to react particularly positive to responding to a visual stimuli. My ethnicity of white, British matched that of all but two participants who were white, Polish, and mixed race British-Egyptian. I did not notice differences in relationships with these two participants, and although, ethnicity can have a bearing on research relationships even when the topic is not explicitly about ethnic differences in experience or

inequalities, I was not as conscious about these differences in comparison to those in class. Therefore, I agree with Merton (1972) when he writes that researchers “have not a single status, but a status set” (p.22), as I had varying amounts in common with participants, who were also all very different from one another. Ultimately, it is difficult to know whether interview participants withheld detail or information from me because of my middle-classness but I felt their commitment to this research and the rich level of detail captured in the interview transcripts is testament to the good level of rapport established from the first interview.

With regard to the interpretation of data, I was aware of the fact that my own voice is responsible “for turning the speech into text” (Drake, 2010:97). Although Bryman (2008) says an inductive analytical approach allows “concepts and theories to emerge from the data”, this is misleading, as all researchers bring their own subjective experiences with them to the analytical process regardless of research topic and their positionality (Saldana, 2009:8; Volkens et al., 2009:236). It is therefore of particular concern here where my personal characteristics differ to those of the participants, as I have approximately 40-hours’ worth of interview transcripts meaning it would not be feasible to include all matters discussed in the interview within the thesis. I attempt to deal with the potential for my own assumptions and views to determine what is included by dedicating the amount the participants spoke about an issue to the amount of space in the thesis itself, and also reflecting the severity and significance of a sentiment with space. An example of the latter is financial matters, which were particularly severe for a small number of participants, but I felt the severity experienced was so acute that more space needed to be dedicated to it. In the later interviews I also asked for clarification and detail to check my interpretation of earlier

interviews was in line with the participant. This of course was not possible for the final interview. However, I sent a short summary of findings to participants to hear their thoughts on it, and to seek their opinion on whether there were any additional points they thought needed to be included or modified (although all those that responded were happy with the findings as I had presented them).

### **3.10 Ethical Considerations**

This research followed the British Sociological Association's (2019) ethical guidelines and was granted ethical approval by the Durham University Department of Sociology ethics board in July 2018. In this section I discuss how I ensured the study adhered to key ethical principles.

#### **3.10.1 Informed Consent**

One key principle of ethical social research is gaining informed consent from participants (BSA, 2019). In longitudinal research this needs to be an ongoing process and sought at each point throughout the research. Although attrition is a key concern in this type of research given the small sample size (Hermanowicz, 2013:202), it is important not to assume that a participant providing their consent at the start means they wanted to participate in every subsequent interview (Farr and Nizza, 2019:200).

After receiving expressions of interest over email, I provided each participant with a participant information sheet (appendix B) and included a short summary of the project in an email. I then invited all students who stated that they would like to participate after reading this to one of three focus groups, for all of which there was full attendance. During this I gave hard copies of the PI sheet to students and asked them

if they had any questions. Following this, I asked them to sign a consent form (appendix K) if they agreed to participate on these terms, which all of them did. After the focus group I sent personalised emails thanking them for their contribution to the research and asking if they would like to be involved in the next part - the one-to-one interview. In arranging the final two interviews of the year, I contacted participants at the mid-point of second and third term asking if they would like to participate in an interview at the end of the term. At the beginning of each interview I explained the format of what was about to take place, and at the end I explained the plan for the next interview. I stressed that there was no obligation to take part in the next stage whatsoever, although all of them - besides one, as explained below chose to.

I was extremely lucky as I had a sample of highly committed, organised and interested participants, all of whom wanted to take part in each stage and attended each interview on time and with eagerness. Numerous authors have stated that it is necessary to over-recruit in the initial sample (Wilkinson, 1998; Hermanowicz, 2013) and therefore I was not expecting for ten of my eleven initially-recruited participants to take part in all four stages of the research; and the remaining participant - Ben - to take part in three of the four. Ben did not participate in his fourth interview as he withdrew from the university during the Easter holiday, before the final interview was due to take place in the third term. I became aware of this when speaking to another participant, Rosie, who had met Ben in the focus group, learnt that they were in the same college, and then discovered that he had not returned for the third term. I wanted to get in touch with him to discuss his decision but the only contact address I had for him was his university email, to which he was not replying. After speaking with the head of the ethics committee in my department, it was deemed appropriate to ask Rosie to contact

Ben to ask whether he would consent to her providing me with his personal email address. He agreed to this but then did not reply to my email contact, which of course was a disappointment. However, I took this as an indication of him not wanting to participate in the study and stopped the contact at that, as the interview would have taken place in the immediate aftermath of his decision to withdraw and may have been too “raw” emotionally to be conducted ethically.

I assured all participants in the interviews that they could stop any of the interviews at any point and did not have to answer any questions they did not want to. Interviews varied in their emotional content - with some staying light-hearted, and others containing descriptions of very distressing circumstances, such as admitting to binge drinking to deal with the financial stress of being at the university and feelings of extreme isolation and sadness. I reflect on how I dealt with the latter type in the next section. As Stoudt (2007) points out, spaces can never be completely safe or neutral and some spaces can feel more comfortable for the participant than others. I therefore allowed participants to choose the location of interviews. Interviews took place in private study rooms in the university library, coffee shops, the students’ union and quiet communal areas of the colleges. I used an application on my smartphone to record the interviews, as I felt this would be less imposing than specialist equipment, which has the potential to appear as a “silent but potentially political listener” (Stoudt, 2007:291), whereas it is now more common than not for phones to be placed on tables when socialising.

### **3.10.2 Confidentiality**

No specific details or identifying characteristics of participants or other named individuals are included in the thesis. Participants have been given a pseudonym, which they chose themselves in the focus group (and seemed to find an exciting task) or were allocated by me if they had no preference. Given the small size of some of the colleges, including the name of a participant's college, along with their characteristics and detailed excerpts from their interviews may have rendered them identifiable. I therefore only refer to whether a college is 'Hill' or 'Bailey', and the faculty of the department to which they belong.

Focus groups present potential ethical issues as it is difficult to ensure confidentiality (Hyde et al., 2005) and discomfort may be caused if the participants see each other again outside of the group (Matthews and Ross, 2010). Consent forms are a "useful way of giving them a sense of control, individuality, autonomy and privacy" (Valentine, 1999:144 cited in Hopkins 2007:532), however there is no way of knowing as to whether the participants have abided by it in practice. Along with distributing consent forms, at the start I expressed the importance of not repeating what was said outside of the room with respect to individuals or specifics, and given how much respect the participants seemed to have for each other's opinions and contributions within the discussion itself, I highly doubt this was a problem. As stated in 3.6.3, in several one-to-one interviews participants happily reported that they had seen another participant from the focus group around campus and they had had a chat about how they were getting on at the university and in my research, and therefore seeing people again did not seem to be a problem. To maximise the opportunity for internal confidentiality throughout the rest of the research following the focus group, I asked participants to write their preferred pseudonym (if any) on a form which they then



handed to me. This ensures that fellow participants will not know their pseudonyms used in the write-up of this thesis and will not be able to determine who said what in the individual interviews, beyond anything associated with their narratives in the focus groups.

Interviews that use participant-produced photographs produce particular issues with anonymity as they often feature the participant themselves, as well as their friends and home environment. For this reason, only I as the researcher saw the photographs and noted down a description of them during the interview rather than taking them away with me. Only my description, the title the participant chose for the photo (with any identifying characteristics omitted), and the participant's narratives about the photographs are included in the thesis. Despite the potential for visual data in itself to be highly illuminating and could have been shown alongside text in the thesis to bring the data 'alive', it would have compromised confidentiality and was therefore not appropriate for this research project.

One ethical dilemma I faced doing this research that related to confidentiality was the case of Tony. What he told me in each of his one-to-one interviews was highly distressing and it was clear his mental and physical health was suffering due to his experiences at the University. To respond to when he was telling me about a particular crisis point in his second interview, that shall be explained in chapter six, I asked him whether he knew of any support channels he could access should this happen again. He said he did and named the appropriate people in his college and department he could speak to. When I asked to whether he would do that going forward, he said he would not because he was concerned of it "getting back" to his father. Therefore, although I had attempted to flag appropriate avenues of support for him, he was already

aware of these but chose not to access them. I left the interview feeling worried about him and this was difficult to deal with given that as he was over the age of eighteen I did not have a duty to intervene myself and I also did not feel I had a right to. By the third interview, he was slightly more positive as he was about to move out of college, which was the main source of anguish – both financial and social. In response to a follow-up email I sent over the summer in 2019, Tony said he was “optimistic” and “looking forward” to his second year as he had moved into a student house which he liked. Therefore, I feel that the real crisis point for him had passed.

### **3.10.3 Institutional Anonymity**

Attempts at preserving the anonymity of the research site is common in case study research, institutional ethnographies, and other research based in a small number of particular institutions. Within HE research, this usually equates to providing the university with a pseudonym, e.g. “Southern University” (Reay et al., 2010), “Capital University” (Read et al., 2003), and “Bodkin University” (Hillyard et al., 2020). However, this is necessarily accompanied by a description of the institution to provide context to the study, with common descriptions being along the lines of “pre-1992 civic university” (Crozier et al., 2008: 168) and “urban ‘new’ university” (Read et al., 2003:264). This detail provided - however brief - paired with the affiliation of the author listed at the top of the paper, results in it being quite possible to narrow down the likely pool of sites to just a couple of institutions. As with the cases of Stevens’ “The College” (2007) and Tuchman’s (2009) “Wannabe University”, reviewers have been able to quickly identify the institution despite the pseudonym (Pabian, 2014), and as a reader I certainly have been able to do this when engaging with existing literature that adopts such an approach. This ultimately results in the pseudonym being of limited use, and often has “unintended consequences”, such as the inability to examine visual

documents about the university's physical environment, and the potential of misleading participants "by giving them ultimately false security", as was the case with Tuchman's research (ibid.:11-12)

The depth of detail about the institution necessary within this thesis as a consequence of having the university as the unit of analysis, combined with the university's unique characteristics that make it anomalous to other universities of its age (Silver, 2004:125), render it perhaps even more easily identifiable than others written about in similar studies. This means that providing the institution with a pseudonym would have offered merely a surface-level promise of anonymity with little, or indeed no, effect of such in reality. I therefore decided to name the case study institution in order to be as transparent as possible and so as not to be reluctant to provide the level of detail necessary for "thick description" (Geertz, 1973). In turn, this enables me to focus on securing confidentiality for the colleges, departments, participants and named individuals. I included information about the limits of this anonymity in participant information and consent forms.

### **3.10.4 Participant Reimbursement**

Although there are various advantages and disadvantages associated with paying qualitative research participants, with disagreement between researchers over what constitutes best practice, payment is becoming increasingly more common – to the extent that most research projects offer some sort of reimbursement (Head, 2009). In line with my research council's own guideline that "research participants may be given small monetary reimbursement for their time" (ESRC, 2018), I provided payment in voucher form to research participants to express gratitude for their participation and to

show respect for their time that they contributed to the research. After discussing which vouchers would be preferred by the participants in the focus group, I purchased Amazon vouchers and sent these via Email to participants after each interview, which was funded by a research support grant from the ESRC.

I agree with many other qualitative researchers (e.g. Head, 2009) when I consider this crucial in ensuring a non-exploitative research relationship, given the time contribution I asked participants for. It is a significant amount of time that they will be spending away from their own study, employment or leisure. As Krueger and Casey (2015) point out, “it takes effort to participate in a focus group” as participants must reserve a set time in their routines, which is even less flexible than for an one-to-one interview where they are likely to have more input over the scheduling of this (pp.93-94). This is a particularly important consideration for non-traditional students, who likely have part-time jobs alongside studying. Providing payment is seen by some as a more ethical way of conducting research as it ensures that the researcher is not the only one to directly benefit from the time given by the participants towards the research project. One participant informed me that the voucher had enabled him to buy a new pair of trousers which he was in desperate need of, and another used one of the vouchers to buy a mother’s day present for her mum. Given the severe financial hardship faced by some of my participants, I personally believe that I could not have conducted this research ethically without reimbursing them financially for their time. Moreover, payment to participants in qualitative research has been shown to increase participation and retention rates (Head, 2009; Hermanowicz, 2013). Thus, offering payment may have resulted in the additional benefit of making the recruitment process go more smoothly than expected, and contributed to the full turn-out rates for the focus

groups and all participants subsequently choosing to continue with all stages of the research.

In line with ethical guidelines advising that payment should not override the principles of freely given and fully informed consent, I provided an amount that is “high enough to show respect for time and expertise but not so high that it might coerce [participants] into participating when they would rather not” (Sullivan and Cain, 2004:615). The standard practice in previous studies that have sought to achieve this is to offer £10 per session that the participant contributes (e.g. Head, 2009). I think that this amount strikes a balance between being an amount significant enough to be taken seriously as a gesture of thanks, but not high enough to compromise the principle of freely-made consent with respect whether or not to participate. Participants who partook in the focus groups and three interviews received £40 worth of vouchers.

To avoid affecting the principle of informed consent, I wanted to ensure that participants who withdrew from the research still received payment, following Wendler et al. (2002). However, in practice this was difficult as the participant who withdrew from the study withdrew from the university and given his lack of response to my emails to both his work and personal accounts, I did not know whether he would receive them. If I were to do this research again, I would have provided participants with the total value of vouchers at the start of the research, although of course there would be a risk that this would result in greater attrition.

### **3.11 Summary**

This chapter has provided rationales, overviews and reflections pertaining to each of the varied research strategies that I used to conduct this research. There were several novel approaches that this study adopted in terms of research design: firstly, focusing its design on the social and cultural experiences of participants. Secondly, adopting a longitudinal interview design and thirdly, employing photo elicitation interviewing within this. The detailed and rich data that these strategies produced will be explored in chapters five and six.

## Chapter Four: the Case Study University

### 4.1 Introduction

As a reminder, the research questions underpinning the design of this project are:

1. How does Durham University position itself in relation to the HE field and HE elite subfield?
2. Whose habituses structure the institutional sub-field of Durham University? What implications does this have for students' positions within the field and their experiences?
3. To what extent can first-in-family students with working class and/or non-traditional student habituses engage in the institutional sub-field?
4. What processes and practices sustain the continuity of the field from year to year, across staff and student cohorts?

The purpose of this chapter is to answer the first two of these questions by providing an in-depth analysis of the “logic of practice” (Bourdieu, 1985) that governs this institution. Different fields are “dominate[d] and legitimate[d]” by different forms of capital (Oakes et al., 1998:260) and Bourdieu drew attention the role of legitimacy in the “constitution, preservation and exchange (i.e. the control) of various forms of capital” (ibid.:262) within these. In exploring the institution’s history, and the image it seeks to convey in the present day, the chapter aims to explore the rules at play in this particular institutional sub-field, as well as its claims to the legitimacy of these rules. In so doing, it provides context for and comparison to the participants’ accounts of their perceptions and induction week realities, and experiences in their first year, that follow in chapters 5 and 6.

## **4.2 A Potted History**

Using the findings of a literature review and archival research, the section seeks to provide the historical background to the university in recognition of the fact that the ordering of the contemporary social world is “accumulated history” (Bourdieu, 1986:241). This is particularly the case in the context of my case-study institution - Durham University explicitly draws on its historical connections and frequently refers to the distinctiveness of its history in making it the institution it is in the present:

*“Durham is different. Its history makes it so” (Watson, 2007:139)*

This section therefore provides the historical context to the findings of the document analysis of university marketing and strategic documentation and the University’s claims to legitimacy (Oakes et al., 1998) that follows in the next sections.

### **4.2.1 1832-1870: A Conservative Social Experiment**

As outlined in chapter 3 section 4, Durham University was founded in 1832 by the Prince Bishop Van Mildert who was, as described by Watson (2007), a “man of extreme conservative values” (p.12). This came two centuries after a failed attempt to establish the university in the form of Durham Hall in the grounds of the Deanery in 1650, the petition to parliament for which was rejected on the grounds that it would produce graduates “inferior” to the two long established universities of Oxford and Cambridge (ibid.:12). However, the diocese of Durham had links to Oxford University since the 13th century, with members of its clergy helping to establish both Oxford’s University and Balliol colleges (ibid.; Ryan, 2016). Moreover, it is thought to be the third oldest university in England following Oxford and Cambridge, although the University College London also claims this, as it was founded six years before Durham



in the form of London University (Arthur, 2015:11). However, Durham was officially recognised as a university ahead of it.

Like its two predecessors but anomalous to other universities founded in the 19th century, Durham was formed to be collegiate in structure (Silver, 2004). Despite being closest in age to the London University and Benjamin Disraeli suggesting the two “co-partner” to return a member to Parliament (*Western Daily Press*, 1867), it was declared that the two had “nothing in common except the fact that both are called universities”: “their organisation [...], their aims and objects [...] their traditions, principles and ruling ideas” were different (*Liverpool Mercury*, 1867). Moreover, London was “metropolitan and cosmopolitan” and “the embodiment of broadest liberalism in all matters of education” whereas Durham was “essentially sectarian” (ibid.). Durham therefore occupied an awkward position “sandwiched between Oxbridge and the new universities” (Watson, 2007:75).

The first Durham University college established was that of University College (now known informally by staff and students alike as ‘Castle’ that is a ‘Bailey’ college). Upon its foundation, the University was reportedly intended to cater for the local and regional middle class, with it being said in the 1830s that the university would open up the chance of higher education for “the middle and higher classes of society” in the north of the country as Oxford and Cambridge were dominated by the southern elite (*The Hull Packet*, 1833). It was particularly well suited to northern young people “destined for the counting house, the surgery, the solicitors’ office, and other departments in active life” whereas the richer landed and industrial classes of the area were believed to “still resort to Oxford and Cambridge” (*Lancaster Gazette and*

*General Advertiser for Lancashire*, 1832). Although the University was therefore seen to be distinct to Oxbridge in terms of its student profile, it was still reported in the 1840s that the archetypal Durham student was seen as “well-connected, well-off and preferred hunting to studying” (Watson, 2007:19).

A potential for change came in the form of Hatfield College, founded in 1846. This – then known as Hatfield Hall - was designed by Durham’s University College tutor David Melville as a “social experiment” (Moyes, 1996:v). Melville’s aim was to move the college away from being an imitation of the Oxford and Cambridge college to “give the opportunity of a university education to persons of limited means” through fixed pricing and communal catering provision. In contrast to the “wealthy and well connected” students at University college who “rented rooms, hired servants and arranged for their own meals to be served privately” (ibid.:1), students at Hatfield would eat together, in turn creating “an atmosphere of congenial collegiate fellowship” (ibid.:2). The University calendar pronounced that within Hatfield, “the greatest regard is paid to the economy” (ibid.:4) and an Oxford University student wrote to a newspaper in 1854 in favour of the “experiment at Hatfield-hall, and Cosen’s-hall, Durham” on financial grounds (*Northampton Mercury*, 1854) - the total of all his brother’s university expenses “from matriculation to degree” at Hatfield were £300 in comparison to his £725 (ibid.). However, although Hatfield Hall clearly offered a significantly cheaper university journey relative to the two older universities, it still remained the case that Durham University was seen as conservative in its values and inaccessible for many. Unlike the London University which was described as “holding out a friendly hand to every student who has the heart to work and ambition to make a figure in the world” and “accessible to all alike”, with no concern for “where the

candidates have come from or where they have studied – they look only at proficiency”, Durham remained “the antithesis” to this (*Western Daily Press*, 1867).

#### **4.2.2 1870 – 1950: Women, Mature Students and the New ‘Bailey’ Colleges**

The end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century saw the university’s demographic profile shift considerably, with the two colleges founded in this period catering for a wider population of students than the University and Hatfield colleges. From 1870, male mature students were admitted to take degrees and in 1888 they founded their own “society” in the form of St Cuthbert’s (Watson, 2007:21). This entry of these “unattached” students was followed in 1881 by female students of all ages (ibid.), and St Mary’s College was founded in 1889 to house these new female students. Although this arrival of women came 12 years after the foundation of Girton College Cambridge and three years after Lady Margaret Hall Oxford, it quickly allowed female students to take full degrees and to graduate in 1895 - 25 years ahead of Oxford and 53 ahead of Cambridge. This was, however, 17 years behind the University of London.

Two other sectarian colleges were founded in Durham just after the turn of the century – St Chad’s (1904) and St John’s (1909). St Chad’s was a “High Church College” that catered for men from modest backgrounds who were training to become Church of England clerics (*Sunderland Daily Echo and Shipping Gazette*, 1904), although they could study any degree programme whilst doing so (St Chad’s College, 2020). St John’s was comparatively smaller, initially matriculating five students in comparison to St Chad’s College’s 28 (Durham University, 2020p; *Sunderland Daily Echo and Shipping Gazette*, 1904) but was also a theological college. Both of these colleges had

attracted additional financial support and were run independently, despite still being part of the University.

At this point, Durham's purpose as an institution stood in contrast to the Victoria University (now Manchester) that was founded in 1880. Victoria University was seen as offering a novel approach to university education as "a centre of modern science and research" (*Manchester Courier and General Advertiser*, 1880). It was to operate "under quite different conditions, and with different aims, from its older sisters" of Oxford and Cambridge - "their social prestige, their collegiate system; the social as much as intellectual character of their training; the life of the river and the cricket-field" was to have "no place, or a subordinate place" in this new university (*ibid.*). In contrast to the social isolationism that characterised Oxbridge (Hasley and Trow, 1971) it would focus on "extending in the most practical and liberal way the advantages of education in the north of England" (*The Standard*, 1884). Oxbridge was seen as "coldly aloof from the country at large" (*ibid.*), whereas Victoria would "take an interest in and endeavour to raise the whole character of education in the district" (*Manchester Courier and Lancashire General Advertiser*, 1882). That the emphasis upon the foundation of Victoria University was the new approach it would bring to higher education in the north of the country indicates that Durham was seen falling short in this regard and was grouped more so with the antiquated Oxbridge model in the public imagination. In the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, then, Durham University as an institution offered new and progressive ways of widening access to those unable to access Oxford and Cambridge. However, it still remained sectarian in nature and was seen as less progressive and accessible than the other civic universities of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

### **4.2.3 1950 – 2000: Post-Robbins Expansion and the Hill Colleges**

Aside from St Mary's College, all these older colleges were - and still are - located in the historic city centre of Durham, with University College located on the Palace Green site with Durham Cathedral and Castle, and the others occupying the street that runs adjacent to this called North Bailey. As Durham expanded in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, it concentrated its other colleges beside St Mary's on the hill that runs out of Durham centre. St Aidan's was established in 1947 as a female-only college and was designed by architect Sir Basil Spence, which was followed by male-only Grey College in 1959. Following the Robbins report in 1962, Durham facilitated its expansion by 6000 more students via the creation of other new Hill colleges (Watson, 2007:77-79). The first of these was Van Mildert (1965) which, although initially admitting only males, became the first Durham college to have men and women in the same college seven years later (ibid.:86). Trevelyan was founded a year after Van Mildert in 1966 as a female-only college. Alongside this was the Graduate Society – now named Ustinov College – in 1965, which was founded by and for post-graduates.

These new colleges meant that Durham University, along with the University College of North Staffs, had among the highest proportion of its students living in university-run accommodation of any HEI (Silver, 2004:126). In 1964 it was declared that “in the English tradition of elite education, a continuous emphasis upon manipulating the relationships of a student outside of his formal studies; and colleges or halls have been largely taken for granted as means of achieving it” (Marris, 1964:74-75 in Silver, 2004:127). However, by the late 1960s students nationwide were criticizing universities (ibid.:167) for the “oppressive nature” and “paternalistic moralism” of the student housing policy (*Palatinate*, 1967:2). Durham was no exception – with one

student writing that its collegiate system was “rigid, autocratic and oppressive” with students “expected to behave as adults yet treated as children” (*Palatinate*, 1968:6). Change came in the form of the opening of Collingwood College in 1972, which was the first to introduce mixed gender corridors and blocks of all university accommodation nationally (Watson, 2007:86). St Mary’s also granted students greater freedoms and “the acceptance of students as adults breathed fresh air through the corridors of the older colleges as well” (*ibid.*:86). Three years later the two former teacher training colleges of St Hild (for women) and the Venerable Bede (for men) merged and opened as new co-educational college of St Hild and St Bede - away from the other new colleges on the hill on the St Hild site on the banks of the River Wear. Other colleges had also begun to become co-educational or soon followed suit – Van Mildert admitted women in 1972, followed by St John’s in 1973 and St Aidan’s admitted men in 1981. The 1980s saw women arrive at Grey in 1984, University in 1987, and Hatfield and Chads in 1988.<sup>1</sup>

During this period, costs of both private rental housing in Durham and college accommodation were being criticised by students. Durham city was experiencing a lack of available student housing, pushing rental prices up. It was reported that in comparison to within Leeds, which also faced a shortage and had average weekly rent prices of £2.75, Durham’s average was £3.50 (*Palatinate*, 1972). It was also reported that increases in college maintenance fees were outstripping that of the maintenance grant, and by 1972 fees were taking up 59% of the grant – a 3 percentage point increase in 10 years (*ibid.*). The expense of living as a student in Durham highlighted the

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<sup>1</sup> The female-only colleges of Trevelyan and Mary’s stayed female-only until 1992 and 2005 respectively.

already “yawning gap” between the university and the rest of Durham city (Watson, 2007:74). Despite the hopes of the northern newspapers of the 1830s, students across the university have become recruited mainly from the south - the university was said to represent “a beleaguered colonial outpost amongst a sea of Geordies” in 1981 (Watson, 2007:110). In 1989, only 60% of Durham entrants were state educated (ibid.) – a 32 percentage point under-representation of state students nationally and 18 percentage points higher than the HE sector average (Bolton, 2012; Watson, 2007). The University therefore sat as a privileged bubble in stark contrast to the villages of County Durham that saw all 11 of their collieries shut down throughout the 1980s until 1994, as well as de-industrialisation of their other major industries of shipbuilding and steel (Duke et al., 2006:25).

#### **4.2.4 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Queen’s Campus, Stockton and Continued Durham City Expansion**

The commencement of teaching and opening of University College, Stockton at the Queen’s Campus in Stockton-on-Tees in 1992 as a joint operation with Teesside University changed this demographic and went some way in strengthening the University’s ties to the wider north east region. This campus was initially intended to “help regenerate the economy of Stockton-on-Tees by attracting businesses to the local area and improving educational attainment among mature and other non-traditional student groups” (Biggar Economics, 2016:9), and it contributed £42.2 million and 540 jobs in Stockton-on-Tees in 2014/15 (ibid.:64). Just under 50 per cent of Queen’s students came from non-traditional backgrounds (Watson, 2007:118). Teesside left the venture in 1994 and the new colleges of George Stephenson and John Snow replaced University College Stockton in 2001 but the demographics still differed strongly to that at the city campus. Of students in the 2003-2004 cohort, the average entry tariff

of Queen's campus students was 159 points lower than the city (Durham University, 2017c). In the same year, 27% of Queen's students were mature, in comparison to 22.3% of city students (Registry Statistics, 2004). The 2009-2010 admissions cycle is the earliest year available in terms of low participation neighbourhood data, which shows that George Stephenson and John Snow had the highest percentages of LPN student entrants of all the Durham colleges at 11.5% and 11.6% - the next highest being St John's with 6.6% (Durham University, 2011a). Both Queen's colleges had the highest proportion of students from north-east postcodes in their intakes by a considerable margin across the eight admissions cycles for which data is available. In 2008-09 they had, together, an average of 29.45% of their students from the North East, compared to the university average of 11.5% (Durham University, 2011b). This margin of difference decreased steadily until 2014/15 but at this point they still had an average of 17.3% of NE-postcode students in comparison to the university's average of 9.6% (Durham University, 2016a). These colleges therefore operated more like the other universities in the region that, as outlined in chapter 3 section 4, admit a considerably higher number of north east students than Durham. The accommodation costs for students were also considerably lower, costing between £45 and £65 in comparison to Durham's £85 to £90 (*The Telegraph*, 2016).

The University ended its academic teaching at the campus as it was in 2016, with the site becoming the International Study Centre for international students taking a foundation year, pre-masters programmes and English language preparation courses (Durham University, 2020j). The two colleges moved to Durham city on the Mount Oswald site at the top of the 'Hill' throughout the academic year of 2017/18. Unlike the catered colleges on the rest of the hill and Bailey, they are self-catered and now sit



alongside Josephine Butler, the first self-catered college founded in 2006. This move caused some controversy – on the grounds of both the loss of revenue for Stockton-on-Tees and the pressures the transferred students would place on Durham city (Westcott, 2018).

#### **4.2.5 Summary**

Durham University has therefore historically been an outsider to the two social fields that were emerging in the HE sector throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The Oxbridge field was characterised by “the luxury, the extravagance, the idleness, the athleticism which so ruffle the intellectual waters of the Cam and the Isis” (*Manchester Courier*, 1880). Although occupying “some of the same social space” as this (along with Bristol, Exeter and York) (Tapper and Palfreyman, 2011:3), it is clear that Durham did not belong firmly in this category in the public imagination. It was also an outsider in terms of its lack of a “close relationship to the leading fee-paying schools” (ibid.:46) and thus having a slightly widened (albeit still limited) demographic intake. Durham also differed to the cosmopolitanism of the civic universities that were closer to it in age, despite them also now constituting members of the ‘elite’ HE sub-field. Since the founding of Hatfield Hall, the university has slowly widened its participation beyond elite male school-leavers. However, despite moments of being ahead of the field, the overall trend of this has been at a slower rate than the 19<sup>th</sup> century universities, and the removal of the Stockton campus moved Durham further away from the civic model of contributing to the local economy and region.

## **4.3 The Collegiate Way: Durham University Today**

### **4.3.1 Colleges as Social and Pastoral Environments**

The structure of the collegiate system today remains unique and differs to both the Oxbridge model and the other semi-collegiate universities of Lancaster and York. Today, Durham University has sixteen colleges, all located within Durham city, with a seventeenth – South College – to open in 2020. Unlike the “Cambridge principle” of teaching being in colleges but examination centralised (Rothblatt, 1966), all of Durham’s teaching remains “firmly within the sovereignty of the academic department” (Burt and Evans, 2016:84). Some research is run at college-level, with colleges hosting seminars and events that complement those at the department level and that are often student-organised and led (Durham University 2020g; 2020q). All colleges run research-based seminars and host visiting lecturers, with some having close links to particular university-wide research groups and some having in-house research staff (Burt and Evans, 2016:78). However, the main function of the Durham colleges remains pastoral and social.

As such, the decision whether to admit a student to the university lies with the academic department rather than the college that the prospective student has applied for. Until 1964, applicants to Durham University were required to apply to each college of their choice but due to the sheer number some colleges were receiving, this was replaced by a centralised admissions system (Watson, 2007:68). Today, students can (and are encouraged to) state a college preference on their application form when applying to the university generally via UCAS. This is the case even for St Chad’s and St John’s, which have retained their status as recognised colleges and operate as independent financial and legal entities. Besides these, the other colleges are run by

the University with a director in the centralised Colleges and Student Experience Division overseeing their operation (Durham University, 2020e).

Despite lacking independent status, colleges continue to have a distinctive grip over the identity of students to a greater extent than the Lancaster or York. Although all - besides Ustinov College which remains solely for postgraduates - are now mixed in terms of gender, subject and stage of study, and religious background, in a similar manner to Hillyard et al.'s (2020) study of alumni at a collegiate university, colleges have “master status” among student identities, “above what subjects they were reading” (p.14). The colleges are advertised as having “their own identities” (Durham University, 2020r). Indeed, they differ greatly in a physical sense. As mentioned in the previous section, they are split across the Bailey and Hill sites, with some of the former being set within a world heritage site and listed buildings, whereas the latter are purpose-built student accommodation. They vary in size in terms of the undergraduate student members (the smallest being St Chad's with 409 and the largest being Collingwood with 1408) and the proportion of postgraduates to undergraduates. They also vary in the number of students living within the college (from 292 to 555 student residents) – students who do not live in after their first year, or opt not to at all, still retain membership and receive “infrastructure support” from their colleges (St Chads College, 2018:8).

Yet the colleges are seen to differ in ways beyond their objective structural features. All colleges also have their own “coat of arms, a motto and a chosen colour” (Burt and Evans, 2016:87). The colleges provide membership for undergraduates in their student-run “Junior Common Rooms” (JCRs) that organise events and monitor and

control JCR funds. The involvement of students in the running of colleges means that the types of activities and events available to students varies greatly according to college. There is inter-collegiate rivalry, in terms of sport competitions and academic rankings, as well as a more general informal loyalty to the particular college a student finds themselves in, as demonstrated in the figures below. There are also some more particular associations with each college - Collingwood has a “fearsome sporting reputation” (*The Durham Tab*, 2014) and St Aidan’s is known for its political activism. These associations extend to stereotypes of the students who attend the particular colleges. In 1975, an author of an article in the university student newspaper, *Palatinate*, stated that “when I tell my college, they roll their eyes. Obviously I’ve got some role or image to fulfil”, and proceeded to provide a “passport” of college types and their caricatures for incoming students to show them the “readily identifiable roles you can aspire to, together with some instantly recognisable portraits of the influential big whigs in Durham” (*Palatinate*, 1975:6). Forty years later, *The Tab* (2015) were offering a quiz purporting to identify which college a student is most suited for based on their choice of food.



**Figure 5:** “Oversubscribed since 1832”: University College’s banner in induction week, referencing being the most popular college (taken by author, 2018)



**Figure 6:** “Could’ve, should’ve, Collingwood’ve”: Collingwood College’s induction week banner (taken by author, 2018)

### **4.3.2 Gowns, Formal Dinners and 19<sup>th</sup> Century Traditions**

Today, the colleges continue to hold practices that stem from the university's 19<sup>th</sup> century foundation, although the extent to which varies according to the college. On arriving at the university in induction week, students across all colleges are invited to a "matriculation" ceremony. This practice involves first year students congregating at their college, before being assembled into a group photograph and then walking *en masse* to Durham Cathedral, where "the act of placing a student's name upon the matricula or roll of members of the University" (Durham University, 2020a) takes place. This is usually accompanied by a formal dinner. Appropriate formal wear is required for this and students of the ten "gowned" colleges (i.e. those that stipulate a mandatory wearing of an academic gown during specific occasions for all their students) – Collingwood, St Aidan's, St Cuthbert's Society, St Hild and St Bede, Stephenson and Van Mildert are the exceptions – need to accompany this with their gown. The gown is black and plain, differing in appearance to the more decorated versions worn for graduation. Beyond matriculation, the colleges require students to wear this "as announced: i.e. to "College Congregations [...] Formal Hall, some chapel services, academic processions and occasionally to events and services in the University, the Cathedral and elsewhere" (St Chad's College, 2020).



**Figure 7:** Academic gown worn at ten of the colleges (from <https://medium.com/objects/56-the-academic-gown-ae6e0536f7b5>)

Formal dinners are a third key traditional practice, which take place at all the colleges. These are two- or three-course sit-down meals and differ to the usual meals for those in catered colleges, as staff and students are served at the table by waiting staff (in contrast to the usual serving in canteen-style). At the majority of colleges formal dinners take place in the usual dining hall, although some of the self-catered colleges have lacked a suitable space for these. For instance, after its move to the City campus John Snow College – self-proclaimed to be a “modern, formal, gowned college with traditional values” (John Snow College, 2020) - used the dining halls of other colleges to host their formal dinners. The seating for formal dinners is usually structured hierarchically. Academic staff of the colleges (members of the Senior Common Room) and their guests tend to sit at their own “high table” away from the students, and

postgraduates (members of the Middle Common Room) sit separately from their undergraduate peers in the JCR.

Although at some colleges a gown is not required for attendance, formal wear is expected at all - with a “smart suit and tie” for men and “equivalent” for women at Stephenson College being among the least prescriptive description of required formal dress of the colleges. The majority of formal dinners require the wearing of a lounge suit or cocktail dress; it is for the more “special events” (St Mary’s College JCR, 2020) that the wearing of black tie and longer dresses are stipulated. Although St Chad’s College provides a similar description as a “guide”, it takes care to point out that “attendance at events is more important than being dressed ‘correctly’”, but this leniency seems to be unique to this college. The extract below is a description of the required dress at the non-gowned college St Cuthbert’s Society:

*“For a black-tie event, men would traditionally wear trousers and a lapelled jacket with a white shirt and black bow tie, although we welcome variations! Perhaps you want to show off your Scottish heritage with a kilt, or wear a green bow tie to demonstrate your devotion to Cuth's! Women's attire is much more flexible, with the options of a full-length gown, cocktail dress, trousers and blouse; anything that looks smart and appropriate for an evening event.”*(Durham University, 2020n)

Trevelyan College is even more prescriptive, stating that students wishing to wear “formal national or religious dress” need to seek “prior consent” from the JCR President but it is only those “from religions formally recognised by the university”



that will be considered (Trevelyan College JCR, 2016:4e). It is then the student members of the JCR executive committee that “exercise discretion” about whether their student peers’ dress constitutes an appropriate style for entry to a Trevelyan College formal dinner (ibid.)

Formal dinners are also not standardised in terms of the other specific rituals or practices - beyond dress - that they adopt. The colleges vary in how “formal” these formal dinners are, with some having an established elaborate code of conduct – Grey, Trevelyan and University have theirs published online and Josephine Butler College prints theirs on the back of the menus during the formal dinner - whereas others are more relaxed. St Aidan’s College states that the “informal and relaxed atmosphere” of the college as a whole “extends” to their “interpretation of formal dinners” (Durham University, 2020m). Similarly, Collingwood proclaims that they take a “relaxed approach” to formal dinners (Durham University, 2020f). Both of these colleges have fancy dress-themed formal dinners alongside those that require smart attire. At some colleges dinners “are governed by certain guidelines, customs and rules”, “in keeping with tradition” (St Mary’s College JCR, 2020). For instance, at many of the colleges the hierarchy established in separate seating is accompanied by mandatory deferential behaviour to the SCR. It is required that “silence is observed” among undergraduates and postgraduates as SCR members enter the dining hall through a separate entrance of the stage door (Trevelyan College JCR, 2016) and that the students stand until they are seated “as a sign of respect” (Durham University, 2020i). Moreover, at some it is forbidden for JCR and MCR members to leave the dining hall and return, ruling out a between-course toilet break. At Grey College, a student who leaves the dining hall without seeking permission from the porter “will be required to undertake two hours’

of community service within the College” (Grey College, 2020:1). Some colleges conduct a “grace” spoken in Latin or in silence, and many have more specific unique rituals. This is true even of the newer Hill colleges where the traditions do not have a basis in a 19<sup>th</sup> century foundation. For instance, at John Snow – founded at the Stockton campus in 2001 and in Durham city in 2018 - a bugler sounds as the dinner commences. Trevelyan has the “Trevelyan Toast” (Trevelyan College JCR, 2016) and Josephine Butler has a ban on mobile phones as a symbol of the “fellowship of the common table” (Durham University, 2020i).

In general, it is the older Bailey colleges that are the most committed to the traditional practices. As noted before, gowns are required at all but one (St Cuthbert’s Society) of the Bailey colleges and these are also the colleges that hold formal dinners on the most frequent basis. Compared to the once a term in the most recently established colleges, and the rest of the Hill colleges hosting them between three and five times a term, formal dinners take a much more prominent role in the social structure of the Bailey colleges - besides Cuthbert’s Society – that host them at least once a week. Of note is the fact that at the Bailey college formal dinners tend to be cheaper, if not free, for students who are resident in college in comparison to the £7 to £11 charged by the Hill colleges. The emphasis placed on alcohol within the meal also varies between them, with the Hill colleges having a limit of half a bottle of wine per person and the Bailey having a full bottle. The Hatfield College JCR website references the drinking games that take place within its formal dinners - “pennyng” – and within the neighbouring college of University – “corking” (Hatfield College JCR, 2020). This stands in contrast to the strict code of conduct at the newer Hill colleges, where “misbehaviour” is

“absolutely forbidden” (Grey College, 2020:1). However, as noted above, all of the colleges allude to their unique traditions.

### **4.3.3 Summary**

Durham University colleges are therefore not just a form of accommodation; despite lacking the teaching element in the Oxford and Cambridge colleges, they are similar in the centrality they hold in terms of the structure of the university and students’ identities. Students become not merely a member of Durham University as a whole but a college in particular. Durham University therefore still occupies a middle ground, differing from both Oxbridge and the rest of the ‘elite’ sub-field. It differs from Oxford and Cambridge in terms of its pastoral collegiate model and is also distinguished from the civic universities of its era that made halls of residence more so “a place to live” (Silver, 2004), rather than intrinsic to the university experience.

## **4.4 “The Durham Difference”: University’s Strategic Positioning**

This section examines how the University draws on this “outsider status” to position itself as “distinct” (Bourdieu, 1984) in the HE field today. The University self-presents an image revolving strongly around the idea of excellence and high quality. In its 2027 Strategy, it describes its values as “inspiring, challenging, innovative, responsible and enabling” (Durham University, 2016b:27). The first three represent this excellence in terms of its academic and research quality, and here the level of excellence is framed not just in relation to the UK higher education but in terms of the wider global HE field – it is striving to be “world-leading” and “world-changing” (ibid.:8), with the website proclaiming it is a “globally outstanding centre of teaching and research excellence” (Durham University, 2020h). It is clear that the University is aligning its

level of excellence with the global social field of HE leaders. This is unsurprising given the fact that, as described in chapter two, the HE field is “increasingly shaped by market-driven demands that emphasise research and teaching quality for the sake of institutional competitiveness” (Raaper, 2020:246) and high-ranking universities in the marketized UK system consistently seek to demonstrate and maintain their high position over lower ranking universities that lack their levels of symbolical and economic capital both at home and globally (Marginson, 2016). This also resonates strongly with Phipps and McDonnell’s (2015) study of Imperial College, which found that its institutional culture was “structured around the core concept of ‘excellence’”(Imperial College, 2020:3). This self-presentation of global excellence is supported by its strong academic reputation, its domination of league tables, and the social prestige that is attached to being membership of the Russell Group and the ‘elite’ sub-field, as explained in chapter two. Baker and Brown (2007) argue that traditional universities aim to “appropriate” societal doxas that underpin institutional stratification in order to gain the power held by dominant social groups, which explains their self-promotion revolving around this idea of excellence. Here we see how the university actively draws on prevalent narratives of the distinct nature of the ‘elite’ sub-field to position the institution as one of these dominant players in the HE field, in order to attract staff and student with high levels of capital who can add to their own capital base and thereby sustain their position at the top of HE field’s hierarchy.

What is new here, and differs to Phipps and McDonnell’s (2015) findings which found that excellence was framed mostly in terms of research and to a certain extent teaching, is that it extends its emphasis on excellence to what the 2027 Strategy terms as the “Wider Student Experience” (WSE), in addition to academic reputation. Raaper

(2019) points out that within the last ten years, the use of the term “student experience” has become a central within HE policies (p.2). This sits in a wider context of the commodification of studenthood and a “pervasive rhetoric of employability” (Hordósy and Clark, 2018:416) within the HE sector as a whole. Halls of residence are increasingly being operated by private providers and offering luxury accommodation featuring cinemas and bowling alleys within the accommodation itself (Silver, 2004; Chatterton, 2010), the largest provider of which, Unite Plc, had a portfolio of £515 million in 2014 (Smith and Hubbard, 2014:96). Student nightlife has become a key market, with nightclub promoters seeking to exploit students’ supposed disposable income and free time (Hubbard, 2011). Baker and Brown (2007) argue that this advertisement of a “brilliant student lifestyle” (p.380) by universities is an extension of their appropriation of the aforementioned doxa in order to monopolise on narratives of excellence by suggesting it characterises all arenas of institutional life. Hordósy and Clark (2018) argue that this “branding” of a “very particular version of university life” is explicitly linked to employability and is “designed to encourage ‘success’ in an increasingly competitive graduate labour market” (p.429). Aside from the work of these authors, this has not received much research attention since, and a study looking at how an institution tailors this to their specific case in terms of the social and cultural life of the university is notably absent. This chapter therefore builds on their theorisation with other useful concepts to explore how in detail Durham University combines the privileging of the doxa of institutional “excellence” with an emphasis on its unique and “distinct” symbolic indicators and WSE to maintain its dominance in the marketized HE landscape. Here, it demonstrates how the university not only emphasises how it belongs to the ‘elite’ sub-field, but how it seeks to position itself as

a leader within this. The last section of this chapter then compares this self-presentation to the realities of the social structure of the university.

#### **4.4.1 Durham’s “Invented Traditions” (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983)**

The collegiate traditions emanate from a time when collegiate dining rituals “reflected the British class system”, as “fellows and students were drawn almost exclusively from its upper reaches and served by waiters and butlers whose primary objective was to protect the privilege of the former” (Dacin et al., 2011:1413). Although for Burt and Evans (2016) who are advocates of the collegiate model, communal eating represents a symbolism of “community, participation and sharing and by implication, of generosity and altruism” (p.79) and Josephine Butler College advocate them on the grounds of promoting “fellowship” through “the common table”, the hierarchical structure of Durham’s formal dinners – with staff and students separated and being served by waiting staff who are marked out as different by uniform and a lack of academic gown – ultimately stem from when their key role was socializing students to become “a homogeneous governing class” (Soffer, 1994: 24-5 quoted in Silver, 2004: 125). The silence and standing of students as SCR members enter the dining hall echoes Dacin et al.’s (2011) findings that the rituals within Cambridge formal dinners operate as a form of “social drama” (p.1402), with clearly delineated roles for different college members. This hierarchical nature “subtly socializes the participants into adopting the sensibilities that make the elite “distinct” (Bourdieu, 1984)” (ibid.:1413). Then, as Donnelly and Gamsu (2020b) write, “Durham's college system comes closest to replicating the architecture, traditions, and culture of the Oxbridge college that has been and remains central to the formation of the British ruling class (Joyce, 2013)” (p.10).

However, the newer colleges – with no historical link to this purpose – also stake claim to conducting these on grounds of tradition, even where there is no appropriate space for them to take place (as evidenced in the case of John Snow using the dining halls of other colleges to host them). South College – due to open in 2020 – is advertised as having “inherited the best of Durham’s collegiate traditions” (Durham University, 2020). The now-outdated and irrelevant class-based context of their creation and their commencement in environments with neither an historical link to, nor an appropriate physical venue for, them indicates that, as an institutional practice, formal dinners are an “invented tradition” (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983), with purely symbolic value rather than a clear function. Indeed, as Eamon (2016) points out, “all collegiate institutions [...] are cultural constructions”, as they combine the broad “collegiate template” with “local educational traditions and expectations” (p.61).

For Bourdieu (1984), each social field has distinction between the forms of capital or products for consumption that are seen as the ‘elite’ version and those that are seen as the more widely popular, and hence more vulgar, forms of the same product. Individuals within these fields are then “classified by their classifications” and “distinguish themselves by the distinctions they make” (pp.5-6). It is these cultural and consumption choices that indicate an individual’s true position in the field: they can confirm or “betray” the position they seek or claim to occupy (ibid.). Thorstein Veblen (1899) also theorized consumption differences between classes in terms of an “emulation” model, whereby those lower in the social scale consume “conspicuously” so as to appear higher up in the social scale. He has extended this work on individuals to HEIs, arguing that academic rituals tend to be “a case of mimicry – due to a desire to conform as far as may be the standards of scholastic reputability maintained by the

upper grades and classes, who have come by these accessory features legitimately by the right of lineal devolution” (p.170). This resonates strongly with Bourdieu’s work: for Bourdieu (1984), some social fields retain “distinction” to others by favouring “the tastes of luxury” over “the tastes of necessity” (p.177), or as Veblen put it, a “notable element of conspicuous waste” (p.171).

Extending Bourdieu’s theorization of the “distinction” between the middle and working classes created through cultural tastes – in which, as proposed by Dacin et al. (2011), formal dinners play an active role – to the level of the university field can help explain this commitment to “invented traditions”. The “adoption and cultivation” (Veblen, 1899:171) of these Durham-specific “invented traditions” are rooted in Durham’s commitment to positioning itself as distinct entity to the ‘elite’ sub-field. Durham University remains different in that it is seeking to offer a “world-class” (Durham University, 2016b:15) and “unrivalled” (ibid.:6) student experience that is “as good as any in the world” (ibid.:6) that is delivered primarily through its collegiate system. It is this that provides, as stated by the former vice-chancellor Christopher Higgins, “a distinctive educational experience” (Higgins, 2007:9). This notion of “distinction” is a mantra across the University’s modes of self-presentation to the extent that “the Durham Difference” (Watson, 2007) has become a phrase used to describe life at the university.

Collegiate formal dinners are advertised by the University and its colleges as adding “excitement” (Durham University, 2020n) to university life in that they are a “great opportunity to dress up, put on your academic gown and socialise with students from across college and beyond” (Durham University, 2020o) - they are “part of what



distinguishes Durham from other universities” (Durham University, 2020i). This focus on distinction to the rest of the HE field demonstrates just how the University carves its “distinctive position in relation to the field of elite universities”, as Davey (2012:513) finds with private schools. Instead of being one of many Russell Group or other elite sub-field options for students, it becomes a choice distinguished by its unique social structure that works as symbolic indicator to align it more so with Oxbridge than the rest of the ‘elite’ sub-field.

#### **4.4.2 Student Choice**

Moreover, Durham positions the collegiate system as key to maximising student choice. As outlined in chapter two, research has highlighted how the framing of student as a consumer is predicated on the idea of the student being “a rational economic actor” in the university choice-making process courses and “marketisation enshrines the satisfaction of the sovereign student as a legitimate and central imperative of the HEI” (Nixon et al., 2018:929). As “each [college] has its own distinctive character from its location and architecture, to its history and traditions” (Durham University, 2020b), this choice of college plays a part in Durham being the ideal place to “create and shape your own individual student experience” (Durham University, 2020v) and “shape your own future” (ibid.). The University therefore not only positions itself as being highly reputable at a global level and providing credentials and “employability” for graduates, but it also provides students with the flexibility to tailor their university experience within this one university to how they wish.

This may at first seem to stand in contradiction to the aforementioned fact that all colleges – even the most recently founded – emphasise how they enable students to take part in the institution’s traditions. This can be explained by the fact that the coherence and legitimacy of it as an institution relies on the fact that “its various parts add up to a self-reinforcing, self-perpetuating and self-regenerating whole” (Tapper and Palfreyman, 2016:44). For Oakes et al. (1998) “the desire to enhance organizational legitimacy and survival may prompt convergence or homogenization in organizational practices or structures” (p.1). Students are required to apply to Durham as a university in the first instance; colleges are the second stage. By demonstrating that the university is “a distinct moral collectivity” (Bernstein, 1975:39) in its distinguished traditional practices separating it from the HE field at large, it draws applicant in the highly competitive and marketized HE field in. This explains as to why, today, colleges are still “inherit[ing] the best of Durham traditions” (Durham University, 2020l), whilst also having small ritualistic variations within these, in order playing up to the consumerist mantra of maximising student choice for all.

#### **4.4.3 Extra-Curricular Opportunities**

The collegiate system is also advertised as offering an excellent WSE through its “environment of enriching extra-curricular activities” (Durham University, 2020t). Durham University’s centralised “Team Durham” offers the opportunity to participate in sports at an elite level - it is the second highest performing university in terms of sports nation-wide (Burt and Evans, 2016:81). The University is also home to an award-winning student newspaper and theatre. However, it is the colleges that provide “a vibrant, supportive community full of opportunities for our students to gain new experiences, develop skills and achieve more” (Durham University, 2020r). All the

colleges run sports teams and societies, meaning that where a non-collegiate university might have one theatre group, Durham University has sixteen at college-level in addition to those at the centralised university-level. Adrian Simpson (2016), principal of Josephine Butler College, states that this means “there is little opportunity for passive opting out” (p.157) in the college. It does seem to encourage greater student participation in activities, as the University has the highest rates of participation in student sport, with some colleges having ten teams for one sport alone due to student demand (Burt and Evans, 2016:81). The University markets this as being not only fulfilling for students themselves - it is described as making sure that its graduates are the most equipped for becoming leaders and change-makers “in challenging and ever-changing local and global environments” (Durham University, 2020t), as they represent “inclusive and participatory working and social environment[s] in which to encourage, support and behave appropriately to one another” (Durham University, 2019a:2).

The collegiate system is therefore seen to offer both social activities and positions of responsibility for students, over and above the focus on hedonism which has found to characterise the campuses of non-collegiate universities (Hubbard, 2011; Cheeseman, 2018). This resonates strongly with the processes that occur within private schools, which adopt “practices of cultivation” in terms of their pupils (Maxwell and Aggleton, 2013; Vincent and Maxwell, 2016) through “academic, sporting, creative and aesthetic experience and success” (Maxwell and Aggleton, 2013: 81) which instils the soft-skills of “perseverance, resilience and team work” (Vincent and Maxwell, 2016:275). In this way, the collegiate system acts to provide, or build on, the same advantages offered by an expensive secondary education, as it enables students to maximise their

individual employability through extra-curricular credentials and training in the soft skills that, as outlined in chapter two, are increasingly becoming as an important form of cultural capital as hard credential currencies in securing students' top positions in the field of employment.

#### **4.4.4 The Reality**

Collegiate models of universities are advocated on the grounds that they are “safe, supportive and inclusive” environments for students from all backgrounds (Burt and Evans, 2016). Yet, today, at odds with the mission of Hatfield College in the 1840s, college accommodation costs across the university are high relative to the rest of the sector. For the 2019-20 academic year rent charges have increased 2.5% on the previous year to stand at £7,672 for a single room in a catered college (Durham University, 2019d). This is more than the total amount of yearly maintenance loan available to students whose families earn £35,000 a year or more, and leaves under £25 a week surplus for a student provided with the maximum student loan (gov.uk, 2020). This college fee is more expensive than Oxford accommodation, where the most expensive college - St Edmund Hall - cost £6475 for 2018-9. When comparing it to other universities in the region, rent appears even higher: Newcastle's catered accommodation costs £2,582 less over the academic year, and *Which? University* (2019) estimates the accommodation costs at Durham University to be £221 more per month than Northumbria University's catered accommodation. Hordósy et al. (2018) point out that there is likely a significant shortfall between the cost of living at any university and the student loan amount provided to all students, with it being “rarely enough to sustain the basic needs of both lower income students and those from higher income brackets” (p.354). As all students outside of London are provided with the

same loan amount irrespective of the actual costs associated with their particular university, this gap between loan and expenditure is going to be among the widest for students at Durham. This points clearly to the fact that accessing the “Durham difference” of unparalleled opportunity is dependent on financial resources, with only students who have sources of income other than the student loan likely to be financially stable in their first year at the university. This is likely to have significant consequences for who applies to the university in the first instance, and then for who can play an active role in collegiate life later on.

Burt and Evans (2016) argue that there needs to be a substantial body of postgraduates and “older students” in order to create the inter-disciplinary and scholarly community intrinsic to the values of the collegiate model, risking becoming, otherwise, merely a place for first years to live (p.3) Yet as Durham University expands and “guarantee[s] college accommodation to all first year undergraduate students” (Durham University, 2020c), postgraduates and returning students are being pushed out, as the accommodation is prioritised for incoming students. For instance, Van Mildert college saw its percentage of its living in students being postgraduates decrease by 16.85% over a four-year period since the academic year 2014/15. John Snow College had no rooms available for students who were not first years in 2018/19. As market values increasingly take paramount importance, Durham’s commitment to providing inclusive accommodation for students from across the university is wavering in reality.

In contrast to the ideal of the collegiate model that “leads to an inevitable sense of respect for others” through a “diverse membership” (Burt and Evans, 2016:xi), Durham’s colleges have long been seen to attract certain types of students, with

stereotypes of the members of each college have been widely written about in student media. In 1975, an author of an article in the university student newspaper, *Palatinate*, stated that “when I tell my college, they roll their eyes. Obviously I’ve got some role or image to fulfil”, and proceeded to provide a “passport” of college types and their caricatures for incoming students to show them the “readily identifiable roles you can aspire to, together with some instantly recognisable portraits of the influential big whigs in Durham” (*Palatinate*, 1975 p.6). Forty-five years later, Durham student media is still filled with references to the colleges’ stereotypes. These, as mentioned before, tend to take the form of a Hill/Bailey dichotomy. The newer, less traditional Bailey colleges are seen to admit more privately educated and middle-class students than the Hill colleges which are seen to be more diverse. The colleges positioned on the Bailey are seen to host “a bunch of pretentious posh southerners” and those with “red chinos, loafers, a signet ring and a conspicuously southern accent” (Poole, 2016). The Hill colleges are seen as having a broader mix of students, but also as the colleges that applicants tend to be re-allocated to after applying to an over-subscribed Bailey college. Despite the variation within and overlap between the structures of the Hill and Bailey colleges as outlined in the previous section, the broad difference in traditions and rituals constitute a distinct typology in the minds of Durham students that provide a way of understanding the social structure of the university.

The stereotypes that are written about have some grounding in reality. The most popular college is Bailey college University, which received 2957 applications, with 48% receiving offers. However, Chad’s (also Bailey) is the most over-subscribed, with only 36% of offers being made (Durham University, 2020d). The colleges are also highly socially segregated in demographic terms, as stated in the previous chapter.

Hatfield College receives almost three times more applications from privately educated students than the newer Josephine Butler College, which translates into there being over three times more entrants from private schools here than at the latter (Durham University, 2017a). The two colleges formerly in the Stockton campus had ten times higher the number of entrants from low participation neighbourhoods than the two oldest colleges (University and Hatfield) which each had under 2% of entrants coming from low participation neighbourhoods. Even for students who do have the financial resources to enter the university and are able to live in a college, they are likely to be segregated according to background. Not only is the University as a whole, as outlined in chapter 3, lacking diversity but some individual colleges are even less socially representative. This calls into question the purported/ostensible purpose of the colleges as being diverse, inclusive environments that prepare students to enter wider society as “enlightened citizenry” (Ryan, 2016:8).

## **4.5 Summary**

This chapter has set the scene for the empirical findings. It has demonstrated that historically Durham has been a “field outsider” to the two distinct fields of universities that emerged in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. This is drawn on by the University today in terms of the “Wider Student Experience” that it purports to offer. It claims legitimate distinction to the rest of the elite sub-field on grounds of tradition – which are in more cases than not invented cultural constructions - as well as maximising student choices to win applicants in the marketized HE field and providing graduates with the cultural capital needed to dominate the field of employment. The evidence uncovered through document analysis indicates that the unparalleled opportunity offered by the university is primarily the reserve of students with high levels of cultural capital. Moreover, as the university commits itself to marketization, it is moving further away from collegial

ideals. As Eamon (2016) states with regard to the collegiate model, “one must ask what traditions reinforce positive outcomes and what practices, constructed under the cultural influences of another time, should be altered, reinvigorated or even ended” (p.67). This chapter has demonstrated that doing so within the context of Durham University is needed, and this is what chapters five and six seek to do.



# Chapter Five: Perceptions and Induction Week Realities

## 5.1 Introduction

This chapter uses empirical data collected from the focus groups and series of interviews with first-in-family students to discuss the first theme of the empirical findings of the research: participants' prior perceptions of the university and their experiences in induction week.

This chapter, along with the next, seeks to answer the follow three research questions:

1. Whose habituses structure the institutional sub-field of Durham University? What implications does this have for students' positions within the field and their experiences?
2. To what extent can first in family students with working class and/or non-traditional student habituses engage in the institutional sub-field?
3. What processes and practices sustain the continuity of the field from year to year, across staff and student cohorts?

The purpose of this chapter is two-fold: firstly, to demonstrate in concrete terms how the social field of the widened sector has implications for equality of access by excluding those who take different pathways to these participants; and secondly, to highlight how equality of access is only one issue, with the 'elite' sub-field actively creating inequalities for students who have been seen to have "won" the game of HE and enter this field.

## 5.2 Deciding to Enter the HE Field

For the majority of participants, university was always - or at least was from an early age - something they had been considering as an option and became an expectation as they grew older. I asked participants when they first thought about the possibility of going to university and it was clear that for some it was never a question of not going to university, with them finding it difficult to pinpoint a particular moment in their past when they decided to do so. This was mostly evident with the case of Holly (SS, HSC 1, SE)<sup>3</sup>, who had been educated privately, and had “always planned” to go to university. Although her parents did not go to university themselves, Holly wants to follow in their footsteps to become a diplomat herself, a profession which now needs a degree. Here we see how the familial habitus “results in a tendency for young people to acquire expectations” (Reay, 1998:525) through her career aspirations.

However, Holly mainly spoke of the importance of her school in facilitating this - she was “in that environment”, where “there wasn’t really an option not to go” to university. She described hearing what universities the team of head girls were going to each year throughout school and the HE pathway became the normal and expected route for pupils in the school. The certainty with which she regarded going to HE echoes that of the confidence young people in Reay’s 1998 study, with parents who had gone to university, for whom the expectation of participating in HE did “not need to be articulated” (Allatt, 1996) as “having family members makes you think I’ve got to do that” (Reay, 1998:522). The combination of Holly’s career ambitions, developed

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<sup>3</sup> Codes indicate faculty, college and home region for each participant. Faculty: AH = Arts and Humanities; C = combined programme; Sci = Science; SS = Social Sciences. College: B = Bailey; H = Hill; C = catered; SC = self-catered. L/O = living out. Numbers after college code are to indicate whether participants are in the same as another participant. Region: EM = East Midlands; NE = north east; NW = north west; SE = south east; W = Wales; WM = West Midlands; Y = Yorkshire. This is also presented in figures 3 and 4.

as a result of her parents' positions in the professional field, combined with the school which structured her "disposition towards education" (Ingram, 2009:423) overrode her parents' lack of direct experience in the HE field and made university the only conceivable choice.

However, many participants who had been educated in the state sector with parents working in non-professional fields also expressed a high level of certainty and confidence that they would go to university. Scarlett (SS, BC 1, SE), Hannah (AH, HSC 2, W) and Tony (AH, HC 1, NE) all attended sixth form schools or colleges that they classed as "very good" (Scarlett) and "really great" (Tony) in terms of the quality of education they received or at least in a relative sense, with it being "really good for the area" (Hannah). Yet prior to this they had attended comprehensive secondary schools that they described as "awful, very comprehensive" (Scarlett) that had low average attainment (Hannah) and had been placed in special measures by OFSTED (Tony). They did not attribute their decision to go to university as a result of the new social field of the sixth form college: both Hannah and Scarlett said they probably "always knew" that they wanted to go to university and Tony said he "came out [at birth] planning to go to university" and that he "knew uni was going to happen" for him, as he "was going to make it happen." Higher education was seen as a relatively certain destination for as long as they could remember, despite the fact that not long ago their objectively lower positions in the field of education (attending poorly-rated secondary schools) and field of employment or power (having parents in non-professional occupations) and lacking cultural capital (being first in family to consider going to university) would have made them highly unlikely to consider going to university at all.

It was clear that this expectation that they would go to university came about either because of, or alongside, perceived pressure from both family members and wider society to go to university, with them saying that it was “assumed” or “expected” that they themselves would go. Scarlett said that she often wonders if she would have gone to university “if there wasn’t so much pressure” and attributes her decision to come to university fifty per cent to her own interests and fifty per cent to societal expectation. She is from a high-participation area in the south east of England where she was “surrounded by middle-class kids” and the normalisation and assumption of going to university may be expected given existing research (Donnelly, 2014; Gamsu, 2018a; 2018b). However, the other participants are from working-class backgrounds and low-participation areas of the country. Hannah is from south Wales, the region with the lowest HE participation rates in the UK. Despite this, Hannah spoke of the implicit social pressure to go to university that pushes students to go regardless of whether they actively want to do so, saying “most of people from my area, it’s a bit mixed, like a lot of us went to university but it was more because we felt we had to rather than a desire to actually go to university”. Her family told her “we all knew you’d go to uni” when she told them of her acceptance. Ben (Sci, BC 2, NE), along with Tony, is from the north east of England - the region with the second lowest rates of HE participation (after Hannah’s). He stated that, within his community, “leaving home at 18, it’s a very strange thing to do”. Yet he also said:

*“A lot of people go to uni nowadays, like everybody does, and if you’re a certain [ability] level then it’s just assumed. I’m happy with it but I don’t know if was given freedom, like rather than this thing from society that tells you that you have to go on this specific path, then I would be in this situation.”*

Similarly, when asked what made her want to go to university, Ewa (Sci, BC 1, NY) - who “wasn’t surrounded by people who were really interested in uni” at her comprehensive school in Yorkshire and whose parents are manual workers and have no experience of British educational system, having completed their secondary education in Poland - also spoke of feeling like she was expected to go to university by her family:

E: I don’t know. I feel like I was expected to go, so I just had to come.

MW: Expected by who?

E: Just my family, I think. And all my friends are like... You’d be wasted if you didn’t go to uni. You’re smart enough for it, so I think you should

Their expressions of perceived pressure are somewhat surprising, given that although thirteen years ago it was reported that university participation has become increasingly “more normalised than it would have been” (Thomas and Quinn, 2007 in Byrom and Lightfoot, 2012:132), ultimately it remained (and still remains) the situation that “for the majority of young people from lower socio-economic groups it is normal to not progress to university” (Keane, 2009:94). The participants’ narratives therefore work to somewhat refute the work of Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) who wrote in the 1990s that class culture works to impress “the indivisible action of structural causality on behaviour and attitudes” on children at school (p.87; Bok, 2010:165) as these participants took contradictory paths to their schools peers and relatives.

This may be unpacked to an extent by the findings of Archer and Yamashita (2013) that for their working-class participants, “the source of ‘resistance’ to post-compulsory

participation was predominantly constructed in terms of personal deficit rather than as an issue of HE itself being undesirable” (p.60). For Reay et al. (2010) the difference between participants at their four case-study institutions which occupied different positions in the HE field, “lies more in the learner identities that they bring to the HE context than in differing identifications and social identities” (p.117). The participants in this study had all been highly academically successful at school, and are similar to those in these authors’ (2009; 2010) study of a high-tariff university in the south, in that they had a “positive learner identity” (2009:1112) and “highly developed academic dispositions” (ibid.:1115) that are more common within the middle classes, as they reported being mostly confident in their abilities and enjoying learning at school.

Moreover, the notion of “waste” as mentioned by Ewa in the quotation above, was prevalent in the majority of participants’ narratives with the notable exception of Holly. Ben also used that exact term to describe the situation of him not going to university later on in his interview and, although having a period of doubt when she was 17 due to the high cost of university, Scarlett clarified that “I do think it’s the best option for me. I think if you get high grades you should be looking at going to university for the challenge”. It seems that it was not in itself a “highly developed academic disposition” (Reay et al., 2009:1115) that oriented these participants to HE, as this worked in conjunction with their perceptions that the only really valuable route for them was to take their high academic attainment and apply it to enable them to take a different path to those around them. The common narrative was that to stay in the same social circle and nearby employment opportunities would be unproductive. This resonates with Harris et al.’s (2019) findings that their working-class participants “felt compelled to participate in higher education (and therefore to borrow) by the

prevailing rhetoric of self-improvement and employability” (p.2). Here we see the workings of meritocratic ideology that encourages “a talented few” from the working classes “to rise to the top” (Littler, 2018:27). This commitment to so-called ‘meritocracy’ is part of the broader neoliberal project, which operates as a societal doxa that straddles multiple social fields (Bourdieu, 1998), as it legitimizes “clear divisions between those with outstanding talent and the rest of the population” (Bathmaker, 2015:64) within all areas of social life.

Bourdieu noted that doxas have different effects on different habituses as “the difference in doxa is what marks off one habitus as distinct from another” (Chopra, 2003:426). The cases of these participants point to the influence of this doxa in disrupting the “reproductive role” of the working-class habitus in terms of their HE orientation (Brooks, 2003:295). The participants’ exceptional academically-oriented habituses combine with the neoliberal doxa in the UK to make it seem as though anything but “escap[ing] the collective fate of their class” (Bourdieu, 1976:116) would reflect poorly on them as individuals, as this doxa “recognises only individuals” and operates to enact a “programme of methodical destruction of collectives” (Bourdieu, 1998:95-6) by “rhetorically eradicate[ing]” the idea of class (Skeggs and Loveday, 2012:487). Holly did not engage with this narrative – for her there was no potential of “wasting” her academic credentials, as the neoliberal doxa worked to ensure that university was the only choice being taken by her and her school fee-paying peers who were already committed to professional careers.

Gale and Parker (2015) argue that Bourdieu’s emphasis on the reproductive is contradicted by the “substantially alternative aspirations of marginalised groups”

(p.93), and instead suggest that “aspirations are as much future focused as they are historically informed” (p.91). Here we can see how the case of the first-in-family participants in this research do not stand as a “provocation to Bourdieu” (ibid.:93) by pursuing an alternative trajectory; rather, the combination of Bourdieu’s tools can be used to analyse and explain their pathways. This shall be further developed in the subsequent sections that look at participants’ pathways to coming to Durham University.

### **5.3 Choosing a University**

As outlined in chapter two, the field of UK higher education today can be said to be increasingly structured around the “marked-led principles” (Maguire et al., 1999) that are part and parcel of the neoliberal doxa and are underpinned by inter-institutional competition. The market of the HE field is “highly reputational” (Briggs and Wilson 2007: 58) with universities ranked according to various metrics and varying greatly in social prestige. Maximising student ‘choice’ in selecting their university is seen as intrinsic to making this market work in their favour, enabling students to go to a university that suits their needs and interests, again emphasising the role of the individual. This section explores the choice-making process of participants to see how this plays out in reality.

Although for some of the participants attending university after leaving school was always - or for as long a time as they can remember - the path they wanted to take, and for all was firmly underpinned by the desire to be socially mobile, their pathways that led them to choose Durham were very different. Before offers, Alice (AH, HC 2, SE), Ben, Joe (Sci, HC 3, WM) and Scarlett had other universities as their preferred option, whereas for the remaining, Durham was firmly their university of choice - so much so



for some that it was their only option they listed on UCAS (Gwyn – Sci, HC 4, NE; Tony) or was the only offer they really wanted (Rosie – C, BC 2, NW). Some came from schools where going to a RG university was common (Rosie) or indeed the norm (Holly, Scarlett) and others from schools where they knew no other students to go to an older university (Gwyn, Faye – SS, BC 1, WM). This section therefore explores the instances that led their pathways to converge in coming to the same university.

### **5.3.1 Status Differences**

When participants started to picture themselves at university, some began their university choice-making process not expecting to end up attending Durham University “or anywhere like here” (Belle – SS, HSC 3, EM). Belle said, “I thought it would just be my nearest [university], like Lincoln”. Although some research has indicated that first-generation students often lack the cultural capital necessary to decode institutional hierarchies or are “contingent choosers” that see these as irrelevant (Ball et al., 2002), more recent research has found that “candidates are well aware of the university pecking order” (Barley, 2013 in Shiner and Noden, 2015:17). This is true of my participants, with the majority expressing in-depth knowledge and understanding of the relativity of the field’s hierarchy. Belle’s earlier use of the word “just” is representative of the implicit references to the social prestige of universities that were intertwined throughout the wider group of participant narratives. All participants were highly aware of status differences between old and new universities and referenced mission groups, tending to group certain institutions together - such as Scarlett who said, “my group of friends [...] are at Russell Groups like Leeds, York, Manchester, Nottingham” - and made value judgements about the status of the university – “they did really well, like *really*, really well for themselves”.

It has been well documented in prior research that private schools instil knowledge about status hierarchies in their pupils (Roker and Banks, 1993) and orient them to those institutions at the top of these. This was certainly the case for Holly, whose school was characterised by a doxa that made going to a RG university seem like the only conceivable option through its everyday practices and arrangements – from having a stream of head girls who were well known throughout the school to be holding offers from these institutions, to the picking apart of students’ university preferences by teachers. This resulted in her attributing her university choices being a result of “80% what other people thought, 20% what I thought”.

Gamsu (2018a; 2018b) has found that this is phenomenon is not unique to private schools, with state schools that aspire to the ‘elite’ positions in the post-16 educational field mimicking practices in the private sector in order to gain the symbolic capital that comes with sending high numbers of pupils to Oxbridge and other ‘elite’ institutions. This was the case with Rosie’s grammar school which also sent “strong classificatory messages” (Donnelly, 2014) about which universities are the “best” and that their pupils should therefore aim for:

*“Our school, because it was quite a good grammar school, they only pushed Oxford or Cambridge and veterinary, medicine, dentistry. And that was like, if you get 12 A\*s in your GCSEs, you have one of those three options or you go and do another subject like law in Oxford or Cambridge. And the science department was pushed majorly”.*

Here, like with Donnelly's findings with state schools in south Wales, Oxbridge is constructed as "a distinct HE destination" (p.70), a notion which has become doxic in the sense that the most valuable choice is to apply there has become naturalised and accepted (Gamsu, 2018a:15). Another notable example here was Alice's school in London. She said she was encouraged to "aim high" and apply to "good" universities. The school is comprehensive but has links with a local private school which provided Oxbridge coaching to students at her school, in which she was included after being marked out as "Oxbridge material" (Donnelly, 2014). It is evident in these examples that schools actively instilled knowledge about status differences within the HE field and pushed students to attend these. Notably, all three institutions – despite occupying different positions along private-state and selective-comprehensive scales – vary in design and function to non-selective schools that do not have the geographical proximity to, or support in the form of the provision of cultural resources from, private schools.

As schools "develop processes that reflect their socio-economic mix" (Thrupp, 1999:125 in Ball et al., 2002:58) it is unsurprising that for the rest of participants, their schools tended to encourage university applications of any kind, with the majority of their school peers opting for newer institutions. Ewa explained that most people she knew at school "went to creative universities, let's say", that were relatively close to her hometown in Yorkshire ("like Leeds Beckett or Teesside"). Similarly, Joe found that a "stupidly large amount" of people from his school were going to one of three local, new institutions that his school had links with. Faye did not know anyone from her West Midlands comprehensive school who went to a RG university. Their knowledge of status differences was a product of more informal channels. For

instance, Chloe (SS, HSC 3, Y) who, when asked how she came to know about the reputation of Durham, replied, “just the things you pick up from how people spoke about it”. Tony explained that he gained knowledge of what the “good” universities were from talking to people over a long time period - “a lot of these things, you seem to grow up with them, like you just kind of know by the time you apply to uni which ones are the good ones and which ones aren’t as much the good ones. It seems to be the harder it is to get into them, the better the university which is weird. Makes a strange kind of sense somehow but maybe that’s just because I’ve thought that my whole life.” At sixteen and seventeen, the students were far removed from the field in that they grew up in low-participation neighbourhoods with parents in non-professional backgrounds, yet the doxa that I argued characterises the HE field in chapter two - that some universities within it are inherently better than others – is naturalised to the extent that these participants as field outsiders accepted it and took it as true.

However, it was clear that participants, like Belle, initially imagined that gaining acceptance to Durham University - which they saw as being distinct to the sector in that “it’s really good for grades and everything and it’s one of the oldest unis” (Elizabeth – SS, HC 4 L/O, NE) - and others they grouped with it and considered to be “like here” (Belle) in terms of being a similar age, requiring similar tariffs for entry and having a similar level of social prestige, would be out of reach of their capabilities. For instance, Gwyn “actually never thought about Durham” because she “always thought Oxford, Cambridge, Durham, St Andrews, I’d never get into any of those”. In a similar manner to Reay et al.’s (2010) working-class students at a prestigious, southern university, going to a university like Durham was nothing “more than a

dream, despite university in a more general sense having been a clearly articulated project often from primary school.” Alongside the distinctiveness surrounding Oxbridge in Davey’s (2012) and Donnelly’s (2014) research, these participants initially also saw the wider elite sub-field of RG universities occupying an “other-worldliness”.

### **5.3.2 Seeking the “Best”**

Although initially the elite sub-field was perceived by the majority of participants to be off the cards, their high attainment at GCSE and AS level was seen an indicator that they could aspire to a university within this, despite the fact that those in their school were selecting newer institutions. From this point many participants decided to actively seek the “best” university they could, as they realised they had the requisite academic capital to do so. When I asked in what regard they considered some universities to be “the best” and why the reputation was important to them, all participants spoke in terms of it being an institution most likely to enable them to get the interesting jobs they wanted when articulating why they wanted to go to university in general. Tony explained his thought process:

*“A degree from Durham and a degree from York St John - which was my safety school - they have different effects. If you’re applying for a job and you’ve got the same qualifications but one’s from Durham and one’s not from Durham, you kind of get the idea which one the employers are going to go for”.*

Although a “love of learning” was an important part of the participants’ narratives in wanting to go to a ‘good’ university as this was perceived to provide access to high-quality teaching, this seemed secondary to the motivation of going to a university that

would provide them with the credentials to get a professional job. The metaphor of “cycle” or “route” was used by participants to describe the types of jobs - mainly in the service sector - that members of their family predominantly work in, which participants attributed to their lack of educational qualifications. Alice’s cousins work in “hairdressing, going to a bank, working in a chippy”. She, however, “wanted to continue education and do something else” and decided at age eleven she wanted to be a barrister. Belle said she wanted “to stray away” from the typical “route” for her family - which is “going to college, getting a job” - and “want[s] to achieve something more and different”. This resonates strongly with Lehmann’s (2009) findings that his participants hoped to “break free” from “the limitations placed upon them (and their parents) by their class origins” by going to university in general, and that “this hope for mobility was rooted in their realization that their parents’ lives and careers were limited by their lack of formal credentials” (p.635). By articulating this in terms of the elite sub-field in particular due to credential inflation, they demonstrated acute awareness of the “dominant and subordinate positions” (Naidoo, 2004:457) of different universities and the rules by which mass HE participation is played.

The reasons underpinning a desire for a professional job were twofold: to have an occupation that was interesting and less exhausting than the long hours required by the service sector, and to provide the financial stability that many of them did not have growing up. Nine out of the fourteen participants spoke about part-time work they did alongside school, or full-time work over school holidays. This employment was predominantly in the service sector, including in hospitality as waiting, cashier or bar staff (Ben, Ewa, Gwyn, Elizabeth), retail work (Chloe, Scarlett, Rosie), and cleaning (Belle), and manual work in the industrial sector as a factory worker (Hannah). For

participants, this experience made them realise that this type of work is not something they wanted to do in the long term. For Ewa, her time as a waitress made her “snap out” of her “laziness” as she realised she did not want to be “stuck in” a job “that hard for that little pay” or a routine nine-to-five job which she classified as “just a bit mundane”, as “scanning some items”, is not for her. Similarly, Gwyn - who had worked long hours from the age of fourteen in a takeaway and a tailor’s alongside her schooling - said “I know the value of working to support your own time. That is really important, and I learnt that from a young age”. When asked at the end of interview one what they hoped to be doing in ten years’ time, Hannah - who had worked in a factory - said:

*“As long as I’m not in a factory I’ll be fine. The work is easy but it’s boring, it’s mundane, there’s no point to it. I just don’t want that to happen. I want to be in a profession and an industry that I actually like and am passionate for, even in the slightest sense, just have that feeling of I don’t hate my job. That’s all I care about. I want to be happy”.*

It was clear that it was more the label of a degree from such a university, rather than any skills or knowledge they would develop throughout it, that was seen as the key to increasing job prospects. This was most clearly articulated by Holly, who said “I’m expecting a good job after coming to Durham because I expect the name to do a lot for me in the future.” She is exceptional to the rest of participants in her class background and schooling, and she spoke with greater confidence about getting a professional job – which she saw as secure now she had entered Durham – than any other participant. However, all participants were highly aware of the functioning of credentials from the

'elite' HE sub-field as a form of "durable institutionalized cultural capital" (Hardy, 2012a:135) and were determined to adopt strategies to accumulate this in order to pursue later career choices that were different to those in their family and local community.

These findings resonate with Archer et al.'s (2007) study, which found that among their participants, their experience in low-paid, low-skilled work was "the strongest motivation" to attend university in general (p.564). These findings contrast with Loveday's (2015) research that found most participants in a WP programme were undertaking education "for education's sake" (p.583). She argues against the common notion that working-class students go to university "as an instrumental way of achieving upward mobility" (p.583), contrasting the earlier study which found that for many of their participants, the main attraction of "better jobs" was increased pay (Archer et al., 2007: 565). Participants here wanted to be upwardly mobile in the sense of "breaking out" (Ben) of the confines of a small selection of jobs that they would find "boring, mundane" (Ewa) but this was also expressed in terms of favouring the pursuit of a more meaningful job. All participants spoke about wanting to do work that would make them "happy" - with the ideal for Joe being a job he would be "happy to do without pay" - or that has high social value, with almost all participants saying they hoped to "help people" in their career, rather than it being solely part of a "social mobility project" (Lehmann, 2009) for instrumental, financial reasons that Loveday (2015) argues against.

However, for some participants the end goal of university was to gain a well-paid job. For participants who articulated the most acute experiences of economic insecurity



growing up (Faye, Gwyn, Tony) gaining cultural capital via the 'elite' HE sub-field was one way to increase the likelihood of being financially stable. Faye, whose mother is unemployed and whose father faced homelessness for a period, attributes her desire to go to university solely because of the need "to get a good job" to avoid "all the financial problems" that her parents have:

*"I never wanted to be in that [parents' financial situation]. But it was like, in primary school, knowing I had to do that but never knowing how. And then, when I started talking to teachers in secondary school and being like, oh, okay, so I've got to, like, join in the system, get good grades, go to uni, get a good job, you know, do all that. And, sort of, it was less of how people think, 'oh, I'm going to go to uni and do something I enjoy'. For me, it's always been, 'I need to go to uni to get a good job, so I can, like, not die in the future, basically'".*

For her the "end goal" of her higher education is to work in a job that allows her to "look after" her parents financially when they retire, as neither receive an occupational pension as her father "works for a really crappy company". Faye's acknowledgement of having to "join the system" to do this exemplifies the fact that although she is working in line with prevalent societal doxas by actively pursuing entry to the elite sub-field, she is enacting what Bourdieu would term an orthodoxic practice, as "the arbitrariness of doxa is recognized but accepted in practice" (Deer, 2012:118). Not all behaviour that is in line with dominant doxas is the "undisputed, pre-reflexive, naïve, native compliance" (Bourdieu, 1990:68) that he writes about as being true of the majority. The participants "adjusted [themselves] to the immanent demands of the game" (ibid.) in order to maximise the chances of transforming their academic capital

into cultural capital for themselves and economic capital for their families, whilst being reflexive and critical about the operations of the broader game in question.

When theorising the cultural preferences of different social classes, Bourdieu argues that it is the “habitus that provides the principle for the logic of selection” (Moore, 2012:103). As habitus is “the social game embodied” (Bourdieu, 1994:63) the selection and choices of an individual will be in line with the doxa that characterises a field if the individual takes a high-ranking position within that field by virtue of the field-habitus match (Maton, 2012:58). As stated in chapters one and two, students are encouraged to “shop” for a university (Raaper, 2020:247) and use the numerous quality measures that are now available for their ‘consumption’ to make an ‘informed decision’. It was clear that the participants as ‘shoppers’ in the UCAS application “navigated” (Moore, 2012:105) the selection process with differing levels of confidence and familiarity. For Holly and Rosie who had gained the “distinction” of being educated selectively, they were more in line with the doxa that positions the ‘elite’ sub-field as superior to the rest of the HE field and knew which institutions were considered “the best” from the “classificatory messages” (Donnelly, 2014) given out by their schools. Consequently, they “navigate[d] the social space with assurance” (Maton, 2012:105).

For participants without social connections with knowledge about the HE sector, the strategies they used to inform their position-takings within the HE field were informed by external sources of information like published league tables. Ewa - whose parents have little knowledge about British higher education due to having been educated in the Polish secondary system themselves - thought “let’s go to the league table and just

pick the top”. Hannah was at a college conference in the first month of her time at her FE college, where she came across a league table for her chosen subject: “I saw Durham was at the top and I was like “going to Durham!” For Joe, Durham was a possibility of a few options in “the top 15, 20 universities” in the league tables he looked at and decided he would aim to get into one of them “no matter what happen[ed]”. He ended up applying to the top five and had his preferences to reflect the order of their ranking. After he did not receive an offer from Cambridge or Imperial College London, Durham was his favourite as it was listed as third in the league table for his subject. Tony said that “each university would get like 6 [internet] tabs open, like what does it say in the *Guardian*, in the *Which? University* [...] just interrogating every university, I may have overdone it slightly”. By virtue of their habituses that lack “distinction” gained from schooling, these participants were less “familiar with how [the] shop is organized” (Moore, 2012:105) and used league tables to stand in for cultural and social capital.

This reliance on league tables directly contradicts existing research that has argued that the psychological- and social-matching of self and identity to an institution often takes precedence over more instrumental concerns like league-table positioning in the university selection processes for first-in-family and working-class students (Reay, 2005). Tony did point out that, for him, alongside ranking position, an indication of the quality of the university was the proportion of middle-class students in their intakes. He said, “posh people universities seem to be the good universities”. Here we see how, in line with Reay et al.’s (2001) findings, “some universities are subject to ‘attributive judgements’ based upon the size of their working class and ethnic intakes” (p.868) and that for students “the good university is conflated with places where there are ‘few people like me’” (p.867). An important difference to this study is that

although Tony said he found this conflation with class and quality “problematic”, it did not stop him from applying. This is another orthodox practice, as the participants’ commitment to maximising their chances of entering the professional field through their HE position-takings made objective rankings of paramount importance. This places the factors in their selection processes in line with the rationalist assumptions that characterise government discourse on student choice – as Raaper (2019) argues, student-consumers are “expected to enact their economic self-interest when evaluating universities” and to “prioritise employment prospects when exercising choice” (p.8). However, as shall be demonstrated through the rest of the thesis, this does not mean that students who are seen to have made the ‘correct’ choices in this line of thinking have a positive and straightforward trajectory towards the higher employment field positions that they actively aspire to.

### **5.3.3 Collegiate System**

It was only Joe that chose Durham solely because it was the highest-ranking university from which he was made an offer. Other participants, after relying on league tables to inform their choices at the initial application stage, referenced prospectuses and open days more so in the post-offer stages when they were deciding which university to firm on UCAS. It was therefore league table positioning combined with other factors that made them select Durham as their firm choice from within the ‘elite’ sub-field.

As outlined in the previous chapter, the neoliberal doxa has increasingly shaped the HE field and ‘student choice’ has become a motif of policy makers, with studenthood becoming increasingly commodified and students being targeted as a distinct set of consumers. The ‘Wider Student Experience’ so clearly marketed by Durham was

clearly something the participants had engaged with when deciding which university to firm. All participants referenced the ‘pull’ factor of the collegiate system. Most of the participants in this research reported being attracted to the university by its unique traditional practices that take place within the colleges. Joe said he was happy to be going to Durham “because it was traditional and was kind of that element I really liked about Cambridge when I applied.” Chloe said, “I liked the whole prestigious, older, like the gowns and more traditional looking dining hall and things like that”. For these students who have bucked the trend and applied to this socially-elitist university, the archaic practices are not at first so incompatible with their habituses that they are put off from applying. This contrasts with the existing evidence outlined in chapter two that non-traditional students often perceive these traditional aspects to be repelling. For instance, Ball et al (2002) study quoted a Cambridge University applicant saying “I was thinking - where’s the moat, where’s the armour? Save me from this” (p.68). However, my findings resonate with Baker and Brown’s (2007) research that found that their participants’ accounts were characterised by “the absence of reports of feeling alienated by aspects of ‘elite’ or ‘traditional’ institutions” (p.382). Hannah said she liked the collegiate system because “I wanted a gown, I wanted to feel like I’m at Hogwarts, I wanted that feeling”. This narrative that evokes the “otherworldly” or mythical in the university was also found with Baker and Brown’s participants - one of whom likened Cambridge to “Narnia” - who were instead drawn to a university they perceived to be ‘elite’ due to the romance of tradition and the exoticness of a university so different to the prior education they had experienced.

When I asked Hannah what “feeling” she would gain from wearing her gown she said “pride”. Similarly, Belle said she would “feel proud in my gown for getting in

somewhere like this”. Baker and Brown (2007) propose that for similar narratives with their participants, this is due to a HE-field doxa that associates history and tradition with learning. It is, as they wrote when discussing a participant who described a trip to Durham, “as if the image of history and tradition is endorsing the prestige of the place” (p.386). Baker and Brown’s participants “did not articulate interest in published league table positions” (p.387) but my participants had their sights set on one of the ‘best’ universities as narrowed down by the meticulous analysis of league tables, which they saw as broadly objective measures. Durham was then positioned as one of the ‘elite’ of the already ‘elite’ sub-field through these symbolic indicators, as institutional practices were equated with symbols of prestige and distinction to the non-collegiate universities.

It was evident, however, that for participants Oxbridge remained a separate entity to Durham, sitting on an even more ‘elite’ tier in the ‘elite’ sub-field than Durham. Even Ben who did apply to Oxford had his reservations about applying: “I don’t think I ever really had my heart set on Oxford, it always felt a little bit too much for me, like a little bit too extreme”, rather he “just did it on a whim” because his “mam was annoyed” if he did not. This rejection of Oxbridge as “too traditional” or “too extreme” mirrors many other studies (e.g. Ball et al., 2002). Although two other participants (Alice and Joe) did apply to Oxbridge along with Ben, for many participants who did not, Durham was seen as an institution to be a good compromise between the highly prestigious but intimidating Oxbridge and the rest of the sector. For Faye, “it’s got that same level of prestige as, like, Oxbridge but, like, without having to go to Oxbridge.” For Belle, Durham was “next best” after Oxbridge, where she felt she would not be given an offer, and if she were, she would not be able to keep up with the level of academic

work because she perceived herself to be “not that smart” and believed that she would feel intimidated by the intelligence of her fellow students, as well as the general environment of the university:

*“My friend, she’s so smart, she’s one of the smartest people I know, and she visited [Oxford] on a special, something gifted like day out or something and she said, “I couldn’t”. It was too, too traditional.”*

Durham’s location in the north of the country was seen to make it a more down-to-earth version of Oxbridge. Many of the participants from the north of the country referred to it being the best of both worlds - having the reputation similar to elite, southern universities but being in the north. Ewa ended up choosing Durham over Surrey due to pressure from her parents to stay closer to their home in Yorkshire. Scarlett - whose preference was to stay closer to her home in the south east and attend university in London - decided against Kings College London because of the high cost of the accommodation and opted for Durham in part due to the potential of lower living costs. Although for most participants there was nothing like the narratives of Reay et al.’s (2001b) working-class students which were “saturated with a localism” (p.861), we can see how Durham’s positioning in the north of the country brought it more within the “boundaries of conceivable choice” (ibid.:861) than other high-tariff universities in the south of the country. That Tony and Gwyn – both from the north east – had Durham listed as their only option on UCAS indicates their choices were much more constrained than the other participants in this study (and is unpacked in section 4.3.4).

This stands in direct contrast to Donnelly and Gamsu's (2020a) findings that privately-educated boys viewed Durham University "as an island of elite, middle-class culture situated in the North of England" (p.13). These authors state that their participants' conceptualisation of the university is the correct one, and this is supported by the findings of this thesis in the demographic statistics presented in chapter 3 section 4, the elitist collegiate practices built on instilling social hierarchy in its members outlined in chapter 4, and the exclusion of non-traditional students as shown in the rest of this chapter and in chapter 6. This demonstrates that although my non-traditional participants were aware of the existence of status differences between institutions and could access publicly available material to seek out the 'best' institutions, subtle differences in the social and cultural characteristics of different institutions were aspects that they were far from knowledgeable about, in contrast to the privately educated who were articulated in-depth knowledge about the "distinctive set of elite circuits of education" (ibid.:13).

Participants were split in terms of how much they wanted to actively engage with the traditional aspects of Durham. As outlined in chapter four, applicants to Durham are required to select a preferred college that they would like to be allocated to (although they can state "open" (no preference)). Seven participants applied to Bailey colleges, which, as stated in the preceding chapter, are older than the modern Hill colleges and are also for the most part more committed to university traditions, hosting formal dinners more regularly. Scarlett applied to her Bailey college because she thought "if you're going to come to Durham you might as well go for one of the stereotypical colleges" and this was common amongst these participants, with them saying they



“might as well” embrace the whole romanticised and mythical nature of this ‘elite’ HEI.

However, the other seven participants chose more modern Hill colleges as their preference. Belle said “if didn't have [*Hill college*] I wouldn't like it. I did want that aspect of tradition, but I do want the new atmosphere.” In line with Belle's narrative, other participants who chose Hill colleges as the first preference referenced the modern environment as a ‘pull’ factor. For Alice, being at her newer Hill, catered college means she can be within the wider college system that has “got all the history” but be within a more modern environment. It was upon visiting these colleges that these participants realised that they would feel at home within the university. Thus, for these participants the attraction of Durham is that it has “distinction” to the rest of the HE field in the public eye due to its traditional institutional practices, but these modern colleges operate as mini sub-fields, facilitating a more positive experience for them in the immediate term: they enable them to practically ‘do’ Durham, whilst still benefitting from its prestige.

Beyond the romanticism of the traditional aspects of the collegiate system, participants also spoke of the positives they perceived it offered in terms of facilitating inclusion. As outlined in chapter 4, advocates of the collegiate model Burt and Evans (2016) state that colleges allow students to “experience university life on a smaller and more human scale – a scale that is both manageable and intimate” (p.xi). This was a reason for an application to Durham articulated by participants. For Holly, colleges were a “similar sort of structure” to the housing system in her private school which made her feel “more relaxed”. However, this was true of other participants from other types of

school. For Alice, who also applied to Oxford, collegiate universities “are more focused on the individual”, and “feel more like an experience than a factory”. Similarly, Rosie said that she did not want to be “in a massive city and find [her]self in a flat”. Participants perceived colleges to be smaller, supportive environments within the ‘elite’ HE sub-field that would make the student experience less anonymous. Colleges acted as fields within the field of the ‘elite’ HEI that would be more inclusive than universities operating as fields without the smaller sub-field of the college.

### **5.3.4 Participation in a Summer School Intervention**

As described in section 4.3.2, for many participants Durham University was not seen as a realistic option until fairly late on in the UCAS application process. Four out of the five participants found summer school interventions a huge enabling factor in them coming to the University. Tony said the Supported Progression is “the only reason” he has come to the university. After participating in it, Gwyn placed Durham as her firm and her insurance place, thereby eliminating any other option in terms of HE, and Faye returned home from the summer school yelling “mum, dad, I’m going to Durham!” as she got in the door.

Firstly, the scheme was helpful in raising awareness of the existence of the university for participants who did not have social connections with knowledge about the institution:

*“I didn't actually know that Durham existed until, when... we were told about the Sutton Trust programme. They called, like, a group of, like, seven of us into a room [...] And I had a look through the leaflet. I was like, oh, well Oxford*

*and Cambridge are going to be really competitive, so I won't apply for those. And then I saw Durham and I had a look on the website. I was looking at the syllabus. I was like, oh, that's quite interesting, I'll apply there*" - Faye [Sutton Trust]

It also made participants who felt they would not qualify for an offer factor the university into their decisions. Gwyn “never thought the top 4” universities [as ranked in the league tables] as being an option for her until a teacher at her FE college encouraged her to apply for the Supported Progression scheme, which contrasted with the majority of other staff who were encouraging her – as well as all the other students – to pursue a vocational career. Although Gwyn had never heard of the scheme before, this particular teacher offered to print out the application form for her so she “thought “oh ok””. This off-chance comment by the teacher can be seen to give weight to Oliver and Kettley’s (2010) argument that teachers are often “active players” in transformation for their students (p.740), as during the summer school Gwyn scored in the top two per cent of participants, leading to her offer being reduced doubly, and enabled her to come to the university after receiving A, B, D in her A Levels.

These schemes, particularly Sutton Trust for those based further away from the university than the north east-targeted Supported Progression, were also crucial in allowing participants to visit when they would not otherwise have been able to due to the cost of travelling to an open day:

*“It was free, that was the thing, thank God it was free because I’ve never been on like an open day with my family, it’s always been with Seren [Welsh WP initiative] because my mum wasn’t working at the time and we didn’t have a*

*car, so it was like I genuinely couldn't go anywhere. This was really, really convenient for me because it was all free and it was a week here, so you would think it's a bit more of an authentic experience and it was to an extent."* -

Hannah [Sutton Trust]

The lowered grade requirements and financial support of the schemes were also of key importance. Gwyn described the reduced offer as a "lifesaver" due to complications at her school meaning her class did not have a teacher for one of her A Level subjects for the majority of the year. When she received her reduced offer, it was then her parents "probably realised "she could probably do this". With the lower offer and the potential of financial support, it was only then that going to university seemed a viable option for her and her parents. For this reason, Durham was her only option listed on UCAS: "Durham was my firm and my insurance, like I was *determined* I was going to get in because if it wasn't Durham then I think I'd probably be doing an apprenticeship with a council somewhere, like, I wouldn't be enjoying it, *this* is what I want to do". Tony said, "Supported Progression came along and said like "hey come and like visit us and if you pass this thing then we'll give you money and lowered entry grades" and so *Durham!*"

Alice, who did not partake in a summer school but received a contextualised offer, said the reduced offer made her think "clearly this is a good place for me, they must have thought something of my application or something of me for me to get that". For Scarlett, who was considering Birmingham after receiving an unconditional offer, the lower offer was the main factor in the reason she chose Durham despite not liking the idea of the collegiate system, as it made her think "at least I've got somewhere to go

and it's a really good university but originally I wouldn't have said that the system here suits me that well".

For Gwyn and Tony, the bursary made Durham a realistic option. Tony said he would have had to go elsewhere if he did not receive it as it is the only way he can afford college fees:

*"I think I would have to go somewhere else because have you seen how much Durham costs without the SP bursary? I might have tried going to Durham but living at home but basically look for cheaper, slightly less good but still slightly cheaper universities."*

The financial support, combined with the reduced offer, was the turning point for Gwyn's parents in making university seem like a viable option. It was then that they began to think that:

*"We could send her, and she could genuinely get an experience out of this that we could kind of afford. And the university's helping me and it's great. That was a shock, it was immediately my mother went "right we're going to all the open events" and I was like "we only have to book on to one" [laughing]" - Gwyn [Supported Progression]*

All those who had been to a summer school reported thoroughly enjoying themselves. This was the case for Faye, who said "the best summer of my entire life was at the summer school". Similarly, Hannah said "I loved it, I loved it here, like I loved

everyone who was doing my course”. These participants described returning home after the summer school with Durham placed firmly as their favourite choice in their mind. Faye, describes that “immediately getting home like, “I’m going to make sure that, like, that is the place””. Similarly, Tony said “I had some like maybe I’ll look at these if it does go to clearing. But in my mind I was like no, don’t need that because we’re going to Durham. I’m going to make it happen - it’s an A and two Bs”. It was clear that the summer school experience sparked an early commitment to Durham as a university for participants - Faye returned home with her Durham University water bottle and “refused to drink out of anything else for the next two years”. Hannah describes this as a special “emotional attachment” to the university in a way that was not shared by friends who had not done a summer school:

*“My emotional attachment to uni is different than my friend’s, like her first choice wasn’t Durham but mine was. Durham was my dream so it kind of gives a loyalty to Durham that I can’t really get rid of, because I’ve been attached to it for like two years before I even got here.”*

Hannah spoke about this in interview 2, describing how the university should recruit more students from neighbourhoods like hers where there is talent but limited opportunity to realise it. It was clear that for her the summer school is a key enabling mechanism for less privileged students to make contact with the university and work towards their “dream”, rather than having it as an option among many other RG universities. Scarlett was the only participant of a summer school who did not have Durham as her first choice, preferring LSE. She was perhaps different to the other participants in the fact that she came from somewhere where going to a RG university

was highly normalised. It did not need to be a “dream” for her; it was more one of a few potential realities.

This idea of the summer school facilitating a “dream”, rather than it being one option among many, points to the fact that the success of these programmes does not lie with them “raising the aspirations” of non-traditional students. Reay et al.’s (2010) participants described having “epiphany moments” when they realised going to their prestigious, southern university was a possibility, and for my participants the summer school schemes were a trigger for such a moment when the “externally-imposed criteria” (Reay, 1998:528) of coming to Durham - that of the prohibitively high college fees and the excessive entrance requirements - were broken down. Byrom (2009) found that for her participants on a Sutton Trust summer school, it “did not present a significant “interruption” of their respective habituses” and questions whether “they attract the young people they are charged to help” (p.221). The students here were already contemplating university and definitely had “predisposition characteristics” in the form of high levels of academic capital and aspirations to attend a university in the ‘elite’ sub-field. Yet without the removal of structural barriers they would never have contemplated it as a realistic option and the summer school was successful in reaching those who needed it.

However, their pathways of coming to the summer school were often highly serendipitous, via an off-chance remark from a teacher. The importance they attributed to the summer school in helping facilitate their entrance to this institutional sub-field, combined with this, means that there are likely a significant pool of students who would highly benefit from the intervention that at the moment are excluded. By

extension, it follows that the criteria that govern and police entry to the institutional field, and ‘elite’ sub-field in general - in the form of grade requirements and requisite economic capital - work to exclude non-traditional students who are otherwise extremely motivated to do so. This is one important way in which “the system of selection that provides advantages to some while restricting opportunities for others” (Pásztor and Wakeling, 2018:993) works to prevent high-attaining, driven disadvantage students from applying to universities in the ‘elite’ sub-field.

## **5.4 Expectations**

When discussing their expectations in the lead-up to their arrival at the University after firming their choice and attaining the requisite grades for their offer, it became evident that these expectations mainly took the form of concerns and worries. This is unsurprising given that there is a “high level of risk associated with hysteresis, since for a time at least, field struggles take place in the context of unknown future” (Hardy, 2012a:144). Some participants were concerned about the practicalities of university in general. Gwyn conducted some “intense googling of what do university students actually do?” and then realised she needed to buy a laptop - “I was like “I can’t afford a laptop!” so I put in obviously for three months work and just before the end of it I had raised enough money to go out and get myself a laptop”. Joe “didn’t really know what to expect” about being a student anywhere would be like because “it’s such a different experience to everything else”.

The existing research that I outlined in chapter two has explored this and focuses mainly on the concerns and worries of non-traditional students about entering the HE field in general. The main body of findings presented here differ to this, with participants articulating their concerns mainly in reference to entering the ‘elite’ sub-



field of Durham as an HEI in particular. The accounts presented here resonate with Baker and Brown's (2007) findings that with their participants, the feelings experienced by non-traditional applicants to a traditional institution "oscillat[ed] between anxiety and ambition" (p.377). This stands in contrast to that of privately educated Holly. When I asked her what she imagined being a student at Durham would be like, she responded that she "didn't really think about it" because all she has "ever really done is study", so she "didn't think it would be any different". Her confidence was striking when compared to the anxiety that filled the other participants' narratives.

#### **5.4.1 Cost**

As outlined in section 4.4 of the previous chapter, the accommodation costs at Durham University are extremely high relative to the rest of the sector and indeed the elite sub-field, totalling £7,672 a year for a catered room in college. The website states that although not compulsory, there is "expectation is that all [first year undergraduates] will live in" (Durham University, 2020c). One main concern for the participants was that of being able to meet the costs of university life. Half the participants articulated that financial planning before going to the university "taint[ed] the run up" (Faye) to their arrival. Importantly, all these financial worries were related to the cost of college accommodation and participants reported being taken aback by this after they had firmed their decision. When Faye saw the accommodation fees she started to question her choice of university: "is this really worth it? If I'm going to Durham, spending so much money on accommodation and just being miserable?" Rosie said her mother's support for her going to Durham lessened when she saw the cost of the accommodation, which was much more than they were expecting. They had used her friend's halls of residence rent at Liverpool John Moores as a ballpark figure for what to expect from university accommodation costs, but Rosie's accommodation is £170

a week more expensive (albeit for catered rather than her friend's self-catered room). Rosie's parents are having to provide her with £4,000 over the course of her first year to meet the shortfall between her student loan and the college costs, which they are funding via a private bank loan and just about "managing". Other participants who do not receive the maximum maintenance loan or bursary but whose parents are unable to help them meet the cost of accommodation – Scarlett described herself and others in this situation as being "kids stuck in the middle" - were having to find the needed funds via a combination of different sources, including using savings accumulated from part-time work during their school years (Ewa, Scarlett), inheritance (Joe) and relying on the assumption that they could gain part-time work in Durham during term time or full-time work at home in the holidays (Ben, Ewa, Scarlett). Other participants who do receive the maximum loan amount and bursary were also having to top this up by paying for some costs of the accommodation on a credit card (Tony) and borrowing from extended family members (Gwyn).

Existing research has focused on the role of HE field-wide tuition fee increases and subsequent accumulation of debt via the Student Loans Company as off-putting to non-traditional students in the first instance and as more likely to result in attrition once they have entered the HE field. For instance, Clark et al. (2019) find that their working-class participants strongly objected to indebtedness in terms of the £9,000 per year tuition fees where their focus was "the perceived inequity between their situation and those who were fortunate to enter university before the changes took place" (p.713). Harris et al. (2020) find that for their students, their "anxiety was triggered by insecurity about being able to function securely in adulthood and to afford ordinary, non-luxury items like accommodation, sustenance and mobility" (p.6) in the future as

a result of the debt. However, the prevailing financial concern for my participants centred not around the burden of tuition-fee debt, which they accepted as just the norm of being a student today, but around the more immanent pressures of meeting the high cost for university accommodation. Rosie said:

*“Obviously, the tuition fees, we’ll worry about those once you graduate, they’re not an issue at the moment, but the accommodation in Durham, compared to Liverpool, it’s ridiculous.”*

The findings here are therefore an important addition to the literature base, given the focus of dominant government and media narratives on this over and above university-specific up-front costs. Universities as institutional fields in their own right set the requisite levels of economic capital required to enter into their field in the form of accommodation costs. Durham demands higher levels of this than other universities in both the wider HE field and narrower ‘elite’ sub-field, which stood in contradiction to participants’ perceptions - as outlined in section 4.3.3 - that its location in the north of the country would mean that it would be financially more accessible. Here we see how the high levels of economic capital that are a pre-requisite to entering the collegiate system, and are unique to the Durham institutional sub-field, mean that for my participants the concerns of first-generation students in other universities are overshadowed by the more immanent costs of surviving their first year.

After receiving information about the actual costs, it was clear that experiencing financial hardship at Durham was an expectation for the majority of participants— both those who receive a bursary and those who do not. The participants all still chose to

attend Durham for reasons outlined in section 5.4.4 and expected to be able in some way to meet the cost of college accommodation, albeit often through a combination of financial strategies that were the last resort. However, for those without additional sources of money, meeting the college accommodation cost is likely unfeasible. We can therefore expect the combination of the institutional pressure for first year students to live in college, combined with the extremely high accommodation costs compared to other universities, means that it is likely that prospective students who cannot afford to live in college would just opt to go to a different university. In this instance, the importance of economic capital overrides academic capital as qualified applicants will have to enter a “slightly cheaper, slightly less good but slightly cheaper university” (Tony). Blaming this on anything but the excessively high costs amounts to symbolic violence “through which social class hierarchy is reproduced” (Schubert, 2012:185), as poorer students are pushed down into lower positions in the HE field hierarchy and as they seek an institutional field that requires less economic capital for entry.

### **5.4.2 Feeling Out of Place**

The second main expectation in participants’ accounts was that of feeling different to the rest of the student body. The nature of this varied between participants but stemmed from their perception of the typical student being young, wealthy, posh - “poshos, just high end, high class people” (Ewa) - from the south of the country, privately educated and classist in outlook. Tony, who grew up locally to the city, was aware of the dominant demographics before he applied: “there are more posh people than there are at a lot of other universities and that’s definitely something I had been aware of since I knew Durham was a thing.” Although Ewa was not aware of this stereotype herself which she attributes to “not being culturally educated all that much” as her parents are

from outside the UK and do not have the same knowledge of the British class system as others, she picked up this stereotype from pupils at her school:

*“People in my college would say “oh you’re off to Durham”, and I was like “yes why?”. “Well it’s just full of posh kids isn’t it?””*

Thus, these participants very much anticipated a field-habitus clash. As demonstrated, this was clearly articulated in terms of clashing with the habituses of other students. Although class differences are often not directly spoken about (Sayer, 2005), they are inescapable, with class membership conveyed by the practices the habitus gives rise to. In the UK where the class system is still “resilient, insidious and nuanced” (Blackman, 2017:14), research has found that assumptions are made about an individual’s class background on first impressions from their accent (Coupland and Bishop, 2007; Addison and Mountford, 2015, Donnelly et al., 2019) and self-presentation such as via clothing (Mountford, 2018). For my participants, entering the institutional field would not change these other students and make their characteristics less “posh” in nature, despite them having left their “high-end” background. This is unsurprising given that “one of the crucial features of habitus is that it is embodied” (Reay, 2004:432). As such, class is “beneath your clothes, under your skin, in your psyche, at the very core of your being” (Kuhn, 1985:98) and cannot be abandoned upon entry to a field, a fact that was clearly recognised by participants. What is notable, however, is that participants felt they would be in such a minority that this feeling of difference would characterise their time in the field. Thus, for these participants the institutional field of Durham was perceived to be structured by the habituses of these “posh kids”.

Yet, for Scarlett this was also channelled into the presentation of the university itself. She recalled receiving a welcome handbook from her college in the post, with her mother looking through this and finding the information funny “because there’s really weird names for stuff, like bops. It was like it was advertising a private school”. Interestingly, for Scarlett this did not translate into feeling daunted. Rather, her and her mother had laughed at it for being “uncool”. Scarlett was used to being around “middle-class kids” because her sixth form was in an affluent area in the south east and so this dismissal of the university’s potentially exclusionary marketing material as “uncool” could be a result of her being used to this sort of environment. For others without this experience, however, this sort of presentation by the university itself is likely to indicate that it is not just the traditional students’ habituses that are going to be different to theirs, but rather that the whole structure of the field will differ to what they are used to, as the institution itself has used symbols and rituals of private schooling to set what is ‘the norm’.

Moreover, for participants who had not experienced those ‘type’ of people they would meet at Durham whilst growing up, this perception of feeling different to other students in the institutional field translated into fear that they would be stigmatised due to their background. For Gwyn, her concerns were about the university being dominated by people from the south. She said “I got really scared, absolutely terrified, because I had the impression that people south of Manchester don’t want anything to do with you. And they’ll all be Conservatives.” She added, “I had to come to terms with talking to people and talking to people from the south. I grew up surrounded by

a lot of prejudice, like “people from the south don't want anything to do with us so why do you want anything to do with them?” and I was always told “don't tell them where you're from”, that was the first thing my parents said to me, “don't tell them where you're from or what we do””. This expectation of being treated with disdain is unsurprising given the long history of middle-class contempt of the working class (Skeggs and Loveday, 2012). To be middle class and to have the values and practices that are the product of the middle classes' habituses have long been seen as the norm, with the working classes treated in terms of deficit or lack (Lawler, 2014). This symbolic violence operating at a broader societal level was perceived by participants to take on an acute form in the narrow confines of the institutional field where they would have to deal with it on an inter-personal level.

These worries were exacerbated by media coverage about numerous instances of classism from Durham students, which participants took to confirm that their expectations were likely to be realities. Faye describes how her thoughts of the university “are split into two mind spaces of AS year and A2 year”. After her initial excitement at the thought of coming to the university and “falling love with Durham” in the summer school during her AS studies (first year of A Levels), she began having concerns at A2 level due to consistently negative media coverage of the university in national and student newspapers and on Durham student social media webpages:

*“When you're actually researching into it and seeing all, like, the Palatinate articles about stuff, the Telegraph articles about, like, classist stuff. When you're looking into, like, Durfess [Durham student Facebook page] and stuff*

*like that, and seeing, like, people writing stuff. And you're just there like, do I really want to apply here?"*

Similarly, Alice mentions reading articles that indicated that the university “would be full of posh twats” and “also everyone would have loads of money and would look down on people who didn't.” In the first focus group Ben and Rosie discussed viewing a Durham University student’s YouTube videos, who uses the channel to speak about her negative experiences at the university, stating in her most wide-reaching video, with 17,000 views, that “classism is rife” at Durham:

Rosie: there was a girl on YouTube and she vlogged about her negative experiences in Durham and I was so worried

Ben: yeah that’s what I saw

R: I firmed my place and then I saw that, and I was like “oh dear, maybe that wasn’t the best idea”

This vlogger’s page features many comments from prospective applicants asking for more detail on the subjects she discussed, indicating that this many other applicants, alongside Rosie and Ben, have viewed this content. The proliferation of this negative coverage, combined with these participants’ engagement with it, points to the negative image the Durham institutional field has acquired in the public eye.

### **5.4.3 Colleges as Facilitators of Inclusion**

Tony anticipated the collegiate system acting as an antidote to this. He described expecting that the formal aspects of the system – like dinners and the wearing of gowns – to be an inclusionary force. He said:



*“I was hoping [that formals] would be a really nice community thing and people would get together and we’d all have dinner together. It would be really nice, it would be great and we’d all be in our gowns and feel really special [...] I really thought they'd be a nice community thing, a nice thing that'll make me feel like I belong in my college”.*

His expectations echo that of the findings of Dacin et al.'s (2011) study of formal dining at a college within Cambridge University whereby “the repeated enactment of an elaborate performance” of dining rituals “makes participants feel “special” and “marks their experience as different from members of other universities” (p.21). As a consequence, participating in these performances that amount to “social drama” “masks any conflict that may be present under the surface”, as students feel united in their membership of something “special” (ibid.) Adopting a Bourdieusian analysis of this, we can see how these elaborate performances and rituals that provide the institutional sub-field with “distinction” are perceived by Tony to take on the form of a type of field-specific symbolic capital that would “feel really special” due to not occurring in any other field. He hoped that gaining this symbolic capital by uniting in these field-specific unique traditions with his fellow students would work against his overt class difference to bring a sense of commonality within the field. Dacin et al. find that in their Cambridge college, this does happen in practice – to the extent that the “ritual transforms the individual identities of participants” and commits them to the social order within colleges. However, my findings about how this plays out in reality differ markedly from both this existing study and Tony’s expectations, as shall be explored in section 5.5.4 and in the next chapter.

#### 5.4.4 Cost-Benefits

Ultimately, participants still chose to come to the University despite their concerns of lacking the requisite economic capital and fitting habitus. This was expressed in cost-benefit terms, with the high financial and symbolic costs in the immediate term seen to pay off in terms of graduate dividends in the longer term. After Tony expressed that he had always been expecting to feel surrounded by “posh” people at Durham, I asked him whether this factored into his decision-making at all, to which he replied:

*“No I was very firmly “no matter how posh they are, I’m not going to let them stop me going” [...] I was very consciously like “I’m not going to not go here because it’s full of posh people.””*

In contrast to Reay et al.’s (2010) study that found that participants’ learner identities were more of a factor in their experiences than social identities, these participants had great concerns over the latter despite also having “a strong sense of themselves as successful learners” (p.117). Baker and Brown (2007) suggest that for their participants seeking to follow a similar trajectory despite feeling a “gulf” between themselves and the students they met at open days and interviews, they were “writing their own biographies’ as individualised, de-traditionalised participants” (p.388). I would suggest that, in contrast, participants here were not “consciously, actively breaking away from their social backgrounds” (ibid.:388) but accepting that they would take this background with them “under the skin” (Kuhn, 1985) into the institutional sub-field and stand out. Yet they accepted this as a necessary part of entering an elite institutional sub-field, which was ultimately the only way they would accumulate the cultural and symbolic capital to provide them with a steady footing into a fulfilling career and financial security. This resonates with Harris et al.’s (2020)

findings that dominant government discourses “press student-borrowers to focus on their anticipated yield in the graduate job market rather than on other associated costs (e.g., the psychological burden of indebtedness) and benefits (e.g., the opportunity for personal growth and enlightenment)” (p.2). Here we see again how the neoliberal doxa that has cemented itself as the fundamental logic to British life works to ensure that non-traditional students see enduring an experience that is likely uncomfortable at best as the only way to improve their life in the future.

## **5.5 Realities**

This section outlines the reality in induction week for the participants, comparing it to their hopes for Durham being “the best”, for the collegiate system to provide a community feel, and the apprehensions about classist behaviour from fellow students. For the most part, their initial experiences in induction week confirmed what they had been expecting and, despite mentally preparing themselves for this, the extent to which they felt it still came as shock.

### **5.5.1 Shock on Day One**

Despite articulating clear expectations of feeling different to the rest of the student body, the extent to which they felt this still came as a shock to several of the participants, with nine of the fourteen describing the “shock of the elite” (Reay et al., 2009) in great detail. Elizabeth, who is in her late twenties and has two children, had anxieties primarily around her age and life-stage in comparison to other students in the lead-up to coming to Durham: “I thought it was going to be parties, let’s get drunk, let’s go to this - what are they called? Them balls”. On arrival at the University she was taken aback when she was confronted by the differences she perceived to exist between her and other students in terms of class background:

Elizabeth: I kind of felt like I didn't fit, like everyone was of a higher class than me. Because obviously I come from a working-class background. I just kind of felt hang on a minute, they're all above me

MW: what made you feel like that?

E: The way they spoke about things, the way they dressed, the way they approached university was completely different to me

This reference to the indirect but overt class differences in the form of bodily markers and self-presentation was echoed by many of the other participants. It was clear that the sense of elitism they perceived other students to embody came to characterise the whole city due to the sheer numbers of students with this elite habitus. For instance, Faye was taken aback by the fact that within the city it is possible to tell the difference between students and non-students due to the stark embodied class differences:

*“The thing I remember most was I went down to where Tesco Metro is, and it starts to look not as nice. And it was looking at the students and then looking at the locals and you can tell who's who and it was really weird, two worlds but in one place”.*

She went on to describe how she felt the differences in the lifestyles between her and other students all around her: “I was walking along the Bailey, walking past Hatfield, and it was like I remember seeing two homeless people beforehand in the city centre. And then walking past Hatfield where there had obviously been a party the night before and seeing like empty champagne bottles, really expensive champagne, in the gutter and just thinking, literally ten steps away, there's a homeless person. It's weird,

I don't experience it anywhere else, this clash.” The differences in students’ bodily markers and traditional students’ elitist displays and consumption were accompanied by overt references to their class and educational background, with where one had gone to school and parents’ occupations being topics of conversation that circulated during induction week. Faye described hearing everyone around her being from “Eton, Harrow” and almost all participants referred to being taken aback by finding out how many people in their colleges had gone to a private school.

This reference to Durham as a city being exceptional draws parallels to Reay et al.’s (2009) participants who described the city of their southern, elite university being “bubble”. For their participants, this “rarefied atmosphere” was articulated mostly in terms of other students’ academic dispositions – their “over performativity, arcane practices and slightly autistic behaviour” (p.1114) – yet here it was very much articulated in social and cultural terms. Participants had expected a gulf between participants’ own habitus and that of the majority of other students, but experienced an “out of field” experience (ibid.:1110) as they were taken aback by how it was the field as a whole that came to be characterised by the habituses of middle-class and privately educated students.

### **5.5.2 Feeling Inadequate**

Being surrounded by the elite habituses of other students to the extent that the institutional sub-field became an elite bubble in itself resulted in participants not only feeling different, but also feeling daunted. For Ben, meeting a certain “type of people” was “so intimidating” as he had “never spoken to that type of people before”. Gwyn’s fears were realised when she was one of three students from the north of the country

out of a corridor of fourteen. She spent the first week avoiding talking to people on her corridor for fear that they would make derogatory comments about her - that they were “going to say something” along the lines she had been warned about by her parents. Reay et al. (2009) find that their participants “compartmentalise the self” by refraining from talking about their university experiences at home. Here we see the reverse, with Gwyn being reluctant to join in with induction week activities for fear that her true self will emerge in discussions with students and make them discriminate against her for her background.

Participants tended to frame their differences in intelligence as well as class terms. Faye said she felt as though she “wasn’t good enough” to be at the university, as “everyone else seemed a lot more intelligent” than her. This feeling of intimidation or imposter syndrome and that everyone else was “above” them led Faye to briefly consider leaving: “I had a bit of a wobble for the first month [...] I remember phoning up my mum saying I wanted to drop out of uni”. Belle said she felt as though she had “never met so many smart people in my life” as she’s from a small town, filled with “mostly retired people”, whereas here she was meeting “all these people who had done all these things and these subjects.” This draws parallels with Reay et al. (2009)’s study that found most of their participants had crises of confidence upon entry to the field.

What is interesting here is how this compares to how they discussed their expectations. As outlined in the above sections, participants used reflexive language around class to describe the differences they expected to find between themselves and fellow students. However when it came to describing how they perceived these in reality, participants articulated this largely in terms of differences in intelligence. That participants were

able to recall their thoughts and use the language of class retrospectively, but upon experiencing it directly they felt it in terms of personal deficit, points to the ingrained nature of class and denigration of working-class people in the UK - class “circulates socially while being unnamed” (Lawler, 2008:126) and becomes euphemized into other terms, such as intelligence. These are then seen a “natural and absolute” (Bourdieu, 1993b:178) and individualise any differences (Addison and Mountford, 2015:140). That these participants felt reluctant to show their true selves in the institutional sub-field points to the real and harmful effect of the social class clustering in the HE field for non-traditional students who are the exception; the “bubble” of Durham becomes an arena where the societal discrimination of the working class becomes magnified.

### **5.5.3 Experiencing Direct Classism**

These indirect manifestations of class difference were accompanied by direct experiences of classism by traditional students. Again, this was articulated by them in terms of differences in attainment. Faye overheard a student saying, “oh I didn’t think I’d get into Durham because they give lower grade requirements for people who are local or poorer students”. This, combined with the stark visible differences she perceived to exist between her and the majority of students, led her to worry whether “do the posh students look at me and think she’s only here because there’s this thing of like oh the northern students are here because they’re local and they get priority?” In Gwyn’s first lecture she met a student who commented upon her northern accent, stating it was “weird”, and treated with her disdain because of it - “she looked me up and down, you could see it on her face as she tried to figure out how I’d got here”. The student asked Gwyn what grades she got at A Level and when Gwyn told an A, B and a D the student reacted by saying “how did you get into a university like this?”. That

was a low point for her, as she had been “warming up to people” and telling them about herself before feeling “woah, [I need to] take a step back!”

Warikoo (2016) found that students at Oxford University were committed to a colour blindness frame, favouring meritocratic and individualistic ideas about admissions policies and rejecting the idea of affirmative action to tackle ethnic inequalities in Oxford’s intake. As Maton (2012) points out, even those with fitting habituses “do not arrive in a field fully armed with God-like knowledge of the state of play” – “there is always a tension between individuals and the social environment in which they find themselves” (Grenfell, 2012:83). Here, traditional students are being confronted by those who they perceive to be different from them and who represent a challenge to these meritocratic ideals which have served them so well in enabling them to comfortably enter the elite sub-field - their vocal disdain at efforts to WP indicate they are feeling threatened by field outsiders and feel a sense of entitlement over field positions that were once their preserve. In the absence of being able to police the field boundaries themselves, they are resorting to making those who differ from them feel less worthy of field membership. Vocalising it (intentionally or not) means that non-traditional students feel like their feelings of anxiety and imposter syndrome are justified. Here we see how the competitive logic or doxa that structures the HE field means that traditional students are here seeking to assert their authority or legitimacy within the internal field.

#### **5.5.4 College Events**

In addition to the actions of individual students, the ethos of the university as a whole had a negative impact on participants. Although Chloe was looking forward to



wearing her gown for the matriculation ceremony, in reality she found it a “very daunting” moment. She recalled the university staff “saying this is a prestigious university, you should be very privileged you got here” and that the name of Durham was “thrown around”, and “meant to have this huge background”. She found this to be “intimidating”, as the implication for her from staff saying this was that if she did not understand something, she does not belong in the university. Here we see how the institution reinforces the doxa underpinning the status differences within the HE field – that to be in an institution belonging to the ‘elite’ sub-field carries distinction and that to be an eligible member of this field you must hold exceptional levels of academic capital. This, in combination with the examples above that demonstrate the visceral distaste of traditional students for students who seem to not fit with this prevalent doxa, means that students admitted with contextualised offers are positioned as being field outsiders even when within it. This will worsen any crises of confidence they have as a result of feeling out of place in class terms.

College events were another way in which the ethos of the university made participants feel excluded. Crozier et al. (2008) write that in their case-study institution, “the university’s college system creates the conditions for strong identification and commitment to both College and university” (p.173) and for Dacin et al. (2011) “the initial reaction of many of those unaccustomed to dining at Cambridge is one of astonishment and wonder” (p.20). However, despite the traditional aspects of formal dinners and gowns being a major ‘pull’ factor, the initial reaction of many of my participants was of discomfort and distaste. Tony, who was the one who articulated the most enthusiasm and excitement at the prospect of the formal dinners found the two he attended in induction week to be traumatic experiences and has never been to

one again. In contrast to his expectation that sharing in the ritual and symbolism of communal dining would foster community spirit, he described the formal atmosphere being characterised by “the distinct feeling of I don’t fit in here. I don’t like this”. For him, this disjuncture between himself and the other students was visually tangible in the form of dress. He said:

*“God formals, I hate formals. I was really, really excited to go to them. I’ve been to the two that you don’t have to pay for in freshers week that we had to go to and since then, nothing, absolutely nothing because they are so expensive. And the imposter syndrome is real because you get to those and, as I may have mentioned earlier, people are wearing suits that cost like more than rent should cost. Like, I stole this suit jacket from my dad [...] Like, I had to save and make a real decision when buying this shirt because I couldn’t have bought a second shirt if there was something wrong with this one. What the hell? Like, my shoes have so many holes.”*

Here it is evident that the sheer volume of economic capital that other students have - as displayed through expensive suits and “watches that cost as much you do” (Tony) - in comparison with his lack of, makes Tony feel worthless and different. This overrides any potential for “the fellowship of the common table” (Burt and Evans, 2016:79) to create inclusivity and formal dinners become an arena in which to display wealth. That there were two formal dinners in induction week alone indicates that his Hill college positions them as a key part of the student social calendar. For an event seen so intrinsic to college life to cause such feelings of worthlessness among students

indicates that there is a huge problem with the principles, or doxa, by which collegiate life is run.

Belle also attended her one and only formal dinner in induction week after a repelling experience. She said, “there were people around the same age as me serving me food and they were wearing white gloves and our head of catering was ordering them around and it really got to me [...] I felt so bad, I said to my flatmates “I don’t like being served, I’d rather go up and get my own food [...] this isn’t right, I don’t like this””.

Dacin et al (2011) describe that the ritual of formal dining “is designed to highlight the boundaries between [...] roles, and to display a particular hierarchy” (p.22), with staff marked out as different to students and fellows due to their lack of gowns. By referencing their “white gloves”, Belle articulates extreme discomfort over the clearly demarcated boundary between her and waiting staff. She describes confusion as to why she felt like this when other students in attendance did not and said, “I felt awful, I don’t know why, I think it’s just my personality”. Belle’s parents own a Bed and Breakfast where she worked part-time during school and returns to full-time in the university holidays. She is therefore used to doing the serving, rather than being served, and her “personality” - or habitus - clashes with the institution’s doxa of “privileging particular activities and roles over others” (Dacin et al., 2011:23).

Dacin et al. (2011) do find in their study that “some students, rather than being enthralled by their participation in rituals, consider college dining a traumatic experience, and attendance is endured rather than enjoyed” (p.26). However, they do not analyse this with the background of the student in mind – referring only once to students from “modest backgrounds”. Instead they report that privately and state

educated students' identities "tended to converge" as a result of sharing in the communal ritual of dining. My study that explicitly engages with the background of the students finds that these rituals actually do the opposite, with the way the institution is structured worsening participants' feelings of being out of place and less worthy of membership to this institutional field.

### **5.5.5 Finding Friends**

These initial feelings of difference, as gained through indirect and direct classed and elitist displays by traditional students and worsened and legitimised by the structure of the university itself, were either slightly eased or further exacerbated by the people around them in their colleges. In the photo interview - in which I had asked participants to bring along photos that highlighted a particular important moment in or helped to summarise their first year at the university - two participants showed me very similar photos which they had given similar names. Both photos showed themselves at their matriculation ceremony and they named them "Into the Abyss" (Hannah) and "Calm Before Storm" (Tony). These participants chose these names as they both felt that, with hindsight, they had not fully anticipated the experience they were about to embark on. For Hannah, who was pictured in the photo alongside her flatmates from her self-catered Hill college, this day was marked with "tentative optimism". This was her favourite of the photos she showed me, as it was with three friends that she is still close to now and she said it was "we balance each other out and it was how I imagined uni would be like before I came".

By contrast, Tony's photo was him by himself wearing a suit and gown. He wanted "to have a billion and one pictures in it" to send to his family who would feel proud at seeing him taking part in the university's traditions. Yet he chose to bring this photo as he believes it was the "defining point" of making him feel as though he does not belong in his college - "this was when I realised this isn't going to be as good as I wanted. I wanted so much for Durham, this isn't going to be it". He added that he would have also brought the whole year group college photo to the interview if he had purchased it:

*"If that doesn't depict the isolation then I don't know what does because I am at the back and the end and there was massive circle around me. Even in the group photo I'm somewhere on my own."*

From then things deteriorated quickly for him and by the end of the day he was questioning "why didn't I go to a normal university? A university with normal price tags and normal people".

It was notable that participants, like Hannah, who lived in self-catered colleges seemed to report smoother processes to feeling like they belonged. Belle and Chloe who are in the same college were surrounded by people with a "similar sort of upbringing, same morals" (Belle) or "same mindset" (Chloe). This unsurprising given the admissions data trends, as unpacked in chapter four, that show that these colleges consistently take more state school students and more students from low participation neighbourhoods than any other college. For participants in colleges where they were in more of a minority, there were still encounters or exchanges they had with other students that seemed to normalise the experience for them. Scarlett found the matriculation

ceremony “very private school” but made eye contact with someone across the room who was laughing at it as well. She realised she “was going to make friends here” as they both ridiculed the tradition together. Here Scarlett realised that not everyone subscribed to the doxa of distinction or elitism that characterises the institutional sub-field.

Another notable case was Gwyn. After initially panicking when people living close to her in her college tried to make conversation with her by saying “you don’t talk much. What do you do? What do your parents do?” as she thought “this is exactly what my parents told me not to say!”, the approachability of her corridor made Gwyn feel less intimidated and they supported her when she told them of the incident in her lecture: “I was very surprised they were open to finding a balance and it wasn’t just like “she’s poor, don’t talk to her””. Gwyn lives on a corridor with people who are mostly very different from her – “we’ve got a girl on our corridor who comes from a very nice lineage, lords and things like that, academics” - but their openness and kindness, rather than elitism, made her feel more comfortable with who she is and confident in her legitimacy of being a member of the institutional sub-field.

Gwyn’s friendship with these students with different habituses to her grew stronger over the year and demonstrate the positives that can occur from students from different backgrounds living, studying (and partying) together, and shall be explored more in the next chapter. However, her making friends with people so different to herself early on was the exception, with participants tending to feel out of place and lonely. The experiences of the participants mentioned above who found likeminded, “down to earth” (Scarlett) people were completely different and reported much happier and

fulfilling induction weeks. This points for the need for the university to admit more non-traditional students – the elitism embodied by students due to the sheer numbers of those coming from extremely privileged backgrounds, as well as the university itself in its structure and social calendar, directly and indirectly denigrates these students according to their background. More non-traditional students in the short term means that these students are more likely to find comfort and “balance” (Hannah) that help support themselves in feeling like legitimate members of the field. In the long term it would mean that the elitism, which non-traditional students need support from each other to counteract, would start to be chipped away.

## **5.6 Summary**

This chapter has provided insight into the choice-making processes of the non-traditional participants at Durham University. Their relatively high levels of academic capital in the form of grades, and a commitment to pursuing a future that was different to that of their parents, enabled them to contemplate it as an option, although this was often late on in their secondary school career and followed a “turning point” (such as attending a summer school intervention) that made them think it was realistic rather than a “dream”. It was argued that their reasons for coming to the university centred on the perception of it being one of the best universities within the Russell Group, which they had come to believe due to its league table positioning and more symbolic indicators such as the collegiate system that they equated with prestige and high quality.

Students had many doubts about coming to the institution – primarily in terms of the high cost of accommodation and worries that they would feel like an outsider in the “posh” student body. However, their firm beliefs that a degree from this HEI would

provide them with the credentials to be socially mobile upon graduation overrode these concerns and they described them as being “worth it” in terms of benefits later on in life. On the other hand, students perceived the collegiate system to be a positive, inclusionary force that would make them feel at home within the institution. However, I then argued that their initial experiences upon entering the university – in terms of feeling like an outsider - confirmed their concerns and elevated them to the extent that some had “crisis points” of contemplating leaving the institution. Those who found students they perceived to be like themselves were much more positive at this stage in the university journey. As a whole, this chapter shows that even for students who excel academically in difficult schooling environments, are extremely motivated, and mentally prepared to deal with being surrounded by people who they have never encountered before, their entry to field of Durham University is characterised by difficulty and doubt. It demonstrates in concrete terms how vital it is to increase the number of non-traditional students at the university. The next chapter explores how these initial experiences compare to the rest of the students’ first years within the field.



## Chapter Six: First-Year Experiences

### 6.1 Introduction

In this final empirical chapter I use data collected from the photo elicitation interviews (longitudinal interview 2) and the final semi-structured interviews (interview 3) with the repeat sample of participants, along with data from the one-off interviews with the smaller sample to continue to answer the final three research questions:

1. Whose habituses structure the institutional sub-field of Durham University? What implications does this have for students' positions within the field and their experiences?
2. To what extent can first in family students with working class and/or non-traditional student habituses engage in the institutional sub-field?
3. What processes and practices sustain the continuity of the field from year to year, across staff and student cohorts?

This chapter focuses on participants' experiences throughout their first year. It looks at how these compare to the initial induction week realities to highlight the ways in which the university facilitated greater inclusion as the year progressed or exacerbated the initial problems to a more intense level. There were some limitations in using photo-based interviewing techniques, which are outlined in greater depth in chapter three, but can be effectively summarised as favouring positive aspects of participants' university lives. However, moments captured in photographs acted as case studies for the participants to recount their experiences and feelings in an in-depth manner, and encouraged them to draw parallels or contrasts with other situations that were not featured in the photograph they had brought along with them. By asking the participants what was absent from the collection of photographs they had chosen to bring along, I encouraged participants to critically reflect on the range of emotions and

experiences they had encountered and provoked interesting discussions related to changes to their identities. Thus, by focusing on the minutiae of participants' social lives, these photos - when combined with prompting interview techniques - opened the door to discussions that were as specific and detailed as they were wide-ranging. In so doing, this method worked well in comprehensively capturing the social and cultural lives of participants in their first year of university.

## **6.2 Feeling Out of Place**

The narratives outlined in section 5.5 of the previous chapter – that of participants' perceiving themselves to be different to the rest of the student body – that were articulated in terms of induction week specifically continued past their first few weeks at the University to characterise the whole of their first year. What differed to the accounts in the focus groups and first interviews was that, after the initial shock and the feelings of inadequacy – both academic and social - that this caused, these differences were often articulated by participants as being a positive in that they were meeting people and making friends from different backgrounds that they were used to. This section explores how these feelings of difference played out and the consequences it had for participants' feelings of legitimacy as members of the institutional sub-field across the year.

### **6.2.1 Visibility of Other Students' Wealth**

Across interviews 2 and 3, participants continued to describe the notable difference in the economic capital held by other students and themselves within the social field of the University. Participants referenced perceiving these overt differences through symbolic indicators across multiple levels within the institution: across the wider university campus, within lecture halls and within colleges. Hannah described how

when her friend from school came to visit her at Durham, she was taken aback by the luxury goods (“Louis Vuitton coats and Balenciaga bags”) that other students wear casually around campus. Although such designer items did not amount to becoming the “student uniform” that Mountford (2018) finds with the “expensive branded goods and leisure wear coupled with a messy and unkempt appearance” (p.141), it was clear that this was compounded by differences in other possessions. For instance, in her second interview, Scarlett referenced the “stereotype” of Durham students that she and the other participants in her focus group described as being “posh”, middle-class students from the south. She said that her experience so far confirmed that “the majority [of students] do fit the stereotype”, a statement which she supported by referencing “the number of macbooks in a lecture”. Participants’ narratives therefore echoed that of Aries and Seider’s (2005) findings that wealthy students display their high levels of economic capital in multiple ways: through “their electronic equipment, dorm furnishings, designer clothes, expensive cars, and in the money they spent on possessions, meals off campus at expensive restaurants, and vacations” (p.425).

What is new here is that although Hannah and Scarlett have referenced the wider university campus and the view of a lecture hall here, participants mainly spoke of the colleges as the place in which differences between their own and their peers’ backgrounds became most obvious. It was clear that living, eating and socialising together outside of the learning environment meant that the less overt differences in economic and cultural capital came through in more nuanced ways than the displays of luxury goods alone. Ewa was quoted above saying she felt “a little bit judged, just because I’m from a different background.” She described that this happened through every day practices and conversations that involve a “passing comment” over dinner:

*“As I say, it’s only little things, it’s not massive things. But sometimes we get onto private school, grammar school kind of talk. Everyone’s like oh but grammar school isn’t even that like posh. It’s like right okay well you tell me that in your southern accent. It was never an opportunity for me. My parents didn’t know what a grammar school is. They just shoved me in a state school, like you’ll cope. So yes, when they say they’ve been deprived because they haven’t been to a private school, it’s like [my home town in Yorkshire] is probably rated the worst, you can’t say anything.”*

As students “carry social structures” (Power et al., 1999:48-49) of their background with them into this new social field, we see how differences in habitus become apparent in micro-interactions in collegiate life. The role of the college dining halls and eating together in acting as a site for wealth differences to play out is also evident in the fact that participants within the self-catered Hill colleges articulated a greater sense of feeling ‘in’ place. Beyond wealth indicators that Belle picked up from being “observant”, she said that these students “don’t make it known” that they are from a wealthier background. Belle, along with Chloe who is also in a self-catered Hill college, socialise mainly with their flats who they perceive – as described in the previous chapter – to be from backgrounds similar to theirs. The lack of wider social space in the form of the dining hall means that they do not come into close contact from as great a diversity of students than those in catered colleges.

After participants had outlined these differences that occur over the dining table, I asked them whether these sort of instances occurred within their departments too. Ewa

explained that in contrast to her college, she felt that in her Science department she felt it “not so much”. She explained, “[the] department don’t know anything about me really. They’re not very personalised” - it was over dinner in her Bailey that “the little things” would come to be noticeable. As I outlined in chapter four, the collegiate system means that it is the colleges that primarily act as students’ social arenas over and above departments. It was clear from participants’ accounts that this means that in some departments there is often a lack of community feel with the emphasis being on “you turn up, do your lectures, do the exams, get out of the way” (Tony).

On the one hand, this means that there is little opportunity for students to interact on a level whereby differences in lifestyles and habituses become apparent and for them to feel out of place. However, on the other, participants who described a lack of community within their departments also described wanting this to change. For Tony, “it would be nice to have a clearer department community and to kind of know other people in the department”. There were notable differences in some departments. Alice, who is an Arts and Humanities student said that it is “a good place to be” and felt a real sense of community among the students there. Elizabeth, who lives out of college, and whose interviews narratives focused on the academic side of the university, spoke of feeling “dead comfortable” in her Social Science seminars. This was despite the fact that she initially felt that everyone was of a “higher class” and that they were “above” her. Joe described his Science department as having a very active student community. An exception to this greater sense of commonality with students in departments – or at least a lack of stark difference – was that of Elizabeth who described feeling different in terms of age. She feels “like the old woman in the corner” due to the lack of other mature students. However, this does not stop her from interacting from her

fellow students and enjoying seminars. There was no clear pattern in terms of faculties within which departments foster a greater community spirit than others, or in terms of the size of the department. The common theme seemed to be that it was arenas in which the dining table is absent – the self-catered Hill colleges and the departments – that participants felt more ‘in’ place.

These points, when taken together, indicate that it is the role of the supposed “common table” (Burt and Evans, 2016) that can accentuate already pronounced feelings of difference. As I stated in the previous chapter, Dacin et al. (2011) find that formal dinners within a Cambridge college instil hierarchy between students and staff, which my participants reported being uncomfortable with in the formal dinners they attended during induction week. Here it is found that communal eating in the college dining halls on an *everyday* basis also create visible differences among institutional members - and these being within the student body itself. Again, this contrasts the studies of Reay and colleagues (2009; 2010) who found that for students at an elite, collegiate university the main difference their participants felt in the student body was in terms of academic differences, rather than cultural or social. However, participants Alice and Joe reported a feeling of being at home and a lack of judgement from other students, despite also being within catered (Hill) colleges. For Joe, the main difference he feels in his college is that his fellow students all seem to play sports at an elite level – he is surrounded by “6ft5 rugby guys”. Although the ability to play elite sports is often due to a history of private schooling (Sutton Trust and Social Mobility Commission, 2019), he did not articulate perceiving these difference to be in terms of class; it was the physical differences alone that he described. Alice described her college lacking any sense of division or cliques. Importantly, both of these colleges – when looking at the

demographics of the student body – are much more diverse in their memberships and explains as to why eating with fellow peers does not result in feeling out of place. This indicates that it is not the structure of the catered colleges *per se* that is the problem. Rather, it is when combined with the skewed demographics that students with less economic and cultural capital feel like they are in the extreme minority.

However, as the year went on participants in all the colleges grew accustomed to experiencing these differences on a daily basis, with it becoming “now normal” (Ben) or at least they described them as “faz[ing] me less” (Faye). For Bourdieu, social fields are arenas “in which agents produce practices, compete with one another and develop social capacities” (Rawolle and Lingard, 2008:732). The *development* of social capacities is due to the fact that, as Bourdieu (2000) wrote, “habitus changes constantly in response to new experiences” (p.161). Here, we see that for these participants, their habituses are acclimatising to the new environment as they are developing “degrees of integration” (ibid.:160) into the social field and are becoming used to being surrounded by high levels of economic capital. This contrasts with studies of working-class students who live out of student accommodation who are only “partially confronted” by the social field of the University as they “distance” themselves from the “student experience” (Abrahams and Ingram, 2013:8), although it is similar to working-class students at a non-collegiate university who lived in halls of residence who were “much more integrated into the life of the university” (Reay et al., 2010:112). It seems this acclimatisation into the new social field was brought about in part by the strong “social guidance” that underpins collegiate living (Reay et al., 2010:112).

### **6.2.2 Positive Framing of Meeting Students from Different Backgrounds**

This full integration into the social field of the University was viewed optimistically by many participants, who, despite feeling different and sensing the wealth of the students around them, framed it in more positive terms as the year progressed. Joe referenced his fellow students being “really, really interesting” due to the range of backgrounds and nationalities that are represented in the student body. Participants seemed to articulate this in the sense of the University acting as a microcosm of wider society. For instance, Scarlett said the University is “diverse in some ways”, referencing the range of nationalities among her student peers. Belle described “people have done all these different things and doing all these subjects that I’ve never even heard of. So I think that’s really cool as well. And everyone’s from different places, it’s crazy. Again from my little town it’s mostly white, working-class people so to meet so many different people and so many people from all over the world I think that’s really cool as well”. Although the University’s student intake is overwhelmingly skewed in favour of middle-class students and the privately educated, due to coming from communities and schools where people from these backgrounds were absent, participants viewed the University as “diverse” in terms of it providing them with opportunity to engage with people different to themselves.

Alice described how she tried to find common ground with these fellow students on lines beyond class - “there’s always at least one element of their life that I can definitely relate to. So some of them it’s they come from a big family and I have three younger sisters, so I talk to them about that kind of thing. Or they are from a working-class background or something like that. Or even just their political views or just general social views”. This resonates with Byrom and Lightfoot’s (2012) findings that



their working-class participants tried “to find some ways in which to establish a fit with the institution” (p.132), and is an example of an individual “coping strategy” that non-traditional students employ to deal with the difficulties of being surrounded by people different to them in the new social field (Pásztor, 2014). It is clear that, although anticipating to feel out of place and expecting to experience classism as outlined in chapter 5, the participants were prepared to deal with this and willing and excited to be involved with the “diverse” student body despite it. This is perhaps unsurprising to some degree – as Baker and Brown (2007) point out, that these students have chosen to enter the elite sub-field in the first place indicates that “they have developed a habitus allowing them to move into social enclaves that were very different to their experience as children” (p.390). As I quoted in chapter one, Christie et al. (2005) argue that historically any difficulties non-traditional students face in integrating within the HE field has been “ascribed to the students themselves” as field outsiders, they are open to embracing a new life in this social field - they have entered the university field in good faith, with open minds, ready to approach the diversity of students and to be included.

As the year and interviews progressed, it became clear that for the vast majority of participants the friendships they had established in induction week grew in strength (again, participants spoke about friendships forming in the living environment of the college over and above the department). All besides one participant – Tony – showed me at least one photograph in interview 2 of themselves with a couple or, more often, several friends. These were taken in numerous different settings, ranging from college events at the beginning of the year, such as matriculation, to more recent “bops” and parties in college, to having drinks or lunch in bars and cafes in Durham city. I asked

participants to choose their favourite photos of the ones they brought to show me and all, besides Ben, Holly and Tony, chose one of these photos that depicted them with their close group of friends. When asked to justify their selection of favourite, they all referenced the fact that the photo “makes [them] happy to look at” (Belle) as it reminds them of enjoyable times they have had with the people they “love” (Gwyn) or “care about” (Joe). The cases of the three exceptions to this shall be unpacked throughout this chapter but it is notable that they differ greatly to the rest of the participants in the fact that Ben chose to leave the university after term 2, as stated in chapter five Holly was not anxious about fitting in or making friends before arriving at the university, and Tony felt a “palpable isolation” in his college. The rest of participants reported having a group of friends that they were extremely close to.

In fact, several participants stated that they had a closer friendship group in which they felt firmly a part of at the University than they had done prior to coming. Both Joe and Chloe referenced the fact that they had found it easier to make friends upon entry to the University than they had at school, with them attributing this to the fact that all students “are in the same boat” (Joe) during induction week and are open and accepting to finding new friends. When I asked her what the set of photos she had chosen to bring to interview 2 said about her time at the University, Chloe said that her home friends and parents would be “slightly surprised that there was such an element of new people”, as it was something she was “scared of” and did not previously “deal very well with”. However, among her new friends in her college she felt “that’s a part of who I am, who I fit into”. Similarly, in response to this question, Belle said she is “a lot happier now” (in contrast to her last couple of years at school) due to the friends she has made.

The change was the most notable for Gwyn, who had felt isolated in her home town growing up and lacked friends of her own age. In response to the same question, she said that the photos demonstrated the fact that her friends have become the most important thing to her in life, when previously she would have said “something along the lines of money, something material”. This change – despite the fact that she considered herself “just as [materially] deprived” - is due to the fact that “Durham University has given me the pathway to me. Without the University, I wouldn’t have the opportunity to have social aspects of my life, to be excited about things”. This echoes Reay et al.’s (2009) findings that a participant reported “Southern has liberated me”, and their wider findings that the University offered “comforts of academic acceptance and compliance in contrast to their secondary schools where a majority of the working-class students had been mocked for working hard” (p.1115).

For some, these friendship groups were formed with people from backgrounds like themselves, with whom they had articulated bonding with in induction week. Rosie describes how she advised her school friends that are coming to the University next year who were worried about how they would find it “because they’re not from wealthy families” that “you’ll find friends, you kind of migrate towards people who are your cup of tea”. However, like Aries and Seider (2005) who found that “friendships did develop across class lines” (p.430), for the majority, their friendship groups grew to contain at least a couple of traditional students from backgrounds very different to their own. Rosie went on to add “and if you don’t, there are a couple in my group who are a bit more well-off and that’s fine”. Gwyn, as described in the previous chapter, articulated the most apprehension in terms of being judged due to her class

both prior to university and during induction week. In the first interview she stated that she was starting to feel more comfortable and confident in being herself around the other students on her corridor. These friendships, with students who are largely very different to herself, continued to grow over the year. By interview 2, she said:

*“You’re living with lords and ladies and you’re seeing people whose parents own multi-million dollar businesses abroad. And on the flipside, yes, you are meeting these people, how cool are they?”*

As a reminder, for Baker and Brown (2007), their participants who were preparing to enter in the new social field of a traditional university were acting as “individualised, de-traditionalised participants” and changing their “social class in the head” (p.388). Previous research has highlighted the fact that having a group of friends from very different backgrounds throughout a degree programme can lead to non-traditional students to seek to temporarily leave behind their working-class habituses as they assimilate into the new middle-class social field (Kaufman, 2003; Abrahams and Ingram, 2013). It was evident here that participants were opening themselves up to new experiences in new social fields. As an example, Ben described how he was going to visit one of his college friends at his home in London and to visit Twickenham stadium – a brand new experience given that “I’ve hardly ever been to London and again that’s new like experiencing his world, because I don’t really watch rugby so just experiencing something a bit different”. Abrahams and Ingram (2013) find that this embracing of life in the new field of the university led to participants describing changes in their identities as they became closer to those with higher levels of cultural and economic capital. Indeed, many of my participants did talk about either their self-

perception or the thoughts of their family in terms of how they had changed. Gwyn returned home at Christmas and her mother referred to her as “now muddle class” due to the fact that she “used to be bottom of the ladder” but is now “mixing with people at the top”. Belle reflected on the fact that she felt she had become more confident in expressing opinions and contributing to discussions when she goes back home.

It has been proposed that immersing in a new social field can lead to abandonment or “disassociation” of the former field “out of necessity, to overcome the habitus tug of the competing fields” (Abrahams and Ingram, 2013:6). However, it was clear that for my participants, this immersion in the university social field and any changes to their character that it brought was accompanied by a strong commitment to their home field. Ben went on to add that this friend has attended football matches to his team in his home town and he, along with the other participants, was aligned with the case of Reay et al. (2009) who found that distancing from previous circles was “rarely the case”, instead retaining a “strong connection” to those they “care[d] about from back home” (p.1105). Abrahams and Ingram (2013) go on to argue that immersing themselves in the social field of the university at the same time as retaining a connection to their local social field can lead participants to lead “two lives”, as they strive to keep their very different environments of home and university separate for fear of incompatibility. They argue that this can lead to a “dialectical confrontation” or “cleft habitus” whereby an actor is “doomed” to “a double perception of the self” (Bourdieu, 1995:511 cited in *ibid.*). Yet here, my participants actively sought to merge these two worlds and invited their friends from home to visit or vice versa. Ben went on to expand:

*“I have one really good [university] friend who is now going on holiday with me and my home friends. It’s just nice that he’s now part of that friendship group and can hang around them without me being there. That integration’s there. I think you worry you go to university and you’ll lose all your friends from home or you’ll have two separate groups. And I think a lot of people are anxious about integrating those groups because they’re different sorts of people. My friends do like plumbing and engineering and it’s very different to my friend that does liberal arts here, you know what I mean? But they can still get on and stuff and I don’t want to keep those groups separate and be like a different person in different environments.”*

As with Reay’s (2009) findings that participants’ accounts “were filled with descriptions of visits from family and friends” (p.1111), this narrative of home and university friends “getting on” was common among participants, and for some these friendship groups at home fitted well with, or slotted into, their group at University. This is articulated by Chloe when describing a photo she had brought to interview 2 which depicted her college flatmate and her friend from home in a nightclub in Durham city:

MW: How were you feeling when this photo was taken?

Chloe: My heart was full, having all the people who mean so much to me together was really nice. This weekend I’m going home and my friends from here are coming with me because they’re from slightly further away, so they can’t go home. You get a bit run down when you’re here all the time. They all want to come and see [my home town], because it is a really nice city. So I was

like, just come, so I'm going to have them all together again. It's nice that I can have these two worlds, parts of life come together.

MW: If you could give this one a title, what would you say?

C: Two worlds colliding, just two sides of life

Similarly, Hannah called her choice of a photo of her friend from school in a restaurant in Durham city "Collision: Old And New". She described it this friend's visit as a "seamless transition", as "nothing had changed".

Therefore, although entering the HE field may lead some working-class and non-traditional students to engage in a "constant fashioning and re-fashioning of the self" (Reay et al., 2009; 2010), it was clear for my participants that there is "no 'denial' of their origins" (Baker and Brown, 2007:390) and "their habituses still appear to retain key valued aspects of working-class self" (Reay et al., 2009:1111). Bourdieu (1990) wrote that "habitus can, in certain instances, be built if one may say so, on contradictions, upon tensions, even upon instability" (p.116) and here we see how these contradictions within the habitus, as a result of straddling two very different social fields, need not be entirely problematic. These accounts of close friendships made with a range of students – from similar backgrounds and from very different – along with the participants' openness to having their school/home friends to visit them at the University, indicates that despite participants experiencing the "shock of the elite" (Reay et al., 2009) and experiencing classist remarks in induction week, the majority of their fellow students, both traditional and non-traditional, are not the

problem. Differences in economic capital between students in the institutional sub-field can be overcome with positive consequences for all students as a result.

### **6.2.3 Persistent Classism**

However, it is interesting to note that when I asked Ben how his friends from home found their visit to Durham, he said “I chose the right ones to come because I knew that they’d be okay with it and think it was really cool”. Ben’s description of “choosing” the right friends to come and visit is telling. That he had to handpick his home friends that he felt would cope best with Durham life indicates that the two worlds are miles away from being wholly compatible – Durham University, although he felt he had “adjusted to it” and felt “its normal now” by interview 2, remains “pretty crazy” from the view of field outsiders. Despite slowly acclimatising to the field, then, the institutional sub-field of the University continued to represent “an elite middle-class bubble rather than what they termed the ‘real’ or ‘ordinary’ world” (Reay et al., 2009:1111). These interesting nuances in the participants’ accounts were present in all interviews, despite many of them being largely positive. As I stated in chapter two, “boundedness” is a key attribute of a Bourdieusian social field. Participants were clearly reflexive and critical about this and, despite being open to immersing themselves within the institutional sub-field, they continued to recognise the limitations of it as a “rarefied” social space in comparison to the real world (ibid.).

All – besides Holly – still experienced uncomfortable situations with fellow students that were specific to being at the University in terms of meeting a small section of traditional students who were, at best, ignorant and, more accurately, out-rightly classist and discriminatory. These encounters, again, tended to happen within the arena



of the college. Faye described how she witnesses middle-class students talking about working-class culture as novel:

*“There’s this one music genre. It’s a techno sub-genre. And I remember sitting at lunch and hearing like a bunch of private school girls, like giggling as they were listening to this music. They were like “it’s so chavvy” and stuff like that. And I remember when my uncle died two years ago, at the wake that was the music that was played”.*

Here we see how, despite being open to and accepting of differences between themselves and their peers, there were still moments where “the environment with which they are actually confronted is too distant from that in which they are objectively fitted” (Bourdieu, 1977:78).

These hysteresis moments often revolved around differences in accents or regional phrasing. Donnelly and Gamsu (2020a) state that Durham University is “a continuation of the ‘bubble’ of West London [...] with students from similar schools also attending the university” (p.13). It was clear that these southern – or “northern [students] who aren’t very northern” (Ewa) – who dominate the university often treated participants with regional accents with disdain. Ewa said “they’re like, we live in the north, but they’re actually brought up as if they were in the south. So sometimes, the things I say or the ways I say it, they’re just kind of like “sorry, what? What did you just say?” And I’m just being myself”. Rosie, who is from a village in the north west, was informed by a student in her Bailey college that he “hates the scouse accent”. Despite her telling him she is not from Liverpool, he told her “your accent, you’re

definitely from Liverpool”. Rosie’s friends from school who were joining Durham the following year expressed to her their concerns about being “picked on” because of their accent, which she had to confirm to them as being what happens in reality.

That these encounters revolving around accents continued past induction week indicates that they were not one-off encounters in which traditional students were getting used to being surrounded by those different to them. Donnelly et al. (2019) point out that the distinction between “RP” and “regional phrasing” is not helpful, given the wide linguistic variations within these. Yet evidently, some southern students continue to see their phrasing and view of the world as the correct one; anyone who does not fit it is treated with disdain or pigeonholed into a category, with whether it is correct or not being irrelevant. Accent therefore operates as a form of social capital within the institutional sub-field of Durham, the functioning of which is underpinned by the overwhelming dominance of south eastern students – or those who sound and “have been brought up as if they were” – across the University and the marginalisation of anyone else. The institutional sub-field is far from being a microcosm of society when students with regional accents are singled out for being different.

There were also select reported instances of more malicious classism. Faye had had a “heart to heart” with a highly privileged student who was known for having “extreme” views, but she still was open to speaking to him, about her father being homeless for a period of his life. After proudly announcing he had spent £120 on champagne at a ball the night before, he continued to make an “off-colour” joke about people facing homelessness. In dealing with both forms of classism, participants reported trying to

“brush it off as banter” (Rosie) in order to deal with these types of comments that persisted throughout their first year. Faye said:

*“I know you’re doing it to wind me up. But at what point is it just to wind me up or at what point is it malicious? Or at what point is it what they think is banter but is actually really harmful [...] and then when you call it out, at what point will people turn on you for not being able to take a joke? And it’s so tiring and every time I ignore stuff I just think about my parents back home and I feel kind of like I’m betraying them for laughing along with the joke. But it’s just, you know, self-care.”*

This reference to traditional students describing their problematic and hurtful remarks as “banter” resonates with Pásztor’s (2014) findings that non-traditional students in a Dutch University described racist comments from other students as “jokes” (para 4.15). It means that other students’ feelings of hurt or upset caused by them is seen as the fault of the recipient for not being able to see the “funny” side. Although my participants seemed to be more reflexive than Reay et al.’s (2010) students at Southern who “often approached the subject of social class apologetically” (p.113), that they were having to outwardly appear to brush these comments off in order to survive their time in the institutional sub-field indicates that their minority status against the perpetrators of these remarks means they can never confidently challenge them.

Laughing along with these “jokes” was a way to deal with classism socially without rendering themselves as even more of a field outsider. In terms of how they dealt with these instances – and more generally feeling out of place as in section 6.2 - mentally,

participants reported internally justifying their own being at the university alongside everyone else's in terms of them having achieved the same grades at school and therefore were able to remain confident that they were worthy of being a member of the university. Rosie said, "at the end of the day I just said to myself, we've got the same grades to be here. Like if anything it's taken me more because mummy and daddy paid for you to go to private school for years, which there's nothing wrong with, but we've still got the same grades. So I think it doesn't really bother me." Similarly, Chloe reported reading a discriminatory post about state schools on a Durham University student social media webpage (DURFESS). She found the post and read it aloud to me – it had said "one of my favourite things to do is look up people from my course and see what school they went to and how much it cost. Love seeing that my primary school cost more per term than most people's secondary schools". When I asked her how she felt when she read the post, she said "it bothers me that that's certain people's opinions, but it doesn't bother me in the sense that it doesn't offend me because I feel like if that's your opinion and we've still got to the same [university] then clearly..." [she shrugged]. In fact, as one of her words to describe her time at the university in interview 3 Ewa chose "rewarding", and explained that she felt proud of the fact that she is at the University: "coming from a state school as a foreigner. My parents didn't help me [...] so being here, fifth, sixth best uni in the UK, I find it quite rewarding to be fair."

Aries and Seider (2005)'s participants reported being "intimidated by the wealthy students, especially those who had attended prep schools" (p.428). As outlined in chapter five, this was clearly the case during in induction week for my participants, but these narratives quoted above differed greatly to the anxiety and feelings of

inadequacy they had articulated in the first interview. As I outlined in the previous chapter, participants had developed “positive learner identities” (Reay et al., 2009:1112) whilst at school, and were clearly highly resilient and experienced at employing “productive resources” to excel against the odds throughout their pre-university education (ibid.:1107). This resilience seemed to develop throughout the year, as they became more confident in their abilities and grew to believe in their right to be at the institution. Therefore, as the year went on they were able to look upon wealthy students who made discriminatory remarks with disdain rather than intimidation. The meritocratic doxa that I argued in chapter two structures the HE field as a whole in terms of access, and in chapter five underpins some traditional students’ repulsion at the idea of contextualised offers, is clearly ingrained and widespread to the extent that participants framed their self-justification in these terms. Paradoxically, this doxa has the effect of creating the problem of discrimination in the first instance, as some traditional students equate social and cultural capital markers (accent, qualification) with legitimacy of field membership and enact practices that make this view clear to others. Yet the meritocratic doxa also means that school-level qualifications are a supposed concrete form of “evidence” that non-traditional students can employ to legitimise their positions within the field.

That participants are having to undertake significant mental work to internally justify their belonging at the university along these lines highlights the profound levels of discrimination that can characterise a non-traditional student’s time within the institutional sub-field. Moreover, this justification was absent from the accounts of students who had received a contextualised offer. As I reported in the previous chapter, numerous comments were heard by these participants from other students about how

they were angry and worried that they would not get their rightful offer from the university as it was giving out contextualised offers to “local or poorer” students. These comments and practices that underpin the meritocratic and competitive doxa made these participants feel a greater sense of imposter syndrome due to supposed academic inadequacy. As I outlined in 2.4.3, existing research had already highlighted that first-in-family students *can* initially struggle with the pace of teaching and level of exams and coursework at university due to possessing less academic and cultural capital (Read et al., 2003), although this does not translate into lower degree classifications overall. This research finds that my participants did not experience these early-on academic struggles, as I go on to outline in section 6.6.1. However, here I have demonstrated that students with less academic capital struggle in social terms as they are equated by others as being less worthy occupants of the institutional sub-field. Thus, within the hierarchical structure of the university field those with high levels of cultural, linguistic and academic capital are positioned above those with less, the maintenance of which is in part sustained by the actions of a select number of individual students who are used to perceiving themselves as above those of a different class, and – importantly - have safety in numbers from being within the class-based majority to act upon this. Ultimately, the concentration of the types of people who advocate these views within the institutional sub-field renders participants and students like them as field outsiders within the elite university.

#### **6.2.4 Other Non-traditional Students as Support Systems**

For both the participants who could mentally justify their being at the university on academic grounds and those who could not, the most important resource for them in dealing with visible differences in economic capital and hurtful classist remarks and behaviour was that of students they perceived to be like themselves in terms of shared

background or similar financial situations. Pásztor (2014) points out that because non-traditional students are unlikely to be able to seek “tangible advice or support” from their families due to their lack of direct experience in the HE field, university friends become the most vital pillars of support in dealing with any difficulties they face (para 4.16). I stated in the previous chapter that it was the presence of students from similar backgrounds that was comforting for participants in induction week. It was clear that, despite many having mixed friendship groups, these similar students remained the most helpful in supporting them in providing understanding, empathy and making participants feel as though they were not the only ones in the boat throughout the year as a whole. Ewa described how, despite experiencing subtle judgemental comments from others in her college, her roommate was able to understand:

*“We are literally on the same wavelength. We are both from working-class families, we’re not struggling for money, but we have to earn it. We have to have our arses in gear to be here.”*

Aries and Seider (2005) found that some of their participants felt excluded from their friendship group as they “could not afford to company their friends on trips abroad for spring breaks, or to go to dinners at high-priced restaurants” (p.428). However, here, participants who were living in colleges near people they perceived to be like themselves described rich and fun social lives that often took place outside of the formal college social structure (that is explored in greater depth in section 6.3). For instance, Joe and his flatmates have homemade film nights and Scarlett described how her friendship group pools together money to cover the cost of a meal in a restaurant if one of the group cannot afford it at any one time. The participants who lacked this

– Ben and Tony – had extremely different experiences. Ben, who worked a minimum of twelve hours a week in a Durham city bar in term time, felt like “nobody else works, nobody else can understand”. Ben said in his second interview that there were “times last term that I didn't want to come to uni” because of “the type of people I meet here.” However, by this point – in reference to a photo he had brought along depicting him and a group of college friends in the library together – he said that “I've found people who I can actually relate to, make things a little more comfortable for me [...] especially coming from the background I've come from, it's harder, I'm not adjusted to this kind of education, the type of people I meet here”.

Tony continued to lack a close friendship group within his college who could understand his situation:

*“I really feel isolated in college. There have been so many times where I have felt a real, palpable loneliness which comes in a large part from the room that I've been assigned because it's a really good college if you're a certain type of person. If you're not that type of person then I mean hell on earth seems an apt description. If as a working-class student you can't afford to be in that sort of scene then you don't really get to engage with college life. That was really true in freshers in particular because that's the point where you have to do your initial cling to some people to form some social bonds. And if you can't afford to go drinking or go to any of the 'dos' or anything, you don't get that, and so since then I've felt like I've been stuck in this vicious cycle of not really having any kind of social group in college, not being able to get one and that real feeling of isolation”.*



His experiences of isolation have taken a real toll on his mental health, as shall be explored in the next section and section 6.6. The presence of just one other student from a working-class background in his corridor would have presented the opportunity to form a friendship based around alternative activities like the others engaged in by the participants quoted above. This would have potentially transformed his university experience from being “palpably isolated” to one that could have been fulfilling and fun.

As Crozier et al. (2008) point out, “the significance of critical mass is important” (p.173) and this data presented within all paragraphs in this section demonstrates the vital importance of having a diverse, balanced demographic within the student body. Students from different backgrounds can and do mix with extremely positive consequences for all involved, which I turn feeds back into structuring the field around inclusion and openness. However, when the privileged demographic outweighs that of students from less advantaged backgrounds, it can result in discrimination and marginalisation, which contributes to maintain an inner-field hierarchy based on the possession of all forms of capital.

### **6.3 Collegiate Opportunities**

As argued in chapter four, Durham University markets itself as distinctive to the rest of the sector: the wide student experience that the university can offer is unmatched by other universities in the field – it is the “Durham Difference”. “Experience Durham” delivers “exceptional opportunities” through centralised sporting, music and theatre societies that students from across the university can participate in at high level, as outlined in the previous section. However, the “Durham Difference” is delivered

primarily through the collegiate system. It is these that provide “a sense of community that is distinctive to Durham” (Durham University, 2020v) and offer more localised and informal opportunities for students to participate in sport, theatre, music and other societies. As stated in 6.1, colleges – for those who lived in – were clearly the main sources of identity for students and where they spend most of their time. The fact that each college has its own array of societies for its members to pick from does mean that the number of opportunities a Durham student encounters is over and above that in non-collegiate universities: for many types of activity, alongside one centralised option, there are sixteen collegiate options that provide a space for participation at non-elite level. For instance, at larger colleges men’s football teams range from A team to M team (Collingwood College, 2020). This should in theory balance excellence with inclusion – indeed, Burt and Evans (2016) argue that “colleges give many more opportunities for students to participate in meaningful ways” (p.80). This section focuses on the role of the collegiate structure and the individual colleges in facilitating or negating participants’ inclusion within the institutional sub-field.

### **6.3.1 Wealth of Opportunities**

The vast majority of participants were hugely positive about the collegiate system and had benefitted from extra-curricular opportunities that they attributed to being a direct result of it. Half of the participants had been actively involved with a range of new activities within their college and the variation of the clubs they listed are testament to the proliferation of teams clubs and societies that are available in each of the sixteen colleges. For instance, Ben said he was enjoying being active in “the drama side” of his Bailey college, as well as “play[ing] pool and table tennis, do[ing] meditation”, Joe had been involved in the technical support during his college’s play, as well as in the

rowing team, and Belle was going to her college's yoga classes and Disney society. The fact that these opportunities were available within their immediate collegiate environments meant that participants found them particularly appealing due to the ease of accessibility. Ben described that whenever he felt apprehensive about trying out a new extra-curricular activity, he thought, "oh what the heck I'll go along to it, and it's really fun and interesting". Belle compared her ability to "nip" along to various activities in her college with that of her friends at non-collegiate universities:

*"There's always a new event that I'm going to and I'm telling them about and they're like "oh my god amazing, we don't have that" and I'm like "oh well it's not done by the uni you know, it's set up by my college". Also, I'm like "I'm just going to my yoga" or "I'm just nipping to the bar" and they're like "oh my god, how far away do you have to go for that?" and I'm like "literally two minutes"."*

This ease of accessibility explains how two of the three participants who worked the most hours in term time (Ben and Scarlett – Elizabeth's case is reported later in this section) still reported active social and extra-curricular lives in their colleges. Moreover, it was clear that these open-to-all opportunities at college level combat the elitism that characterises Team Durham (university-wide) sports. As outlined in chapter four, Team Durham operates at an extremely high level, topping varsity league tables among British universities and having ranked in the top three universities in the British Universities and Colleges Sport (BUCS) points tables since 2011-12 (BUCS, 2019). In Scarlett's first interview she described that the "most noticeable difference" between her and the more privileged students she was surrounded by related not to

academic ability disparities but the fact that “they take part in so many sports because they’ve been able to afford to. The rowers, the fencers, the rugby players have been to private school”. She contrasts this to the extra-curricular activities she was involved with at school, which were limited to “Latin, debating because they were free” and because much of her free time outside of school was spent doing paid work. When I asked her whether she perceived these inequalities to be operating within college-level sport too, she contrasted her earlier statement by saying “college is actually really fine” and described that her small, Bailey college’s sports teams “just want people to get involved”, whether they are new to the sport or not. This seems to be the case as all colleges have teams for most sports, meaning they require players to fill a team, even if their student body is small. This results in greater accessibility and inclusivity as sporting ability becomes less important than representation.

Indeed, it was notable that the only participant who could consider taking part in university-level sport was privately-educated Holly, who had played hockey to a high level at school. Still, she chose to play for her college’s team instead as “there was a lot of commitment” within university-level sports and she described high levels of training and matches, as well as restrictions over diet and intra-team competition, as students have to “play to keep their spot” throughout the year. Holly decided not to pursue this in her first year as she wanted to spend the year “just having fun”, a decision which she attributed to the fact that “first year doesn’t count” academically, which meant that she thought she “might as well” throw herself into the social and “fun” aspects of university life, over routine and commitment. Not all centrally-run sports are like this: Ewa does breakdancing and said “it’s just relaxed, you don’t have to be there every week, you go at your own pace.” However, she pre-faced this statement

by saying “it’s uni[-level] but it’s not uni standard” indicating that the perception of most university sports is that they operate at a higher standard. Although Holly’s reasoning for non-participation was specific to her - and is unpacked in 6.6.1 - this intense level of commitment required by university-wide sports means that, in addition to excluding non-traditional students on grounds of prior ability gained through exposure to, and practise of, these activities at school, it also operates to alienate those who cannot commit to the high level of time investment due to other responsibilities, like part-time work.

At the end of the photo interview, I asked participants what the collection of photos they had chosen to bring said about their time at the University so far, and how this compared with what they would have brought if I had done this exercise with them during their last two years at school. The range of extra-curricular opportunities to suit a wide range of interests in which “everyone can get involved with something” (Belle), combined with the ease of accessing these, in the collegiate setting meant that participants perceived their life at Durham University to be much more varied, and therefore exciting, than their time at school. As two participants said:

*“I have such a range of things going on in my life now, so day to day my life’s a bit more interesting. I didn’t just go to school, then come home and graft my absolute ass off to get into uni to get the grades I had, but now there’s just more interesting things going on and meeting a lot more interesting people.”*

(Ben)

*“I’d say they’re definitely more diverse. Like when I was doing A- levels, it’s not like I was just revising all day but there’s a far greater array of opportunities while you’re at uni. I couldn’t do rowing while I was at school [...] it’s a lot more exciting, there’s a lot more do to do, it’s a lot more full-on. I did take a lot on during A levels, but it was all stuff you could take on and have an evening off, whereas here it’s all day. When you wake up to when you go to bed, you’re doing stuff.” (Joe)*

This busy and varied social structure within the colleges meant that Scarlett, who was apprehensive and unsure about the collegiate system not “suit[ing]” her “so much” due to her coming from a large sixth form college, said “I definitely like the collegiate system more than I thought I was going to”. She explains “you literally can’t feel like you’re not part of the community when there’s people emailing you every day or stuff going on basically every day”. Colleges therefore operate as more inclusive social fields that provide all students with an opportunity to try out new activities and be part of a team, rather than just attracting the “next generation of elite sportspeople” (Durham University, 2020s) with the aim of dominating sporting league tables, as with most university-wide teams. In this sense, the collegiate system mitigates the more general elitism and pursuit of excellence that characterises the rest of the university and operates to exclude non-traditional and - in the case of sports teams – the wider group of state-educated students. There were clear exceptions - Gwyn told me she is not able to use a “communal” piano in her college as students have to be at the level of grade 7 or above to use it, and access to it is monitored by a porter who checks students can prove they hold this level of cultural capital through a certificate. Therefore, within the elitist institutional sub-field there undeniably remains pockets of

elitism and exclusion, which favour those who have the cultural repertoire gained through a middle-class and privately-educated background.

As stated above, about half of the participants were actively engaged in activities at college level. For the rest, they were actively involved in (non-sports) clubs and societies but at department and university level. For instance, after hearing her college principal announce at the start of the year that he hoped that students would “join maybe two groups, doesn’t have to be in college”, Gwyn opted for committees within her department over and above within her college, as she wanted to “do work that is beneficial and helping the department”. The reasons for this are unpacked in the later section of 6.5, but this suggests that the combination of university and college clubs and societies work together to offer an array of opportunities for Durham University students that suit a wide variety of interests and needs. As a further example, Tony was able to go some way in combatting the isolation he felt within his college through joining in with extra-curricular opportunities at university-level. At the time of his first interview at the end of his first term at the University, he already held seven elected positions in various associations – one of which was in one of his Humanities departments, with the other six being university-wide committees. After feeling alienated by his college during induction week, he visited the freshers’ fair where student representatives from the university-wide clubs and societies advertise for new members. Here, he saw one of the two identity-based associations with which he was to become involved and thought, after speaking to the student representatives, that in contrast to the elitism and “loud and posh” people within his college, the association “might be a normal thing” as it was formed by an “island of normal people”. For him, these associations are “the redeeming feature of Durham”:

*“I just don’t seem to fit in with a lot of Durham, whereas these two associations, it’s like okay, these bits, I can fit in with these bits.”*

Bathmaker et al. (2013) point out that for their participants finding a social group where they felt as though they belonged was not restricted to their institution, as they used extra-curricular clubs to form friendships. Although within the wider field of the institution, the existence of university-wide representative and identity-based societies outside of colleges and departments is important, as it allows students from across the college who feel like they are in a minority to come together in greater numbers.

The combination of college-, department- and university-level activities means that Durham as a university is able to offer more opportunities and activities to its students than a non-collegiate institution, and is reflected in the fact that all but one of the participants was involved in at least one activity. Existing research at a non-collegiate RG university found that the significant majority of students they surveyed who reported *not* participating in extra-curricular activities were working class (Bathmaker et al., 2013), and Abrahams and Ingram (2013) find that their working-class participants felt isolated from the “student experience” and did not get involved with extra-curricular activities because they were focusing on the “functional and primarily about the academic” (p.7). Hordósy and Clark (2018) found that many of their low-income participants described themselves as “not being part of the mainstream student experience” (p.420). As extra-curricular activities can function to actively generate capital for the field of employment (Bathmaker et al., 2013), this inequality in access to clubs and societies in HE in general is problematic in terms of both ensuring



fulfilling free-times for all students and for preventing longer term social reproduction. The collegiate system, along with centralised activities, therefore contributes to reducing hierarchies between students based on social and cultural capital within the institutional sub-field and also the wider field of power by providing its students with credentials (or “trump cards” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992:98 in Crozier et al., 2008:168)) that they can draw upon when seeking employment.

The one exception was Elizabeth, a mature student studying Social Sciences who is nominally a member of a Hill college but lives out with her two children. For her, getting involved in activities within the college, department or university was unthinkable:

*“I literally come for my lectures and seminars and then I’m gone. Because I need to be back for my kids.”*

As well as studying full-time and caring for young children, Elizabeth works 14 hours a week at fast-food chain. Her daily routine was busy from the moment she gets up in the morning:

*“I’ll get up, give the girls their breakfast, get them dressed, drop them off at school and once they’re in school I’ll travel here [...] When I’m finished, I collect the girls from my mum’s because they’ve normally already finished school by the time I’ve finished here and then my mum will have given them tea, so it’s bath, bed, story. Then I eventually settle down to do my work but there’s that much going on in the day that my brain just can’t concentrate to when I need it to. So I have to slowly ease myself into the work but then by the time I’ve got into it it’s half 10 and I’m like oh god I need to get to bed because*

*the girls have got to be up in the morning. It is hard. And then I do like 6am until 2pm [at work] on a Wednesday and Thursday when I don't have any lectures. [...] Then I've got [the kids'] swimming lessons, gymnastics lessons".*

This indicates that the benefits of the plethora of opportunities within the institutional sub-field is dependent on another form of capital – free time. This is explained more in section 6.4.3.

### **6.3.2 An “Air of Excellence”**

In the previous section I described how the collegiate system – in tandem with societies and clubs in departments and the wider university - offers numerous opportunities for students of the University. This was undoubtedly positive in many ways – in facilitating students’ participation in activities and opportunities that they would not have been able to access outside of the institution, and the subsequent effect this had in making them feel as though they were part of the student community. However, in addition to encouraging inclusion alongside elite-level participation, it was clear that the sheer number of activities available, combined with the high numbers of their peers taking part in this, resulted in a general “air of excellence” (Joe) within the institutional sub-field of the university that characterises both attitudes to extra-curricular involvement and academic work. For instance, Joe describes how upon entry to his college “you see a trophy shelf in reception and they’ve got a screen up with a leaderboard and how many points we’ve got per student. All our students are doing something!” Here, like with their elite collegiate university in the south, “the culture and ethos is one in which ‘there is strong classification and framing’ (Bernstein, 1996) and an expectation of total commitment not only to the work but to the collegiate

system” (Reay et al., 2010:113). To employ Clark’s (1972) “saga”, there is an “air about the place” built on the idea of excellence that encompasses all aspects of student life. As a reminder, Clark proposes that this is “rooted in history” (p.179). This is exemplified by the fact that Ewa said to me on numerous occasions that her college “drums” it into their students that, on average, 95% of their students finish with a First Class degree. Although upon looking at the data, the actual figure is lower than she recalled here, the fact that it was imprinted in her mind at such a high level, and the pressure she described because of this, indicates just how prevalent this idea of excellence is. Students are encouraged by staff within their colleges to act in line with this, on the basis of the college having a history or tradition of high academic performance.

Participants described the University’s “air of excellence” also being embodied by their student peers. Reay et al. (2009) find that among their participants there is an “ironic recognition of the compulsive obsessive workaholic dispositions that constitute the highly successful academic habitus” (p.1114). This recognition of commitment to academic work was articulated here too – Ewa explained that “most people are head down, they want to do well”, and Joe said that “everyone’s proud of what they do and their work, and it needs to be good”. Clark (ibid.) goes on to state that a saga “claims unique accomplishment” (p.179). It was evident that participants perceived this attitude to academic work differed to the ethos at other RG university campuses. In her third interview, Scarlett compared the environment in revision and exam season at Durham to that at the University of York which she encountered when visiting her boyfriend there, saying that “there is a notable difference” in students’ attitudes towards academic work at the two universities, as York students “weren’t doing what

[Durham students] were doing here, like waking up in the morning, revising, going to lunch, revising again.” Similarly, Ewa described how upon her home friend who was at Edinburgh University visiting, he commented “you guys don’t drink enough, nobody’s out, they’re doing work, what is this?” This was not always problematic, and participants did not express the “irony” as with Reay et al.’s (2009) participants - Ewa pointed out that this commitment to being at the top of their academic game did not lead to competition between students, saying that “there’s no “what did you get” kind of thing, we’re supportive of each other”. In fact for Rosie, the academic culture of the university and the “clever” students who have “worked hard to get here” “overrides” the culture being based around “the wealth people and the middle class”, as she said that students were united over their commitment to academic study. This is similar to Reay et al.’s (2010) findings that found “learner identities appeared on the surface to hold more importance than social identities, class differences remain, lurking in the background” (p.113) and indicates a saga to the extent that academic excellence becomes a “normative bond” (Clark, 1972:179) among the student body.

What is new here is the detail of how the “air of excellence” extends to extra-curricular activities. Ewa said that in addition to students wanting to do well academically, they also “want to be part of college, there’s so many people running for exec[utive committee positions], there’s so many people doing, this, that, charity work here, they’re literally doing everything they can, whatever they’re passionate about, they do”. Ben explained that even within college-level drama groups there is a commitment to keeping the society “serious” and like “proper acting”. Hannah describes how “you see everyone walking around in their sports stuff. You see people head to toe in their kit, they look really official”. This account of long hours spent doing activities was

echoed by Gwyn, who told me that there is a culture in her college built around working as hard as possible in voluntary leadership roles, with older students joking “oh remember when so and so passed out”. Although Hordósy and Clark (2018) found that their participants at a red-brick university articulated feeling like they “ought to” get involved with more activities due to the more active involvement of their peers (p.419), the participants perceived this to be “an accomplishment” (Clark, 1972:179) unique to Durham. Joe compared his experience at Durham with his girlfriend’s experience at Newcastle University. He said:

*“In Durham, you tend to find people are very, very obsessed with their work and doing a lot of extra-curricular stuff. So everyone I know is on, like, five sports teams, they play for the uni, they do this crazy degree, they do drama, they do everything. But from what I can tell, a lot of my girlfriend’s friends get up to go to uni, like I do my degree, I come home, I cook some food maybe, and then I might sing in a choir once a week or something. They seem a lot less driven but maybe that’s a university culture thing.”*

For Masland (1985), a saga “shapes reality on the campus and thus helps control behaviour” (p.159). Ingram and Allen (2018) point out that it is the institutional actor that “brings the institution into being” (p.729). Hannah’s narrative explains how this “air about the place” translates into altering students’ behaviour as they become the “institution made man (or woman)” (Bourdieu, 1996:3). She said, “my friend does running, and he enjoys running but he wants to say he did a sport, so it’s kind like for the status. It’s like the idea of you join loads of societies, you’re so busy all the time.” This resonates with Hordósy and Clark’s (2018) finding that participants reported

feeling that their peers' involvement with extra-curricular activities was sometimes performative rather than due to a genuine interest in an activity. This allusion to the "status" that comes with being a member of a team, and the possession of club apparel which conveys this status, indicates just how this eagerness to play up to the air of excellence is transmitted across student cohorts. Within Durham University, this apparel is termed "stash" – and "no one else calls it stash anywhere else apart from us" (Tony) – and Scarlett describes that, "there's stash for [college], they do grad stash, they do stash for [social event committee], exec [team within college]. They do stash for some other random execs, or sports teams or other communities". Students organising and ordering branded clothing for every activity, which is a process unique to the institutional sub-field of Durham and was not mentioned in Hordósy and Clark's (2018) research, indicates how taking part in these activities is indeed, in part, for show as they "internalise" (ibid.) the "air of excellence" that they are encouraged to do so by staff and see their peers enacting – they "give body" to the institution (ibid.:3).

The third characteristic of a saga is that it is "held with sentiment by the group" (Clark, 1972:179). Indeed, this "air of excellence" was clearly viewed positively in many ways by participants. For Joe, the pressure he felt because of it "was very positive pressure" because it encouraged him to try rowing, a sport which he has since discovered he really enjoys – in fact, he has found a rowing club in his hometown to join over the summer. This pressurised environment in which participating in activities is the norm opened him up to a new hobby for life, despite lacking the cultural capital to have done this prior to entering the institutional sub-field. However, the extent to which this amounted to "sentimentality" was limited, as participants also described negative consequences of the proliferation of opportunity described above and they viewed it

with a certain “irony” that Reay et al. (2009) found in terms of academics. Joe described the sense of never being able to switch off – the busy extra-curricular schedules built into collegiate life, combined with intense academic work, resulted in his day-to-day life becoming “when you wake up to when you go to bed, you’re doing stuff.” One of Tony’s photo collection depicted a packet of ProPlus energy tablets resting on his laptop. He chose not to give the photo a name as it “spoke for itself” and I could sense he felt upset when he was talking me through it and looking at the photo. He told me that at the point he took that photograph, he felt like he “had reached a point” where he felt like he “couldn’t get through it” by himself:

*“The pace of it all is kind of terrifying. You’re expected to be on call 24/7 - what happened to office hours? You’d think at least the lecturers would respect that and not send out reading at like 10 at night. And then with the association stuff, there doesn’t seem to be a finish time on exec discussions. Just this feeling of the need to be constantly available and constantly around and aware and awake means yeah I need a ProPlus to get through this”*

Evidently, this requirement to be “doing stuff” from morning to night extended to participants who had chosen to remove themselves from collegiate life; the need to “always be on” is an ethos that characterises the wider university. This in itself, as demonstrated by Tony’s quote, is problematic in the sense that it has negative knock-ons for students’ mental health in generating an anxiety and an inability to relax – a phenomenon that is likely to affect students regardless of their backgrounds. As Reay et al. (2010) state, the “powerful processes of institutional socialisation, and the strong academic and social guidance and channelling that underpin them, both cut across and overshadow class differences” (p.113).

However, as I go on to explain in the next section, 6.4, this is worsened for the non-traditional group due to the financial restraints they face simultaneously, with participants describing this restricting their ability to throw themselves into the proliferation of activities that their more privileged peers are able to. Moreover, as explored in section 6.6, this anxiety combined with the academic anxiety faced by participants – which will be argued is most acute in first-generation and working-class students due to their perception of the need to prove their worth at the institution – takes a more significant toll on their mental health than likely faced by their traditional student peers. Therefore, as I will argue in the rest of this chapter, this “air about the place”, although having many surface-level “saga” qualities, amounts to a doxa in that it “misrecognises” the inequalities within this (Hunter, 2004). As I demonstrate, participants were articulate about this, which means that this is not a “pre-reflexive” nor an “unquestioned” (Deer, 2012:115) belief that is typical of a doxa. It might be the case for the majority of institutional members, but my participants were, again, enacting “orthodoxic” practices where the problems are recognised but adhered to in order to participate in the game played in the institutional sub-field.

## **6.4 Financial Difficulties**

This section outlines how participants dealt with entering the elite sub-field of the university financially. All but one of the participants are classed as coming from low- to mid-income households as defined by student finance. As outlined in the financial strategies column in the participant information table in chapter three and the sources of income table in chapter five, eight of the fourteen qualified for the maximum student loan and the highest amount of Durham Grant or Supported Progression bursary. The other six participants classed themselves as “kids in the middle” (Scarlett) or “in that



grey area” (Joe) who received a lower amount of loan but whose parents could afford to give them little or no financial support. Holly was, again, the exception. She has not taken out a Student Finance maintenance loan; rather, her parents provide her with a monthly allowance. 6.4.1 outlines how participants’ worries about how they would afford to meet the cost of college accommodation before coming to the university played out in reality throughout their first year. It was clear that for all participants besides Holly and Elizabeth (who lives outside of college accommodation), meeting the high cost of the college fees was extremely difficult and necessitated taking on a high number of hours of paid work (6.4.2) and strict budgeting (6.4.3) which limited their ability to take part in the opportunities offered by the collegiate system. It also resulted in high levels of stress. This was particularly the case for Gwyn and Tony, who, as outlined in 6.4.3, experienced extreme financial hardship.

### **6.4.1 College Costs**

As I stated in chapter four, the University charges extremely high rents for its college accommodation relative to the costs of other universities’ colleges or halls of residence. I argued in chapter five that, prior to coming to the university, this caused great apprehension for the participants who were concerned about how they were going to afford to pay for it, a concern which pushed any worries about longer-term tuition-fee debt into the background. It was clear that this played out in reality throughout their first year. The rest of this 6.4 section outlines the knock-on effects this had but it is important to flag here that the details that follow about participants’ financial insecurity was caused directly by this high cost of accommodation. As Tony put it, “the stress from the academia is a thing but it is nothing in comparison of the stress of trying to live here”.

Moreover, when looking forward to their next year at the university, participants were optimistic going forward that “everything w[ould] be fine” (Tony) due to the fact that in their second and third years they would be living out of college, or, as described by Tony, “somewhere with reasonable rent” – a fact that he “just kept holding to” in his more anxious and stressed moments of first year. Ben said that he expected that the following year would “be better because I’ll be paying less”. By living out in his second year, Joe estimated that he would save “a couple of thousands of pounds”. Rosie anticipated that her second year “would financially be better”, as the rent for her student house is £100 per week less than her college fee. Although she would have to purchase her own food when living out which would reduce some of this surplus, it would still be a significant saving. What was notable was that the situation generally seemed easier for those in self-catered accommodation who pay £2,300 a year less and could budget strictly in food shopping, rather than the £77 a week that colleges charge for food. However, Chloe still said she expected to be in “a better financial position” next year than she was whilst living in her self-catered college.

When I asked participants who had enjoyed their time in their college whether they would consider returning to live in later on in their degree, the answer was a resounding no for this reason. Although Scarlett stated that she “really liked living in [college]”, she said “I really don’t want to pay 7 and a half grand to live in”. Similarly, Joe would not be considering moving back into college later on in his degree even though he would “absolutely love” to because “it’s extortionate, absolutely ridiculous and I really don’t have a lot of money”. The cost he was paying to live in college in comparison to what he would have paid elsewhere led Tony to actively regret choosing to come to the

University. He said, “at any other university I would have been able to put money away through this year so that I could have some money for my summer rent”. All of the participants were experiencing high levels of anxiety as to how they were going to be able to pay for the rent on their student house over the summer before they received their next loan instalment in October of the following academic year – students do not receive a loan for the summer period (Hordósy et al., 2018) - a situation which would have been a lot easier had they been paying less rent for their college accommodation across their first year. The prices of the college are therefore the single-most significant contributing factor to the financial situation of the participants – if they had lived out of college accommodation or had lived in student halls of residence at another university, they would have significantly higher levels of finance than they did in their first year living in a Durham college, meaning the problems they faced would be reduced in severity.

Here it should also be noted that the high cost of college fees does not amount to a higher quality of accommodation. Participants were positive about some general aspects collegiate life and there were clearly many aspects of living in that they enjoyed. The physical space of the JCRs in college offer many activities for free. For instance, Ben referenced the fact that it was possible to play pool whenever he liked, something that helped him to wind down after coming home from a late shift at work, and Tony had used it to play video games. In the final interview with the repeat sample I asked participants if they could design their “dream” college, what it would look like. Despite the fact the dining hall was where differences between themselves and their student peers were most noticeable, as described in section 6.2.1, all those in catered colleges (except Tony) said they would keep the communal dining aspect, as they

enjoyed socialising with a wide variety of people and the issues that were outlined in that section lessened over the year as they formed great friendships that helped them deal with these differences.

However, there were other aspects of living in college that were frustrating. For instance, for those who worked and lived in catered colleges, the strict mealtimes was causing them to have to pay extra to buy their own food when they missed a meal due to being at work. Scarlett told me, “I’m working tonight, I have to get a packed lunch and they’re so gross, they’re not dinner”. As Tony explained, “you can sign up for a late meal or a packed lunch or whatever but only if you get enough notice and also if you make it to pick it up and sign in the first place”. This was difficult for him, as there was constant partying on his corridor which was disrupting his sleep. Moreover, Ewa and Scarlett were paying approximately £7500 each and sharing a room – and one that used to be a single but had been converted into a double, with it being so small that Scarlett said she can “reach out and touch [Ewa] in the mornings” (Scarlett). She brought a photo of the room along to her photo interview to show me her “average day”, which showed Ewa doing university work whilst lying on her bed. She explained that “one of us usually works on the bed and one of us usually works on the desk because desk to desk is just too close.” It should be stated that both Ewa and Scarlett really enjoyed sharing a room as they got along so well, and it meant that they were “never lonely”. However, it remains the fact that they were being charged so much that both of them were having to work such significant hours for a room not fit for purpose.

One of Tony's photo collection was of "Geoffrey the Silverfish", one of many of the creatures he had living in his bathroom. Rosie's friend in nearby college accommodation was having an issue with rats. Many of the participants referenced the fact that they were not allowed to leave their belongings in college over the Christmas and Easter holidays. Although students get a slight discount for this, they are still paying over £7,000 a year for a room that they are only able to inhabit for thirty weeks of the year. All of the participants were having the issue that their college room rental term ended a couple of days before their student houses were available. Out of the laid-out term time, colleges charge £25 a night for students to stay in their own room, with no catering provision. College residence ends on 29th June despite the fact most Durham tenancies begin on 1st July, forcing students to pay to stay on in college to reach 1st July, pay for temporary storage for their belongings, or move their belongings home for the summer, resulting in added costs either way. In sum, the "extortionate" rents charged by the colleges push students without economic capital from sources beyond a student loan or maintenance grant into having to cope with severe financial insecurity and are less than fit for purpose.

#### **6.4.2 Paid Work**

Hordósy et al. (2018) find that "narratives of employability" (Brown and Hesketh, 2004:36) "partly underpinned the desire to find part-time work" among their lower-income participants, but this was "tempered" by more immanent demands of financing "a comparatively large cost such as housing" (p.358). The majority of my participants work considerable hours in term time or in the holidays, directly to meet the costs of accommodation – the sheer necessity and "categorical imposition" (ibid.:359) to do so meant that references to doing so for employability reasons were absent from their

narratives. The type and sector of employment varied between participants and is summarised in figure 8:

| <b>Participant</b> | <b>In employment?</b>  | <b>Hours p/week</b>               | <b>Sector</b>  |
|--------------------|--|-----------------------------------|--|
| Alice              | N/A  |                                   |  |
| Belle              | Full-time during holidays  | Unknown, informal basis           | Service/ Hospitality (cleaning for parents' B&B)                                   |
| Ben                | Part-time during term time from term 1                               | ~12                               | Service/ Hospitality (bar)   |
| Chloe              | Part-time during term time from term 3, full-time during holidays    | 8 during term; 40 during holidays | Service/ Retail (high street chain)  |
| Elizabeth          | Part-time during term time from term 1                               | 14                                | Service/ hospitality (Fast food chain)   |
| Ewa                | Full-time during holidays  | ~45                               | Service/ Hospitality (restaurant)  |
| Faye               | N/A  |                                   |  |
| Gwyn               | N/A  |                                   |  |
| Hannah             | N/A  |                                   |  |
| Joe                | Matched betting in term-time, seeking paid internship for the summer |                                   |  |
| Rosie              | N/A, part-time job for arranged for second year                      |                                   |  |
| Scarlett           | 2 x part-time during holidays, full-time during holidays             |                                   | Service/ hospitality (café), (supermarket), administrative work for the university |
| Tony               | Actively seeking employment  |                                   |  |

**Figure 8:** Participants' forms of employment

As noted above, Ben was the only participant who had secured a part-time job during term time in term one. Although half of Maher et al.'s (2018) surveyed students had a part-time job (Hordósy et al., 2018), Reay and colleagues found that only 8% of their survey respondents at the collegiate, southern university worked during term-time, as “weekly assignments and stringent academic demands mean students could not engage in paid work even if they need to” (Reay et al., 2010:113). However, for some of my participants – Chloe and Scarlett – who did not want to pursue part-time work for this reason upon initially entering the field, amounting pressure on their finances pushed them into taking part-time employment later on (in addition to full-time work in the holidays). Chloe said that “I was worried before. Before the job I was like what am I going to do?” and so secured a job in her home-town (so that she could continue working over the holidays) that she travelled back for at the weekends. Scarlett joked that she had “had so much jobs here”, and was taking as many part-time jobs on campus that she could.

Both those who had employment during the holidays and those who worked in term time worked long hours. For instance, one of Ewa's photo collection was a picture of her rota from her work as a waitress over the Christmas holidays. It shows her allotted hours mounting to over 60 hours per week, including Christmas Eve, Christmas Day, Boxing Day and New Year's Day. During this period she was also having to revise for her university exams that were taking place at the beginning of term two. She gave the photo the title of “Compromisation” to demonstrate the fact that “it's a summary of how much I have to work in order to sustain myself here” to be able to do “what I want” but balancing this also with “then doing work to be successful at uni.” This reference to the careful balancing of working to be able to fully participate in university

life but leaving enough time to do university academic work and engage in extra-curricular and social activities was also articulated by Ben, who said “I have to work in order to get by. I have to be in this situation. It feels like a bit of a cycle – I have to work in order to go out and if I don’t go out then I won’t be able to be like a normal uni student but then because I’m doing that I’m not being able to like do as well as I can at university, and that’s frustrating”. Similarly, Chloe said she has to work out necessity but was bearing in mind that she “would like to look back on university and think I did everything I wanted to, not that I was always working”.

It was evident that this balance was rarely able to be achieved. Like Hordósy et al.’s (2018) participants who were “running just to stand still”, Chloe said, “I feel like I never have a day off”. The final three weeks of the summer term at Durham are known as the “three weeks of nothing”, as exams have finished, and teaching is over, and college JCRs plan a packed social calendar in their place. Chloe was “super excited” for one of the events within this but was unable to take it off from work, which she was “really gutted” about. Similarly, Ben said to me in his second term that he was “just surviving”, as the toll of all his commitments, in addition to trying to socialise with his peers, was amounting to too much - he was regularly going to bed in the early hours of the morning after work before getting up a few hours later to attend his lectures. He then misses out on weekend socialising, as he works Friday and Saturday doing his bar job and then needs to spend Sunday doing his academic work. Tony, who did not work throughout his first year but was actively seeking it, spent a significant amount of time “sitting at a computer working out which jobs can fit together so I can work three of them at a time”. Although as stated in section 6.3.1, many participants were involved in college opportunities, these were often one-off events that they could



fit around commitments or were limited to one particular club or society, falling below the recommended amount for Durham students that – as stated by the president of Gwyn’s college – is a minimum of two. Existing literature has pointed to the fact that needing to work can impact on a student’s quality of academic work (Carney et al., 2005; Hordósy et al., 2018). Here, this demonstrates that both students who receive the full student loan and a grant, and those who receive less and are not in receipt of any or adequate financial support from parents/ family as expected by Student Finance, are having to sacrifice their extra-curricular opportunities and social involvement, as well as academic work, in order to meet the costs of Durham University accommodation.

Reay et al. (2010) find this to be the case with students at a newer institution outside of the elite sub-field – they had “complex and often overloaded lives” which resulted in “psycho-social strains” and “academic costs” (p.118). However, they contrast this with the case for the working-class students at the elite, collegiate institution, who did not work, who “were positive about their learning experience” (p.119) and were focused “developing as a learner” (p.118). In the case of the institutional sub-field of Durham, students have to deal with the combination of working at a fast-paced, intensive academic level, as well as working significant hours in employment. These differing pressures, combined with the encouragement for students to behave in line with the “air of excellence” in terms of extra-curricular activities, means that they are being pulled in many different directions.

Therefore, despite the numerous opportunities within the collegiate system, Durham is not exceptional to the rule that, as Bathmaker et al. (2013) put it, “university thus does not become a social leveller” (p.739). Rather, these non-traditional students face

a “double deficit” (Hordósy et al., 2018) whereby they are actively encouraged to participate fully in university life by a doxa that positions excellence in many endeavours as the defining characteristic of a Durham student, but at the same time are forced to engage in routine work just to be able to “survive” (Ben) within and retain membership of the institutional sub-field. As I described earlier, by his second interview Ben seemed more positive in terms of the friendship group he had by then established but continued to describe extreme pressures on his time. I therefore would argue that the main contributing factor to his decision to leave the university was this “double deficit” whereby he felt that no matter how hard he worked in paid employment or academic work, he was in a lose-lose situation where either one of these arenas, in addition to his social life, would be sacrificed. Those students who have free-flowing amounts of economic capital independent of their efforts are the only actors within the field able to maximise the range of opportunities on offer, embody the doxa, and commit themselves to the social opportunities within the field.

As I argued in chapter four, the institutional sub-field of Durham positions extra-curricular opportunity as key to its “wider student experience” as it provides its students with the “soft currencies” needed to succeed in today’s graduate labour market. As stated in chapter two, these – along with internship experience within a relevant field – are becoming increasingly important forms of capital to enter the field of graduate employment as credentials are inflated. Only two participants – Joe and Rosie – discussed employment opportunities that related to their long-term career ambitions rather than their more immediate financial situation. Joe had secured a paid placement at a nearby company and Rosie had gained a place on a WP scheme for the legal profession. This may reflect the fact that internships and summer placements tend

not to be accessible for first-year students (with many graduate employers requiring a student is in their second or third year of a degree to apply), and as such, it is a limitation of this study with first-year students that it did not explore the effect students' employment had on the wider group of participants' ability to contemplate and apply for such roles.

However, as Hordósy et al. (2018) point out “without a financial safety net to fall back on, lower income students are less likely to be able to shape employment opportunities to the needs of their future career ambitions”, as “processes of job searching, application and assessment are also often a necessary requirement of graduate positions”, which lower-income students are likely to lack the time to do so (p.362). This means that these participants, who have to work considerable hours, are unlikely to have the time available to spend applying to such opportunities. It is notable that throughout the year neither Rosie nor Joe had had a job (although Rosie had arranged one for her second year and Joe worked for himself, doing matched-betting on his computer). Moreover, although unpaid internships are now technically illegal, there are many “grey areas” and there are still many opportunities, such as work-shadowing, that can be done unpaid over the summer (Target Jobs, 2020). Participants who have to work full-time in the university holidays will be unable to contemplate such opportunities.

### **6.4.3 Budgeting**

Bathmaker et al. (2013) find that involvement in extra-curricular activities is limited for their participants due to financial as well as time constraints (p.733). Indeed, for both sets of my participants - those who did work and those who did not - their day-

to-day lives at the University revolve around managing their low levels of economic capital and involve strict budgeting and planning - or as Faye described, making “financially sound decisions”. Their strategies included having a maximum amount they could spend on a night out clubbing (Faye), limiting themselves to how many clubs and societies they could join (Ewa) and opting out of social events (everyone besides Holly). They were often extremely pragmatic about this, showing high levels of resilience and an attitude of “just getting on with” rather than complaining or negatively comparing their situation to others. For instance, for Faye:

*“I don’t have the same experience as other people, which in a way I’m kind of happy with [...] it’s better for me because of the situation of not being able to have anything to fall back on and having to actually go out and get a job myself, and having to budget, it’s helped me feel like I’ve matured a lot. This is going to sound really conceited and not humble at all but I feel like I’m a bit more mature than other people in my college because it’s knowing that I’ve got to make a spreadsheet and stuff. I’ve got to budget. I’ve got to know exactly how much I’ve got and I’ll hear people phone up their parents and be like “can you transfer me £100” and just not having to do that, I feel it’s made me a lot more mature and a lot more responsible”.*

However, it was clear that, despite this narrative, participants were having to forgo many opportunities that they were previously excited to engage in and that their more privileged peers were able to attend. Although participants were often extremely positive about the range of activities on offer, it was clear when I asked why they had chosen that particular activity to be involved with, that their decisions about which to

join had been dictated by cost. Ewa said “I haven’t joined any clubs, because they cost. I’ve joined break dancing but that doesn’t cost anything”. Brown et al. (2016) point out that, “the struggle for distinction in education and the labour market is no longer limited to a competition for credentials” (p.193), as employers look for “hard currencies including credentials, internships, sporting achievements and music prizes” as well as “soft currencies” of inter-personal skills. This resonates with Bradley’s (2018) work that found that “working-class students [...] were hampered in building up persuasive CVs by the necessity to take term-time jobs which limited their ability to engage in extra-curricular activities and volunteering” (p.84). Although she found this “especially at UWE”, here we see how it affects ‘elite’ sub-field too.

#### **6.4.4 Extreme Financial Hardship**

Crozier et al. (2008) find that despite succeeding academically, working-class students’ lives “were often fragile and subject to disruption” (p.176). For two of my other participants, the financial insecurity they experienced was more acute and pushed them into poverty to the extent they could not afford daily necessities (Tony) and experienced a mental health crisis (Gwyn). Both Tony and Gwyn receive the highest amount of student loan, along with the Supported Progression bursary. Tony was actively seeking employment from his second term at the university – both in term time and out of but was “just getting rejections and rejections”. Gwyn was unable to find work in her home town over the holidays due to the lack of job availability there and she has a disability meaning a large section of manual jobs would be unfeasible. The lack of income from work meant that Tony’s budget across the year was extremely low – amounting to £10 a week for everything besides rent and the three meals provided for him in college. This leaves him with little to no cushioning for unusual

or emergency situations. For instance, in a period in his second term he fell unwell and was unable to afford the cost of the bus to the doctors and/ or a prescribed medicine. Instead, he had to resort to “as many over-the-counter Poundland remedies in the hope that one of them would help” as well as “re-stocking my emergency food supply because if you miss a meal in college then you have to buy your own”. However, this hardship continued throughout the year beyond this particular crisis point:

*“You have those nights where you can’t sleep because you’re worried about paying rent or those nights where you’re really hungry because you couldn’t make it back in time for college in time for dinner and you can’t afford any food so you just have to sit there and drink loads of water because that will take your mind off it.”*

This was taking a severe toll on his mental health and he was experiencing panic attacks. He was considering leaving the university, with him thinking “I should have gone somewhere else. Like I know I get the name of the degree but surely it can’t be worth all of this you know”. The reason he remained at the university despite this shall be unpacked in 6.6.

Gwyn did not have enough money by term three to pay for the first instalment of rent for her student housing, resulting her going on “a bit of a bender” for five consecutive nights, as she “panicked” and “wasn’t thinking clearly”. To this day, she “can’t remember most of those days”. She felt ashamed and guilty for responding to this crisis in this way. Harris et al. (2020) find that some participants “assumed full responsibility” for their financial situation, which amounts to symbolic violence as “an individual’s gradual internalisation and acceptance of those things which subordinate

them” (p.9). In a field where such high levels of financial capital circulate, it is a travesty that students’ physical and mental health can be compromised to this great extent. The severity of the cases of Gwyn and Tony is such that their existence alone should be the most solid evidence base for change – however, it is important to note that most of the participants who worked would also have been put in this situation had they not had the income from their jobs. Scarlett found the most stressful aspect of working during her first year the fact that “if I went home and didn’t have a job then I was screwed”. Therefore, it is likely that many other students who are unable to find work or maintain it on top of an intense academic course are also in this position.

The points presented in 6.4, when taken together, indicate that the opportunities promised to students are limited in reality due to time and money constraints. This pushes non-traditional students to be positioned even more as field outsiders as they cannot engage and meet other students: they cannot ‘do’ Durham the way the university presents as the correct way. The high cost of accommodation means that those without adequate financial capital face extreme situations that compromise their mental and physical health.

## **6.5 Social Structure of Colleges and the Assumption of Money**

This section describes how the colleges are built around the assumption of students having a high volume of disposable financial capital. As stated in sections three and four in chapter four, Durham colleges are not merely a place for its students to live, rather they offer (and often require a commitment to) traditional institutional practices and activities, such as the wearing of gowns and formal dinners. These are archaic in the sense that their original function was to socialise students to become a governing

class by instilling rank and order through mandating deferential behaviour to ‘superiors’ and authoritative behaviour to ‘inferiors’. I argued in 5.5.5 in the previous chapter that initial experiences at these events in induction week repelled some participants to the extent that they did not ever attend again. In this section I provide more insight into participants’ experiences throughout the year whilst navigating this obsolete and elitist social calendar that persists in the colleges until the modern day. In section 6.5.1 I outline the exceptions to this – there are several activities and events that are accessible to non-traditional students that participants greatly enjoyed. However, I follow this in sections 6.5.2 and 6.5.3 by explaining how the main social calendar works to exclude working-class students and how the processes of the JCR work to ensure the commitment of this exclusive social structure in place across student cohorts.

### **6.5.1 Accessible Activities**

As Byrom and Lightfoot (2012) point out, “the ‘cultural characteristics’ (Reay et al., 2005) of a post-1992 institution have been identified as being different than those of a traditional institution” (p.129), with them generally having a more negative impact on students’ sense of belonging. However, as I have emphasised in the rest of this chapter, there were clearly aspects of collegiate life that many of the participants greatly enjoyed. This extended to social events, with many participants in the photo interviews showing me photos of themselves and friends at events, such as bops (informal parties in college), college days, formal dinners and at balls. For many, the fact that these events were on offer was a positive as it provides “a short break from the intensity and repetitiveness” of university life (Gwyn) and are “a really nice break from just being at university and having to work all the time” (Joe). The first two of the events listed are more informal. Gwyn showed me a photo of a “bop” featuring a crowd of students,



of which she was one, dressed in fancy dress dancing at a disco within their college's dining hall, which she called "Standard [college name] party". Importantly, these parties are mainly free or low cost to attend and Gwyn explained that "in my other photo that's what you see of [my college] when you walk around but this is what it is like to live here." Ewa and Scarlett showed me similar photos of their group of friends, covered in face paint and smiling at their "college day", an event which was free to attend – Scarlett said it was "accessible to everyone". Ewa said this day was "so fun" and Scarlett described the relaxed atmosphere of the day - "no one really cared about appearance, everyone's just happy with themselves." For Gwyn, the relaxed party atmosphere captured in her photo demonstrates "this is the experience that is the collegiate system" and it is evident that many of the free or accessibly priced events are great facilitators of inclusion in the social life of the university. These events that take place within the colleges themselves are therefore an opportunity for these non-traditional students, who have established friendships within their college, to fully participate in and integrate into the smaller field of the college and the wider institutional sub-field.

However, it was clear that participants at more formal colleges, along with participants who occasionally attended the more formal events at other colleges, enjoyed some aspects of the more formal aspects of the collegiate system too. College balls at Durham are lavish affairs, with some costing up to £120 for the one ticket. Included in the ticket students get access to a range of entertainment, such as "fairground rides, a caricature, a fortune teller" (at Belle's college) and "four amusement park rides, dodgems, fire eaters, a trapeze" (at Joe's). Gwyn attended her college's annual ball which took place at a private venue outside of Durham city. She had expected to be

like a “big version of a bop” - “where everyone dresses up and we have a dance and then we eat and then we go home” – but was taken aback when she arrived by the extravagant nature of the event:

*“I was absolutely amazed when I walked in because I was like places like this, I’m northern, I’m from around here and I didn’t even know this place existed. I was looking around like this is something you would see in a movie, you wouldn’t actually expect to be a person there.”*

This echoes Dacin et al.’s (2011) findings about students’ reactions to formal dinners, which, as outlined chapter five, could be described as “astonishment and wonder” (p.20). Gwyn reported enjoying the event, and this novelty at taking part in social activities that they previously had experienced nothing like was a common theme in narratives and was viewed positively. Chloe said going to her ball was “so exciting”, as she had “never really had the opportunity to get dressed up or go somewhere like that” and Joe said he enjoyed “getting all dressed up and feeling really smart” for a formal he went to in his college. Belle said her experience at the ball was “cool” because she had “never got to go to a ball before”, and is “different to what [she’s] used to”, as it was “really fancy”. As I applied in the context of the institutions themselves in chapter four, for Bourdieu (1984), “taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier”, with agents distinguished by their own distinctions “between the beautiful and the ugly” (pp.5-6), which betrays any social position they are aiming for by revealing the true nature of their habitus through their tastes. Here we see how non-traditional students do to some extent enjoy engaging in the social structure of the university. They too find these “fancy” events, so different to what they have

experienced, “beautiful” in that they present an opportunity to engage in a special practice that they would not get a chance to do in any of their previous social fields.

In terms of formal meals, the participants who continued to attend these after induction week grew to like these after the year went on. When I asked her what advice she would give to herself before she came to Durham, Ewa said that she would advise “don’t stress, it’s not as formal as you think, you just have to dress smart”, in contrast to her prior expectations that “I’d have to sit like this [*sits up very straight*] and be like “oh yes this is lovely, isn’t it?” [*spoken in a posh voice*], that’s how I imagined it, especially with the whole prayer thing [*Latin grace is said at her college*]. I thought that was a bit extra but it seemed very, very traditional and I thought oh I’m not used to that. Some people gone to boarding and private might have come across but to me it was always canteen”. Rosie said her formals at her Bailey college are “a nice Durham tradition” that presented the opportunity to get together with friends. Hannah showed me a photo of the outside of a college where a formal she attended on her 19<sup>th</sup> birthday took place, saying “this represents the really formal aspects of uni that I really enjoy”. Although these events stem from a time when the aim was to instil hierarchy within the student body, some participants did not associate them with such. The enjoyment of participants for all, or some, of these different types of events that are unique to Durham’s collegiate structure give weight to Burt and Evans’ (2016) assertion that “a dormitory is organised for mere life, a college for the good life” (p.14).

### **6.5.2 Elitist Social Calendar**

However, it was clear that although many participants clearly enjoyed many of the – both formal and informal - social events, they were part of an elitist social calendar that worked as a whole to exclude non-traditional students. Firstly, it is important to remember that there were other participants who did not attend another formal dinner after induction week due to feeling alienated by their hierarchical structures and arena in which traditional students displayed their economic capital. Moreover, although the participants quoted above reported enjoying these events, it was clear that throughout the year these events also exacerbated the feelings of difference participants felt between themselves and other students in terms of wealth. For instance, although Faye was a fairly regular attendee of formal dinners at her college, in which they are free, she was continually reminded of her difference to the rest of the student body due to the “slight elitism” that accompanies her Bailey college’s drinking culture. She explained the “unspoken competition” between her student peers over who has purchased the most expensive bottle of wine, whereas she always opted – out of necessity – for the cheapest bottle available.

A ball at a Durham college is often not an annual one-off special event. At some colleges there are as many as four per year – Scarlett said, “we have a winter one, we have [a Christmas] ball, [name of a ball], a summer one”. This means that they, in combination with the formal dinners, punctuate the social calendar and attendance at these events is seen as intrinsic to maximising the student experience. Several participants referenced the fact that they were glad they experienced a ball for the fact that it is “something everyone does” (Gwyn). Scarlett said that she was struck by the “number of people who would think it’s normal to spend huge amounts on a ball

ticket”. The lavish entertainment at the balls is reflected in their price - Scarlett estimated that the cost of attending all the balls within her college over the course of a year would add up to over £200. Unsurprisingly, many of the ball tickets priced participants out – Joe chose not to attend as it would use up a significant amount of his budget and Tony was unable to afford it. Joe pointed out that drinks at the ball venues are not included in the price of the ticket, meaning that an evening would be even more costly as these events are commonly held in hotels and similar venues that charge a premium for alcoholic drinks.

However, the typical cost of a ball ticket varied drastically between colleges. Scarlett that she was fortunate in that she countered herself being in “the most inclusive” colleges, as the price of balls was cheaper than the rest. She said that she sees balls in other colleges being advertised that cost as much as her budget for three weeks, which would render her participation unfeasible. Belle was “swayed a bit” as to whether attend her £70<sup>4</sup> ball, as she does not “just have that to hand” with the price being a “big discussion” among her group of friends but the fact that it was possible to pay in instalments made it possible to go. Hannah paid £50 to go to her college’s ball but said she had spoken to a friend in a college where the ticket was £97, and she said would not have attended for over £50.

Moreover, in order to access these events – bops, balls and formal dinners - one also has to be a fully paid member of the JCR (explained in the next section) and to have the requisite attire, with the combination of the JCR fee and gown alone costing approximately £150 (ten weeks’ budget for Tony and over a month’s for Scarlett), on

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<sup>4</sup> Prices rounded to the nearest £10 to retain anonymity of participants’ college membership

top of which an appropriate smart outfit is needed. Chloe said that she paid for these “lump sums in the beginning”, without realising “how much of a difference it made later on”, in part contributing to the point where she was pushed to get a part-time job. Beyond the cost of attending these, it was clear that many of the events were exclusive due to their emphasis on drinking. Although as stated earlier, many participants’ friends referenced upon visiting the University that students were working rather than partying, there is a significant drinking culture that comes to characterise these elitist events. Hannah explains how her friend was telling her she feels a pressure to drink at formal dinners “because everyone brings a bottle of wine and if you don’t drink everyone looks at you weirdly”, whereas for Hannah – who does not drink – it was “never like that” at the formals she had gone to. There seemed to be no clear pattern as to which colleges were more committed to drinking events than others, and clearly, this is not communicated to prospective students throughout the college-choice making process. The lack of transparency around this results in very different experiences for students based on luck of the drawer.

A lot of these events named above take place within college – the exception is the balls that often take place off-site - and students who cannot afford to pay the price for these one-off nights, despite paying college fee and JCR fee, are forced to be confined to their own room surrounded by the noise of their excited peers taking part in balls, bops and formals. They are quite literally excluded from their own home. Furthermore, the nature and name of these events are unique to Durham and require learning a specific ‘lingo’ upon arrival to the university. As stated in the previous chapter, Scarlett described how her college handbook she received following her offer gave her doubts due to the specific terms used making her feel like she was joining a secret society that

you might find in a private school, and Rosie said her friends from home were always asking her “what’s a formal?”. Tony describes how all these nicknames makes him feel excluded for not understanding what they mean. He was unable to afford to attend and therefore not able to informally pick up what the terms mean in reality:

*“It took me until about a week ago to work out what “ents” meant, there are so many of these things, jargon and the acronyms and all the little words that are just a Durham thing, and yeah I don’t know what any of these mean, these are words designed specifically to keep people like me out of places like this and I resent all of them. You have to like learn a new language”.*

### **6.5.3 Student “Democracy” and the Domination of JCR Positions by Traditional Students**

The JCRs within the colleges are built upon a model of nominal democracy, whereby students stand for election to be on the executive committee in charge of running the events, and to some extent the finances, of the college. These students who hold these positions then recruit other students to sit on their committees. As such, in addition to the many sporting opportunities outlined earlier in this chapter, there are also many positions of responsibility and leadership. One such position is that of a “freshers’ representative” (or, in line with the ‘lingo’ that characterises Durham collegiate life, a ‘frep’) who are second-, third-, or fourth-year students who hold pastoral responsibility for the wellbeing of a corridor or flat of first-year students. Many of the participants referenced the benefits of the fresher representatives in assisting them in induction week, and who they stayed in touch with over the year. The college parenting system was also seen as helpful – Rosie said that she would reach out to them for support.

Tony, who, as described in the previous section, felt a “palpable isolation” from being in the college environment, felt supported by the pastoral structures in place in his college:

*“our identity rep[resentative] is absolutely lovely and is almost solely responsible for keeping me sane and alive. Like I’ll complain about the noise and they’ll just go “come to the TV room, we’ll play Mario Kart and calm you down””.*

This residential proximity between Tony and his college’s identity representative meant that, in the absence of friends, he could seek out these students as alternative channels of support. This close relationship and the proffer of immediate, practical help is unlikely to occur in a non-collegiate university where the student representatives would be responsible for a much higher number of undergraduates and would be less likely to live in halls of residence alongside them. Indeed, as Burt and Evans (2016) argue, “in the tight social environment of the college, a seriously troubled student cannot easily pass notice” (p.9). The paradox is that although Tony attributes the collegiate structure as the cause this extreme isolation in the first instance (as outlined in the previous section), it also provided him with a means to alleviate it slightly. However, if the collegiate environment was less exclusive in the first instance, the reliance on students to volunteer to take on unpaid representative and pastoral roles and support other students from the goodness of their heart would not be necessary.

As stated in the previous section, at the start of the year the JCRs charge a mandatory levy that students have to pay in order to be able to attend social events and benefit



from JCR-run activities (attendance for which payment is required on top of this levy). Many participants spoke about how they were disappointed with the work of their JCR and felt it had done little to effect genuine, or in fact any, positive change in the time that they had been there. Consequently, Hannah “regretted” paying the levy, as did Gwyn who stated that “they make you pay so much at the beginning and then never talk to you again”. She explained “they don’t care about the people, they care about their stupid roles”, describing them as “kids with prefect badges” who favoured spending the funds on “chocolate fountains” and other unnecessary costs for the elitist social events, rather than spending the money on improving the collegiate environment as a whole for everyone.

The majority of participants referenced a problematic drinking culture taking place within the colleges that extended beyond balls and formals. For Holly, “if you don’t drink, college [*the JCR*] won’t put anything on for you”. Others felt the same, as when telling me her ideas for her “dream” Durham college, Chloe referenced the fact that they would put on alternative events in induction week and throughout the year in the JCR that would include those who do not drink alcohol. As I argued in 6.2.4, many of the participants dealt with the problems of exclusionary college environments by exerting agency by finding students who were of a similar mindset and means to them who, then, as a group would opt for alternative events. Yet this is of course dependent on there being within proximity to like-minded people, which currently can be quite unlikely in an institution characterised by the same demographics as Durham (as demonstrated by Tony’s situation). For the combination of these reasons, participants spoke about wanting to bring about wider structural change within their colleges. For instance, Scarlett wanted to stand to become the head organiser of the largest annual

ball in her college, in order to make the event more accessible for low-income students by reducing the price of the ticket and providing bursary support for students who could not afford it otherwise.

However, there was clearly an issue with the so-called democratic processes of students being elected into the positions that make the decisions such as these. Many participants referenced the collegiate environment – and particularly those within the executive committees – being “cliquey”. Chloe said that within her college, because of the existence of the “in-crowd” cliques, “you already know who is going to get voted for as soon as you see who is nominated”. Moreover, it was clear that students with high levels of both cultural and economic capital were most likely to gain the power of an executive JCR position. Scarlett described the application process for this position, saying that previous candidates had filled up the pages with points such as “I’ve been head girl, I’ve been on sports teams”, which was unavailable to her, as all she had in her previous life “was going to work”. At some colleges it is mandatory to live in the college in order to take on an executive role. As stated in section 6.4.1, this means that the vast majority of the participants in this research would be unable to consider doing so. As Bourdieu (1996) wrote “it is the people who are the richest in economic capital, cultural capital and social capital who are the first to head for new positions” (p.262) and here we see how, as Bathmaker et al. (2013) “certain students can more readily mobilise several forms of capital simultaneously, for example combining cultural capital in the form of ‘what they know’ with social capital in the form of ‘who they know’” (p.726). They argue this in terms of the differences in abilities for young people to gain positions in the labour market. This process that

advantages those with middle-class habituses is clearly at play within the earlier stage of the university too.

It was evident that beyond holding formal executive positions within the JCR, there was little opportunity for other students to contribute to enacting change due to the hostile, “cliquey” environment that extended to the group of student-leaders in many of the colleges. Rosie explained that she felt as though if she were to express an opinion in a JCR meeting within her college, “people would look at you like *what?*” Holly said that she felt the need to “impress and get on the good side” of the student leaders within her college, and Ewa said she felt nervous going to play pool in the (physical) JCR in her college due to the presence and domination of executive committee members within this space. This means that non-traditional students who want and need change to enjoy a fulfilling and inclusive student experience are being shut out of these “democratic” processes, and currently have no platform to create change. Instead, we have wealthy “kids in prefect badges” who are more likely to be elected into positions of power due to their previous experience at school, and are more likely to have ideas that resonate with other wealthy students, running the show. There is little evidence of the “civic engagement” that Burt and Evans (2016) suggest characterises collegiate life (p.80).

This process results in the events put on by college JCRs continually catering to wealthy students. Scarlett said that when she articulated her plan to widen access to her college’s ball, her fellow students expressed resentment at the fact that cheaper tickets would mean less extravagant entertainment and defended the current cost on the grounds that “you do get a lot for your money for £80”. There was no consideration

of the fact that, as Scarlett pointed out “you’re not going to get a lot if you’re not there”. Rosie and Ben described the presence of a self-proclaimed “elite gentlemen’s club” within their college, which operated on an invitation-only basis with only those who had attended one of a few of the most expensive private schools in the UK and abroad being considered. This is clearly an intimation of the “secret” and Oxford Bullingdon club societies (Verkaik, 2018). It was clear that they dominated collegiate life – Rosie reported hearing them “with their champagne” – and that there was little effort on the part of the JCR to shut this club, that operates on a by definition exclusionary and elitist principle, down. Scarlett said her enjoyment of her college day was lessened by the occurrence of dares or challenges, which included getting first-year students to consume inedible substances, such as a whole bottle of fish oil, which they then have to vomit up, and felt like “bullying”. The Social Committee within her college organised this. These occurrences are clearly reminiscent of the “hazing” that occurs within private schools. The student-run element of colleges, that the university is so proud of and advocates on ground of increasing accountability and democracy, actually results in events catering to the elite within the student body, and is a significant contributing factor to the fact that “what gets to count as tasteful is simply that which is claimed as their own by middle-class people” (Lawler, 2008:126) in the institutional sub-field.

When I asked Scarlett why she felt the JCR chose to hold these activities, she said “it’s just tradition and everybody sticks to it”. Here we see how the ‘saga’ that unites traditional students at the University on the basis of historical unique accomplishments continues into the modern day due to the dominance of wealthy students in the positions of power. Far from establishing “normative bonds” in the wider student

body, this resulted in feelings of discomfort and exclusion for participants, who were also directly excluded through the workings of economic capital. There is a persistent over-representation of the social group with the fitting habitus and correct capital who thrive in this environment. This group does not understand that others may be unable to partake as fully in certain activities, which has ensured the continuity of exclusionary activities from year to year. They are able to exert their dominance through both being a force in a numbers and also due to the fact that university is structured to provide an extension to the boarding school experience and essentially legitimises this behaviour.

This is problematic in terms of the inequalities this creates for students in the university itself, but also in terms of how it plays a part in contributing to later inequalities in the field of employment. Bathmaker et al. (2013) state that existing research finds “demonstrating leadership capabilities [is] particularly beneficial” (p.726) for graduates entering the field of employment, and so these disparate opportunities in accessing executive communities builds on those that in other extra-curricular activities that I outlined earlier in this chapter. Burt and Evans (2016) argue that the “strong civic engagement” that comes with the collegiate structure “is sure to feed back later in life” (p.80). In actuality, the “feed-back” process that is likely to result from Durham’s college system is that the students who were richest in specific forms of capital upon entering the university see the greatest increase in this by graduation, in turn securing a future that provides them with high amounts of economic capital and a life in the financial elite.

## **6.6 Pride, Family Sacrifice and the Commitment to Pursuing Social Mobility**

This final substantive section seeks to demonstrate why, despite the numerous different processes that work to exclude these participants within the institutional sub-field, only one participant chose to leave by the end of their first year. In turn, it will show how the high retention rate that characterises universities within the ‘elite’ sub-field, is not a result of more positive experiences and better pastoral support offered by these institutions. Rather, it comes about due to the doxa that privileges pursuing the pathway that will lead to social mobility above or else, and is underpinned by non-traditional students’ anxiety of not making the most of their “one shot” at reaching a more financially secure future.

As argued throughout this chapter, participants faced a number of difficulties that ranged from objectively unfair to severely debilitating and were directly a result of being from a non-traditional background in an ‘elite’ university environment. As I have mentioned, one participant – Ben - did leave the university before the end of my research and another – Tony – was also seriously considering it but emailed me during the summer before his second year saying he was “optimistic” about starting at the university again now he was living out of college. This (one of fourteen, or 7.2%) is higher than the typical level of attrition for first-year students – as stated in chapter two, 6.3% of students leave the sector nationally. Obviously this sample statistic cannot be taken to be representative of the wider Durham University student population but it may be explained by the fact that although this attrition figure is lower for RG universities, it is higher for non-traditional student groups. Overall, given the stories of discrimination, exhaustion, hardship and anxiety faced by the participants, it

is a testament to the determination and resilience of my participants that the figure was not higher.

### **6.6.1 Anxiety about Academic Performance**

It was notable that all but one of the participants remained extremely committed to their academic work despite the difficulties they were facing and their overloaded schedules. First-year students at the University are required to achieve 40% in each module to pass the year and continue into second year, with this mark not contributing to their overall degree classification. Despite this, most participants were putting immense levels of effort into lecture and seminar preparation and every piece of assessed work. For instance, Faye said, “I already try and work as if I was in third year” and Rosie told me, in reference to one of her photos that showed her making pancakes with her corridor friends, that this was a rare night of her socialising as she had spent the rest of the time working her way through texts on her course’s recommended reading lists. When I asked participants if they had any particular “highs” throughout the year as a whole in the third interview, most responded by detailing a time when they had received feedback on a particularly highly scoring piece of coursework or essay, with Joe describing a time when he had scored 100%. After exam results were published, I emailed (with consent gained in interview 3) the repeat sample participants asking if they could provide me with an update of how they did, leaving it open for them to provide as much detail as they wished. All of them who replied in percentage terms had received a 2:1 or higher, with some achieving over 80% overall or in some modules. The others who replied qualitatively said they were “really happy” (Chloe) with the grades they had achieved which were “higher than expected” (Tony), and Joe and Rosie had secured internships in their sectors of interest, requiring high grades on their application form.

Reay and colleagues find that with their high-attaining, hard-working non-traditional participants, this investment in academic work was due to the fact that the collegiate institution “represented a haven of learning; a place to display their intellectual selves without being ridiculed as odd, which had been their experience at their comprehensive schools” (Crozier et al., 2008:174) and that they invested in their academic work whilst viewing the social space of the university critically (Reay et al., 2009). However, it was clear that my participants remained so conscientious not only due to their interest in – or “love” for (Rosie) - their disciplines and eagerness to learn, but also a compulsion to do well, which meant that this commitment to work tipped over into anxiety-inducing and/or -responsive behaviour for several. Chloe said that she felt “guilty” whenever she was not doing academic work and Faye said that every time she spends “having fun”, “it just feels so wrong” because she feels as though she “should be studying and focusing”.

One root of this anxiety was a feeling of needing to prove their worth at the institution academically due to their social background. Gwyn explained that she received coursework marks when she was home for Christmas, four of which were within upper second class boundaries and two were within first class, which she thought was “pretty okay for the first term”. However, she explained:

*“my parents were like “no, come on, we need more firsts” because they are still scared stiff that the university is going to turn around and say, “we’ve just done a background check and you’re actually not going to sit at our table and actually your grades are really bad so we’re going to get rid of you” and*



*they're still scared that that's going to happen because that's just the culture, they're still in [my home town], that's what they still think".*

Notably, Gwyn was one of the participants who received a contextualised offer and – as outlined in section 6.2.3 - did not use her prior academic attainment as a way to mentally justify her own being at the university when she felt out of place. Moreover, as explained in section 5.5.4 in the previous chapter, she had received derogatory and classist remarks about her A-Level grades from another student. These factors combined, meant that she was working extremely hard throughout her first year to justify her worthiness of being at the university on academic grounds, primarily to herself but also in response to her parents' fear of her being gotten "rid" of.

For other participants, the anxiety was caused by a feeling the need to maximise their time at university in the belief that it was their one shot to get the best footing into a professional career. Faye said her "biggest fear" would be "flopping out and getting a third or something" because of the consequences this would have on her job prospects and not being able to financially support her parents as she plans to do. She felt that her being able to improve the financial situation of her and her parents was "very much now or never", saying that:

*"If I screw this up, there's no turning back, there's no safety net".*

Joe was committed to finding an internship in the summer of his first year, an option that is not usually available until after second year. With regard to her selection of second-year modules, Faye said it was "less and less" a consideration what she would

enjoy the most and more the content that she perceived to provide with “good employment prospects”. Elizabeth was irritated and concerned that her department did not have a greater provision of careers information, as she already had a career in mind that she was committed to pursuing as “an end target” of her HE journey to provide a better life for her and her daughters.

This anxiety about maximising their time at the university in order to produce the most solid set of credentials possible often related to the high cost of tuition fees and their maintenance costs. For Tony, the high cost taken on by both him and his father for him to be able to attend the university means that he feels like he needs to be a “return on the investment” in terms of him seeing a pay-off in his future prospects. Rosie said she was constantly questioning “am I going to get a good job at the end of this?” because “this is so expensive, am I doing the right thing here? It always come back to money, the expense of the whole process.” Faye said, whenever she had moments of wanting to “just send [a formative essay] off” without putting maximum effort into it, she reminded herself “no, because I’m going to be paying god knows how much for the rest of my life”. This resonates with Hordósy et al. (2018)’s findings that students felt a “fear” of achieving below a 2:2 because of the long-term consequences this could have on entry into, and progression throughout, a career. These narratives are perhaps unsurprising given that, as Raaper (2019) argues, “the functionality of education in terms of needing to secure employment has become prevalent in neoliberal societies” (p.12), which is exacerbated by the current context of “pension crises, unaffordable housing and continuing austerity” that is likely to result in feelings of financial powerlessness within a whole generation of graduates (Clark et al., 2019:718).

However, Crozier et al. (2008) found that “middle-class students tended to demonstrate greater confidence and sense of self-worth” due to the fact that they “are successful people who have rarely if ever failed” (p.170). My participants had never experienced academic failure in the fact they had been highly successful at school despite challenging educational journeys through to university. Yet Faye compared this to the case of more privileged students who she felt experienced these worries to a lesser extent due to having a “safety net” in place in the form of financial help from their family. She said, “I feel like walking alone through a forest and nobody else is there, it’s starting to get dark and you’ve got to fend for yourself, compared to other people that might have had a campfire going on, they’ve got friends and family there, all sorted.” Moreover, it was striking how these participants’ accounts of constant hard work and anxiety surrounding it differed to the case of Holly. As I stated in 6.3.1, she framed her first year very much in terms of it “not counting” towards her overall grade, and therefore she wanted to spend it “having fun”. In interview 1, she reflected on her first term saying, “I didn’t work enough, I know that for sure” and said she was motivated to work harder in the next two terms. However, in interview 2 at the end of her second term, she said “I’ve done less work, I’m definitely less studious this term”. When I asked her why she thought she needed to work harder than she was, she told me she had not attended any lectures “in so long” and had not caught up in her own time. She said “I need to remind myself that I’m here to do a degree. I do forget that from time to time”. This contrasts greatly with the cases of the other participants, who, rather than needing a “reminder” as to the real purpose of their being at the university, struggled to ever switch off from this bigger-picture thinking.

### 6.6.2 Reluctance to Admit the Truth

It was clear that, alongside the positives of forming great friendships, experiencing new opportunities, and finding knuckling down to their academic work rewarding as well as stressful, a major factor in keeping participants within the university was a reluctance to admit the full truth of how they were finding the university to their family due to the pride they had in their children being at Durham. Their pride was clearly very important to participants, as evidenced in the fact that – as outlined in the previous chapter and articulated by participants in their first interviews – several participants reported being attracted to the university’s traditional practices and referenced wanting to wear a gown “to feel proud for getting in somewhere like this” (Belle). It might be expected that as the year went on, this aspect of pride would lessen in significance, in relation to all the new experiences that they were encountering. However, in response to me asking whether she had any particular “high” moments during the year in interview 3, Belle again said “matriculation”. This was because she was feeling like she had “already made good friends’ but also “because it was such an achievement”. She went on to reference the fact that she had bought a photo of the event for her parents:

*“my dad was like “oh that’s such an amazing thing to have as no one we know from home has got one of these and you’ve got one” so yeah that was definitely a high point just in terms of being proud.”-*

Other participants alluded to the immense pride felt by their family members that they were at Durham University, as articulated by Elizabeth:

*“they’re all really proud but I’m just like I haven’t done anything yet to be proud of, do you know what I mean? It’s like you can proud when I finish in like three years but like getting in wasn’t exactly the hard part. But my mum’s like “oh yeah my daughter’s at uni” [...] My friend’s already planning my graduation. I was like “it’s bit far away. What if I don’t even graduate?” and she’s like “you will, you will, you’re doing really well” [...] My girls are like “oh mummy are you doing your uni work?” They tell everyone that their mummy’s at uni, they think it’s great. Everyone’s dead proud but I’m thinking “oh god, yous are all proud and I might fall flat on my face.”*

This contrasts with Reay et al.’s (2010) findings that “many working-class parents, including those of case-study students, want their children to go to university but there remain underlying fears that the move may result in ‘abandoning the family and its norms and values” (p.116). Here, all participants’ families were clearly highly invested in their entry to a university like Durham and like Bathmaker et al. (2013)’s participants they were “from aspirational working-class families, who encouraged and supported their children’s development in ways redolent of more middle-class families” (p.733).

It was interesting that many of the participants commented on the fact that a photo they had chosen to bring with them to the interview had originally been taken by them to show their parents. For instance, Ben said in reference to a photo he showed me of him playing croquet at a college event, “it’s the sort of thing I can send to my mam and be like “look what I’m doing at uni.”” However, when discussing this photo with me, his narrative revolved mainly around work – this event took place following a night where

he had been working long hours. Although he mentioned how enjoyable the event at which the photo was taken was, he focused on discussing how difficult it is to balance his paid work with fun activities – an aspect of his university life not captured by the actual photos taken to send to his family. It was clear that this familial pride translated into participants wanting to live up to their family's expectations. For Tony, many of the photos he took throughout his first two terms at the university were "performative". He showed me a photo of him at matriculation, where he is wearing a suit and gown and smiling. He said that this is the photo he "got people to take" so that he could "have something" to send to his family and "go "look I promise I'm definitely at Durham, here's some evidence"". This smart and smiley photographic version of himself sits in direct contrast to how he felt on the day – as outlined in the previous chapter, this was a day that is etched into his mind for it being the day he realised he would not fit in at the university. He said, "what doesn't get sent to everyone is that later that day I had to hide in some woods and have a small breakdown".

This feeling of needing to present a positive picture of themselves at university was underpinned by participant's realisation of the level of pride that their family members attached to them being at Durham, and not wanting to disappoint them by admitting the reality. Tony said that admitting how he is finding the university, and the financial difficulties he was having, would lead his dad to think it was his own fault for failing to provide. The option of leaving the university was also unthinkable to him. He said that, despite often contemplating it, he realised that "it has always hit me as it would break dad's heart":

*“He’s living vicariously through this because he never got the chance [to go to university] so you absolutely cannot drop out. I don’t care how ill you get as a result, I don’t care how much of your time is consumed by fear and anxiety and an awful sick feeling in the pit of your stomach when you contemplate the future, you have to stay at the university. Life would be so much easier if I dropped out and got a job. I could go to a university somewhere else or I could do some practical training. I could do anything and it would be better than this. But I always come back to how disappointed dad would be. I’d rather that I suffer and he is proud than I feel okay.”*

This demonstrates that high retention rates at universities like Durham are not a necessarily a reflection of fulfilling student experiences at these universities. Rather, the pool of students who are most likely to contemplate leaving at other universities – working-class and first-generation students - have likely made, along with their friends and family, significant financial and emotional investment in their own, or their child’s, university experience that leave them unable to contemplate leaving due to having to live with the guilt for the rest of their lives.

## **6.7 Summary**

As I argued in chapter four, the institutional sub-field of Durham University displays an image of a collegiate, welcoming, traditional and special – or “distinct” - environment. I have argued in this chapter that the reality for non-traditional students who enter this field is very different. The over-arching argument was that access to life within the college communities and the wider university requires high levels of all types of capital, which in turn feeds back into how much students are able to build on these same forms of capital during their time in the field. The institutional sub-field of

Durham University is therefore a prime example of how educational institutions build on “pre-existing social differences”, which reinforces and enables them “through official recognition, to become fully realized and lastingly inscribed in objectively measurable dispositions” (Bourdieu, 1996:150). In the next and final chapter, I will outline how this can be changed.



## Chapter 7: Concluding Discussion

### 7.1 Introduction

This PhD research has sought to move beyond deficit conceptualisations of non-traditional student experience by focusing on the role of the *institution*. It looks at its role in creating low application rates from non-traditional students in the first instance, that in turn feed into non-traditional students feeling different and inadequate due to the dominance of privately-educated and middle-class students within the student body. The thesis has contributed to the literature base by employing three novel approaches. Firstly, it employed a holistic case study design that took one university as the unit of analysis. Through taking a multi-faced methodological approach, I was able to focus on the *institution* and explore both the positives and the problems that characterise it structurally, culturally and socially. Secondly, the research explored the experiences of non-traditional students in relation to the institution at a level of detail unmatched by other studies. To do this, I conducted a series of repeat interviews with participants throughout their first year in the institution. The selection of students at this point in their studies was designed to maximise the focus on change and transition, as they were able to recall life within, and the process of leaving, former social fields, as well as being at the point in which they were initially experiencing the new field and trying to adjust to it across the year. Finally, I contributed to the literature that seeks to apply Bourdieu's theoretical tools to understanding current social problems. This is particularly true for my application of his term "social field" (Bourdieu, 1966), which has received less attention in sociological literature than "habitus" (Gamsu, 2018a), but is key to the development and use of his other concepts due to his emphasis on the relationality between environment and disposition (Rawolle and Lingard, 2003; Maton, 2012; Thomson, 2012).

I have sought to argue that universities that share certain characteristics in common (such as being established before 1992, holding membership of mission groups that self-proclaim to represent the ‘leading’ institutions, receiving high levels of research funding, as well as holding high levels of social prestige) can be seen as their own social field. I have termed this the ‘elite’ sub-field throughout this thesis, in recognition of the fact that the attributes of the institutions within this group mean that they are autonomous to the wider HE field. I then proposed that individual universities should be conceptualised as individual social fields, and I termed this the ‘institutional sub-field’. This is because existing literature has pointed to the fact that students experience life within ‘elite’ universities differently according to their background, which points to the fact that they occupy dominant and subordinate positions according to their levels of capital.

## **7.2 Key Findings**

This section highlights my key findings in relation to the four research questions that underpin this thesis:

1. How does Durham University position itself in relation to the HE field and HE elite sub-field?
2. Whose habituses structure the institutional sub-field of Durham University? What implications does this have for students’ positions within the field and their experiences?
3. To what extent can students with non-traditional habituses engage in the institutional sub-field?
4. What processes and practices sustain the continuity of the field from year to year, across staff and student cohorts?

## **How does Durham University position itself in relation to the HE field and HE elite sub-field?**

I argued in chapter four that Durham University was historically a field outsider to both Oxbridge and the newer civic university models that it is close to in age in terms of structure, function and outlook. I proposed that this field outsider status holds relevance today, as the University draws on this historical position to market itself as an institution distinct to UK universities in general and its close competitors within the so-called 'elite' collection of research-intensive, high-tariff universities. In terms of the wider UK field, the University markets itself as built around the core concept of 'excellence' and aligns itself more with the leaders of the global HE field. This is similar to other universities of the Russell Group that seek to maintain dominant positions above newer universities. The notion of 'difference' is central to how the University positions itself *within* the elite sub-field. Durham University's claim to 'distinction' to the rest of the field is done by employing its unique attribute of the pastoral-based collegiate system to demonstrate the "unrivalled" student experience it can offer. This is done, firstly, by maintaining its arcane institutional practices – that are "invented traditions" (Hosbawm and Ranger, 1983) in the fact that they are hold no relevance today and are artificially created in colleges founded after the 19<sup>th</sup> century - that are not on offer elsewhere outside of Oxbridge. Secondly, it plays up to narratives of maximising student choice by advocating the choice of its colleges as a way in which students can tailor their Durham experience to themselves. Thirdly, it advertises the vast array of extra-curricular opportunities that the colleges offer in order to attract students who want to gain additional forms of cultural capital to secure advantage in the field of employment. The "distinctive" collegiate structure is therefore "integral to attracting staff and students and thereby supporting the university's reputation", as it competes for social and financial capital in the "ever more complex and competitive"

“global ecology of higher education” (Durham University, 2016c:8). In sum, the University positions itself as a special institution within the elite sub-field, marked out by its collegiate system that provides a distinguished experience for its students. This system allows them to enjoy experiences that they would not have in another institution and provides them with the credentials to, in turn, be marked out as “distinct” in the graduate labour market.

**Whose habituses structure the institutional sub-field of Durham University? What implications does this have for students’ positions within the field and their experiences?**

As demonstrated in chapter four, historically the habituses of the children of the elite and professional classes of the 19<sup>th</sup> century structured the field of Durham University. Chapters five and six showed that this continues to be the case today. The admissions processes that act as a gatekeeper to the field, along with the high cost of accommodation, ensure a critical mass of traditional students, as non-traditional students are pushed out through lack of academic or economic capital in the first instance. This leads to middle-class students having the power in numbers to structure the field. This is evident in the instances of direct and indirect classism experienced by participants from student peers, revolving around their supposed lack of different forms of capital – linguistic (accent), academic (A level grades) and cultural (schooling background). Participants with non-south eastern accents felt stigmatised against and had to deal with ‘banter’ relating to how they spoke or where they were from, and felt as though they needed to defend their place within the university field. This indicates that there is a problem with such a strong skew to traditional students – although those who are perpetrators of such behaviour are in the minority, they take the fact that they are very much in the majority in demographic terms as justification to act in ways that

structure the field around exclusion. Traditional students are further able to structure the field by taking up leadership positions within the colleges and designing student events to suit people like themselves. This shows the multiple ways in which condensing a high volume of privileged students into one institutional sub-field results in the discrimination that working-class people face at large in society being played out on an acute and interpersonal level for non-traditional students at the university.

Moreover, the University itself actively contributes to the structuring of its field around middle-class student habituses. This occurs firstly by actively articulating the normally silent and taken-for-granted doxa that underpins the HE field in general and that positions some universities as ‘special’ places and legitimises the HE hierarchy. This results in non-traditional students further feeling like they need to prove their worth at the institution via excelling in academic terms, which – in the case of these participants - often results in students experiencing anxiety. This is accompanied by, secondly, the University’s commitment to specific practices on grounds of tradition that work to maintain the orderings of the past into the present through rituals and symbols. Events such as formal dinners and their intrinsically hierarchical nature provide a space for students to display their wealth and demarcate boundaries between institutional sub-field members and college serving staff. These are part of a wider student social calendar that is built on extravagance and luxury, which is a result of a combination of the institution’s “embedded priorities” stemming from its institutional past and the student demographics it solely served. However, it is also a result of the University’s present day priorities to market invented traditions as central to the university and distinct from competitors, and attract students in the increasingly competitive field of HE. We can say that this university is an active agent in reproducing inequalities in

HE by channelling the preferences of middle class, particularly the privately educated, cultural group into its social structure.

Participants' initial feelings of difference to the rest of the student body continued past induction week and were a product of primarily the environment of the college, in which differences in the habituses of students from different backgrounds become expressed through micro-encounters. I explained that this was not wholly negative, as evidenced by the many narratives of diverse friendship groups and the new experiences participants had as a result of this. It demonstrated that the problem with any habitus-field clash lies not with non-traditional students for being reluctant to engage and immerse themselves in university life, or in fact with the behaviour of the majority of traditional students.

The thesis has demonstrated in the strongest terms that the result of this privileging of the traditional student habitus negatively impacts the experience of non-traditional students. These students feel like they are in the minority on the basis of their class background and encounter many obstacles to feeling like they belong within the institution. This impacts their perceived self-worth, as they conceptualise their difference in class terms as academic inadequacy, contributing to contemplations of leaving the university and poor mental health as they navigate their first year whilst battling with these feelings. Lacking the requisite economic and cultural capital to take part in events that are positioned as intrinsic to the Durham student experience make students feel like they are illegitimate members of the field.

### **To what extent can students with non-traditional habituses engage in the institutional sub-field?**

The participants in this research were still able to engage with the sub-field at the level of access. I argued that, in contrast to existing evidence that argues that first generation students often lack the cultural capital to understand university hierarchies, participants demonstrated a detailed understanding of the presence of status differences within the HE field, gained from the school in the instance of two selectively educated students or more informal channels with comprehensively educated participants. The significant majority of participants were actively seeking to go to the “best” university they could, despite the fact that earlier on in the choice-making process they had set their expectations on a lower-ranking university. The desire for the “best” university was expressed in social mobility terms of this facilitating opportunities that were different to the ones available in their local community, with them aspiring to careers that are more interesting and require fewer demanding hours than those in the service and manual sectors that they or their relatives had experienced. Participants then actively sought to develop their understanding of which universities are ‘the best’ by referencing published league tables. These stood in place for cultural capital, with the comprehensively educated participants basing their choices around league table positions as much as selectively educated participants based theirs around their school’s wishes.

It was then argued that Durham University was perceived by participants as one of the ‘best’ options within the already smaller ‘elite’ sub-field, seen as such due to the traditional practices being seen symbols of prestige and associated with high quality and distinction to the rest of the sector. This reasoning for selecting the university again points to how non-traditional students are increasingly framing their decisions

in terms of rationalist discourses. Participants then described their preferences for Durham University being centred on the perception that it occupies in a middle ground between the prestige and career prospects associated with the unattainable Oxbridge field and a more relaxed environment associated with the rest of the 'elite' sub-field. For some participants the University's traditional practices were seen as having the potential to facilitate feelings of inclusion and these actively drew them to consider entering the University.

Participants described their concerns in the lead-up to going to university in terms of entering the Durham University field specifically, rather than going to higher education in general. These were, firstly, in terms of feeling like a field outsider due to being aware of the dominance of middle-class students in the student body. Moreover, the high costs caused them to have strong doubts about firming Durham University as an option. Participants were otherwise incredibly committed to and excited by the prospect of coming to Durham University and ultimately all participants still entered the university - these worries were described in rationalist terms as being worth it in terms of the cost-benefits of attending a university in one of the more 'elite' positions in the 'elite' HE sub-field. It follows by extension that many non-traditional students who do not subscribe to such socially constructed rationalist discourses, but would be equally engaged students, are put off from applying in the first instance due to these two factors. The research design of this study sits in contrast to the majority of existing studies, which have taken a particular school, or handful of, as their starting point and examined their students' orientations to HE and subsequent post-18 paths. This study reverses this and takes the university as a starting point to see how the different pathways of participants – who have started from different places in the



country and in different types of school - converge to end up at the same institution. This approach provides insight into the often serendipitous route that participants took to entering the university, particularly those who attended summer school interventions as outlined in section four of chapter five. The importance of summer school interventions in breaking down structural barriers for students to enter - rather than raising their aspirations - suggests that there are many students who have the aptitude and motivation to come to such a university who are excluded from doing so on the basis of high tariffs. Therefore, many non-traditional students are likely unable to engage in the field of Durham University at the level of access on these grounds, which in turn contributes to a reputation and reality where non-traditional students remain firmly in the small minority.

In terms of participation within the field, the non-traditional students found it difficult to participate fully. Although some students were actively drawn to the field by traditional practices and the collegiate structure, these paradoxically caused them to be unable to engage in student life at the university. I demonstrated that there are many benefits to the collegiate system and that participants described rich engagement with available activities that arise from the plethora of opportunities at department-, university-, and most importantly, college-level. However, the wider attitude that characterises the institution creates an anxiety about the extent to which students need to do this. I argued that this a prime example of how the “air about the place” (Clark, 1970; 1972) is an example of a doxa (Bourdieu, 2000) that creates divisions among the student body, rather than a “saga” (Clark, 1970; 1972) that unifies institutional actors who occupy the same objective “rank”. Moreover, the research shed light on the profound financial difficulties that participants – including those who received the

maximum student loan and a bursary, and those who did not, as well as those who worked and those who did not – face as a result of the extremely high price of college accommodation. For those who had to meet this cost via paid work, they had significantly less time available for studying and socialising in comparison to their wealthier peers who did not work. For all students, cost meant that they had significantly less opportunity to engage in extra-curricular activities than their peers.

Ultimately, this means that they do not have the time or money to engage in wealth of opportunities that the University advertises, the collegiate system promises, and that the majority of their peers embody. Therefore, the paradox is that although being a member of the institutional sub-field of the University is believed to provide non-traditional students with the ‘hard currency’ of a degree from within the elite sub-field to enter the professions, the requisite economical capital demanded by the University in terms of accommodation costs is likely to affect the extent of non-traditional students’ later social mobility, as it directly hinders their ability to compete with their student peers who have free-flowing economic capital and are able to access extra-curricular and internship opportunities.

There were some accessibly-priced and informal social activities that take place within college that participants greatly enjoyed, such as fancy-dress ‘bops’. However, these paled in significance in most colleges in terms of the regularity they assume within the social calendar. Although some participants enjoyed one-off attendance at events like balls due to having never experienced like it before, many were priced out and the centrality they assume in the life of a traditional Durham student means that for those who lack the capital to regularly attend, it can result in isolation in their own home of

the college. They are physically surrounded by opportunity, but excluded from partaking in it. Outright demands for particular levels of cultural capital – such as the requirement of being a specific grade to be able to use the music room – build on this to mean that even if they wanted to partake, students are excluded.

Despite this, the non-traditional participants were committed to maximising their time in the field for themselves and their families. It shows the immense resilience these students have despite the challenges they face. The University is incredibly lucky to have these committed, engaged and eager students in their community and the evidence base of this thesis clearly demonstrates that they deserve institutional change that will create a fair environment that provides them with the same opportunities within the field as their wealthier counterparts.

**What processes and practices sustain the continuity of the field from year to year, across staff and student cohorts?**

First and foremost, the University's admissions processes maintain the structure of the university sub-field – with wealthy students occupying the dominant positions and non-traditional students occupying the lower positions – from year to year. Continually high-tariff entrance requirements mean that middle-class students, especially those from the south of the country, are dominant in terms of being part of a strong majority within the student body. The high cost of the colleges fees mean that those with the requisite academic capital but who are low in economic capital likely consider it unfeasible to come to the University purely on financial grounds, further contributing to the unbalanced demographics across cohorts. These positions are cemented throughout students' time at the institutions through practices that are implemented on grounds of tradition. Formal dinners and lavish social events enable privately-educated

students to display their schooling background and wealth, and leave those students without that level of economic and cultural capital to feel inferior. As a consequence, they often self-exclude from practices and remove themselves from events that are deemed central to collegiate life. This, combined with college fees, mean that non-traditional students are forced to take up employment alongside studying, meaning they have significantly less time to invest in collegiate social events. The student democracy within the colleges, combined with the unbalanced social demographics, mean that students from wealthy backgrounds are able to take up positions within the colleges and design events that suit themselves and those like them. Others face little opportunity to contribute to creating change. First and foremost then, the University's top-down processes create an environment in which students enact behaviours at the micro-level are seen as legitimate and justified.

### **7.3 Contribution to existing research**

This thesis has added to the literature base on working-class and first-in-family students in 'elite' UK universities through its unique findings, some of which refute earlier studies or provide an alternative angle to findings from similar research. Firstly, this thesis has demonstrated that the families of the working-class students who participated in this research were highly invested in, and supportive of, their children's education. This began, as evident in chapter five section 3.4, from the point of the participant contemplating whether or not to go to university and continued in the form of pride when they were offered a place, to the provision of financial assistance where at all possible (5.4.1), interest in how they were performing academically (6.6.1) and visits to see them at university, as shown in participants' photos (appendix J). That participants spoke of taking photographs explicitly for the purpose of showing their parents (6.6.2) indicates that they were aware that their families were interested in

understanding what they were experiencing whilst in the university field and wanted to share this experience with them as far as possible. This contrasts the body of literature that indicates that working-class families often do not provide support to their children who are taking alternative pathways through education, through lack of either interest or understanding, and are often passive or oppositional in their attitudes to higher education. This has been the case historically, with Rubin (1976) finding that working-class parents in the US lacked information about universities but were relieved about this in the sense that it contributed to the prevention of their children becoming “lost to an alien way of life” (Gorman, 1998:12). Lareau (1987) distinguished between two different parenting styles belonging to middle-class and working-class parents, with the latter having lower aspirations for their children (Gorman, 1998). At the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Reay (1998) and Brooks (2004) found instances of “familial passivity” among working-class parents with regard to their children’s higher education, although there was acknowledgment by Brooks that “this “varied considerably across the sample” (ibid.:500). In 2010, Reay et al. (2010) stated that “many working-class parents, including those of case-study students, want their children to go to university but there remain underlying fears that the move may result in ‘abandoning the family and its norms and values’” (p.116). For my participants, there was no reluctance or hesitation by their families and friends about them going to a university like Durham – as a reminder, Elizabeth reported that her mother tells everyone “my daughter’s at uni” and her friend is planning her graduation celebrations and Tony said him leaving Durham University “would break dad’s heart”. Bathmaker et al. (2013) classifies her similar participants as being “from aspirational working-class families, who encouraged and supported their children’s development in ways redolent of more middle-class families” (p.733). The findings of this research indicate

that this continual comparison of working-class families who support their children's education to middle-class families is becoming increasingly redundant: there are many working-class families highly invested in their children's pursuit of higher education in their own right. Any lack of involvement is likely to be due to lack of opportunity rather than interest; to declare working-class families as a collective less interested in higher education is a deficit conceptualisation that paints an inaccurate picture of the truth.

Linked to this is the second key contribution of this research. As stated above, it may have historically been the case that the fear of losing their children to "alien" worlds made working-class families reluctant to embrace higher education. Prior research has emphasised that working-class students do tend to actively try and shed their working-class identity when at university by distancing themselves from their previous fields. Granfield (1991) found that his working-class participants "disengaged from their previous identity by concealing their class backgrounds" (p.340) in an elite law school. This happened through disguising themselves in new dress codes such as suits and not talking about their parents' occupations. As stated in 6.2.2, Abrahams and Ingram (2013) argue that working-class students who immerse themselves in the social field of the university at the same time as retaining a connection to their local social field of their home can lead "two lives". Gwyn was initially reluctant to speak about her home life within the university for fear of judgement from her peers if they found out that she was from a working-class background, as explained in 5.5.5. However, she and the other participants abandoned this approach as the year went on and they behaved authentically and honestly within the field. The only exception was Faye's example of not directly confronting classist "banter" thrown around conversationally by

privileged peers, due this continual confrontation being exhausting to engage in. Moreover, as with Reay's (2009) findings, participants' accounts "were filled with descriptions of visits from family and friends" (p.1111). Participants were not concealing "faking it" (Granfield, 1991) within the university field but acting authentically as themselves.

Thirdly, this research found that participants' part-time work led to trade-off in their social experience at university: the significant time they spent in paid employment compromised how much time they could spend in extra-curricular activities and informal socialisation with peers. Prior research in a university within the 'elite' sub-field has found that it was a heavy academic schedule, rather than part-time work, that impacted on student participants' social lives (Reay et al., 2010); it was in newer universities that part-time work is seen to affect students' social lives (ibid.) As evident in 6.6.1, participants did have an intense academic schedule and were extremely dedicated to their work which limited time for socialisation, but this was further exacerbated by the need to engage in part-time work – without this additional income there would have been no money available for socialisation in the first place. Therefore, within 'elite' university fields that force students to turn to part-time work through charging high accommodation fees and offering insufficient bursaries on top of a demanding heavy academic workload, students face a dilemma similar to that of Hordósy and colleague's (2018) concept of the "double deficit". However, in these settings it becomes a struggle between *four* different pressures, with the need for part-time work, the employability agenda, and an intense academic culture competing against socialisation for time within the participants' schedules. This research

therefore sheds light on the particular struggles faced by working-class students within the 'elite' university field.

Finally, this research has demonstrated that working-class students are increasingly choosing universities on grounds of 'rationalist' decisions that were previously seen as the reserve of the middle classes. Existing evidence - outlined in 2.4.2 - has sought to emphasise the fact that non-traditional students are less likely to frame their university choices in rationalist cost-benefit terms, instead favouring universities where there is greater likelihood of a socio-cultural 'fit' between their habituses and the field they enter into (Ball et al., 2002; Byrom and Lightfoot, 2012; Read et al., 2003; Reay, 2001; Reay et al., 2001b). The findings of this research – that participants were actively striving for the 'best' university, in terms of league table positioning and social reputation - therefore adds to the literature base by understanding how the doxa that characterises neoliberal society works to affect the university and career choices of high-attaining working and lower middle-class students. These participants view the 'elite' sub-field as the only field worthy of entering. However, unlike their middle-class peers, they reflexively acknowledge the strong potential for a clash between themselves and the field they are entering to occur and expect to feel like outsiders. This research has therefore shown how neoliberal ideologies that shape the educational landscape today through meritocratic discourses encourage working-class students to put themselves in uncomfortable settings, by positioning this as the only reliable method to achieve more financially stable futures for themselves and their families.



## 7.4 Recommendations

Throughout the process of conducting this research – from designing my methodology, conducting the interviews with participants, to undertaking my thematic analysis, to writing the findings up – I have sought to include both the positives and negatives that characterise Durham University in terms of facilitating and negating the access and inclusion of non-traditional students within the institution. During the research process of holding the interviews, transcribing the data, and analysing it, it became clear that in order to do justice to the narratives of participants, the final product of the thesis would have to give more space to the difficulties and challenges that they faced than the positives. This was due to the fact that, although there were many positive aspects that are unique to the structure of the university (which are given due weight throughout chapters five and six), dedicating half of the thesis to that would not be accurate reflection of what participants told me. Moreover, the purpose of this research is to highlight what works, but also what should be changed, and it became starkly evident that much change is needed and that this deserves to be reflected in the final product of this thesis. In this section I highlight the recommendations for policy based on these required changes.

The first and most important recommendation from this research, that underpins the following recommendations, is that Durham University and its counterparts within the ‘elite’ sub-field need to focus on *actively* increasing the proportion of non-traditional students in their future student intakes to reflect proportions within society at large. The findings outlined in the previous section demonstrate that Durham University will likely go on to produce graduates who are not practised at working with diverse groups of people, who continue to think in terms of class-based differences, and who act

favourably to those who they perceive to be like themselves. Universities as institutions are uniquely positioned to be able to tackle such societal problems: in being in charge of their own admission practices, and needing not to rely on intakes from the immediate vicinity in which they are located, they are able to admit students from all over the country. If this power was used to actively create a student body that is truly diverse, they could foster a positive learning and social environment for all, which would in turn produce graduates equipped with the credentials, but also skills, to approach society and its problems with fairness and inclusion – rather than division and self-interest - as their priorities. Durham University plans to recruit 4,000 more students by 2027 (Durham University, 2016c) and the following recommendations outline the specific practices that should be implemented to ensure that these additional students are increasingly recruited from non-traditional groups. This would work to change the reputation the university holds in the public imagination and encourage more non-traditional applicants.

The second recommendation from this research is to significantly reduce the collegiate accommodation fees for all students. It has been shown in this research that bursary provision does not make up the significant shortfall between level of disposable income generated from the student loan amount and the collegiate fee – students across the low to medium household income distribution face huge difficulty in meeting this cost. The University has a target to provide collegiate accommodation for half to 55% of the student body by 2027 (Durham University, 2016b). This target, combined with the current extremely high costs of collegiate accommodation, mean that the additional 4,000 students are likely to be recruited from wealthy backgrounds, as those who cannot afford to pay the fees are priced out. The University itself admits that the current

state of its residential state is significantly poorer than sector norms, having the second highest costs of all universities to improve the condition of its buildings. This is likely a necessary consequence of the University occupying the privileged position of being located upon an ageing world heritage site, with only 27% of the estate being less than 20 years old (Durham University, 2016c). Yet to place the burden of these costs on the students themselves is firstly, unjust, as it does not reflect the quality of accommodation that they will receive and prevents many students who would otherwise consider pursuing a Durham degree from attending the university and knocks those who do into financial precarity. Secondly, it is unwarranted - at a University where the Vice Chancellor has a base salary of £274,895 - it is a travesty that its students are living in financial hardship. It is not within the remit of this section to delimit the amount that should be charged – rather, its purpose is to highlight that there is an overwhelming need to calculate accommodation costs with student budgets, rather than the cost of building maintenance and profit generation, as the main consideration. The University has the resource to transfer the cost of estate upkeep from students' rental charges to the institution.

Moreover, the colleges should remove the mandatory levy for incoming students, payment of which is required for students to attend college events (with students still having to pay for tickets to individual events). This significant upfront cost has negative knock-on consequences for students throughout their first year, and was not seen as worth the cost by the participants. To charge students for the privilege of taking part in activities that take place within their own home of the college is unreasonable – any advertisement by the University of the benefits of the collegiate system takes for granted the fact that students have to have the requisite capital to pay for this. For those

who cannot, colleges are an empty shell in which they are excluded from taking part in the “special” events that mark out the university as distinct from its competitors. Here, they are likely to have a much more negative experience than they would have done at a non-collegiate university where the ability to attend events is not mandated by payment of an arbitrary fee. This is the only way that it will provide anything near equality of opportunity for applicants and students alike.

Thirdly, the research has pointed to the importance of greater use of contextualised admissions. Those participants who received a contextualised offer went on to finish their first year with good grades and embodied an enthusiastic, eager and determined approach to academic learning from the moment they entered the university – including the student who had a reduction of three grades. This, combined with the body of research that indicates that those with such offers finish their degrees with just as good classifications as those admitted on the standard terms (Boliver et al., 2017a), indicates that the current tariffs that are set by the market are actively excluding those who could add substantially to the university. Currently, the University implements “varying entry grade requirements by one or two grades to take account of disadvantage” (Durham University, 2020u). The University should seek to extend this conservative use of contextualised admissions and lead the elite sub-field by using evidence to radically transform the admissions system: it is the students who have persevered throughout their education and considered going to university despite adverse circumstances that are going to be the most engaged learners. Furthermore, participants in summer schools described the realisation that they could receive a reduced offer as being a turning point in them contemplating the university as an option. This indicates that the University should advertise the offering of

contextualised offers at an earlier point to applicants, as currently there are likely many students who do not factor this into their decision making and self-exclude on the basis that they believe they will not meet the extremely stringent academic requirements.

This research has pointed to the need for colleges to be built around a more inclusive social structure. Reducing college accommodation fees would mean that students have greater resources to be able to attend the lavish events if they wish. However, this is not enough, as it has been shown in this research that many non-traditional students are put off from attending events that instil hierarchy within the student body and distinction between staff and students on cultural, as well as financial, grounds. To return to the principles of college life, as laid out by the authors within Burt and Evans' (2016) *The Collegiate Way*, and the values that Durham University proclaims it seeks to encourage within the institution – that of fostering respect, inclusion and “participatory working and social environment” (Durham University, 2019a:2) – it seems that a big overhaul of the events that are on offer to students is needed. By creating a more diverse body of students this is likely to happen organically, as students from different backgrounds would take up positions of leadership and decision-making within the Junior Common Rooms. However, in order to contribute to diversifying the student body in the first place, this is needed to be implemented on a more immediate basis. To do so, the permanent and paid leadership staff within colleges should encourage their JCRs to make the events more accessible and informal, which would in turn reduce the cost of attendance. Formal dinners should be re-purposed to emphasise the collective nature of the event with the sole aim being to bring all members of the college together, rather than acting as an extension to the boarding-school experience. To do so, they should have less strict clothing

requirements, removing the requirement for the wearing of gowns and should operate on a more participatory basis, with students themselves taking turns to serve meals and clean dining halls after use. Colleges should designate a space, or table, for those students who do not have anyone to attend with, to sit together, thereby ensuring that all members are welcome. As college memberships become more diverse, randomly-allocated seating could be an option to encourage students to mix with those they have not yet met. To do this immediately risks non-traditional students being placed among others who they do not feel comfortable around due to their classist presentation or behaviour. Overall, students should be taught upon arrival at the university that the purpose of the colleges and their events is inclusion over luxury, tradition or rule. By instilling this as the university's overarching ethos, it will encourage all students to reflect on what practices they *should* – rather than want to – implement. When advertising these events in publicity material, the University should emphasise inclusion over tradition in order to attract a greater diversity of applicants.

Finally, it is necessary that colleges have diverse student bodies. Given the importance of colleges to forming friendships in students' first years this is necessary to ensure students are able to make friends but also to ensure that students have the opportunity to meet people different to themselves. The college preference system has the potential to result in smaller sub-fields within the University as it diversifies, with students from different backgrounds opting for colleges that have cultural and social structures that mirror their past schooling experiences and lifestyle preferences. Therefore, this needs to work in conjunction with the previous point about creating more inclusive social systems within all of the colleges. In so doing, it will lead to more applicants from a variety of backgrounds to each college and therefore both student preferences and the

need to actively create diversity can occur in a mutually supportive manner. Re-allocating students may be necessary to ensure the balance is achieved. However, if colleges share the overarching ethos of inclusion over everything else, then it should not result too negatively on any student that is re-allocated.

## **7.5 Future Research**

This study has several limitations, which all result from resource limitations of this three-year doctorate and the necessity to narrow the focus of the research in order to meet its specific aims within its allotted timeframe. Here, I reflect on these and consider what this means for where future research should be directed. Firstly, this research took class background as the focus for analysis. Ethnicity, gender, age and commuter-student status were largely absent from consideration and resulted in a sample that was dominated by women and young students, and all the participants from non-traditional backgrounds were white. I made the decision to keep the sample as it was: to do justice to using ethnicity as an analytical concept in this study, I would have had to extend the length of fieldwork in order to adequately explore points of comparison along ethnicity as well as class lines. However, it has been noted that the focus of literature, the media and policy on white working-class students - particularly boys - works to promote the analytical centrality of white students, which obscures the viewpoints of those from ethnic minority backgrounds. This fails to pay due attention to how ethnic background can work in conjunction with, or separately from, class to position ethnic-minority students from working-class backgrounds at a greater disadvantage than their white working-class peers, as white students still retain privilege on grounds of their ethnicity (Gillborn, 2010). This study has highlighted the ways in which a collegiate, 'elite' university excludes students on grounds of wealth

and cultural background. Future research should therefore explicitly focus on the experience of students from ethnic-minority backgrounds in such environments.

The lack of attention to gender is less problematic - women were over-represented and issues of sexism and misogyny were evidently secondary to issues related to class in their narratives. However, within their interviews it became apparent that Durham University has an issue with “lad culture”, and the media has recently reported several high-profile instances of sexual assault on campus. Future research could focus on exploring any link between elitist traditions in colleges and patriarchal norms which create an environment in which privileged male students feel entitled to act as they wish. Secondly, the perspective of international students is absent from this study. This is in recognition of the fact that the high fees charged to non-EU students mean that they are likely to be from very high-income backgrounds. However, given the link between the British boarding school and the structure of collegiate universities, future research could investigate how non-British students experience collegiate life. The inclusion of only one mature student in the sample was justified in chapter three. However, it became clear with hindsight and reflection, that the reported emphasis the university places on the colleges as being the primary arenas in which social activities take place, and the limited sense of community within some academic departments, means that these students are most likely to feel a sense of isolation. This (mature/ “day” student experience at collegiate institutions specifically) is an important aspect for future research to take forward.

A third limitation is that this study did not follow participants beyond the end of their first year. It would have been insightful to compare their experiences of living in



colleges to living in privately-rented accommodation to see which facilitated a more positive experience. The success of the photo interviews in creating rich narratives points to the fact that employing visual methods, such as photo interviews or video-diary ethnography, would be well suited to exploring this, and would add to the literature on the use of innovative media methods. Moreover, continuing a longitudinal study to see how students from collegiate institutions fare in graduate life would be a useful addition to the literature base. The emphasis of Durham University on the soft skills that it provides its students through the opportunities of the college structure, combined with the evidence of this research that shows that non-traditional students have significantly less time and money to engage in extra-curricular activities, means that it will be important to see how this inequality translates into graduate prospects in a labour market that increasingly looks to soft skills in guiding recruitment decisions.

A final limitation is that there was no comparative case-study university incorporated into this study. It would be of great use going forward to compare the structures of different collegiate institutions – within the UK, Europe and globally - and the rituals and practice adopted within these. For instance, the role of the “nations” within Uppsala University in Sweden take on a similar function to colleges in that they are the “core of [...] student life” (Uppsala Universitet, 2020) but differ in that students take part in cooking and serving food to peers, in addition to event planning and governance (ibid.). Comparing such institutions would allow for the exploration of which practices create a participatory and inclusive atmosphere and which create divisions that replicate those within Durham University through alternative practices. Looking at differences would also draw further attention to the socially constructed nature of collegiate traditions and encourage universities to move beyond the focus on tradition to focus on *what works* in terms of facilitating inclusion in the student body.

## **7.6 Final Remarks**

This thesis has demonstrated how the university, as an institution, actively contributes to reflecting, reinforcing and refining existing inequalities in the HE field between students from non-traditional and traditional backgrounds. Beyond wider governmental policy, and inequalities that begin at pre-school level, there are many ways in which universities can take responsibility and use their power as institutions to consider and actively work towards what they themselves can do to create a more equal learning environment and, in turn, society.

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## **List of Appendices**

- A. Recruitment Poster
- B. Participant Information Sheet
- C. Consent Form
- D. Focus group topic guide
- E. Longitudinal interview 1 topic guide
- F. Longitudinal interview 2 (photo elicitation) topic guide
- G. Longitudinal interview 3 topic guide
- H. One-off interview topic guide
- I. Photo Task Information Sheet
- J. List of participant photos, descriptions and titles

## Appendix A: Recruitment Poster



**Would you like to take part in a research study?**



We are looking for **first year home undergraduates at Durham University** in any department/ college to take part in a research study.

We are looking to hear from students for whom **going to university was uncommon/ not the norm.**

We would like to invite you to an informal focus group and interviews to **chat about your time at university so far.**

We hope this will be a chance to meet other students and to share your thoughts. Participants will be reimbursed with a £40 voucher for your time.

For info please contact Maddy, PhD student in the Department of Sociology at [madeleine.winnard@durham.ac.uk](mailto:madeleine.winnard@durham.ac.uk)

## Appendix B: Participant Information Sheet



NINE DTP

### Information Sheet

You have been invited to take part in a research project I am doing at Durham University. Please read the information below and take as much time as you need to consider whether or not you would like to take part. Feel free to contact me about any questions you have.

#### What is the research about?

This research is exploring the culture of one UK university and the experiences of students in relation to this. I am particularly interested in hearing from students for whom going to university was uncommon/ not the norm, and hearing about your time as you settle in and go through your first year – there are no right or wrong answers, I just want to hear about your thoughts and feelings.

#### What will it involve?

I would like to interview you with a small group of other participating students in the middle of the first term. Following this, there will be a one-to-one interview at the end of each of the three terms in your first year. These will last approximately one hour, although this is flexible. Dates and locations of interviews can depend on what works best for you. I will record the discussion and transcribe it. Once transcribed, it will be made completely anonymous – your name and identifying characteristics (e.g. college, department) will not be used in the thesis, and the audio file will be deleted.

#### What if I change my mind?

Participation in this research is voluntary and it is entirely your choice whether or not you would like to participate. There will be no ramifications at all if decide you do not want to take part, or decide you do not want to continue after beginning participation (although this will need to be before July 2019 to allow me to make edits on my thesis before submission). You may pause or stop the interview at any point. As thanks for participation you will receive a voucher equivalent of up to £40.

#### Contact Information

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## Appendix C: Document Analysis Corpus

### Theme one: History of the University

Sources derived from archival search using “Durham University”; “Durham” and “University”; “north east” and “University” as keywords and refined by publication date of 1830 onwards on Gale Primary Sources: British Library Newspapers (<https://go-gale-com.ezphost.dur.ac.uk/ps/start.do?p=BNCN&u=duruni>)

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## Appendix D: Focus Group Topic Guide

### Welcome and thank them for coming:

Explain aim of the study: my thesis looking at student experiences at Durham, looking to hear from students for whom going to university was not necessarily the norm; thoughts and experiences as settle into university

Emphasise this will be very informal – a chance to get to know each other and share thoughts; no right or wrong answers; not looking for anything particular

Don't worry if want to chip in with something or build on each other's points - you don't have to wait for me to ask the next question

### Go through PI sheet:

Highlight where aims are summarised, which I have been through

Outline structure – this focus group followed by one to one interviews that will be more in-depth and detailed, these will be next week or start of next term, end of term 2 and end of term 3

These can be based anywhere, I'm happy to come to you

It's going to be recorded, just on my phone and then I'm going to transcribe it. Once this is done I will delete the file and I will give you a pseudonym which you can pick or I can pick one for you. I will include whether you are at a hill or bailey college and which faculty you are in but this will be broad enough to reduce any risk of being identified from the written thesis

Participation is completely voluntary – you can withdraw at any time and it will not result in any negative consequences for you whatsoever

Does anyone have any questions?

### Go through CF and re-iterate above points:

Asking whether you've understood the info

That it is voluntary and you can withdraw

Personal info and details will remain confidential

Agree to being recorded

Not sharing what was said in here with others

Ask participants to provide personal information - e.g. college, department, age - on sheet and collect in. Can choose pseudonym or leave blank

### **To start off with, if you could summarise in three words, how would you describe your first term at university so far?**

Why would you pick those?

If words are similar > if I had given you five words what else might you have said?

Does anyone have very different words?

### **What would you say your first impressions of the university were?**

Can you provide some examples as to why this was the case?

### **How do you think these compare with the expectations you had before coming?**

Why do you think you had this prior expectation? Where did the image come from?

If all agreeing so far > Has anyone had different experiences/ thoughts?

**Now speaking about induction/ freshers week specifically, what was that like?**

**How do these initial expectations and experiences compare to life now that you've been here a while?**

**So the collegiate system is something that's quite unique to Durham, what do you make of it so far?**

**Do you have any expectations or hopes for the year ahead?**

**Is there anything else you want to say about what we have discussed or otherwise?**

## Appendix E: Longitudinal Interview 1 Topic Guide

### Demographic

**I would like to start by getting to know a little about you and a bit about where you lived before coming to Durham – could you tell me a bit about your life before you started university? For example, where did you live? Who with?**  
Probes: Whereabouts? Who did you live with? Have you lived there long?

**Could you tell me a bit about the schools you went to before coming to university? Perhaps starting with your primary school**  
Was your school gender-mixed? Did you have to take a test/ have specific grades to get in?  
How did you find school?

**How did you find your school in terms of preparing you to apply and attend university?**

**What sort of things are the other students in your cohort at school doing now?**  
Are they are at university? Have you seen any at Durham?

### Choice

**Would you be able to talk me through your decision to go to university?**  
How long before you applied had you contemplated going to university?  
Do you remember the moment when you decided you would?  
If participants states wasn't sure about university for a while > were there any particular trigger moments that encouraged/led them to apply?

**Can you tell me about your pathway that led you coming to Durham in particular?**  
If local to home > why is this important for them? to retain existing networks? Job? Familiar place?  
Reputation > reputation among whom? (e.g. employers or friends/ family/ school)  
Got the grades so why not > why did wanting high grades make it a good choice?

**What did you imagine being a student at Durham would be like before you got here?**  
Any particular positive aspects or aspects you were nervous about?

**What do you think your friends and family think of you coming to university?**  
What do they think of you coming to Durham? Why do you think this is the case?  
How does this make you feel?

### Experience

**How are you finding being a student at Durham so far?**  
If mainly talk about academic > probe for about the social side and integration in student body

**How are you finding your college?**

What did you imagine the collegiate system might involve before you came? How does that compare to it now you're here?

**How would you compare the ability to interact with peers in departments compared to colleges?**

[Conducive to interaction - which one more?]

Future plans and aspirations

**What do you see yourself doing in 10 years' time?**

What would you like to be doing? What do you think you will most likely be doing? What sort of job? Where will you be based?

Other

**We spoke about [insert] in the group interview, and some participants said [insert] would you say this is true for you?**

**Is there anything else you would like to say with regard to the topics we have discussed?**

Set up photo task for next interview

## Appendix F: Longitudinal Interview 3 Topic Guide

[Interview 3 was highly tailored to the participant – this guide is an example of the topic guide used with one participant, Scarlett]

### Reflecting on the term

#### **Could you tell me about your third term - what's it been like?**

How does this compare to your first and second terms?

Refer back to three descriptor words used in first term and second term - are these still good terms in relation to your experience this term? How so? Or why not?

Have there been any particular high or low points?

What are your plans for the rest of the term?

### Reflecting on the year

Now you've been here for a year, how would you describe Durham as a city to someone who hadn't been before?

Where is your identity based? Why? Is there anywhere you don't feel comfortable?

In focus group you said Durham was unique in terms of its culture, can you say more?

How does this compare to the culture in your college?

How does this compare to the culture in your department?

When you were working on the telephone campaign, what sort of things were you talking to alumni about? What did they ask? How did the Durham they spoke about compare to the one you experience?

Knowing what you know now, what are your top tips for managing a first year at Durham university for someone from a similar background to you?

If you could describe your ideal college - what it would be like, location, culture, etc - what would you say?

### Looking to the future

How will next year be financially compared to this one?

Within: would you move back into college in 3rd year?

#### **What do you see yourself doing in 10 years' time?**

If different to in first interview > what do you think has changed your mind?

### Closing questions

Why did you volunteer for this study?

Demographic information: what is your mum's occupation?

What are your sources of finance?

Would you mind me getting in touch after exam results to see how you've done?

### Give thank you note

## Appendix G: Photo Interview Task Information Sheet



NINE<sup>EDTP</sup>

### Photo Task

I would like to invite you to take part in doing some research yourself. I would like you to **take photos of naturally occurring events** during your next term here. These photos should be of **moments, encounters or events that you think help summarise or describe your experience at Durham University**. These might include anything from photos of friends during a night out or society event, or a selfie of you reflecting on how your day has gone, for instance.

We will then use these photos as a **basis for discussion** in the next interview. This is called photo elicitation - where we chat about the context of when the photo was taken, and reflect on what the photo itself signifies.

Between now and the next interview, please could you take as many as you would like but aim for a minimum of **four**. You can take these on your phone/ camera - if you don't have one I can loan you a camera.

There is no right or wrong choice with these photos, just whatever you find significant – these can be positive, negative, neutral or just significant for you. Only thing is, please don't take photos of any illegal activity!

These photos **will not** be used in the thesis – I will only include a vague written description of the photo using no names or identifying characteristics. I will return the photos to you, or delete/ shred them after the interview.

Any questions, email me at [madeleine.winnard@durham.ac.uk](mailto:madeleine.winnard@durham.ac.uk) or text me on +44 7807 134 025.

Have a great Christmas,  
Maddy 😊



## Appendix H: List of participant photos, descriptions and titles

(alphabetised ascending by pseudonym)

\*indicates participant's favourite photo of the collection (if chosen)

### Belle

|                                |  |
|--------------------------------|--|
| <b>First Day*</b>              | Photo of Belle with her two flatmates on her first night of induction week. They are eating candyfloss in their college bar  |
| <b>Matriculation</b>           | All of Belle's flat on Prebends Bridge dressed in formal wear and gowns, about to attend the university matriculation ceremony   |
| <b>Exploring The City</b>      | Belle standing on Prebends Bridge in October looking at the view of the Cathedral, taken when her younger sister was visiting  |
| <b>Sunrise</b>                 | A photo taken from Belle's college accommodation window: fields with sheep and a sunrise over them, Botanic Gardens also in shot   |
| <b>A Fun Winter Ball</b>       | Belle and her two best friends (and flatmates) at their college's Winter Ball. They are standing outside a grand building, surrounded by fairy lights, with a sign saying "Wonka" above them |
| <b>The Best Frep</b>           | Belle and her two flat mates/ best friends with their Freshers' Representative in induction week, wearing fancy dress hats   |
| <b>The City</b>                | A view of the Cathedral in sunshine taken from Observatory Hill on a walk organised by the university's hiking society   |
| <b>Family Experiencing Uni</b> | A "selfie" taken by Belle of her, her parents and her sister on Prebends Bridge during their visit to Durham   |
| <b>[Name of subject]</b>       | Belle's new badge for a visit to a [local institution] where she went with her course  |

## Ben

|                                   |  |
|-----------------------------------|--|
| <b>Winning at pool</b>            | Ben playing pool with his college team's Pool Captain in the Students Union                                    |
| <b>Winning at pool part 2</b>     | Playing pool with a friend from his college in the college JCR at lunchtime                                    |
| <b>Croquet*</b>                   | Ben posing with a croquet bat on another Bailey college's lawn in the sunshine at an inter-college welfare day |
| <b>Reunion with friends</b>       | Ben with a group of three friends from school/home town in a north east city                                   |
| <b>[Name of football stadium]</b> | A view of a stadium home to a north east football club with a rainbow in the sky                               |
| <b>Studying</b>                   | Group of Ben's friends from the college theatre club studying together in the college library                  |

## Chloe

|   |   |
|---|---|
| <b>New Friends</b>                                  | Chloe and her five flatmates dressed in formal wear and gowns ready to attend a formal in induction week  |
| <b>Sophie [pseudonym]</b>                           | Chloe and her flat mates with their freshers' representative Sophie [pseudonym] in their college bar on the last day of induction week  |
| <b>Excessive Amounts of Coffee</b>                  | Cup of coffee next to Chloe's laptop in the university library; laptop is displaying an academic journal article  |
| <b>Best Friends</b>                                 | Chloe and her closest flatmate Lily [pseudonym] at one of their college's balls. They are wearing formal dresses and holding glasses of prosecco and standing in front of curtains at a grand hotel |
| <b>Experience</b>                                   | Chloe's visitor badge for visiting a local institution on a day trip as part of her course  |
| <b>Family</b>                                       | Chloe's dad at a restaurant in Durham city when he came to visit  |
| <b>Two Worlds Colliding, just two sides of life</b> | Chloe's flatmate and her friend from home together on a night out in a nightclub in Durham  |

**Chill** A bed sheet hung up in Chloe’s flat kitchen with a film projected onto it, as part of their Sunday “movie night” tradition

**Cocktails and Best Friends** Chloe and her flat mate Lily [pseudonym] having a cocktail in a Durham restaurant as part of their Friday night tradition of going out for cocktails

**Durham As A Home** View of the river Wear, featuring a rowing boat, taken from Kingsgate Bridge whilst Chloe was walking to go out for breakfast with her flat mates

**Fake Christmas\*** Chloe and her flatmates wearing matching pyjamas standing by their Christmas tree in the flat

## Ewa

**Cardiac Hill** View of “Cardiac Hill” (a very steep hill leading up to the university’s science departments) that Ewa saw on her way home from a practical session

**Peace** View of the Cathedral in the sunshine taken from Prebends Bridge, taken whilst walking to Observatory Hill with a school/ home friend who was visiting

**Happiest Place On Earth** Photo of Ewa, Scarlett and their three other college friends doing a silly pose under a banner that says “[Name of Bailey college: the happiest place on earth]” on their College day

**Snooze Or Lose\*** Screenshot of a Snapchat sent by Ewa’s friend to her, featuring Ewa asleep with a course textbook open on her and the text “factual [Ewa’s surname]” imposed over it

**Compromisation** Ewa’s rota from her work as a waitress at her local pub at home. She took this over the Christmas break when she was working 60-hour weeks

## Gwyn

**Rumble In the Jungle/ Standard [Hill College] Party** Black and white photo taken from above a stage in Gwyn’s college dining hall of a crowd of students wearing big headphones and jungle-themed clothes at a silent disco. Gwyn is in the background

|                              |  |
|------------------------------|--|
| <b>Relaxing On The River</b> | Three plates of stacked pancakes and cups of tea at a restaurant in Durham city where Gwyn went with two of her coursemates  |
| <b>Standard Swingers*</b>    | Photo of Gwyn with 5 people from her corridor in college, along with her college “sister” in a nightclub in Durham city  |
| <b>Summative Fall Out</b>    | Gwyn’s desk in her college room with several open notebooks, sheets of paper and stacks of revision on it. A bottle of gin and bottle of vodka are in the background. She usually keeps her room in a very ordered and organised way but she got extremely stressed in the lead up to summative coursework and exams – this photo captures the “remains” of this time when she let everything go and ended up being hospitalized |

## **Hannah**

|  |   |
|--|---|
| <b>Into The Abyss*</b>                       | Hannah and her three friends from her colleges (and her future housemates) at the university’s matriculation ceremony, wearing formal wear and gowns  |
| <b>19<sup>th</sup> Birthday Extravaganza</b> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. A view of University College lit up in the evening, taken when her and her flatmates went there for a formal on Hannah’s 19<sup>th</sup> birthday</li> <li>2. A tower of chocolate bars that Hannah received from her flatmates for her birthday and her birthday cake</li> </ol> |
| <b>It’s Okay Not To Be Okay</b>              | Hannah on her bed wrapped in her duvet  |
| <b>Collision: Old And New</b>                | Hannah’s friend from school/home town in a restaurant in Durham city  |
| <b>We Lost It</b>                            | St James Park stadium where she went to see a football match with her close friend/ flat mate Faith [pseudonym]   |

## Holly

|  |  |
|--|--|
| <b>Durham At Its Best*</b>                             | View of the river Wear in the sunshine, taken by Holly from Kingsgate Bridge   |
| <b>A Day In the Life of a [Social Science] Student</b> | Holly and her course mate holding a [teaching aid] in a practical session  |
| <b>Pitchers All Round</b>                              | Holly and her two college friends holding drinks in a bar in Durham city   |
| <b>[Nickname of College] Hockey/ Drunk</b>             | View of a hockey inter-collegiate varsity match where Holly's college played another Hill college at the central university sports grounds, Maiden Castle                                |
| <b>[nickname of College] Hockey</b>                    |  |
| <b>Dancing The Night Away</b>                          | Holly and three friends from college dancing in a nightclub on a night out in Durham city  |
| <b>I Love [Nickname of College]</b>                    | Holly and three other college students acting as representatives outside their college on an open day. They are standing by a sign that features the nickname of their college and flags |

## Joe

|  |  |
|--|--|
| <b>First [Science subject student society] [name of challenge] challenge</b> | View of the outside of a local company office near Durham city where Joe did a field trip to with his course   |
| <b>Exhausted And Accomplished</b>  | View of a rowing machine screen featuring Joe's score after a training session with his college's rowing team  |
| <b>"Story"</b>   | A video of a band on stage with hi-tech lighting taken by Joe at "Story", a Christian Union event, in a marquee in grounds of another Hill college             |
| <b>Don't Leave Your Phone Unattended</b>                                     | Close-up photo of selfie photo of Joe's friend from college doing a silly pose, taken at one of their corridor movie nights                                    |
| <b>"Contamination Zone: Be Careful!"</b>                                     | Joe's bedroom door in college with sign on it saying, "Contamination Zone: Be Careful!" that his college friend had put on there when he had a chest infection |
| <b>[Name of College Ball] Antics*</b>  | Joe with his girlfriend (who he met at school) and two friends from college at a silent disco at a formal in their college                                     |
| <b>My First Job in [Science Subject Field of Industry]</b>                   | Screenshot of an email confirming Joe's placement at a local business start-up   |

## Rosie

|   |  |
|---|--|
| <b>First Time Cocktails</b>               | Rosie with her two “college mums” and “college sister” in a bar in Durham city having cocktails  |
| <b>Friends and Formals</b>                | Rosie and five other students from her college wearing formal dress and gowns, ready to attend a formal dinner at their college                            |
| <b>Extra-curriculars</b>                  | Rosie and six other students wearing coats and hats on the North Yorkshire moors in the snow, taken during their excursion as part of Hill Walking society |
| <b>Rowing In The Snow</b>                 | Rosie and three college friends standing on Baths Bridge, about to watch their friend from college row in a race   |
| <b>Pancake Day Amongst the Summatives</b> | Rosie and five friends on Pancake Day making pancakes in their college pantry  |

## Scarlett

|   |  |
|---|--|
| <b>Favourite Photo of Epiphany Term</b>                                     | Scarlett, Ewa and their three friends covered in green paint on their college’s lawn   |
| <b>Good Weekend Away: I Love Durham But I Don’t Want to Be Here Forever</b> | Scarlett in Edinburgh, taken when she went with her boyfriend for a weekend trip   |
| <b>Average Day In Durham</b>  | Ewa and Scarlett’s shared room, with Ewa lying on the bed, propped up by a cushion with her laptop on lap doing coursework                               |
| <b>Average Night Out In Durham</b>  | Scarlett in a big group of other students – some from her college with others from another college that they met up with – in a nightclub in Durham city |
| <b>[No Name]</b>  | Ewa and their friend James at a restaurant in Durham city  |

## Tony

|   |  |
|---|--|
| <b>Cold, Sad Man -is that not just me whenever I am in college?</b> | Tony wrapped in his duvet and peering through it whilst sat at his desk doing coursework in his college room |
|---|--|

|   |  |
|---|--|
| <b>Calm Before The Storm</b>                    | Tony standing on his college lawn wearing a suit and gown before the university's matriculation ceremony during induction week |
| <b>Geoffrey The Silverfish</b>                  | A silverfish on Tony's sink in his college room's ensuite bathroom   |
| <b>No Name</b>                                  | A packet of Pro Plus tablets on Tony's laptop  |
| <b>Fuck, Bartholomew!</b><br><b>[pseudonym]</b> | A pint of beer on a table in Tony's college bar. The only drink he has ever purchased in there                                 |

## Appendix I: Longitudinal Interview 2 Topic Guide

For each photo:

### **Tell me about this photo**

The context in which it was taken: who were you with? When was it taken?

If took it especially > why did you choose to photograph this and bring it?

If brought it along > why did you choose to bring this photo?

What title would you give this photo?

### **What were you feeling at the time this photo was taken?**

You said [insert emotion]. Are you able describe them?

What do you feel now when you look at this picture?

As a set:

What do you think the collection of photos says about your experience?

Are there any differences/ similarities in the photos?

Do you have a favourite?

Any aspects of uni experience that aren't captured by the photos??

Any emotions you've felt that aren't captured by these photos?

Why didn't you bring them along?

If taken far apart, what changed between these two photos, if anything?

What do these photos look like in contrast to life before uni?

Not from photos

### **How would you describe this second term?**

### **If you remember, in the focus group I asked you to say three words which describe your university experience so far - what would yours be now?**

Refer back to what they said in the FG about this and if different - why do you think this has changed?

If the same > is there anything about this term that has changed in relation to the former?

**I remember in the FG/ first interview you said [insert], would you say this is still the case?** (This may turn in to several questions depending on what they disclosed in interview 1).



## **Appendix J: One-off interview topic guide**

### Demographic

Can you tell me a little bit about your life before you came to uni? For example, where you were living and who with?

How did you find school?

How did you find them in terms of preparing you for uni?

What sort of things are your friends from school doing now?

### Choice

Can you describe what led you to think of applying for university?

How do your family feel about you being at uni?

What was your pathway that led you to come to Durham in particular?

[If attended open-day] when you came on your post-offer open day, what did you think of the university? City?

What did you imagine it would be like to be a student at Durham?

[If haven't described which college they chose to apply to] How did you come to be at [your college]?

### Experience

How does those thoughts/ expectations compare to your everyday life now that you're here?

If you could describe the uni in 3 words what do you reckon you'd say?

How are you finding being in that college?

How are you finding your department, your course?

How does living in Durham compare to [home town]?

Now that you're coming towards the end of your first year, do you think you've had any high points? Or low points?

### Future

In terms of the rest of this year, do you have any expectations or hopes of what you'd like to achieve by say June?

How do you think your second year of your degree will compare to this one?

In terms of the rest of your degree, what do you hope to have achieved by June 2021?

What about in 10 years' time, where do you see yourself in the world?

## Appendix K: Consent Form



|  | Please tick |
|--|-------------|
| I confirm that I have read and understood the information sheet and have been given the opportunity to ask questions and have had them answered adequately.  |             |
| I understand that my participation is completely voluntary and that I am free to withdraw from the project at any time before November 2019 without providing a reason.  |             |
| I understand that my personal information and details will remain confidential and that I will remain anonymous in the thesis as I will be given a pseudonym.  |             |
| I agree to my interview(s) being audio-recorded. I understand that these recordings will not be shared with anyone and will be deleted after transcription.  |             |
| I agree to keeping matters discussed in the focus group interview with other participating students confidential: I will not share the names or details of other participants with people outside of this group. |             |
| I agree to participating in this research project.   |             |

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Researcher

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date