

# **Traditional or Non-traditional Students?: Incorporating UK Students' Living Arrangements into Decisions about Going to University**

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## **Abstract**

Since the introduction of the post-1992 university, various, and ongoing, higher education policy reforms have fuelled academic, political, media and anecdotal discussions of the trajectories of UK university students. An outcome of this has been the dualistic classification of students as being from either 'traditional' or 'non-traditional' backgrounds. An extensive corpus of literature has sought to critically discuss how students experience their transition into university, questioning specifically the notion that all students follow a linear transition through university. Moreover, there is far more complexity involved in the student experience than can be derived from just employing these monolithic terms. This research proposes incorporating students' residential circumstances into these debates to encourage more critical discussions of this complex demographic. Drawing upon the experiences of a sample of students from a UK 'Post-1992' university this research will develop a profile for each accommodation type to highlight the key characteristics of the 'type' of student most likely to belong to each group. In doing

so this establishes a more detailed understanding of how a 'student' habitus might affect the mechanisms which are put in place to assist students in their transitions into and through university. Moreover this will identify links between HE aspirations and the types of accommodation students come to reside in. This will be achieved by examining the different ways in which students identify their prior knowledge of university life and the role of others in informing choices; the desire to be included in traditional 'student experiences' and how the propinquity of university to home impacts upon their decisions.

### **Keywords**

Higher education, Non-traditional students, Habitus, Bourdieu, Capital, Students.

### **Introduction**

Since the introduction of the post-1992<sup>1</sup> university, various, and ongoing, higher education (HE) policy reforms have fuelled academic, political, media and anecdotal discussions of the trajectories of UK HE students, including their mobilities (Duke-Williams, 2009) and living arrangements (Holton, 2016), 'town' and 'gown' issues (Munro et al., 2009) and graduate employability (Mason O'Connor et al., 2011).

These debates have taken on new dimensions in recent years in light of the restructuring of HE fees and funding (Wakeling and Jefferies, 2012), which has ushered in an increased neo-liberalisation of the sector (Walkerdine, 2011; Holloway and Jöns, 2012) and visibly changed the appearance of contemporary UK HE.

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<sup>1</sup> This informally refers to the former polytechnics or professional colleges which received the status of a university at the end of the Twentieth Century.

This paper will examine the often contrasting ways in which prospective students approach HE by problematising the dualistic terms which label students as being either from 'traditional' or 'non-traditional' backgrounds. Incorporating students' living arrangements into these debates will enable a more critical discussion of this complex demographic and indicate how students might consider 'fitting in' at university. This adds to discussions of the 'student experience' (Holdsworth, 2006) by providing Universities and their associated service providers a clearer understanding of the expectations of their student cohort. Importantly this highlights how undergraduates' expectations of what 'university life' might provide them may extend beyond teaching and learning to encompass other factors such as accommodation, facilities and social activities (Crozier et al., 2008). This is timely as anecdotal evidence suggests that student satisfaction league tables, such as the National Student Survey (NSS), which embody the overall 'student experience' (teaching quality, support networks and more recently the quality of the Students' Union) have become increasingly important indicators for prospective students' (and parents') institutional preferences<sup>2</sup>. The remaining sections of this chapter will focus on a quantitative analysis of the survey results. Sections two and three will contextualise traditional and non-traditional student experiences and explain the role of Bourdieu's notions of habitus and capital in framing the research. Section four will outline the student survey and the statistical methods employed to analyse it. Sections five and six will report the results of the statistical analysis and discuss them in relation to the conceptualisations of habitus and capital, focusing specifically upon prior knowledge and the role of others in informing choices, the student

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<sup>2</sup> The NSS reports that 86 per cent of final year UK undergraduate students graduating in 2015 were satisfied with their overall University experience (HEFCE, 2016).

experience and the propinquity of university to home. Finally, section seven will offer some concluding remarks.

### **[Non]traditional students**

Critical to these structural changes have been various reconfigurations of the types of students attending university. An outcome of the gradual opening up of HE since the Second World War (Brown, 1990) has been the emergence of, and sustained increase in, non-traditional students. Non-traditional students are defined as first generation university attendees from working class or minority backgrounds – whose limited knowledge of the inner workings of HE mean they can often experience much greater difficulties in 'fitting in' at university (Christie, 2007). While it has been broadly argued that this has facilitated greater opportunities for access to HE for those not previously considered eligible to go to university, some have suggested that increased access has diluted HE and paved the way for a group of students unaware and unprepared for student life (Archer and Hutchings, 2000). Others have sought to critically discuss how 'new students' (Leathwood and O'Connell, 2003) may experience their transition into HE, questioning the notion that all students follow a linear, normative pathway through university (Reay et al, 2010; Leese, 2010; Mangan et al., 2010). Moreover, non-traditional students are often characterised in opposition to their more traditional counterparts who follow seemingly 'expected' pathways through HE that are bolstered by familial legacies (Patiniotis and Holdsworth, 2005):

"Academic culture and socially dominant discourses of academic life present the middle-class student as the 'norm', and students from such backgrounds

do not often question their right to 'belong' in such an environment" (Read et al., 2003, p. 263).

Hence, it is argued that prior knowledge of university life arms traditional students with the correct tools with which to make successful transitions through HE (Reay, 2004). A large corpus of work exists concerning the transference of traditional student cultural capital from parent to child (Reay et al., 2010) and conversely, the potential disadvantages faced by non-traditional students as they transition into HE (Patiniotis and Holdsworth, 2005). This work typically focuses on the mobilities (Christie, 2007) and incongruous social (Clayton et al., 2009) and learning (Noble and Davies, 2009) experiences of non-traditional students which, almost unanimously, places their experiences as more problematic than their counterparts.

This paper explores this by questioning whether the diffuse ways in which students approach university are indeed reinforcing difference through imbalanced trajectories. By exploring contemporary HE experiences, the terms 'traditional' and 'non-traditional' will be unpacked more critically – specifically how students' approaches to university have become increasingly fractured and individualised in recent years. While the notion of students "not being from around here" (Holdsworth, 2009a, p. 227) remains prevalent among discourses of HE, the motivations for non-traditional students to attend 'local' institutions have become more nuanced, with students living at home with parents or partners (Christie, 2007); taking unspecified gaps between compulsory education and HE (McCune et al., 2010) or studying whilst in employment (Dibiase, 2000). Running parallel with these social changes, structural reconfigurations within HE have sought to make Universities more inclusive environments, with initiatives and targets to draw students from

disadvantaged background into institutions using financial and funding [dis]incentives for students and Universities alike (Cochrane and Williams, 2013). What this paper will discuss is how the diverse trajectories of HE students have problematised these monolithic terms and will present an opportunity to examine the more delicate nuances of contemporary HE students.

### **Habitus and cultural capital**

This paper employs Bourdieu's theories of habitus and capital as a conceptual framework to analyse the findings. Habitus is broadly defined as the transference of dispositions learned in one environment to another environment (Bourdieu, 1977). Nevertheless, Lee (1997) cautions that, habitus is about a propensity toward certain dispositions rather than a compulsion, meaning habitus can be altered by education or other experiences. Hence, habitus can be complex and multi-layered, meaning it can be altered by different opportunities or constraints (Reay, 2004). A key component of habitus is capital, which takes four forms – economic, cultural, social and symbolic. This paper focuses specifically on the mobilisation of cultural capital which exists in three forms: (1) institutionalised by academic qualifications; (2) embodied in the attributes and characteristics of an individual and (3) objectified in material artefacts (Waters, 2006). Bourdieu (1990) suggests that cultural capital allows individuals to move like 'fish in water' through an awareness of the mechanics of the field they are in, yet those without access to particular types of cultural capital may experience difficulties transitioning through certain social and institutional situations (Reay et al., 2009). Cultural capital is primarily transferred from parent to child and in the context of HE, this transference allows for more successful transitions through university. However, in terms of non-traditional students, Noble

and Davies (2009) argue that attempts to mobilise the wrong type of cultural capital may disadvantage attempts and increase the likelihood of making mistakes or misinterpreting important knowledge.

Key to this paper is the role of families and institutions in influencing successful mobilisations of cultural capital. Familial habitus hinges on the collective histories of the family and their class position and in many ways removes certain levels of agency from the child over their decisions through expectations that they will follow the habitus of the parent (Reay, 2004). Crucially, this is not achieved in a deterministic way but through common-sense, meaning children are likely to want to aspire to follow in the footsteps of their parents (Pimlott-Wilson, 2011). Like familial influences, institutions are influential in the transference of cultural capital and the ways in which Universities represent themselves can be fundamental in attracting or discouraging certain types of student (Reay et al., 2010). Habitus has, of course, been critiqued, with some accusing its fixed, generational characteristics of not fitting with the flexibility of the student experience, particularly those in transition, whose movements may be messy and spontaneous (Holdsworth, 2006). Moreover, as Patiniotis and Holdsworth (2005) argue, used uncritically, habitus can be overly deterministic or self-fulfilling, particularly in the transference of cultural capital between generations which may pre-determine the trajectory of students even before they have attended university.

## **Methodology**

The data collected for this project were gathered through a web-based survey conducted in the spring of 2012 with a Post-1992 university in the South East of England. Respondents were invited to participate via an introductory email sent by

departmental managers within the university which contained details of the project and a link to the survey. The survey contained questions relating to the students' living and learning experiences and the questions were tailored to suit four categories of living arrangements: halls of residence, privately rented housing, living with parents and living in their own homes. In all, 1147 valid responses were collected representing approximately six per cent of the total full-time undergraduate student cohort for 2011/2012. The sample broadly aligned with the composition of the sample university and comprised approximately one third of responses from each undergraduate year group. The sample were predominately female (60 per cent), 21 or under (78 per cent), white (86 per cent) and British (86 per cent) with 69 per cent stating that they went straight to university from school or college and 64 per cent being the first in their family to attend. In terms of living arrangements, 60 per cent were living in a privately rented 'student' property, 18 per cent were living in halls and those living in either their own home or with their parents counted for eleven per cent each.

A multinomial logistic regression (MLR) technique was used to analyse the data to establish a profile for each accommodation type and highlight the key characteristics of the types of students most likely to belong to each group. In MLR, the odds of a particular case fitting within any of the categories of independent variables is predicated upon a given set of characteristics. In other words MLR assesses how well a set of independent variables predict or explain the dependent variable. It does this by examining the goodness of fit of the model which in turn indicates the relative importance of each variable and/or any interactions between them.

Four dependent variables were selected for the MLR models. These variables were taken from a question within the survey asking: “*What type of property do you live in during term-time?*” that contained four fields: *halls of residence, rented ‘student’ house, with parents* and *own home*. Two different multinomial models were then set up to investigate the factors associated with living in *typical accommodation* (halls of residence and rented student housing) or *non-typical accommodation* (living with parents or in their own home). In each model, the alternative living arrangement category represented the reference variable (Table One).

[Place Table One here]

Three sets of independent variable were identified as being useful to this study:

1. Personal characteristics of traditional and non-traditional students (including demographic characteristics)
2. Reasons for going to university
3. Reasons for choosing the sample university as a destination

These variables were chosen to provide a more critical understanding of the respondents’ entries into HE and unpack some of the features which categorise traditional and non-traditional students. The first set comprised the characteristics of the ‘traditional student’, as evidenced within the literature (Patiniotis and Holdsworth, 2005; Holdsworth, 2006). The five attributes (*age* (over 21), *gender* (female), *ethnicity* (white), *parent with degree*, and *straight to university*) were tested against

the dependent variables in order to verify associations within each model. Finally, *year of study* (year 1) was added to the model to ascertain whether being a first year student had any bearing over the results. Whilst this is not thought to be related to any of the definitions of the terms traditional / non-traditional students, the literature does suggest that there are particular trends for choosing specific types of accommodation among year groups (Christie et al., 2002; Rugg et al., 2004).

The second set of independent variables highlight the reasons for attending university. Six independent variables were based upon the question “*What made you decide to go to university?*” with responses being: *gaining an experience*, *leaving home*, and *gaining a qualification*, and with *decisions* being made by parents, schools or themselves. The third set of variables investigates why the sample university was chosen and was based upon the question “*What made you choose the university you are currently studying at?*” The responses include: *distance* (close to home), *the quality of the course*, *the reputation of the university* and whether it had been *recommended*. Through the following analysis, this data emphasises the priorities of students within each group whilst offering explanations of how these characteristics might shape students’ habitus.

## **Results**

Figure one shows the percentage response to each of the questions used from the survey stratified by accommodation type and reveals differences in the types of students living in *typical* or *non-typical* student accommodation. Whilst contrasts exist between each of the variables, the most prominent of differences expose variations in age, familial understandings of HE, mobility, and the desire to gain a ‘student experience’. For example, the results reveal that, in direct comparison to

their peers in the non-typical category, those living in typical student accommodation are more likely to be younger (86 per cent / 50 per cent), desire a 'student experience' (67 per cent / 26 per cent), have a familial history of HE (68 per cent / 29 per cent) and choose an institution some distance from home (27 per cent / 71 per cent). Moreover, while the distinction between these categories is fairly clear, further investigation of the four dependent categories (table two) reveals more detailed variation between the types of living arrangements particularly regarding age, mobility and access to HE. Those respondents living with parents share greater similarities with their counterparts in the more typical halls and rented housing when considering age and access to university than those living in their own homes. Likewise, while over three quarters of those living with parents had chosen their university because it was close to home, this dropped to two thirds for those living in their own homes suggesting distance was slightly less important in their decision to choose their institution.

*[Place Figure One here]*

*[Place Table Two here]*

The MLR models in table three take this analysis a stage further by indicating which of the independent variables are most significant in each model and which characteristics best describe those students likely to belong to them.

[Place Table Three here]

*Halls* – Students in this category were 28.55 times more likely to be under 21 years of age and 2.34 times more likely to belong to an ethnic minority than those from the reference category non-typical accommodation. While this emphasises the attraction of halls to a younger cohort, the significance of ethnicity also suggests that halls may be well placed to cater for non-traditional students, particularly as the odds of a student belonging to this category having entered university straight from school or college decreased to less than half (0.47) in relation to the reference category. Perhaps, as expected, these students were 3.98 times more likely to want to gain a student experience and 7.43 times more likely to have wanted to leave home than those in the reference category, suggesting halls may be a primary location for what Holdsworth (2006) terms the more ‘typical’ student experience. This link between mobility and the student experience is supported by the odds of a student living in halls choosing their university because of its proximity to home reducing to less than a fifth (0.16).

*Rented housing* – In contrast to those living in halls, the odds of a student living in rented accommodation being in their first year of study were reduced to two fifths (0.41) and were 1.96 times more likely to be under 21 years of age, suggesting that - while these students were young, they are likely to have progressed from halls into rented housing in subsequent years. Like those in halls, these students were 2.93 times more likely to desire a student experience, 8.40 times more likely to have factored a period living away from home into their decision to go to university and far less likely to choose their university based on its distance from home (the odds are

again reduced to less than two fifths (0.17)) than the reference category, non-typical accommodation. This again implies that students living in rented accommodation are aligned closer to the more typical student identity, yet their age and experiences suggest there are slightly different ways in which this may be approached.

*With parents* – While students belonging to this category appeared to contrast directly to those in the reference category – typical accommodation, there were certain characteristics which were shared with those in halls than those in the other non-typical accommodation category, own home. These students were 1.92 times more likely to have attended university straight from school or college suggesting they were approaching university from similar backgrounds as those in student accommodation, yet their living arrangements defined them as non-traditional students (Patinotis and Holdsworth, 2005). Continuing with this contrast, the likelihood of a student desiring either a student experience or a period living away from home belonging to the living with parents category were reduced considerably (0.27 and 0.02 respectively). Hence, their propensity to remain local meant they were 9.17 times more likely to have factored distance into their decision to choose their university than those in the reference category, emphasising their relative immobility to those in more typical student accommodation (Christie, 2007).

*Own home* – As with the with parents category, one of the predominant features of those belonging to this group is age, with the odds of belonging to this category being reduced to less than a third (0.28) for students under the age of 21.

Interestingly, gender and ethnicity were significant here, with the likelihood of a student belonging to this category being 1.98 times more likely if they were female and the odds of being 'white' reduced to two fifths (0.41) than those in the reference

category. While this links to Gibbons and Vignoles' (2012) and McClelland and Gandy's (2011) suggestions that ethnicity and gender are important components in the sensitivity of geographical distance, ethnicity was very poorly represented in the sample, with fewer than twenty per cent non-white respondents in each residential category. Linked to their age, the odds of these students having gone to university straight from school were reduced by half (0.52) and this was also reflected in the student experience (0.41) and leaving home categories (0.41 and 0.30 respectively), revealing links to those living with their parents (Christie et al., 2005). These variables are supported further by students belonging to this category being 2.75 times more likely to have chosen their university because it was close to home, however these odds are reduced to less than a third (0.30) when considering the reputation of the University into this decision. This suggests that proximity may be the primary reason for choosing to go to an institution for older students living in their own homes (Reay, 2003).

## **Discussion**

In discussing the results of this analysis, the remainder of this paper will focus on prior knowledge and the role of others in informing choices, the desire to be included in traditional 'student experiences' and the propinquity of university to home.

### ***Prior Knowledge and Influencing Factors***

It has been suggested within the literature that access to knowledge of the mechanics of HE is a key driver behind how students experience their time at university (Leese, 2010; Mangan et al., 2010; Murtagh, 2012), and that mature students, or those living with parents can often lack access to such knowledge (Christie et al., 2005; Leathwood and O'Connell, 2003). These notions are echoed in

the findings of this study with respondents placing varying degrees of importance upon their decision-making – such as quality of course, recommendations or the reputation of the university. However, when moving beyond the dichotomous categories *traditional* and *non-traditional* students, discussing these pre-student experiences according to the residential circumstances of the students problematises these notions of [in]equitable access to knowledge by exposing the heterogeneity within this student sample. For example, those living in *halls* or *with parents* appear more likely to exhibit similar characteristics when choosing to go to university than those in their *own homes*.

Examining these characteristics through the lens of cultural capital, infers that the respondents' 'pre-student' habitus plays a role in how this knowledge is accessed. Bourdieu (1986) suggests that families who have a history of HE transmit their knowledge of the 'right' types of cultural capital required to make a successful transition through university to their child (Reay, 1998; Ball et al., 2002). This was most pronounced among the students in the *halls* and *rented housing* categories with respondents demonstrating a more concentrated understanding of the benefits that might be had from attending university beyond that of the degree itself (e.g. a 'student experience' and the opportunity to spend a period of time away from the family home), than that their equivalents living in *non-typical* accommodation. However, as the results of the survey have demonstrated, there is an observable lack of prior familial or institutional knowledge among these respondents, most noticeably within the *halls* category which reports only 40 per cent of students having a parent with a degree and 51 per cent being influenced by their school or college to go to university. According to the literature, this would indicate that a significant number of these participants living in halls have accessed HE with insufficient levels

of cultural capital to get by. This presents a problem, particularly as living in *halls* is perceived to represent the most conventional and expected route into university for young undergraduates (Christie et al., 2002; Rugg et al., 2004). While this may be a fairly crude comparison it highlights the possibility that other factors are likely to be involved in making successful transitions into HE which might add to the familial and institutional influences. As Hopkins (2006) suggests, for many non-traditional students, their knowledge of the practicalities of university life (finances, debt, workload, accommodation, exams etc.) can be extremely fragmented, meaning they can often end up picking up information along the way.

Moreover, the data from the respondents further complicates the accepted notions of familial and institutional habitus. Of the three 'decision-making' categories (parental, school / college or own decision) the 'own decision' category was most prominent across all four residential circumstances. This agency could be expected in the *own home* category (e.g. through their age and gap between compulsory and tertiary education) with the opposite effect for members of the other residential categories who would be expected to have more parental or institutional influences. Instead, the responses showed signs of individual agency in decision-making across the categories, blurring who might be defined as traditional or non-traditional. This may be partially symptomatic of the increasing widening participation targets discussed earlier (Cochrane and Williams, 2013) with greater numbers of young adults approaching HE from families (or schools) whose education biographies mean they may be unable to give appropriate advice about making successful transitions into HE.

The findings from this study suggest that decisions among a largely non-traditional sample could be assumed for three reasons, which transcend the more typical familial or institutional influences (e.g. friends, media representations or general curiosity). Going to university might represent a purely pragmatic understanding that gaining an academic qualification might enable students “*to gain more opportunities later on in life*” (Survey response – Male, Y1, Halls of Residence); an unwritten expectation that going to university “*was the ‘next step’, it was the thing to do*” (Survey response – Female, Y3, Rented Housing); or an opportunity for respondents to “*start to make my own decisions*” (Survey response – Female, Y1, Rented Housing). A common thread which runs through each scenario is that the respondents appear to have some knowledge of how the system operates outside of their school or family. As a ‘post-1992’ university, this may of course be to do with the *type* of institution the sample university is, raising assumptions that it would be more likely to attract prospective students from non-traditional backgrounds. Nevertheless, there is no denying that a level of agency has gone into these decisions, across all residential categories, which has surpassed the familial or institutional knowledge which may be [un]available to the respondents. As Bourdieu (1986) suggests, academic qualifications imbue an individual with a level of legitimate ‘cultural competence’ which “produces a form of cultural capital which has a relative autonomy vis-à-vis its bearer and even vis-à-vis the cultural capital [s]he effectively possesses at a given moment in time” (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 248). With this in mind, it could be assumed that a proportion of the respondents had approached university with the intentions of only gaining the requisite qualifications to facilitate the transition into paid employment and independent living.

### ***The Student Experience***

A clearer indication of the differences between the residential categories is whether applicants desire a student experience while at university. The results of the regression models demonstrate a clear differentiation between those who chosen to go to university to experience 'being' a student (predominantly *halls* and *rented housing*) and those who did not (predominantly *with parents* and *own home*). The 'student experience' has been researched extensively and can be defined by popular depictions of student life. These characteristics include in[ter]dependent living, often away from the family home (Chow and Healey, 2008), and experimentation with social and leisure activities (Chatterton, 1999; Wattis, 2013). Much of this literature points to a 'student experience' being largely taken for granted by those living in *halls* or *rented housing*, with such students being exposed to student-centric socialising, such as Freshers' night-clubs and bars, the Students' Union, volunteering groups and university sports or academic societies. This is consistent with the survey results which suggest that students in more typical accommodation are almost four times likelier to factor social activities into their decision to go to university than those living *with parents* or in their *own homes*. Importantly, information regarding these activities is widely available to prospective students through university web-sites, open-days and social media (Madge et al., 2009).

Extending these discussions of the knowledge of social activities, those students within the study living in more typical student accommodation appeared likely to begin mobilising their capital prior to commencing their degrees through access to compatible social networks (Bourdieu, 1986; Holton, 2015). These respondents were able to recognise the potential benefit utilising capital might have on their student experience before starting university. Bourdieu (1986) suggests that transfers of social capital can often be taken-for-granted and are achieved through mutual

recognition of 'legitimate exchanges' (e.g. occasions, places or practices) which attempt to be as homogenous as possible in order to bring members closer together. This implies better understandings of the likely conditions they may be investing their capital in to ensure they understand, and can maximise the potential for, the opportunities available to them. Importantly, this extends Brooks' (2002) proposal that prospective students base their future 'educational destinations' upon the collective interests of their friendship group by suggesting that *social experiences* may also be important in preparing students for university. This was evident in the survey with 71 per cent (n=144) of respondents living in halls citing 'making friends' as a contributing factor in choosing halls to live, while 82 per cent (n=167) suggesting halls had provided them with the 'student experience' they both expected and desired.

Conversely, Christie et al. (2005) suggest that students living *with parents* or in their *own homes* often take a pragmatic approach to university, meaning they are likely to experience *doing* a degree, rather than necessarily *being* a student. Whilst this is evident in the study, what is important is whether or not this process of *doing* rather than *being* is shared between those living *with parents* or in their *own homes*. As Christie (2007) suggests, many non-traditional students inevitably seek a continuation of the same social, familial and / or employment patterns they had prior to university. This was apparent here, with fewer respondents from *non-typical* accommodation desiring a 'student experience' than the students living in *halls* or *rented houses*. For some respondents, this can be explained by a desire to maintain their non-student identities among their non-student friendship groups (e.g. 26 per cent (n=33) of those living *with parents* chose to remain at home in order to maintain long-term friendships). Whether these respondents are oblivious (or unwilling) to

take on the characteristics of student life is unclear. Nevertheless, what emerges is that gaining a student experience is only a small factor of the reasons the students living in non-typical accommodation gave for going to university. Gaining a student experience can often be disregarded because of financial commitments or worries or caring responsibilities which can motivate students to mobilise capital in more familiar social groups, thus preventing risks of failure and / or rejection. As Holdsworth (2006) suggests, not having access to what could be considered an “authentic’ student experience” (p. 505), can label students as disadvantaged. However, whilst potential access to knowledge of student-centric social activities may be limited, this may not necessarily disadvantage local students’ experiences:

*“The Uni [sic] is really lovely and is not too near or far from home. I’m around my friends and family and have made some great friends here too. It’s a nice city”* (Survey response - Male Y3, Own Home).

This comment from the survey hints at how capital exchanges between family and [non]student friends may help to alleviate some of these disadvantages and collectively go on to influence how (and where) capital is invested in the future (Thomas and Webber, 2001).

### ***The Propinquity of University to Home***

One of the more obvious differences between the residential categories is the desire to leave home to go to university, with a clear distinction between the types of students who factored leaving home into their choice to attend (*halls* and *rented* housing) and those who did not (*with parents* and *own home*). While there still exists a trend for ‘going away’ to university in the UK (Holdsworth, 2009a), the findings from the survey suggest that ‘leaving home’ is one of the least influential aspects between

all four residential types. Only 41 per cent of students in *halls* and 38 per cent of students in *rented housing* suggested this factored into their decision. This implies that, while over two thirds (78 per cent) of the survey respondents had chosen to live in student accommodation during their degree, they had not considered leaving home to be part of that decision. There may, of course, be a simple explanation for this where the action of moving away from home for a period of time may simply be taken for granted for potential undergraduates (see Holdsworth, 2009b; Calvert, 2010). Yet, for some of the survey respondents, their prior understanding of the mechanics of university highlighted an expectation that going away to university was simply an inevitable part of the process.

For those living *with parents*, their choice to remain in the family home was often pragmatic, as illustrated by some of the qualitative responses from the survey:

“ [University] *is not far from my parent’s home so I saw no point in leaving*”  
(Survey response – Female, Y2, With Parents).

“*Don’t live far enough away to move*” (Survey response – Female, Y1, With Parents).

“*It was easier to go to [university] than to go to other unis [sic]*” (Survey response – Male, Y1, With Parents).

These comments extend Hinton’s (2011) proposal that young people may shape their HE aspirations according to their ideologies of home by suggesting that those living *with parents* may have been conscious that university was likely to impact upon their home lives. This goes some way in confirming the earlier claims as to why some of those students in more typical student accommodation had not considered

moving away in their decision to go to university. Comparatively speaking, those living in their *own homes* fit closest to the literature's definition of the 'non-traditional student' being comprised predominantly of mature learners and those experiencing a gap in education (Leathwood and O'Connell, 2003). Hence, it would not be unusual to assume they cite gaining a qualification as one of the primary factors in choosing an institution (Christie et al., 2005). However, students from this residential category exhibited little propensity (compared to other residential circumstances) to base their decisions upon what the university might offer them. This suggests that some respondents may have been spatially constrained in their choice of institution, which is pertinent as Reay (2003) suggests that adult learners can feel restricted by their 'immobility'. It may be understood that the experiences students gain through HE may offer new opportunities and, ultimately, a change to social identities. However, mature students, particularly those living in their *own homes*, are often tied to their geographical location by family or job commitments (Baxter and Britton, 2001), making them unwilling (or unable) to take full advantage of such prospects.

Factoring distance from home into decision making can be problematised further when considering propinquity to the sample university in the decision-making process. Gibbons and Vignoles (2012) suggest that living arrangements impact greatly upon non-traditional students' choice of institution, with a significant proportion choosing institutions close to home. Whilst there are consistencies within this data, being close to home was evidently the most significant driver for choosing the sample university for students living in non-typical accommodation. Those wanting to stay close to home were more than nine times more likely to be living *with parents* and almost three times more likely to be in their *own homes* than those in rented accommodation. Comparing these findings to the students within the *typical*

student accommodation categories reveals that, while these students appear less likely to choose an institution based upon its proximity to home (the odds of a student wanting to remain close to home would be living in either *halls* or *rented housing* is reduced to less than a third), there are still enough students in each of these categories to suggest that some have considered their distance between university and home. This could be for a number of reasons, one of which being the potential to move between student accommodation and the family home with ease during term-time (Calvert, 2010). This was expressed by these respondents within the survey who were living in *rented housing*:

“[University] was just far enough away for my independence, but not too far away so that I could get home easily should I need to” (Survey response – Male, Y3, Rented Housing).

“Far enough from home to not be on my doorstep and close enough to go back on the weekend” (Survey response - Female Y3, Rented Housing).

This was a common theme in the responses and emphasises that, whilst students may be mobile, their movements may also be limited to choosing institutions within their region, in particular, placing proximity to home above the quality of degree or value of the institution itself.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, this paper adds to discussions of student geographies by suggesting that living arrangements be considered an indicator of a students' traditional or non-traditional status. Recognising the differences between the 'types' of student who are likely to live in student and non-student accommodation whilst at university

recognises both the complexity of students' understandings of HE and importantly the heterogeneity that exists within the student community. Examining behaviours from the perspective of term-time living arrangements usefully assists in unpacking the experiences of students, throughout the HE pathway, and exposes greater nuance between students' tastes and behaviours. This is particularly useful when conducting research on those students living in non-typical accommodation, as the models shown here have revealed many contrasts between the types of behaviours demonstrated by students living *with parents* or in their *own homes*. When examining the reasons for going to university, differences were highlighted between how the students were approaching HE which is suggestive of them gathering knowledge of the mechanics of HE from sources outside of the more traditional sites of the family or the school in order to accrue sufficient capital to make the initial transition into university. This paper has also highlighted clear distinctions between those living in *typical* and *non-typical* accommodation types in the ways that they might choose to experience university. This draws attention to whether or not the participants were capable of recognising the potential benefits associated with mobilising the 'right' types of social capital prior to commencing their degrees.

Importantly, by problematising non-traditional students, this paper has shown that there is no neat fit for how students access cultural capital, particularly among those living in *non-typical* accommodation where those living in their *own homes* or *with parents* may have preconceived ideas as to whether or not they wish to be (or may feel capable of being) involved in student-centric social activities. In addition to this, while clear distinctions were apparent between the residential categories with regard to the desire to leave home to attend university, these processes appeared to be considered pragmatically, with a certain degree of inevitability about whether a

student might leave home or remain in the family home, rather than a conscious decision being made. Finally, in outlining the general characteristics of students according to their residential circumstances, these models are useful in developing our understanding of the micro-geographies of student experiences, both prior to and during university as well as expanding our knowledge of how students make sense of their term-time location. While this case study has focussed on the experiences of a sample of students from a 'post-1992' university, further study could provide fruitful in examining the trajectories of traditional and non-traditional students attending other 'types' of universities and how the institutional and familial drivers raised in this study may influence students' experiences. Naturally, this quantitative approach was unable to determine whether other social or cultural predictors were directly involved in the decisions made by the respondents. However, what this paper achieves is a strong basis of students' [pre]conceptions of HE with which to compare their transitions at subsequent stages of their degrees.

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Typical accommodation		Non-Typical accommodation	
Code	Label	Code	Label
(0)	Rented housing	(0)	Own home
(1)	Halls	(1)	With parents
*(2)	Non-typical accommodation	*(2)	Typical accommodation

\* Reference category

**Table One: Coding of the dependent variables (source: author's survey data).**

Percentage of responses in each category				
	Halls (n = 204)	Rented House (n = 687)	With Parents (n = 125)	Own Home (n = 131)
Year of study (year 1) <sup>a</sup>	96	18	34	31
Age (under 21)	93	84	75	27
Ethnicity (white)	85	81	88	82
Gender (female)	59	42	64	70
Parent with degree	40	37	24	34
Straight into HE <sup>b</sup>	66	74	75	25
Gain experience	73	65	31	21
Leave home	41	38	1	7
Gain qualifications	91	89	84	85
Parent decision	44	48	34	18
School decision	51	46	35	20
Own decision	56	57	57	53
Close to home	30	26	77	66
Quality of course	81	80	74	61
Recommended	20	13	17	7
Reputation	49	35	35	21

*a = missing data – 8 (2%) for 'Rented House', 1 (1%) for 'With Parents' and 4 (3%) for 'Own Home'.*

*b = missing data – 10 (5%) for 'Halls', 23 (3%) for 'Rented House', 4 (3%) for 'With Parents' and 6 (5%) for 'Own Home'.*

**Table Two: Independent variables for the reasons for going to university (source: author's survey data).**

	Typical accommodation <sup>a</sup>				Non-typical accommodation <sup>b</sup>			
	Halls		Rented		With Parents		Own Home	
	B	Exp( $\beta$ )	$\beta$	Exp( $\beta$ )	B	Exp( $\beta$ )	$\beta$	Exp( $\beta$ )
Intercept	-3.19		1.15		-2.59		-1.07	
Year of study (year 1)	3.35	*28.55	-0.89	*0.41	-0.17	0.84	0.31	1.36
Age (under 21)	0.68	1.97	0.67	**1.96	-0.21	0.81	-1.28	*0.28
Ethnicity (white)	0.85	**2.34	0.28	1.32	0.03	1.04	-0.89	**0.41
Gender (female)	0.12	1.12	-0.23	0.79	-0.12	0.88	0.68	**1.98
Parent with degree	0.06	1.06	-0.11	0.90	-0.25	0.78	0.55	1.74
Straight to university	-0.75	**0.47	-0.03	0.97	0.65	**1.92	-0.65	**0.52
Gain experience	1.38	*3.98	1.07	*2.93	-1.31	*0.27	-0.89	*0.41
Leave home	2.01	*7.43	2.13	*8.40	-3.89	*0.02	-1.20	*0.30
Gain qualifications	-0.54	0.58	-0.44	0.65	0.51	1.67	0.45	1.57
Parent decision	0.06	1.06	0.47	**1.60	-0.30	0.74	-0.52	0.60
School decision	0.35	1.42	-0.21	0.81	-0.17	0.85	0.52	1.68
Own decision	-0.49	0.61	-0.36	0.70	0.47	1.59	0.15	1.16
Close to home	-1.86	*0.16	-1.78	*0.17	2.22	*9.17	1.01	*2.75
Quality of course	0.39	1.48	0.20	1.22	-0.15	0.86	-0.32	0.73
Recommended	0.37	1.45	-0.13	0.88	0.02	1.03	-0.02	0.98
Reputation	0.46	1.58	0.34	1.40	-0.01	0.99	-1.20	*0.30

a. The reference category is: non-typical. \* $p < 0.005$  \*\* $p < 0.05$

b. The reference category is: typical. \* $p < 0.005$  \*\* $p < 0.05$

**Table Three: Multinomial regression results for students living in either 'typical' or 'non-typical' accommodation (source: author's survey data).**

**Figure One: Students living in typical or non-typical accommodation (source: author's survey data).**