

Lynn McBain
Doctor of Education
Oxford Brookes University

**An investigation into the social integration of Young
Adult Carers who are undergraduate students into Higher
Education Institutions in England.**

**A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the
requirements of Oxford Brookes University for the degree
of Doctorate in Education.**

May 2023

This thesis is dedicated to my Dad, John McBain.

“And when you have reached the mountain top, then you shall begin to climb”
Kahlil Gibran

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my Director of Studies, Professor Roger Dalrymple and second supervisor, Dr Sarah Frodsham for their words of wisdom, advice and encouragement, and for supporting me enthusiastically as I journeyed through this project. I would also like to thank Professor Mary Wild who acted as my Director of Studies towards the end of this process.

I am particularly thankful to the participants in this study who freely gave up their valuable time to talk to me and enlighten me on their world. I am forever grateful to them and I hope, by sharing their stories, this research has given them a voice.

Last and certainly not least, I would also like to thank my family and friends who have been extremely supportive throughout this process and without whom I might not have been able to complete this doctorate. Their patience was limitless.

Abstract

This thesis investigates the social integration of young adult carers (YACs) who are undergraduates in a higher education institution (HEI) in England. This study recognises the increasingly neoliberal nature of higher education (HE) and that it was carried out during a pandemic. YACs are defined as 'young people aged 16–25 who care, unpaid, for a family member or friend with an illness or disability, mental health condition or an addiction' (Carers Trust, 2022). It has been estimated that there are 376,000 YACs in the UK (Carers Trust, 2022), but there are no definitive figures for how many of these young people are studying at university. It is widely acknowledged that YACs are an under-researched student group, and it is the intention of this thesis to contribute to the growing body of knowledge about them. Following an initial review of documentary evidence from 50 HEIs on the levels of support for YACs from an institutional perspective, this study takes an interpretive approach employing narrative inquiry as the research methodology. Participants (n=5) were recruited from HEIs across England and interviewed at three points across the academic year. They were also invited to keep a reflective journal of their experiences. Findings and discussion chapters were presented as a combined narrative, in order to represent the student life cycle in terms of transition into, through and potentially out of university. Findings indicated that YACs felt there were a limited number of named contacts, no personalised support plans, varying financial support, and an absence of acknowledgement of the challenges this group of young people encountered on a daily basis. The study also found that family and friends were, and are the most important groups of people in a YAC's social network. It also found that academics could be more supportive in terms of understanding YACs and their different situations and how these impact their educational journey. It concluded that both HEIs and students' unions could do more to recognise YACs, and therefore ensure they feel more socially integrated into their respective universities.

Contents

Abstract.....	1
List of Tables and Figures	6
List of Abbreviations.....	8
Definition of Key Terms	9
1.1: Introduction to the thesis	10
1.2: Introduction to chapter 1.....	10
1.3: Rationale	11
1.4: Defining and Identifying Young Adult Carers	13
1.5: The Role and Impact of Caring on YACs.....	16
1.6: Neoliberalism and higher education (HE)	18
1.7: The Impact of the Pandemic Context on the Study.....	20
1.8: The Role of the Office for Students (OfS)	21
1.8.1: Current provision for young adult carers as undergraduates	22
1.8.2: Current provision for YACs: areas of emphasis.....	24
1.8.3: Bespoke Programmes and Specific Support.....	28
1.9: Aims and research objectives.....	31
1.10: The structure of this thesis	31
Chapter 2: Literature Review	33
2.1: Introduction	33
2.2: The Approach to the Literature Search.....	34
2.3: The Research on YACs and Social Integration.....	36
2.3.1: Young Adult Carers in Education	36
2.3.2: Social Networks, Social Capital and Social Support in Academia	41
2.3.3: Investigating Social Support.....	43
2.3.4: Student Persistence and Retention.....	46
2.4: Theoretical Perspectives	51
2.4.1: Social Ontology.....	51
2.4.2: Constructivism vs. constructionism	55
2.4.3: The Family of “Socials”	56
2.4.4: Social Capital.....	57
2.4.5: Social Support	61
2.4.6: Social Integration and Social Networks	63
2.5: Conclusion	67
Chapter 3: Methodology.....	70
3.1: Introduction	70

3.2: Conceptual Framework	70
3.3: Ontological and Epistemological approach	75
3.4: Methodological Approach: Narrative Inquiry	76
3.4.1: Introducing Narrative Inquiry	76
3.4.2: The Three Dimensions of Narrative Inquiry	77
3.4.3: Researching Sensitive Topics	79
3.5: Participant Recruitment	81
3.6: Collecting Narrative Data	85
3.6.1: Data collection methods and links to research objectives	86
3.7: The Data Collection Methods in Detail	87
3.7.1: Visual network diagrams	87
3.7.2: Semi-structured interviews	89
3.7.3: Reflective journals	95
3.8: Data Analysis	96
3.8.1: Thematic Analysis	96
3.9: Research Ethics	101
3.10: Reliability, validity and limitations	103
3.11: Conclusion	105
Chapter 4: On the Role of Academics, Friends and Family	107
4.1: Introduction	107
4.2: “They are such lovely people – sometimes”	109
4.2.1: The role of academics	109
4.2.2: The importance of friends in and out of university	115
4.2.3: The dual role of family	123
4.2.4: Mother is so supportive	126
4.3: Conclusion	129
Chapter 5: Socialising inside and outside the university	132
5.1: Introduction	132
5.2: The power of socialising	133
5.2.1: University-organised events	133
5.2.2: Extracurricular works for me	138
5.2.3: Virtual worlds are an option	140
5.2.4: “It’s an escape from everything”	143
5.3 Conclusion	144
Chapter 6: Barriers and challenges to social integration	146
6.1: Introduction	146

6.2: What's stopping you?	147
6.2.1: Reluctance to share	147
6.2.2: Money is a worry	153
6.2.3: There's never enough time	156
6.2.4: My own health isn't great	160
6.2.5: The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.....	164
6.3 Conclusion	166
Chapter 7: Achieving educational goals and student perspective on HEI policy and provision for YACs	167
7.1: Introduction	167
7.2: Staying or going?	168
7.2.1: I felt so isolated	168
7.2.2: Dropping out was always an option.....	170
7.3: "I feel so guilty"	172
7.4: Young adult carers' perspectives on HEI policies and provisions	174
7.4.1: Wellbeing and academic support	175
7.4.2: Financial support	178
7.4.3: A single point of contact.....	178
7.5: Conclusion	180
Chapter 8: Conclusions, recommendations and reflection	182
8.1: Introduction	182
8.2: Conclusions.....	183
8.3: Recommendations	194
8.3.1: Existing recommendations and further enhancements.....	196
8.3.2: New recommendations	199
8.3.3: Conclusions	204
8.4: Contribution to knowledge	206
8.4.1: Theory	206
8.4.2: Practice.....	207
8.4.3: Policy	207
8.5: Reflection	208
References	213
Appendices	239
Appendix A: Summary of review	239
Appendix B: Interview protocols 1, 2 and 3.....	244
Appendix C: Reflective journal template	251

Appendix D: Visual network diagram template	257
Appendix E: Consent form	259
Appendix F: Participant information sheet	261
Appendix G: Initial coding approach	264
Appendix H: Summary of visual network data	265

List of Tables and Figures

Tables

Table i: Definition of key terms	9
Table 1.1: Content analysis of 50 HEIs with support for YACs as of January - April 2022	25
Table 2.1: Results of the literature search using various search terms and databases	35
Table 3.1: Seminal theories included in the conceptual framework	73
Table 3.2: Participant profile	84
Table 3.3: An indication of the links between the research objectives and the data collection methods	86
Table 3.4: Interview dates and times	91
Table 3.5: Themes, sub themes and codes	98-99
Table 4.1: Themes, sub themes and links to the literature.	109
Table 5.1: Themes, sub themes and links to the literature.	133
Table 6.1: Themes, sub themes and links to the literature.	147
Table 7.1: Themes, sub themes and links to the literature.	167
Table 8.1: Recommendations arising from this research project, but evidenced in the extant literature	195
Table 8.2: Recommendations arising from the findings in this research project and considered a contribution to knowledge	200

Figures

Figure 1.1: The process followed to analyse the provision of support for YACs across HEIs in England	23
Figure 2.1: An illustration of the overlap between social support, social networks and social capital and how they all contribute to social integration. Source: Author's own.	57
Figure 2.2: Path diagram of Tinto's Interactionalist Model of Student Persistence (Source: adapted from Tinto (1975) and cited in Braxton and Hirschy, 2004)	64
Figure 2.3: Diagram showing the antecedents to social integration subsequent institutional commitment and persistence. (Braxton and Hirschy, 2004)	65
Figure 3.1: Conceptual model for the relationship of social networks and social support to health (Heaney and Israel, 2008:194)	71
Figure 3.2: Conceptual framework	72
Figure 3.3: Initial visual network diagram from Participant 2	88
Figure 3.4: Extrinsic and intrinsic factors and underlying challenges or barriers to social integration.	100
Figure 8.1: Conceptual framework	183
Figure 8.2: Rae's social network	210

List of Abbreviations

APP - Access and participation plan

BPD - Borderline personality disorder

CV – Curriculum vitae

DMS - Designated member of staff

HE - Higher education

HEI - Higher education institution

MACA - Multidimensional Assessment of Caring Activities

NERUPI - Network for Evaluating and Researching University Participation Initiatives

OECD - Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

OfS - Office for Students

SDG - Sustainable development goal

SU - Students' union

TA – Thematic analysis

VR - Virtual reality

WP - Widening participation

YAC - Young adult carer

Definition of Key Terms

Concept	Definition (Gottlieb and Bergen, 2010:512)
Social support	'The social resources that persons perceive to be available or that are actually provided to them by non-professionals in the context of both formal support groups and informal helping relationships'
Social network	'A unit of social structure composed of the individual's social ties and the ties among them'
Social integration	'The extent to which an individual participates in private and public social interactions'

Table i: Definitions of key terms

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1: Introduction to the thesis

This thesis intends to examine the social integration of students who are carers into higher education (HE). The rationale for focusing on this group of young people is that as a subsection of the higher education demographic profile, they are a global phenomenon, but, for various reasons, are under researched. Consequently there is a limited set of pedagogic and pastoral resources for HE professionals working with them. Such research as there is derives preponderantly from the UK, Australia, USA and Norway, and tends to come from countries that recognise young adult carers (YACs) as an underrepresented student group in HE. The scope of this thesis will focus on YACs in an increasingly neoliberalist HE system in England, a defined administrative region of the UK. England is selected as the specific focus, since this enables sustained insights and comparisons with reference to the relevant policy contexts and data sets publicly available through the Office for Students (OfS), the independent regulator of HE in England. Most studies on YACs tend to focus on academic integration, with no substantive literature fully focusing on the role of social integration on student persistence. This project will therefore attempt to provide a deeper understanding of what can be done to support young adult carers (YACs) as they transition into HE, and how pedagogic and pastoral interventions designed to promote social integration might positively impact their educational journey.

1.2: Introduction to chapter 1

In reflection of the specific context and positionality of the research, this chapter will start with the rationale for wanting to embark on this project and why it is significant to me. It will then give an overview of the phenomenon of YACs and how they may, or may not be, recognised in various countries around the world. Following this is a section that provides context for this research study, including an overview of neoliberalism in HE and how it

potentially impacts the widening participation agenda. It was also considered pertinent to highlight that this research project was carried out during the pandemic and the impact of this has been noted throughout. Then follows a section introducing the Office for Students (OfS) as the independent regulator of higher education in England, and how it defines underrepresented student groups. This section will also discuss why higher education institutions (HEIs) in England seeking to charge the full tuition fee are required to submit an Access and Participation Plan (APP) to the OfS. The chapter will also include a scoping review of a mapping exercise carried out on 50 HEIs in England to ascertain what level of support was available for student carers at the time of data collection, in order to contextualise this study. Finally, the chapter concludes with the aims and objectives of the project and a section regarding the impact of this research and how it might be meaningful to HEIs.

1.3: Rationale

The study's rationale arises from a convergence of personal researcher interest in the topic, and a wider sectoral need to gain additional insight on the experiences and outcomes of this section of the HE student demographic. The discourse and policy context surrounding different categories of underrepresented students has become increasingly nuanced in recent years, as has the availability of student outcome measures and metrics for these different student groups; this increasingly enables research and practitioner enquiry into new dimensions of higher education student experience. In terms of my own positionality, I currently act as the Widening Participation Coordinator for the Business School in my own institution, which means I am aware of the outreach projects and research areas being investigated by the Access and Participation teams. Widening participation (WP) is an area that is close to my heart; I was the first person in my family to go to university; from a relatively low income background and a military family; all of which are now deemed WP indicators. I went to university in the early 1980s, and, at that time,

there was virtually no awareness or support for underrepresented student groups, so it was a challenging environment in which to gain a qualification from an HEI.

My motivation for researching this topic was that I wanted to be able to contribute to initiatives that help YACs integrate into HEIs. In addition to the gains this might bring for individual student outcomes, a cogent case can be made for the societal benefit of better supporting this population. YACs offer many transferable skills for employers and by not facilitating their educational journey, society and the economy is missing out on the contribution these young people could make. I had been made aware of some students with caring responsibilities at my own HEI, and was the academic advisor for one of them. I had not been aware of this student's situation until it was shared with me during a tutorial towards the end of the second year of their programme. It explained the student's frequent absences and their inability to attend 9 o'clock classes; what worried me more though was why it had taken two years for this student to pluck up the courage to share the situation with me. That then made me wonder how many more YACs were unidentified and unsupported across HE. The student I had been speaking with also had very few social connections with the University and this had hampered any social integration, she reported a sense of isolation. Young Adult Carers are not currently a group of students on which my own HEI is focusing in terms of specific provisions in the institutional Access and Participation plan and associated initiatives, however, a recent development in terms of their support means there is now a bursary of £500 available to them when they join the University.

At the time of writing my research proposal, there was very little research regarding YACs as students; there was more on young carers in schools, but not YACs and HEIs. As I have progressed through my research project more papers have been published, perhaps motivated by the pandemic and the increasing number of carers that arose as a result. I have spoken to many colleagues at conferences and in my own HEI about this project and they have all expressed interest in it and potential application to their own practice; this

gave me the confidence to persist with the study and the intention for it to have real impact, and therefore make a difference for YACs as they transition into HE.

1.4: Defining and Identifying Young Adult Carers

Young carers are a global phenomenon; they exist in every region of the world and, despite cultural differences, largely carry out similar roles in terms of caring for a family member with a long term illness, disability or addiction (Nagl-Cupal et al., 2015). In the UK they were first formally recognised in the 1990s by Aldridge and Becker (1993); and later, Dearden and Becker (1995, 1998). Their research highlighted the young adult carers' (YAC) role as informal or unpaid carers, challenging the widely held view that carers were a homogenous group of people and that their age was irrelevant. In the UK there is a distinction between young carers, who are generally defined as those children under the age of 16, the mean age of a young carer in the UK being 9 years old (Sempik and Becker, 2013), and young adult carers. The definition of a young adult carer in the UK is 'young people aged 16–25 who care, unpaid, for a family member or friend with an illness or disability, mental health condition or an addiction' (Carers Trust, 2022). This definition of a YAC is generally in line with those from other regions of the world, despite some disparity in nations where YACs are not formally recognised (Kavanaugh et al., 2016). In other countries where young adult carers are defined and recognised the definition is often quite similar; this includes the USA and Australia.

It is acknowledged that definitions not only vary between countries, but also administrative regions in larger countries. For example, in Western Australia a carer is defined as 'someone who provides unpaid care and support to family members or friends who are living with a disability, mental health challenge, a long term health condition (including a chronic condition or terminal illness), an alcohol or other drug dependency or who is frail aged' (Carers Western Australia, 2022). However, there is no definitive term for YACs in

Western Australia. Haugland, Hysing and Sivertsen (2022) also state there is no common definition for YACs in Norway either. The UK would thus appear comparatively forward thinking in its identification of YACs, however they still remain an underrepresented group of young people and until relatively recently, under researched.

In a systematic review of the extant literature regarding YACs and how they are defined and characterised, Chevrier et al. (2022) found that defining YACs is problematic. From the resultant 23 papers in their review, there were three identification procedures; these were YACs who were already identified by social services or other support provision; YACs who self-identified; and criteria based on a wide definition. The parameters associated with the wide definition were suggested by Becker and Becker (2008) and are the nature of support; its frequency; the caregiver's affiliation to the care receiver; and the type of illness or disability of the care receiver. Young adult carers are a heterogeneous group of people; there is a spectrum of caring responsibilities which can include domestic chores, household management, emotional care and instrumental sibling care (Chevrier, Untas and Dorard, 2022). Recognising the diversity of carers further complicates the attempt to provide an all-encompassing definition.

Chevrier et al. (2022) suggested that a complete definition is required in order for YACs to be correctly identified. It has been further posited by Chevrier, Untas and Dorard (2022) that a person-oriented approach to defining YACs is taken; this would take a more flexible approach to identity construction. Using the parameters of type of caring activity, level of caring activity and personal characteristics such as age, gender and socioeconomic status, Chevrier, Untas and Dorard (2022) were able to classify sub-groups of YACs more accurately. Their study demonstrated the diversity of YACs and the challenge of applying one definition to such a heterogeneous group of people. It should also be noted that some YACs in HEIs who live away from home, are caring from a distance and as such, are secondary carers; this may have a further emotional toll on these students (Chevrier,

Untas and Dorard, 2022; Xue et al., 2022). This adds a further dimension to the issue of defining YACs in HEIs. It can therefore be surmised that a definitive identification of YACs is difficult owing to the breadth, scope and location of caring responsibilities.

Whilst the challenge of defining YACs is acknowledged, for the purposes of this research project and because of the requirement to identify a group of participants, the definition of YACs here will be in line with that of The Carers Trust (2022). This is 'young people aged 16–25 who care, unpaid, for a family member or friend with an illness or disability, mental health condition or an addiction'; however, in terms of identifying YACs in HE, the age range will be altered to 18-25 years old. It should be reiterated that in line with this definition, this research project will exclude student carers who are parents of typically developing children, or who have a primary caring role for a typically developing sibling. It is recognised that some young adult carers do care for siblings, however, this tends to be a secondary caring role, when the primary care receiver in a household is a parent (Dearden and Becker, 2004). Accordingly, the extant literature pertaining to YACs all focuses on individuals who are caring for an ill or disabled relative or friend.

Regarding identification of YACs, it has been suggested that there is no accurate measure for the number of young carers in the UK, this despite numerous research studies and two censuses (Wayman, Raws and Leadbitter, 2016). The Carers Trust (2022) cites a recent estimate of 376,000 YACs in the UK, this does however include young people in the age range of 16-25. In terms of YACs over 18, the only figure available is approximately 250,000, but this is somewhat outdated (Becker and Becker, 2008). More recently, Joseph et al. (2019) stated that around 7% of young people in their study self-reported as undertaking major caring roles which included domestic chores, household management and emotional care. The Carers Trust (2015) states it is difficult to establish a finite number of carers, as it is a dynamic area in terms of people becoming carers; at the last estimate there were around 7 million carers in the United Kingdom. The issue with

identifying numbers of young people who care is that they may be reluctant to self-identify or share their role. Additionally parents being cared for may be reluctant to seek parenting support for their children who are carers, as they fear child protection involvement, which further complicates the difficulty of identifying young carers (Aldridge, 2006).

1.5: The Role and Impact of Caring on YACs

This section gives some context around the role and responsibilities of YACs and the impact of caring on their life satisfaction and mental health. In order to understand the caring role, Joseph et al. (2009) developed the Multidimensional Assessment of Caring Activities (MACA) framework for administration with research populations of young carers as a self-report measure. MACA is an 18-point framework encompassing the six main areas of caring previously identified by Dearden and Becker (2004). These are personal care; sibling care; emotional care; domestic chores; household management and financial/practical responsibilities which also includes translating for non-English speaking relatives and paying bills. MACA was developed using a sample of young carers aged 6.5 to 22 years, which therefore included some YACs from age 16-22. However, there was no detail regarding the number of YACs included in the sample of 410 children, although the mean age of the participants was 13.25 years. A later phase of the study examined a sample of 128 young carers with a mean age of 13, but again there was no detail regarding the number of respondents who were aged over 16 years. The MACA framework has since been used as a quantitative assessment of the positive and negative impact of caring on young peoples' mental health and education (Becker and Sempik, 2019).

Chevrier, Untas and Dorard (2022) used the French version of the MACA framework to investigate 3273 undergraduate and graduate students who were confronted with the illness or disability of a relative. 42.19% of the students lived with this relative and were

involved in their care to some extent. Using a person-oriented approach, Chevrier, Untas and Dorard (2022) found there were three main responsibilities for these YACs; these were characterised by household chores, emotional care and sibling care. Although these three groups were identified, their paper also recognised the broad range of additional caring activities associated with the role of a YAC including financial and practical help, and personal care.

An additional study that extracted data from the 7th wave of the European Social Survey examined the relationship between life satisfaction, social participation and depressive symptoms of 673 young carers (Gallagher et al., 2022). Surprisingly, the researchers found that young carers were much more likely to participate in social activities compared with their non-caregiving peers; that social participation led to greater life satisfaction and less depressive symptoms (Gallagher et al., 2022). Gallagher et al. (2022) discuss the limitations of their study in that the data extracts did not describe the nature of the social activities, and that this would have been useful.

As the spectrum for caring responsibilities is broad, the impact of caring on the mental health of caregivers may vary accordingly. For example, it has also been suggested that caregivers with responsibility for household chores had better mental health than those YACs with lighter caring duties (Chevrier, Untas and Dorard, 2022). Further studies that specifically examine the impact of caring on young adults' mental health report both negative and positive connotations. Whilst there may be financial and emotional pressures, the positive impact of caring may be significant. Young caregivers reported that they felt closer to those for whom they cared, and therefore had better relationships with them, as well as feeling a sense of purpose in their caring role (Dellmann-Jenkins, Blankemeyer and Pinkard, 2000; Fruhauf, Jarrott and Allen, 2006; Haugland, Hysing and Sivertsen, 2019; McLaughlin et al., 2019).

1.6: Neoliberalism and higher education (HE)

This research project was undertaken in the context of what is increasingly recognised as a neoliberal higher education (HE) system. According to Giroux (2014:1) ‘neoliberalism is a predatory global phenomenon’. Neoliberal policies have affected HE globally, including the rise of corporatisation, the decline of public funding for universities and a shift towards a more market-driven model of education where the students have become positioned as customers or consumers (Giroux, 2014). There are concerns that HEIs are more focused on profits and efficiency, as they respond to targets for recruitment and retention, rather than academic and intellectual freedom (Giroux, 2014). The neoliberal focus within HEIs means there is a drive to enhance student employability and incorporate “enterprise” into the curriculum; thereby potentially ensuring greater economic sustainability and national wealth (Wilkins and Burke, 2015). On average across OECD countries, the employment rate for tertiary educated individuals increases by 10% to 84% (OECD, 2021). In this respect the link between education of individuals, their employability, and a growing global economy becomes apparent. Additionally, the United Nations Educational Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) calls for action to promote inclusive and accessible education for everyone (OECD, 2021); the main focus of this is primary and secondary education, however, this is also applicable to tertiary education.

Despite the widening participation (WP) agenda, the neoliberalisation of HE has had a number of negative consequences for students, with concerns about the commodification of HE, and the impact of student debt on access and social mobility (McGettigan, 2013). Globally, there is evidence that some governments have shifted the burden of debt from state-funded places onto individuals; this means students who cannot afford to pay fees upfront leave university with a considerable debt. Widening participation (WP) is often seen as the key to resolving social inequality, however as underrepresented student groups often come from low-income families, they are amongst the students who are

more likely to incur high levels of debt whilst studying (Office for Students, 2018a). YACs are also more likely to come from low-income households; this has obvious ramifications for this student group and may impact their decision to initially attend or persist in higher education (Becker and Becker, 2008; Day, 2017; Haugland, Hysing and Sivertsen, 2019; Moore, McArthur and Morrow, 2009; Smyth, Cass and Hill, 2011). Financial pressure is therefore increasingly likely to be a stressor for YACs if they do transition into and progress through HE.

Any organisation operating in a market-driven economy has to make decisions about where to allocate resources, and the neoliberal HEI is no exception. For example, Leaney and Mwale (2021) describe a situation where satellite campuses that offered accessible HE provision for underrepresented student groups were shut, because they were considered no longer profitable. These campuses offered solace for the students from the local poverty and increased their confidence and self-esteem. When the campuses closed the students were no longer able to attend the university as the commute to central campus impacted them negatively, including not being in close proximity to responsibilities at home.

The marketisation of HE has led to increased competition between institutions as they attempt to recruit more students. As tuition fees are currently fixed at a maximum of £9250 per year for UK-domiciled undergraduate students (Office for Students, 2023), the only resolution to directly increase revenue from this student group is to increase recruitment. Increased student numbers consequently place a burden on HEI resources; potentially this may mean there are difficult decisions to be made regarding allocation of resources to support underrepresented students; including financial bursaries. These decisions may also be impacted by the fact that WP students are more expensive to teach and more likely to drop out (McCaig, 2018). For YACs this figure has been previously calculated at 29% of students who do not continue with their educational journey (Sempik and Becker,

2014). This then, is a further tension between market-driven HEIs and the drive to recruit students from underrepresented groups, as WP becomes an issue of financial viability with increased focus on evaluation of outreach initiatives (NERUPI, 2023). This may also mean that HEIs are motivated to recruit increasing numbers of international students, as they are able to operate more competitive pricing strategies (Naidoo et al., 2022), further detracting from a focus on underrepresented undergraduate student groups.

1.7: The Impact of the Pandemic Context on the Study

This research project was carried out during the COVID-19 pandemic; with data collection taking place between October 2021 and June 2022. The acute phase of the pandemic led to radical adaptations in teaching and learning approaches and thus introduced a whole range of further contingent variables into the student experience. For example, much teaching and learning was delivered through online channels, for many academics this happened almost immediately with the onset of the pandemic in March 2020 (Nuere and de Miguel, 2021; Rapanta et al., 2020). In addition, social activities were severely curtailed, as various periods of lockdowns across the globe impacted individuals' opportunities to interact physically with each other and to attend events. As a result of the pandemic, Liu et al. (2021) found that individuals described as Generation Z (those people born between 1995 and 2010 (McKinsey, 2018)) suffered from information overload. This led to them experiencing social media fatigue, and consequently many individuals decided to reduce or remove their social media activity. As a result, this also meant there were fewer channels of communication available to education providers, as they strived to maintain contact with students during the pandemic. HEIs were one group of education providers that were unable to deliver their 'usual' student experience. In my personal experience of working at an HEI during lockdowns, this meant we were not only obliged to teach online, but also attempted to create online social networks with new and returning students.

It is likely that YACs were affected by the pandemic in different ways when compared with students who were non-carers; learning whilst locked down at home and simultaneously caring for a relative might have been difficult. YACs' caring responsibilities may have increased during the pandemic (Andrewartha and Harvey, 2021). Additionally, having to try and maintain contact over social media platforms with friends who were disengaging from social media might also have been challenging (Liu et al., 2021). Those students who were locked down and prevented from travel may have had to remain in student accommodation, therefore keeping in touch with family over social media might also have been an issue. For YACs living away from home increasing worry about the person being cared for might have been an additional stressor on them. Recent studies have highlighted the increased pressures on YACs caring for family members during the pandemic and have found they were more likely to suffer from poor mental health than non-caregivers (Andrewartha and Harvey, 2021; Landi et al., 2022). Unsurprisingly, the data collected in this study included extensive reflections of the pandemic context, therefore a degree of analysis was required to distinguish unique pandemic factors from existing challenges.

1.8: The Role of the Office for Students (OfS)

The Office for Students (OfS) is the regulatory body for higher education (HE) provision in England. It aims to ensure that HE is accessible for full-time UK-domiciled students under the age of 25, and that, no matter what background an individual comes from, everyone has an equitable opportunity of success. The OfS is particularly focused on underrepresented student groups (2022a); some of these groups are students from areas of low higher education participation; low household income or low socioeconomic status; some black, Asian and minority ethnic students; care leavers; and carers. If higher education institutions (HEIs) wish to charge the full tuition fee the OfS requires that they

submit an Access and Participation Plan (APP), which details how each provider will 'improve equality of opportunity for underrepresented students to access, succeed in and progress in higher education' (OfS, 2022b). Young adult carers are sometimes mentioned in these plans, however specific targets relating to their inclusion are missing, as data on these students is difficult to access or obtain. HEIs who are in the 'approved fee-cap' category must submit an APP in order to be able to charge more than the basic tuition fee; in this respect their plans must be approved by the OfS's Director for Fair Access and Participation (Office for Students, 2018b).

1.8.1: Current provision for young adult carers as undergraduates

Insight on the current scope and extent of student support provision for YACs can be gained by a review of a selection of HEI websites where such support arrangements are specified. Additionally, bearing in mind that YACs may use the universities' websites to access information when applying to university, the level of support available to them may, or may not, impact their decision to apply to that HEI. Such an initial overview of the support arrangements available at the time of the data collection (January – April 2022) informed the parameters for the primary data collection and allowed me an insight into what support was available, and then to usefully compare this with the support the student carers in this study had actually experienced. In terms of which HEIs to include in such a review, my starting point was a publicly available analysis of Access and Participation Plans for HEIs in England which had been undertaken by the Office for Students (OfS) to encompass plans from 2020-21 to 2024-25 (Office for Students, 2022c). The data from the OfS indicated what bursaries and scholarships were available to disadvantaged students and sometimes this also included YACs. The OfS data also included all Further Education colleges that were delivering HE programmes of study and these were discounted as part of the scoping review for my study, the justification being that this study was investigating undergraduates on a three-year programme of study within HEIs.

Following this, HEIs without bursaries and scholarships were also discounted, as this was one of the areas of interest in terms of support for YACs. From the initial list of 171 HEIs, this resulted in a final list of 100 HEIs, whose websites were accessed for evidence of support policies for student carers, students with caring responsibilities or YACs. Figure 1 illustrates the protocol that was followed to undertake the review.

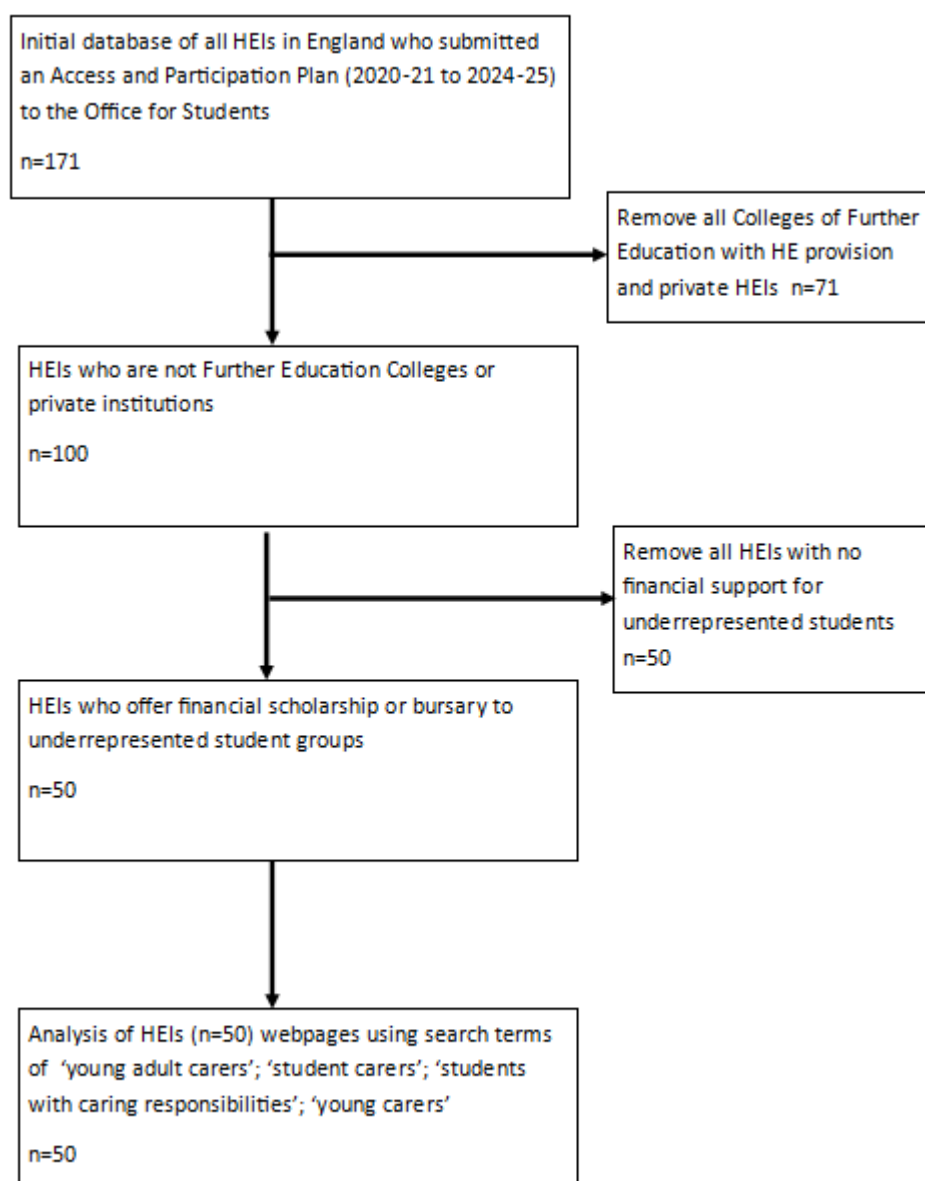


Figure 1.1: The process followed to analyse the provision of support for YACs across HEIs in England

Consultation of the websites of these HEIs (accessed during January - April 2022) revealed that, of the 100 HEIs offering bursaries and scholarships to underrepresented student groups, only 50 had web pages that specifically mentioned student carers. Examination of the web pages and linked policy and procedure documents from these sites affords more detailed insight on how HEIs seek to support or advise this student group. The findings were presented as an overview of the final list of 50 HEIs that provided even a modicum of support for young adult carers (YACs) and can be seen in Appendix A. It should be noted that each university was described with a letter and number as U# to preserve anonymity. The justification for this being that following participant recruitment it may have been possible to identify participants as they potentially referred to specific initiatives in their own institution.

It was noted that some of the HEIs used the term 'student carers', 'students with caring responsibilities' or even, inaccurately, 'young carers'. To recall, in England, young adult carers are defined as 'young people aged 16–25 who care, unpaid, for a family member or friend with an illness or disability, mental health condition or an addiction' (Carers Trust, 2022) and in the context of this project as young people aged 18-25. In terms of taking note of student carers or students with caring responsibilities, I was therefore mindful of not including details or analysis of provision for students who were parents and who therefore also had caring responsibilities.

1.8.2: Current provision for YACs: areas of emphasis

Downloading and collation of the policy and procedure documents and webpage from each of the 50 HEIs generates 140 pages of documentary evidence and enables a more detailed overview of current provision and some preliminary content analysis (Krippendorff, 2013) of key vocabulary and recurrent terminology as follows in table 1.1:

Textual term or phrase	Frequency of occurrence
Young carers	99
Student carers	51
Young adult carers	50
Students with caring responsibilities	41
Financial support	37
Your commitments	24
Academic support	13
We are committed	12
Designated (parking, staff, contact)	10

Table 1.1: Content analysis of 50 HEIs with support for YACs as of January - April 2022

It should be acknowledged that carrying out a content analysis takes the term or phrase identified out of context, and that the copy generated for website content may likely be the responsibility of the marketing and communications function in a university. The debate here might therefore further endorse the move towards an HE system that is increasingly recognised as neoliberal, where student recruitment is the responsibility of marketing.

Generally the overarching term that appears on all HEI websites is that of ‘support’ with 631 mentions. To reiterate this is only on the web pages associated with YACs and therefore the intention to support YACs in each of the 50 HEIs is evident to a greater or lesser degree. Referring to table 1.1, it can be seen that the phrase ‘young adult carers’ is used almost as much as ‘student carers’ and more than ‘students with caring responsibilities’. However, the phrase ‘young carers’ is also used twice as often as these three phrases to describe YACs, which, in itself, is inaccurate as young carers are technically those young people aged below 16 years in England. This demonstrates, at

the very least, a lack of understanding of the terminology for YACs i.e. young adults between 16-25 years of age who care unpaid for someone (Carers' Trust, 2021). From the web pages analysis, some of the references to young carers are specifically associated with outreach programmes, where the HEIs are promoting outreach to disadvantaged student groups before they decide to study in HE. The universities with specific outreach programmes for young carers in particular, tend to have some support in place for them when they enrol at that HEI.

Appendix A demonstrates that only 15 of the HEIs identify a named contact for YACs, with one of these only being named after the students enrol. For those HEIs with named contacts, the students can at least contact these people and ask more questions before making their choices regarding which university to attend. An additional 7 HEIs have a specific email for YACs to use when seeking advice. Therefore, in total only 22 of the 50 universities identify a contact email or named person, with 28 of them having no contact details at all. Some of the contact emails are even generic wellbeing email addresses, which is arguably not very reassuring for a young person who is already experiencing stress as a result of their home situation, and who may not have the time or energy to search university web pages for support. For those universities offering a named contact or Designated Member of Staff (DMS), these employees are available for YACs throughout their educational journey; it may be the case that these DMS understand the pressures associated with long term caring responsibilities. The presence of and accessibility to staff who can empathise with YACs is likely to be more reassuring to potential students, than not having a key point of contact. There is evidence that employing staff who can relate to underrepresented student groups is a positive form of support for these students, and that it may lead to greater student retention (Guiffrida and Douthit, 2010). This may also apply to students who are YACs and therefore, will also be investigated in this research project.

Table 1.1 also indicates that the phrase 'financial support' is mentioned significantly more often than 'academic support', therefore potentially illustrating that HEIs consider financial support to be more important to YACs. In the context of many YACs coming from low-income households this is understandable, as HEIs may wish to promote financial support more prominently. All of the universities represented in the sample state that they had bursaries or scholarships available for underrepresented student groups; however, the precise nature of which groups were eligible for this financial help is not detailed in the data from the OfS. On investigating further it is apparent that only 16 of the 50 HEIs in the final list have specific bursaries for YACs ranging from a single payment of £500 at the start of their studies to a generous £5000 (this included £500 on graduation). Other phrases regarding support such as 'emotional support' are not recorded in the table as the total occurrence of these is less than ten.

There are no mentions of the phrase 'social support' demonstrating the lack of priority around this area; however, this does depend on definitions and the presence of synonymous phrases which are not designated as key terms in this scoping review. There are however, 6 mentions of 'peer support' which include peer support programmes to help with academic studies. These are not described as peer carers who understand the caring situation of the student seeking support, but who are students on the same programme of study. Interestingly, there are areas considered supportive in terms of such elements as designated car parking for YACs.

Finally the phrase 'we are committed' is only mentioned 12 times across all 50 HEIs; but there are double the mentions of 'your commitment' in terms of the students focusing on their studies. The partnership between students and HEIs should be equitable with respect to institutional integrity and student commitment; Braxton and Hirschy's (2004) model of persistence highlights the former as an important antecedent to social integration. This model is discussed in more detail in Chapter 2.

1.8.3: Bespoke Programmes and Specific Support

Regarding bespoke programmes specifically for YACs, only three of the HEIs in this review expressly mentioned the availability of such a programme. Following the labelling of each university as U# to preserve anonymity, these are:

- U3 Cares
- U6 Cares
- U35 Cares

U3 Cares is a support programme that aims to provide financial, pastoral, and educational support to students who have unpaid caring responsibilities, from application stage through to graduation and searching for employment. A quote from a YAC on the U3 website said the programme had made life less stressful for her. As part of the programme there is a peer support scheme called City Buddies, YACs are prioritised for this programme and matched up with a second or third year student, who is also a YAC, to help them settle into HE life. This would appear to address the issue regarding reluctance to share, as the peer would be understanding of the new student's home situation and would likely be more empathetic.

U6 Cares has been running for 16 years as of 2022; the programme is available for a number of underrepresented student groups including YACs. The scheme includes financial support, access to year-round accommodation and access to internal and external opportunities including paid work, mentoring schemes and social and networking events. U6 obviously recognises that social integration is important for these students.

Finally, U35 Cares is a similarly structured programme to U6 Cares, but also offers the YACs an opportunity to shape the support they require by running Student Voice events for student carers. The bursary offered to YACs at U35 is also very generous compared to

other HEIs, with £1500 per academic year and £500 on graduation. Communication about events that are relevant to YACs is also highlighted on the webpages about U35 Cares.

These three bespoke programmes include strong elements of opportunities to enhance social integration for YACs, it is clear that they recognised this was an important addition to academic and financial support. These HEIs exhibit strong institutional integrity and therefore commitment to the students (Braxton and Hirschy, 2004). For future research, it would be interesting to understand how these programmes impacted student persistence, in comparison with HEIs with no bespoke support for YACs.

There are carers support plans in place in seven other HEIs, which consist of a number of elements similar to those in place in the three named schemes above. For example, U39 has a U39 Carers' Project that brings staff and student carers together and includes opportunities to socialise through a Carers' Cafe and other social events. U39 also recognises the skills that YACs acquire through caring, and allows these students to use 25% of their caring hours to go towards a U39 Graduate Attributes Excellence Award. The Carers' Champions Scheme at U29 was started by a student for student carers; the student realised that YACs were living with a number of challenges and was motivated to help. As part of the scheme, training sessions are introduced for staff members on how to recognise when YACs needed support and how best to help.

U34 made available a very useful six-page document for YACs, which demonstrates clear understanding of the pressures these students are under. The document outlines various areas of support including financial, mental health and wellbeing. As there are over 300 student carers at U34, the University obviously recognises the importance of supporting this student group. Another university, U23, also has a substantial number of registered student carers. This constitutes 3000 students, and, despite the significant size of this group, U23 has no named scheme. They do, however, have a Students' Union officer

designated to students with caring responsibilities and some anecdotal evidence on their website with regards to this. Overall there are few obvious links to students' unions across the HEIs examined in this study and therefore this may be a potential area of development.

U8 has a specific document for student parents and student carers, although this only focuses on financial support. U15 has a Young Carer and Young Adult Carer Agreement, however this only includes outreach activity and so is support for pre-entry to HE. The agreement refers to their outreach programme and outlines all the support available at HEIs generally, including social support; although the reference to the latter is rather vague. There is no specific help for YACs once they had enrolled at U15. U19 has a Disrupted Education programme, which does mention YACs, but again focuses on outreach and pre-entry to HE. There are a number of other HEIs that acknowledge YACs as a target student group in their outreach activity, but once the YAC has enrolled there is no obvious support for them as far as could be ascertained from their websites.

Finally, the Open University does not submit an Access and Participation Plan to the Office for Students, but they are the only HE provider with a specific student carers policy. Their student carers policy was written in August 2020 and focuses purely on academic and financial support; it may be that social integration is not their focus as the majority of the teaching and learning is online. However, it might be interesting to consider social integration online where students can feel part of a cohort.

All of the above illustrated the gaps in provision of support for YACs in HEIs in England. The review therefore further supported the rationale for this research project and contextualised some of the areas of existing and potential support for this group of students.

1.9: Aims and research objectives

The aim of this research project is to investigate the process of social integration of young adult carers into higher education and how this might impact their persistence and progression through their programme of study. The scope included undergraduate students in any year of their programme. In order to address the full range of considerations flagged in the extant literature the following research objectives will be explored:

RO1: To examine YACs' perception of their social integration into an HEI.

RO2: To explore how university and support networks impact social integration for undergraduate students who are YACs.

RO3: To identify which University-organised events have the greatest impact on social integration from the perspective of undergraduate students who are YACs.

RO4: To examine the main barriers to social integration and building social networks from the perspective of undergraduate students who are YACs.

RO5: To comprehend the perceived impact of social integration on persistence and progression of undergraduate students who are YACs at an HEI.

By addressing this range of research objectives the study aims to raise awareness of the phenomenon of YACs in higher education, in the hope that HEIs will adopt some or all of the recommendations, thus enabling more YACs to consider applying to study at an HEI. If YACs can observe that support systems are in place for them and that HEIs can be flexible to their needs, then they are more likely to persist on and successfully complete their educational journey.

1.10: The structure of this thesis

The first chapter is an introduction to the thesis and an overview of the relevance of this research. Having indicated the focus, context and scope of the study in the present chapter, the next chapter encompasses the literature review. This is presented in two

sections with the first examining the extant empirical literature regarding young adult carers (YACs) in education, and the second giving an overview of the theoretical considerations and frameworks adopted in the project in order to elicit optimal insight from the data collected.

The frameworks segue into Chapter 3, which describes the methodology, and begins with a conceptual framework for the study. A discussion of the ontological and epistemological stance as social constructionism, and the methodological approach as narrative inquiry is presented next in this chapter. Chapter 3 then goes on to describe the data collection methods and the analytical processes used to synthesise the findings. Finally, limitations, ethics and validity are also presented here.

The findings and discussion for this project are presented as separate chapters; the justification behind this decision is that this mirrors the social integration journey of the participants. A further justification is that this also follows the student cycle as they transition into, through, and potentially out of higher education. Chapter 4 therefore discusses the findings around the role of academics, friends and family and in doing so crosses the boundary between inside and outside the HEI. Chapter 5 then examines what it means to socialise and the impact this has on the participants. Chapter 6 realises the barriers and challenges the participants face as they attempt to socially integrate and Chapter 7 analyses the outcomes for the participants in terms of persistence on their educational journey. Finally, Chapter 8 begins with a discussion of the participants' thoughts in comparison with the findings from the scoping review of HEIs carried out at the outset of this study; conclusions and recommendations to HE professionals, and my reflection concerning my journey through this process.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1: Introduction

This chapter is presented as two distinct parts; the first examines the empirical evidence surrounding the subject of this thesis, whilst the second discusses theoretical perspectives. The chapter will review the extant literature that has previously investigated the role of young carers and any impact this would appear to have had on their education. The literature review will also demonstrate that this is a relatively under researched area in the context of research regarding disadvantaged or underrepresented student groups. Specifically the literature on Young Adult Carers (YACs) in higher education (HE) is limited and is dominated by research in the UK, Australia, USA and Norway. The kinds of study that have been conducted to date tend to involve qualitative data collection, for example, Day (2017) and Kettell (2018). Quantitative studies conducted in the UK and Norway involve analysis of datasets that are part of a wider national survey, illustrating the issue of directly accessing YACs. For example, Haugland, Hysing and Sivertsen (2020) accessed 40,205 HE students who responded to the Norwegian national Students' Health and Wellbeing Study in 2018. Of these students 2,228 had caring responsibilities and the findings were analysed with logic regression analysis. These studies will be discussed in more detail in this chapter. The role of social support in the context of HEIs will also be presented, followed by a section on student persistence or retention and the importance of academic and social integration in this vital element of the student journey through higher education.

The chapter then moves onto theoretical perspectives in part 2. As part of this study's wider framing of how YACs make sense of their own social integration into higher education, social ontology is considered, and a discussion of how this field has developed in terms of allowing a deeper understanding of how we make sense of the world ensues. The chapter then reviews the extant literature regarding social capital, social support, and

social networks, and how these concepts impact social integration in the context of disadvantaged student groups and their educational journeys. The concluding section involves a critique of Tinto's (1975), Braxton and Hirschy's (2004) and Day's (2017) frameworks. These all introduce the concept of social integration into the student journey through higher education and how far this might be linked to persistence and progression.

2.2: The Approach to the Literature Search

In undertaking a systematic search for the current literature, the following steps were taken.

The search protocol for this literature review was to interrogate the following databases; ERIC (Education Resources Information Centre); SOLO (Search Oxfordshire Libraries Online) and the Oxford Brookes University Library. I also performed searches on Google Scholar to cross check for any articles or book chapters not listed in the other databases; however this search returned high numbers of results and no new sources. The criteria for my search were as follows:

English language; global (despite this being a study on HEIs in England, restricting the search to England or UK only articles would have been too limiting); 1993 - 2022 (I began with 1993 as this was, in effect, the date when young adult carers were formally recognised in the UK); students in HEIs (rather than Further Education) and aged 18-25.

The search terms used were "young adult carers"; "young adult carers" AND "higher education"; "student carers" AND "higher education"; "young carers" AND "higher education". Exclusions were sources that included research on the impact of parental caring responsibilities. I also used "social integration"; "social networks" and "social support"; however, these terms returned high numbers of results that were largely outside of the scope of this project. I therefore concentrated on the terms that included synonyms of young adult carers as used by HEIs globally. I also observed that as my project progressed and as the pandemic developed, there were increasing numbers of papers

being published that focused on young adult carers. The results were therefore updated and as of August 2022 were as follows:

Search term	ERIC		SOLO		Oxford Brookes University		Google Scholar	
	Results returned	Relevant sources	Results returned	Relevant sources	Results returned	Relevant sources	Results returned	Relevant sources
“young adult carers” AND “higher education”	2	2	78	12	5	4	201	15
“young adult carers” AND “higher education” AND “social”	1	1	73	12	2	1	199	15
“student carers” AND “higher education”	3	1	171	15	3	0	161	10
“young carers” AND “higher education”	1	1	290	14	15	0	1410	18
“young adult carers”	6	4	307	18	67	10	605	18

Table 2.1: Results of the literature search using various search terms and databases

2.3: The Research on YACs and Social Integration

2.3.1: Young Adult Carers in Education

This section will review extant literature regarding the impact of caring responsibilities on young people in an educational setting. There is a small, but growing body of research on young carers i.e. 16 years and less; their role and its impact on their mental health and education (Joseph et al., 2019; Kaiser and Schulze, 2015; Wayman, Raws and Leadbitter, 2016), however until recently there has been less focus on YACs. It has been recognised that YACs are an underrepresented and under researched population (Kavanaugh and Stamatopoulos, 2021). Joseph et al. (2009) recognise that studies on young carers and young adult carers have generally been carried out on “known” carers who are part of a young carer project, rather than the wider unknown population of carers, as it is acknowledged that they are a hard-to-reach population of young people. This is likely one of the reasons that YACs in higher education are under researched. In terms of young carer research where the children are under 16, Joseph et al. (2019) carried out a quantitative study on an unknown population of 925 school children of which 22% reported some level of caring responsibilities. Additionally 7% of the pupils said they undertook major caring roles which included domestic chores, household management and emotional care.

The few studies that could be found that focus on young adult carers include those from Becker and Becker (2008), Sempik and Becker (2013, 2014) and later Becker and Sempik (2019). The studies by Sempik and Becker (2013, 2014) were funded by The Carers Trust and constituted part of a series of reports. The report from 2014 examined a sample of 101 young adult carers who were either in further or higher education, and found that those students with high caring responsibilities were more likely to be adversely affected in their educational journey, compared to those with moderate caring responsibilities (Sempik and Becker, 2014). Other studies on YACs in HEIs include those carried out by

Day (2017, 2019), Kettell (2018), Kirton et al. (2012) and Larkin and Kubiak (2021).

Kettell's (2018) was a small-scale qualitative study from a single HEI using interpretative phenomenological analysis. Day's (2019) study was also qualitative, but, in contrast to Kettell's (2018) study, included ten HEIs from across Australia. The Young Adult Carer University-Student Experience Framework (YACU-SEF) was developed by Day (2017) to examine the impact caring appears to have on YACs' educational journeys in Australian HEIs. The framework encompasses academic engagement, work-based learning and the learning environment; whilst it does include some aspects of social interactions, it was not considered as a model for wholesale adoption in this research project because of its main focus on academic, rather than social aspects of support.

In Becker and Sempik's (2019) study, 45% of YACs reported mental health issues associated with caring responsibilities and, of the 93 respondents who were at college or university, 46% reported being positively supported by someone from the education setting. Generally the YACs enjoyed being in further or higher education, but sadly they frequently had to leave early or miss teaching days completely due to their caring responsibilities. Of the 38 respondents who had left college or university, 29% reported that it was because of their caring role; clearly illustrating the impact of caring on persistence in education (Becker and Sempik, 2019). Although this paper showed the link between poor mental health and impact on education, Becker and Sempik (2019) note its limitation in being an online study and acknowledge that some young carers might have experienced digital poverty and therefore been unable to access the survey. In an earlier study, Greene et al. (2016) also found that YACs in the USA found caring negatively impacted mental health, as young caregivers at college reported higher levels of anxiety and depression compared with young non-caregivers. Further, a recent examination of the UK Household Longitudinal Study by Xue et al. (2022) found that student carers are 23% less likely to have a degree qualification if they care for up to just 4 hours a week. It has

therefore been widely recognised that there is a strong correlation between caring responsibilities and a negative impact on the education of these young people.

Generally, the challenges and barriers YACs face in HEIs have not been widely researched. Kirton et al. (2012) undertook a mixed method study of healthcare students who were informal carers. The study involved semi-structured interviews with 10 healthcare students and a quantitative survey of 36 students. Some of the issues that arose from the data included the feeling of guilt associated with studying a course that involved caring, whilst the students felt they should have been at home caring for their relative. The impact of the lack of time for academic studies was also explored in the paper from Kirton et al. (2012). Kettell (2018) presents some of the issues including the perceived intractability of University processes and the reluctance to engage with lecturers to ask for support; social integration is touched upon briefly, as peer support is mentioned by one respondent as being key to success. More recently a study by Larkin and Kubiak (2021) proposed strategies that HEIs could adopt to help YACs, including flexible study programmes, providing financial aid in finding employment and social engagement opportunities.

In a quantitative study, Haugland, Hysing and Sivertsen (2022) further examined the dataset used in their previous paper in 2019, and found that 5% of the sample of 40,205 students in HE in Norway had caring responsibilities. They found that for those YACs with over two hours of daily caring responsibility, 24.9% reported delays in progressing with studies as they struggled to juggle the many facets of their lives. In line with Day's (2019) research, Haugland, Hysing and Sivertsen (2022) also found that YACs reported an increased feeling of loneliness, compared with students with no caring responsibilities, as YACs tended to have significantly fewer close friends than their peers. However, as students transition into university they may all struggle with loneliness and isolation; many

report that it is difficult to make friends as they feel lost in the crowd (Scanlon, Rowling and Weber, 2007).

Participation in extracurricular activity is generally considered one of the ways to socially integrate into an HEI. Haugland, Hysing and Sivertsen (2019) found lack of money was a reason that might impact the propensity of YACs to participate in social activities whilst at university. They noted that students with caring responsibilities are more likely to come from low income households and therefore struggle financially. However, in their later article, Haugland, Hysing and Sivertsen (2022) found that YACs with up to one hour a day of caring responsibility were far more likely to participate in cultural activities, professional societies and other interests than their peers; no explanation was provided in the discussion for this finding. Participation in extracurricular activity has been found to be enhancing to curricula vitae (CVs), as some employers actively seek to identify extracurricular activities on applicants' CVs (Dickinson, Griffiths and Bredice, 2021). However, the same study found that the student perception of extracurricular activity was that it was 'just another thing to think about'; citing lack of time, lack of confidence, and lack of money as just three of the barriers to participation in social activities (Dickinson, Griffiths and Bredice, 2021). There is therefore a tension between the findings of Haugland, Hysing and Sivertsen (2022), who evidenced that YACs willingly participate in extracurricular activities, and Dickinson, Griffiths and Bredice (2021), who found the opposite for students more generally. Therefore, this project will seek to identify how YACs use extracurricular activity to socially integrate into HEIs.

In 2017, Leu and Becker carried out a global comparison of awareness of YACs, and found that the UK had the most formalised social services policies surrounding the support of this group of young people. Regarding support of YACs in education, Sempik and Becker (2014) carried out a study for The Carers Trust and found that of 101 YACs, 75% of the students informed their place of further or higher education of their caring

responsibilities. Despite this, they still felt that no one in the organisation really recognised them in respect of this identity and many thought there was little point in saying anything at all (Sempik and Becker, 2014). Other research shows that YACs do not always tell lecturers and professional staff about their caring role and therefore find it hard to seek help when it could be useful (Day, 2019; Kettell, 2018; Kirton et al., 2012). Some of this reluctance may be attributed to the fact that 31% of young carers at school may have experienced bullying at school as a result of their caring roles, even though bullying related to caring roles dropped to 6% at college or university (Becker and Sempik, 2019). It might also be suggested that YACs assume educational professionals may think they will be unreliable students if they reveal their caring status (Kettell, 2018). Based on Day's (2019) research of 13 HE students who are YACs, they also appear to struggle with forming supportive relationships with university staff, particularly tutors and wellbeing liaison officers. It is likely that YACs are so emotionally impacted by their caring responsibilities that they have little motivation to socialise with, or seek support from others.

In addition to these studies, Runacres et al. (2021) carried out a scoping review of the literature regarding student carers' experiences of support in HEIs and found only fourteen papers that met the inclusion criteria of students studying at an HEI, who were over the age of 18, and who were caring unpaid for someone else, but not in a parental role. The review aligned with papers already included in this chapter and reiterated findings and themes. A second, and even more recent, systematic literature review encompassing caregiving students has been published by Knopf et al. (2022) who found only six articles that examined the impact of caring responsibilities on students in higher education. This section of the literature review demonstrates what little research has been carried out regarding YACs in HE; and how no research focuses specifically on the role of social integration on a student's educational journey. It also shows how many of the studies are qualitative, with the few studies that are quantitative generally using datasets that are not

generated directly by the research teams; this supports the idea that YACs are difficult to identify and hard to reach.

2.3.2: Social Networks, Social Capital and Social Support in Academia

The lack of research regarding young adult carers in HE is further highlighted in a systematic review by Mishra (2020). This review consisted of studies on social networks, social capital, social support and academic success in disadvantaged student groups and comprised 136 papers. In terms of country-focus, 68% of the papers focused on the USA and only 3.8% focused on the UK. The research questions for Mishra's (2020) review were:

1. Do social networks, social capital and social support play a role in the success of students in higher education, with a special focus on underrepresented students?
2. What are the mechanisms through which these factors influence academic success, here again, with a special focus on underrepresented students in higher education?

The underrepresented student groups represented in Mishra's (2020) review mainly included African-American and Latino students as well as other groups such as women in STEM, Native Americans and immigrants. There was also one study on 626 Maori students, one on 4 Hispanic women and three studies on mature students. Study sizes ranged from 4 participants (the Hispanic women paper) to 10,908 participants, which was a Canadian study on third generation immigrants aged 18-34 years. Of the 136 papers reviewed, only 48 were qualitative studies, which equated to 35% of the total papers.

Key findings from Mishra's (2020) review were that social networks, social capital and social support all influence academic attainment in positive ways, but that there are variations for underrepresented student groups. For example, those students with higher social capital are more likely to succeed academically and that this may be related to information-related social capital. Also strong social support may compensate for lack of

social capital in underrepresented student groups. Mishra (2020) discovered two major themes which were the importance of the role of personal and institutional networks in facilitating students' educational journeys; and then of the relationship between social capital, social support and social networks and their impact on student achievement in higher education. These themes will be discussed in more detail as this chapter develops. No papers in Mishra's (2020) review investigated the social networks, social support and social capital of YACs and the impact of these factors on social integration or on YACs' academic success. Additionally many of the studies focusing on disadvantaged student groups are cross-sectional, rather than longitudinal. In comparison, my project investigates social integration of the same sample of YACs over the course of an academic year and can be defined as longitudinal.

This research project also intends to follow an interpretivist methodology, in line with Aldridge (2006) and more recently Kettell (2018) and Day (2019). Aldridge (2006) stated it was important to be able to give young adult carers a voice; this informs my decision, related in Chapter 3, to use an interpretivist approach. Other scholars have adopted a more quantitative approach, such as studies by Becker and Sempik (2019), Joseph et al. (2019) and Xue et al. (2022). The data in this project is intended to be richer and allow for deeper insights into the perceptions of YACs in HEIs and the impact caring has on their educational journey. It is also clear there is a gap in the knowledge regarding social integration of YACs into higher education, more so in terms of qualitative studies to understand in some depth their perception of social integration into an HEI and any barriers or hurdles they may encounter in terms of this and the impact on their educational journey. Hence this research project intends to investigate social integration and its impact on YACs' educational journeys using narrative inquiry in order to give a full voice to student carers. Narrative inquiry will be discussed in depth in Chapter 3.

2.3.3: Investigating Social Support

There have been numerous studies examining the links between various stressors and their support measures. Those that may be loosely aligned with caring responsibilities include the research carried out by Cohen et al. (1982) and Thoits (1982) regarding the impact of chronic long-term illness on individuals' stress levels. The support measures in these studies were the number of close friends and neighbours; and number of meetings or clubs attended, including religious meetings. Regarding support outside the home, it has also been found that YACs who attend a Young Adult Carers Service feel better supported, more confident and are able to make more friends (Sempik and Becker, 2014). Therefore if YACs feel better supported, it may be argued that their mental health might improve. Recent research more precisely investigates the impact of caring duties on the mental health of YACs (Becker and Sempik, 2019; Haugland, Hysing and Sivertsen, 2019); showing a positive correlation between the amount of time spent caring, the level of stress and negative health outcomes. Other papers on the impact of caring for someone with a long term mental illness, such as dementia, have also linked feelings of entrapment, shame and guilt to the depression that carers may experience (Cherry et al., 2017; Martin et al., 2006); this may possibly extend to YACs. Again support may alleviate these feelings and this may transpire through the findings and discussion chapters of this thesis.

It has been suggested that individuals with better social skills are more likely to use social support effectively. Those individuals with less social anxiety perceive there is better support available to them; additionally people who are more socially competent are able to attract and maintain the social support available to them (Cohen, Sherrod and Clark, 1986). Students transitioning into higher education arrive in a new situation that requires them to make new friendships and seek support where necessary. Therefore, those students who are more socially competent and less socially anxious are more likely to access, and then benefit from the support systems on offer at university. Younger

students, who are not from underrepresented groups, are more likely to concentrate on making friends than attending lectures and are therefore more socially integrated, but perhaps doing less well academically (Scanlon, Rowling and Weber, 2007).

Underrepresented student groups may be reluctant to seek support and make friends as they are often viewed as “outsiders” by the larger HEI community. These students often have lower social capital and smaller social networks, consequently, they are often stereotyped by other students (Johnson-Ahorlu, 2013). Stereotyping has been shown to impact academic performance and educational achievement (Fischer, 2010). As an underrepresented student group, it may be that YACs experience this type of stereotyping whilst at university, which may lead to further social isolation. Conversely, it was stated earlier that YACs are more likely to participate in social activities than their non-caregiving peers (Gallagher et al., 2022). It is also important to recognise that underrepresented student groups have access to other forms of support and networks that are unique to them (Yosso, 2005). In the case of YACs this may be support provided by local carers groups, of which there are many in the UK. I have personally observed that local carers groups provide many social opportunities for the young people they support.

The support students receive from their social networks including friends, peers, faculty, and family impacts their ability to cope with the transition into higher education (Eggens et al., 2008; MacKinnon, 2012). Early research showed that the higher the perceived level of family support, the more positive the outcome educationally as this helps students adapt to university (Barrera, Sandler and Ramsay, 1981). Indeed, family social support would appear to have a more beneficial effect on students’ propensity to study than the level of family economic support. Family support appears to have a more positive effect on female students than male students (Cutrona et al., 1994; Cheng, Ickes and Verhofstadt, 2012). Whilst family support has a beneficial impact on first year students transitioning into higher education, it has also been found that increased social support from peers or friends

during the first year has a more beneficial impact on adjusting to university (Friedlander et al., 2007; MacKinnon, 2012).

Conversely Eggens et al. (2008) carried out a quantitative study on 1451 students who had recently transitioned to university and show that social support per se, had no immediate impact on student success and persistence, but that personal networks would appear to do so. In their study students were asked to identify individuals in their close personal network who impacted their attitude to their studies, they found that the mean number of individuals in a student's personal network was five. The participants were then asked to illustrate the links between their network members, to illustrate the density of their personal networks. Eggens et al. (2008) concluded that more links meant a denser personal supportive network, and that personal networks were more positively impactful on the students' educational journey than broader support groups. This study contradicted earlier results found by De Berard et al. (2004) and Robbins et al. (2004). However, Eggens et al. (2008), did acknowledge that they may not have included all support variables in the study, but still found that personal networks may be more effective than wider social support. One of the reasons for this was deemed to be peer pressure and social control may have impacted student behaviour.

Moving onto the wider impact that HEIs might have on social integration, those institutions that actively sought to socially support and engage with underrepresented student groups were more successful in retaining students (Museus, 2011). HEIs that appreciate the social and cultural needs of different student groups are also more likely to have higher completion rates across the student population (Museus, 2011). An earlier study by Guiffrida and Douthit (2010) found that recruiting diverse faculty is key in retention of minority group students in predominantly white HEIs. Students are likely to form better relationships with members of faculty that can understand them from a social and cultural perspective. In summary, we can conclude that social ties and networks both inside and

outside of the HEI positively impact the educational journey and that they facilitate social integration (Havnes, 2008; Summers and Svinicki, 2007). The networks of YACs and relative social support from individuals in their networks will be investigated in this study in order to address research objectives one, two and four detailed in the introductory chapter.

2.3.4: Student Persistence and Retention

The chapter will now review extant literature pertaining to student persistence and retention in line with research objective five of this project. The terms persistence and retention are often used interchangeably in the literature, with the former being favoured by scholars in the United States (Austen et al., 2021). However, Hall et al. (2021:205) go further to clarify both, 'Retention and persistence are different perspectives on the same process: students' continual enrolment until graduation. Whereas the study of student persistence focuses on the students' attitudes and behaviours as associated with their educational attainment, the study of retention focuses on institutions' environments and processes as associated with continued student enrolment through graduation.'

Building on this, it can be noted that retention and success of students are key performance indicators for universities globally. In the UK HEIs are encouraged to utilise the Advance HE Framework for Student Access, Retention, Attainment and Progression to inform university policy and practice (Advance HE, 2021a). HEIs are impacted financially by student attrition; students are also impacted personally and economically if they leave higher education prematurely. More widely, the macro environment is also affected as society and the broader economy lose out on potential skills and knowledge that students will have gained during a complete programme of study (Crosling, Heagney and Thomas, 2009). Advance HE (2021b) recognises the benefits of HE study for students as personal development and enhanced employability. The declared reasons for students leaving education settings early include financial difficulties, choosing the wrong

course, being away from home, lack of academic support, family obligations and the feeling of 'not belonging'; some or all of which may impact YACs.

The institution has a core role to play in enhancing the student experience and facilitating belongingness by providing academic and social support; it has been mooted that students were most likely to persist with their studies if they socially integrated in their first year (Tinto, 1993; Tinto, 2006). Those students who are more optimistic in their first year are likely to adjust more successfully to the transition into HE. Indeed, individuals who are optimistic have better coping mechanisms to stressful life events and are likely to have larger social networks (Brissette, Scheier and Carver, 2002). In the first year in HE, on-campus support networks and relationships are likely to increase, whilst off campus support networks largely remain the same or decrease; however, despite this change the perception of social support remains the same (Brissette, Scheier and Carver, 2002; Tao et al., 2000).

In the literature comparatively little attention has been paid to continuing students in their second and final years of their programme as HEIs assume they are now well integrated. Previously, faculty were rarely involved in retention programmes and activities were often add-ons to core learning rather than being integrated into the course of study (Tinto, 2006). However, with the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 onwards, studies have emerged that examine the impact of COVID-19 on students at every stage of their educational journey. Continuing students from communities of colour found that finances, living conditions and academic performance were impacted, along with a rise in mental health issues (Molock and Parchem, 2021). Other studies regarding continuing students reported similar results; almost 32% of students found the requirement to care for family during the pandemic impacted their studies and future plans (Lee et al., 2021). As universities moved to online learning, many students struggled with the uncertainty surrounding their studies and the economic pressures the pandemic brought to their

learning situation. Students from lower income backgrounds relied on jobs for additional income and were often unable to do these during the pandemic; resulting in another stressor on their educational journey (ESU, 2020; NECC, 2020).

Student persistence on a programme of study may be affected by a number of things including work, finances and family obligations (Tinto, 2017); the latter may be a likely factor influencing the decision of YACs to withdraw from HEIs. It may be expedient for educational institutions to make efforts to be able to understand what support to provide, and make it accessible to students that need it at the point at which it is required. It has been found that involving faculty in retention programmes is important. For example, in Black culture the concept of Other-Mothering exists where an adult person outside of the family group may act as an “Other Mother” to the children or young people in the family (Guiffrida and Douthit, 2010). Recruiting diverse faculty may address these important cultural links for students and ensure they feel more integrated into the educational environment.

The impact of familial support on academic achievement has already been highlighted in this chapter. Strong relations between parent and child benefit the latter and also impact persistence. In a US-based study of 4000 grade 10 and 12 high school students, dropout rates of children with two parents, one sibling and mother’s expectation of college were 8.1%; compared with the children of one parent with four siblings and no mother’s college expectation who had dropout rates of 30.6% (Hoffer, 1986; Coleman and Hoffer, 1987). Accordingly, the impact of familial support on persistence of YACs in this study will be investigated under research objectives four and five as detailed in the introductory chapter of this thesis.

Persistence and attainment are also influenced far more by a student’s proximal peer reference groups than the more distal environment of the campus. Students who affiliate

themselves with peer reference groups early on in their first semester are more likely to persist with their studies than those who are reluctant or unable to do so (Tinto, 1993). Previously in the chapter it has been found that peers provide social support and that personal networks are important in terms of social integration. Peers also significantly influence identity development, and membership of such reference groups determine how students spend their time and how they behave. It is likely that students gravitate towards others who are 'like themselves' (Kuh, 2002). Likewise the positive impact on persistence of making friends early in the first year of higher education has also been researched (Buote et al., 2007). Buote et al. (2007) also discovered that those students who commute to college or university are able to retain more stable friendship networks, as they keep in touch with childhood friends. This makes the transition from school to higher education less overwhelming and may be also something to consider for those YACs who commute rather than live in university accommodation.

Earlier, Feldman and Newcomb (1969) claimed that peer influence over behaviour and attitude is far more impactful on a student's decision to remain at university than any intervention the university can provide; this also aligns with Eggens et al. (2008) as discussed earlier in this chapter. However, later studies show that interventions that have worked successfully include credit-bearing semester-long activities built into the programme of study (Cuseo, 1991) and a year-long first year intervention of social activities, that incorporate subject based topics to create a STEM learning community (Dagley et al., 2015). Such activities were also significantly impactful on students' abilities to make long-lasting friendships and their persistence on the programme. It has also been noted that non-academic programmes are as important as academic ones, in terms of social integration of students and facilitating a sense of belonging to the university, despite the fact that the impact of these programmes on persistence and retention has been rarely measured empirically (Austen et al., 2021).

Perceived social integration impacts the learning experience for underrepresented student groups. Indeed for student groups who are non-traditional e.g. part-time adult learners, relationships with faculty members are more important than for traditional students, which are, according to Kasworm and Blowers (1994) and Kasworm (2005), full-time, 19 year old, middle-class learners. Both Kasworm and Blowers' (1994) and Kasworm's (2005) papers are included in the scope of the literature reviewed for this study, as I can see a parallel between part-time adult learners who are employed outside of the university and who have extracurricular responsibilities, and YACs. Part-time adult learners are likely to have parental responsibilities and other demands on their time such as employment, both of which align with the demands that YACs have outside of university. Relationships outside the classroom help students develop their own learning identity and in doing so increase their learning experience and likelihood of persistence on the educational journey (Kasworm, 2005).

Research into the impact of social integration and familial support on student persistence and progression is evident and many authors agree it fosters a sense of belonging, enhances persistence and motivation to engage with a programme of study (Roberts and McNeece, 2010; Roksa and Kinsley, 2019; Tinto, 1997; Tinto, 2017). However, to reiterate, to date no studies focus entirely on the social integration of YACs into HEIs, highlighting a gap in the knowledge. This research project will therefore attempt to contribute to the body of knowledge on this underrepresented and under researched topic.

2.4: Theoretical Perspectives

2.4.1: Social Ontology

YACs have been identified as a relatively novel category and it tends to be an area where identities are largely reified by the language available to describe them. Linguistic philosopher Searle (2010:16) observes that 'social reality has a formal structure as simple and elegant as the structure of the language used to create it.' This section of the chapter will therefore examine the literature regarding the construction of social reality and how various scholars have made links between social factors, such as social networks, and the language used by individuals to describe this reality. As this project is investigating one of a number of underrepresented student groups in HEIs, how YACs are described and how YACs describe their own reality requires a sustained reflection on the nature and foundations of social ontology. Additionally the labels ascribed to various student groups by HEIs and indeed, the Office for Students also indicate a shared understanding of the language used by institutions to describe these student groups. It is also interesting to note that, although there is an accepted definition of YACs courtesy of The Carers' Trust (2021) and this is used widely by many HEIs in the UK, there are also additional labels used to describe this student group. These include 'student carers' and 'students with caring responsibilities', both of which are frequently used interchangeably by HEIs on their various websites. Whilst reviewing the policies and procedures for YAC detailed on 100 HEI websites, I noted the use of different phrases used to describe this group of students. This led me to further review the literature about how we describe our social reality and the language we use to do so.

Social structures influence how individuals may think and act, despite existing independently of said individuals (Rubinstein, 1986). The structure of social systems may be studied by examining the ways in which they are manifested through regular patterns of interaction boundaried by general rules and habits (Giddens, 1979). Giddens (1984)

attempted to differentiate between rules and routines. For example, it may be routine for an individual to arise at a certain time each day, but it is not a rule; whereas it might be a rule for the same individual to arrive at work at the same time each day otherwise there may be negative consequences. Earlier scholars supported this proposition, stating that individuals grow up in a society which has pre-formed opinions and concepts, therefore their thinking is rarely new in the sense of never having been “thought” before; and so, the sociology of knowledge is collective as individuals think with and against others (Mannheim, 1936:3).

Social reality comes into existence when humans interact as socialising agents (Pernecky, 2016). Social institutions such as HEIs are dependent upon the individuals within them and how they think and behave, they are, in essence, a social ecosystem. In the context of this research project, social reality is constructed and collectively understood as the students interact with other people inside of and relating to the university. For example, students interact with their peers, both in and out of class; they also interact with academic and professional staff; as they do this they are, to some extent, constructing their own social reality. Searle (2010) explains this as weak constructionism, as he says the reality is constructed subjectively; however strong constructionists such as Crotty (1998) previously posited that social reality is constructed through both an objective and subjective understanding of the world. Constructionists also argue that meaning is constructed, as opposed to being created which is the view of constructivists (Crotty, 1998). In the context of this project the meaning of social integration is constructed by the YACs, as they interpret both objective and subjective realities. For example, the objective reality may be that the university in which they are studying provides various support channels such as a wellbeing team; however the subjective reality may be that the professionals offering the support are not very effective or understanding of the student’s situation, so the student therefore decides not to seek support and in doing so constructs meaning about the support system and the individuals within it.

In order to understand the ontology of HEIs, Searle's (2010) framework of social ontology has been applied to this research project. It is worth noting here that Searle's philosophical approach originates in the field of linguistic philosophy, rather than sociology; he is better known for his work on the philosophy of language and speech act theory (Searle, 1971); the latter being a framework for interpreting what we mean, what we say, and how we say it. The first of Searle's (2010) concept labels is the social fact. Students are a social fact, they are people to whom a meaning and role has been ascribed; they do not come into existence through natural processes, students are not born students. In terms of YACs, it might be argued that they cannot be easily labelled as a social fact, as the terminology used by HEIs to describe them varies from 'young adult carer' to 'student carers' and 'students with caring responsibilities'. Additionally, many YACs do not subscribe to the general opinion that they are carers, or, as we have seen previously in the literature, are reluctant to share information about their caring role with anyone outside of their personal network. In this respect, it might be concluded that it is difficult to ascribe a meaning and role to YACs in the context of an HEI. The second concept is the status function. Students also have a status function as learners within the university and this status function is collectively agreed upon by societies that understand what a university represents. YACs have a status function as students, so this aligns with Searle's (2010) theory. The university also has a status function and additionally, deontic powers in that it provides learning and awards qualifications. In possessing a status function and deontic powers, the university is also therefore an institutional fact, the last of Searle's (2010) labels. Searle's (2010) use of labels such as the social fact, social function and status function are therefore purely linguistic, but serve as a way in which to further understand the ontology of HEIs.

Academics and support staff within a university may also be ascribed a status function that is collectively understood by other stakeholders within this context. These groups of individuals possess deontic powers in that they operate within the confines of a regulatory

environment and may have the authority to make decisions that affect the social reality in the university. In terms of YACs, their perception of the deontic powers of academics and support staff may be different from the perception of other stakeholders in this context, as they seek to integrate into an HEI with a different set of needs compared with other students. As this research project seeks to understand the impact of the social space within a university, the individuals therein and the relative tensions between them on social reality, it is of importance to include this explanation. By understanding the YACs' perceptions of status and deontic powers of the various stakeholder groups in an HEI, this project seeks to understand how HEIs can better support this group of students.

In conclusion, a university is a social space with the ability to impact the people within it. None of this can be examined in the absence of the knowledge that, at least in England, UK, this linguistic and social reality is influenced by central policy, the central arbiter of which is the Office for Students (OfS, 2021). In essence the authority of stakeholders within a university to make decisions is conferred upon them with the approval of the OfS, as the independent regulator of higher education in England.

Taking the university context as an example again, students recognise that they need to engage with their learning in order to gain a qualification (a constitutive rule (Searle, 2010)). They also understand that if they leave the university, they can no longer "play the game" and so remove themselves from the opportunity of gaining a qualification awarded through the university's deontic powers. It is also the collective intentionality of a university to retain students, so they engage with learning and succeed in their studies, potentially enhancing their employability and impacting positively on the wider economy.

Despite Searle (2010) claiming that few philosophers had discussed social ontology, lectures from Bourdieu (2020, [1982]) discuss the metaphysical nature of sociology using the Church, the State and Art as examples, asking sociologists what is the meaning, the

ontological reality, of these elements of the social world. Bourdieu (1989:14) later labelled his work “structural constructivism”; thereby including both an objectivist (structural) and subjectivist (perceptual) element to his studies, and further defined by Searle (2010) as strong constructionism.

2.4.2: Constructivism vs. constructionism

Throughout the literature pertaining to social ontology and sociology, the terms constructivism and constructionism are used frequently. It is therefore pertinent to state the difference between them for the purposes of clarity in the context of this study.

Constructivism is defined as that knowledge which is socially created, it is the meaning ascribed by an individual to a situation and in this sense is meaning-making unique to each individual (Crotty, 1998). Educational constructivism is a convergence of Piagetian (1959) and Vygotskian (Vygotskiĭ, 1978) thought. Both scholars believed learning was in part a social activity and that it was also an iterative and biological process; in effect what is learnt is about how the individual utilises the external environment and how they observe the behaviour of other individuals in the same situation. Vygotsky (1978) called this the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Knowledge and understanding is therefore created within the individual based upon their experiences with the world.

Papert, a student of Piaget, later posited that constructionism is about the dialogue between an individual and an object, literally learning by making (Papert and Harel, 1991). Social constructionism then, is about how meaning is constructed through interpretation of the world within the boundaries of an individual’s culture and what is already known (Crotty, 1998). For example, it is about how we might interpret the use of objects presented to us in order to provide a solution to a problem, as we already have a tacit understanding of those objects and their basic purpose. In the context of this project, social constructionism is appropriate as YACs have an understanding of the purpose of educational institutions and their deontic powers, and in this regard, also know what their

own status function is within the institution in order to galvanise those deontic powers in order to gain a qualification. Within the HEI the YACs are constructing meaning, they are making sense of their social reality.

Furthermore, Burr (1998) discusses the effectiveness of social constructionism in enabling the difference and diversity of individuals within categorised groups to be recognised; extrapolation of this theory to YACs as a categorised group means that within that group, individuals will have many subjective experiences. Both constructivism and constructionism are subjectivist views of knowledge, however the latter has also been effectively used as a framework in counselling in understanding the inner subjective experiences of individuals (Rudes and Guterman, 2007). Therefore, this research study will focus on constructionism as it aims to understand how YACs interact with their social environment, including the objects that create that environment, and how this impacts their educational journey.

2.4.3: The Family of “Socials”

During the search and review of extant literature, the Conceptual Model for the Relationship of Social Networks and Social Support to Health (Heaney and Israel, 2008:194) was discovered. Whilst reviewing this source, I began to visualise how this might help frame my own project; in addition, it brought some cross-disciplinary theory into the current project. I discuss Heaney and Israel's (2008) model in more detail in chapter 3 and how it informed my own conceptual framework. As the literature review progressed I also began to understand that in many papers social support, social networks and social integration were closely related. I then realised that a seminal element of social integration was also social capital; Mishra's (2020) review supported this was the case. Very simply the literature surrounding social integration can be represented in figure 2.1 below, which illustrates the 3 core elements that constitute social integration.

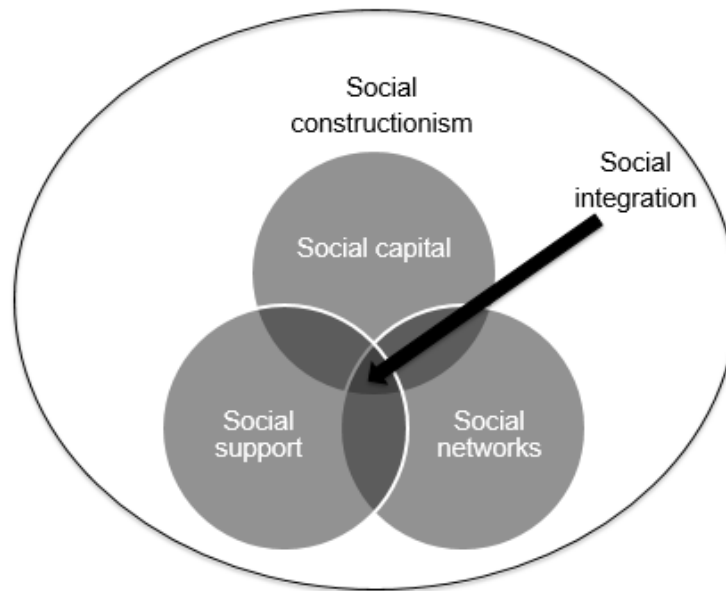


Figure 2.1: An illustration of the overlap between social support, social networks and social capital and how they all contribute to social integration. Source: Author's own.

To reiterate, figure 2.1 is a simplistic representation of the relationship between the three elements that constitute social integration in the context of this project and how these are all framed by social constructionism. Capturing such a complex concept as a two-dimensional model is limiting as there are many environmental influences impacting each social idea.

2.4.4: Social Capital

Social capital will now be discussed as another important element in the theoretical framing adopted in this research study. Generally social capital is theorised as consisting of social structures and of the interaction of actors within and between those social structures. Social capital has been studied by a number of scholars. Marx was the originator of the concept of capitals (Son, 2020); he posited that social capital was the accumulated sum of all other capitals and that it could be divided between capitalists. Social capital was defined as an accumulation of all the material resources spread across a society and was quantifiable (Marx, 2000). Additionally, Marx's theory of capitals did not

include social networks, which is an area of investigation in this research project, therefore this was not adopted.

I have also refrained from adopting Bourdieu's (1986) approach to social capital, primarily because of his proposition that social capital is attached to the resources of the elite, in other words it is co-created, co-owned and shared within the ruling class. Bourdieu (1986:248) defines social capital as 'the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalised relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition'. He suggests that the resources of the ruling class are passed on generation after generation and in doing so social capital accumulates and facilitates social mobility. Like Marx (Marx, 2000), Bourdieu defines social capital as the sum of material resources, however unlike Marx's account he does acknowledge that social networks are an important part of social capital.

Coleman (1988) examined the effect of social capital within the nuclear family and the close community. He described three forms of social capital - obligations and expectations, information channels and social norms. YACs may feel an obligation to their family to carry out their caring role and there may be additional familial expectations of the YAC to actually perform caring duties. Social capital in the form of obligations and expectations may impact their educational journey. Likewise the effective norm in a family where one member has long-term caring needs may be that the role falls to a young adult; it may be a cultural norm that caring is kept within the family or financial pressures that mean the caring duties cannot be outsourced to a professional carer. Social capital within a family is important for a child's development; if a parent or guardian is able to facilitate a child learn this is an example of social capital working positively (Coleman, 1988). The focus on education, community and family in the context of Coleman's theory of social capital would appear to be a more appropriate approach for the current study, compared with either of Marx's or Bourdieu's perspectives on social capital.

Furthermore, Bourdieu (1986) posits social capital is quantifiable, as it may be converted into economic capital given the right conditions. Likewise, Coleman (1988) states that social capital can have economic outcomes; however he also discusses the impact on non-economic outcomes, such as study circles that enable sharing of knowledge and learning. This type of social capital is intangible, as it exists because of the exchange in relations between individuals and is thus in tension with Bourdieu's theory. Putnam (2000) also agrees with Coleman (1988) asking how we can measure trust, social contacts, strength of network and membership of societies; certainly not in the same way we measure economic capital using financial assets.

Belonging to social networks is sometimes an indicator of social capital. Coleman (1988) defined closed and open social networks. Closed social networks are those in which all the individuals support and know each other and norms are accepted e.g. a small religious community. When social networks are open there are individuals in that network that do not know each other, and thus there is a lack of trust between all the members of that social network e.g. all students in a university (Coleman, 1988). Examining the idea of religious communities as closed social networks, Coleman and Hoffer (1987) found that dropout rates from Catholic Schools in the United States (3.4%) were a quarter of those of non-religious public schools (14.4%). They concluded that the social capital acquired as a result of being a member of a religious network (a closed social network) had a positive effect on propensity to learn. Coleman (1988) further examined the impact of social capital outside of the family on educational outcomes and found that relationships with local community groups were also important in terms of social networks and support. Coleman (1988) went on to examine the phenomenon of families who moved location frequently and found that for this impacted social capital negatively. Those parents that were mobile i.e. moved location frequently, and broke social ties, had lower social capital than those parents who stayed in a residential neighbourhood and maintained a sense of community.

In a family, parental social networks were deemed important in the growth of social capital. In the context of this research project, the impact of student mobility on social capital will be investigated; additionally, any impact of the family moving location will also be noted.

Parents with long-term caring needs may have lower social capital as they may have less contact with social networks. However, this may not necessarily be an issue, as parents who have a university degree have a higher degree of information-related social capital, and are therefore better able to support their children as they apply for university (Mishra, 2020). In conclusion, the lack of contact with social networks and diminishing social capital from that perspective, does not necessarily mean parents are unable to positively influence their children's aspirations, as long as they themselves have a university education.

Membership of social networks such as unions, religious groups and political parties afford social capital; however, there is a global decline in membership of these social networks (Putnam, 2002). Membership of such groups is largely defined by more affluent, educated individuals, with less well educated and less affluent individuals not belonging to any or many social groups, reflecting the increasing socio-economic divide. Social capital and the benefits associated with it is decreasing for less affluent and less educated individuals. As social capital plays an important role for individuals being able to access and succeed in education, consequently groups with lower social capital may have lower educational attainment (Putnam, 2000). It has been acknowledged that the relationship between caring responsibilities, social capital and social support needs further investigation (Joseph et al., 2009). Getting through and succeeding beyond university is dependent upon high social capital (Villar and Albertin, 2010); arguably the outcome of an educational journey through an HEI should be based on academic merit and not be impacted by social capital (Wells, 2008). These findings will be of concern to all university

educators, as clearly social capital does impact persistence and progression of students through education. However, not all students with low social capital drop out of university, it may be suggested that social capital may be enhanced by seeking and investing in relationships outside of family, perhaps with faculty or mentors (Mishra, 2020).

As with Putnam (2000) the philosophical stance adopted in this study is aligned with Coleman's (1988) concept of social capital rather than predominantly indebted to Marx or Bourdieu. For me, Marx and Bourdieu's inclusion of the total sum of material resources that belong to the ruling classes in their definition of social capital, does not sit comfortably with my positionality as a researcher of disadvantaged or underrepresented student groups. Coleman's (1988) social capital theory examines its effect within the nuclear family and the close community and considers three forms of social capital - obligations and expectations, information channels and social norms. This therefore, is more apposite in the context of this research project. As an aside, it should be noted that these theoretical perspectives were all formed in the absence of a digital world; so virtual networks, whilst not replacing physical contact, may also contribute to enhancement of social capital. Coleman's (1988) social capital theory will therefore be followed through in my analysis of the data, as I assess the extent of each participant's social network and therefore their social capital and any links there may be to facilitation of social integration into their respective HEI.

2.4.5: Social Support

Having seen the relevance of social capital we now turn to consider the importance of theories of social support as manifested and expounded in the literature. This builds on the earlier discussion in this chapter of the empirical evidence for social support. Social support has been studied extensively. Cohen and Wills (1985) discuss the inconsistencies in conceptual frameworks used in a range of studies to measure social support and

attempt to arrive at a definitive position in their paper. Two models are examined; that of 'Buffering' in which it is suggested that social support is only beneficial for individuals under stress and the 'Main Effect' model which suggests that social support or social resources are beneficial for everyone. Cohen and Wills (1985) arrive at the conclusion that both models are relevant and are not independent of one another.

Cohen and Wills' (1985) 'Main Effect' model describes social support as being large social networks that provide positive interactions leading to a sense of belonging to a community. This sense of belonging is a social reward and allows an individual to feel socially integrated. The 'Buffering Effect' sees social support as just that, a buffer; so that when an individual encounters a problem, their social support acts as a protective or coping mechanism against stress; it helps with problem solving. If individuals have no coping mechanisms when encountering multiple problems they become stressed; this causes mental health issues. This aligns with the findings of Joseph et al. (2009) as they examined the relationship between caring responsibilities and social support and found that the latter may alleviate negative outcomes of caring for YACs. However, the same study also discovered that although caring responsibilities may have a negative impact on females, conversely it has a positive impact on males. Joseph et al. (2009) acknowledged this finding, but also noted the study was cross-sectional and in order to be representative of the population of YACs it should be carried out with a larger sample and as a longitudinal project. The 'Buffering Effect' (Cohen and Wills, 1985) is likely to be the more appropriate model to use with YACs, as it is posited they seek help when required, rather than actively seeking to be part of a large social network as in the 'Main Effect' model. The 'Buffering Effect' has also been linked to social participation of young carers in that this has a positive effect on reducing stress (Gallagher et al. 2022).

There is compelling evidence that social support is an essential factor in terms of student persistence and progression (Tao et al., 2000). Students who identify strongly with their

university feel better integrated and more supported, and as a consequence demonstrate greater problem-solving skills; this in turn reduces their stress levels (Cassidy, 2004). It can therefore be surmised that those individuals with strong social support will exhibit better coping mechanisms when under stress.

2.4.6: Social Integration and Social Networks

Having reviewed the literature regarding social capital and social support and identified them as antecedents to social integration, the chapter will now review the extant literature on social integration and the role it plays in academic achievement. In line with Braxton et al. (2000) the construct of social integration was later defined as 'the degree to which the students perceive they have had positive and satisfying social relations not only with their peers, but also with the various other actors of the academic environment, outside and inside the classroom' (Gilardi and Guglielmetti, 2011:37).

This project focuses on the role that university culture plays in terms of a specific group of underrepresented students and attempts to understand the impact of their external environment on their ability or even their propensity to socially integrate. There are demonstrable benefits for those students who understand the importance of socially integrating and the impact it can have on their studies (Gilardi and Guglielmetti, 2011). In a study of non-traditional students who were over 25 years of age and had external responsibilities, it has been found that one of the obstacles to academic success is a feeling of isolation and of not fitting in (Goncalves and Trunk, 2014). These non-traditional students were described as having additional pressures of childcare and employment in addition to their studies; and in this respect this group can be likened to YACs. Likewise there is good evidence that the university would do well to take an active role in facilitating social integration both inside and outside of the classroom. Students need opportunities to meet and network with other actors such as academics, support staff and other students, who will validate their educational journey (Rendon, 2005; Gilardi and Guglielmetti, 2011).

According to Braxton and Hirschy (2004), Tinto's (1975) 'Interactionalist Model' (figure 2.2) has been cited over 700 times in scholarly articles and is now considered paradigmatic in studies of retention in higher education. The model presents both academic and social integration as elements of student persistence. Academic integration is linked to goal commitments, whereas social integration is linked to institutional commitment. The importance of social integration in this model is key and it incorporates both the institution and the student, also acknowledging that persistence (or retention) is a longitudinal process. Tinto (1975) went on to establish that those students who were more effectively socially integrated had a greater commitment to the institution and were therefore more likely to persist with their studies. However, Tinto (1975) only investigated students generally, rather than specific underrepresented student groups including Young Adult Carers (YACs).

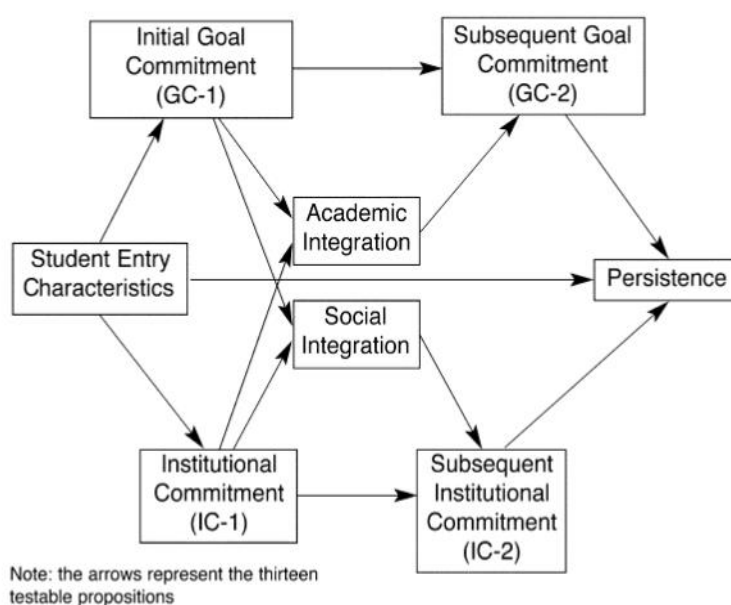
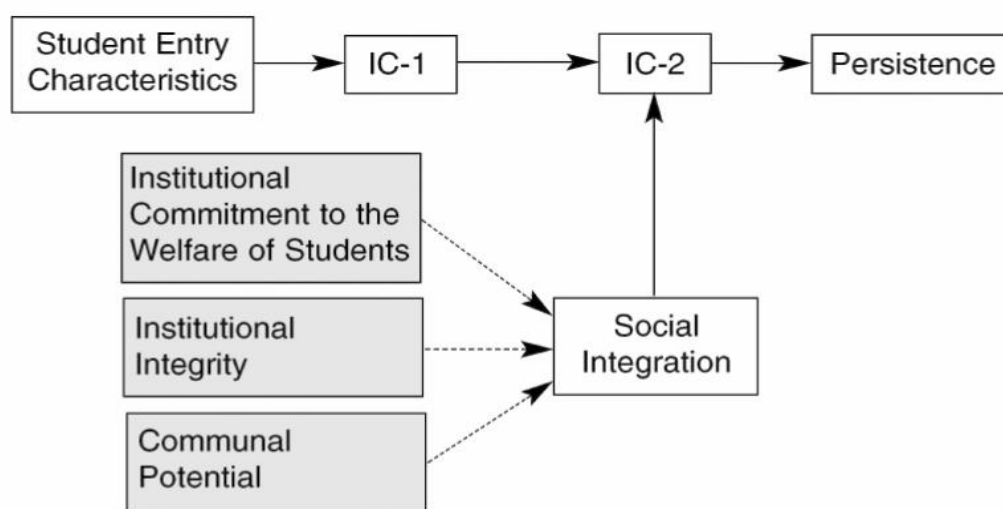


Figure 2.2: Path diagram of Tinto's Interactionalist Model of Student Persistence (Source: adapted from Tinto (1975) and cited in Braxton and Hirschy, 2004)

Braxton and Hirschy (2004) revised Tinto's (1975) model with the following conceptual framework posed as result, see figure 2.3 below. This revision introduced institutional

integrity and communal potential as two additional variables that impact social integration. Braxton and Hirschy's (2004) model implies that the antecedents of social integration are only instrumental in subsequent institutional commitment (IC-2) and that institutional commitment (IC-1) happens organically in the absence of social integration. This is a change from Tinto's (1975) model in figure 2.2, which clearly indicates that IC-1 leads to social integration and that the latter precipitates IC-2. In other words students enrol in an institution and experience institutional commitment, but it is not until the three antecedents are apparent that social integration impacts student perception of further institutional commitment (IC-2). Braxton and Hirschy (2004) place greater emphasis on the antecedents of social integration and the role of the institution per se, as well as the potential for community. Finally their adaptation of Tinto's (1975) model also disregards academic integration.



Note: shaded boxes indicate new constructs; dotted-lined arrows indicate new propositions

Figure 2.3: Diagram showing the antecedents to social integration subsequent institutional commitment and persistence. (Braxton and Hirschy, 2004)

The way in which Tinto (1975) and later Braxton and Hirschy (2004) presented these models was aligned with the student life cycle in terms of transition into and through the

educational journey. It would have been interesting to think about extending the models in terms of transition out of education, but that is outside the scope of what the authors were trying to present.

Day (2017) designed a conceptual framework as part of a thesis investigating the experience of Young Adult Carers in Australian universities. Entitled the Young Adult Carers at University-Student Experience Framework (YACU-SEF), it is a very detailed and exacting model in that it encompasses both the internal and external environments impacting on this student group, and also looks at the academic environment in more detail. The action and outcome elements of this model align with Tinto's (1975) earlier model regarding persistence. Overall the three concepts are appropriate two-dimensional attempts at portraying the variables influencing and impacting the student experience. In accordance with Tinto (1975) the conceptual framework used in Day's (2017) study is not linear, as humans are not linear in their behaviour and so depicting an educational journey as a linear occurrence may not be entirely appropriate.

Tinto (1993) later designed his Social Integration Framework, which Thomas (2000) applied as a theoretical framework in an investigation of social network impact on social integration. The study looked at predominantly white, middle-class freshmen who lived in college and whose sole commitment was studying. Thomas (2000) acknowledges the limitations of the research as it did not examine the impact of race, ethnicity, gender or students who may have commitments outside of the HEI, such as YACs. The students in the study had the luxury of being able to concentrate on building personal networks and social capital, which positively impacted their persistence and attainment. This section of the literature review demonstrates the role of social integration in student persistence and led me to consider elements of Tinto's (1975) and later Braxton and Hirschy's (2004) models in my own conceptual framework.

2.5: Conclusion

In conclusion, this chapter has examined the extant literature around the phenomenon of young adult carers and their journey through higher education. It has illustrated the gap in the knowledge regarding research into the social integration of this student group into higher education. A systematic review of the literature pertaining to social support, social networks and social integration of underrepresented student groups by Mishra (2020) was examined in depth in order to understand the issues arising from prior research in this area. The major conclusion arising from Mishra's (2020) review was the absence of any research into the YAC student group. The chapter examined the evidence for the role that social support plays in facilitating social integration into HE and also the impact it can have on educational journeys. Additionally, in order to put the project into context, the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on the student experience was mentioned.

An examination of the literature pertaining to student persistence and retention and the interchangeable nature of these terms in education was included. From here on and underpinned by the literature, a decision was made to use the word persistence as this is about how students perceive their journeys through education, whereas retention tends to be an institutional term. To examine the student opinion using the concept of retention implies this study is investigating students through a university lens, rather than a student lens. Overall the chapter clearly identified a gap in the knowledge regarding the social integration of YACs into higher education.

The chapter then introduced the importance of understanding the increased emphasis on distinct student identities used in access and participation plans in HEIs, and how this may be framed using the concepts in social ontology. It was considered pertinent to include social ontology as this is how social factors and social structures may influence individuals' beliefs, knowledge and behaviour. This section also allowed us to understand

the relationship between the various groups of individuals in a social system, such as a university, and the tensions that may or may not exist between them. There was also a discussion regarding the epistemology of constructionism and why this is more appropriate in this project than constructivism.

The chapter then continued to review the literature regarding social capital and concluded that Coleman's (1988) concept of social capital was the favoured theoretical framework. This section also linked the positive impact that social networks have on social capital. Having positioned the relevance of social capital and the impact of social networks, the chapter then moved onto review the extant literature on social support; from the literature it may be concluded that YACs are more likely to benefit from the 'Buffering Effect' (Cohen and Wills, 1985) as they are likely to seek support when required. The positive relationship between social support and student persistence was also identified in this chapter, and it was noted that students with less strong social skills are not as likely to benefit from university support systems. Outside of the university environs, the role of familial support was also discussed; it was deemed relevant to review literature on this given that YACs are most likely to be caring for a family member. In relation to this project, the impact of this for commuting students compared with those students who live on campus is potentially significant and will be addressed in the findings and discussion if necessary.

The chapter then examined the link between social networks and social integration and reviewed frameworks of student integration into higher education from Tinto (1975) and Braxton and Hirschy (2004) with the conclusion that social integration plays a key role in student persistence. However, rather than attempting to prove the impact of social integration on persistence, this research project is investigating the impact of social integration for YACs and potentially how university educators might better facilitate this phenomenon. The relationships between the various sections inform a conceptual

framework that frames the methodology for this project. In accordance with Braxton and Hirschy (2004) my own conceptual framework will only focus on social integration and the interplay between students and the HEI environment, since academic integration of YACs has already been somewhat investigated by Day (2017) and Kettell (2018). In conclusion, the conspectus of apposite frameworks at the end of this chapter forms the preliminary to this study's own presentation of a conceptual framework in Chapter 3, which draws on Heaney and Israel's (2008) work on the impact of social support and social networks on health education and how this affects behavioural change.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1: Introduction

This chapter will introduce the conceptual framework for this research project. It will then discuss the ontological and epistemological assumptions that were made and approaches that were adopted. In the previous chapter constructionism was discussed in some depth and this chapter will explain further why this was considered an appropriate paradigm to apply in the context of researching social reality. The methodology will be introduced as narrative inquiry (NI) and it will be explained how this study only drew on some elements of NI rather than fully applying the customary three dimensions of time, space and place. The data collection methods will then be described as visual network diagrams, semi-structured interviews and reflective logs. The participant recruitment strategy will be discussed and the challenges encountered in terms of accessing a hard-to-reach group of students will be noted. The chapter will detail the approach to data analysis taken and finally present the ethics and limitations of the project.

3.2: Conceptual Framework

Having reviewed Tinto's (1975), Braxton and Hirschy's (2004) and Day's (2017) models that incorporate social integration as a factor in student persistence in the previous chapter, I decided to operationalise Heaney and Israel's (2008) model of social support and social networks for my own conceptual framework. In accordance with Day's (2017) model, Heaney and Israel's (2008) framework was also not linear and illustrated how complex the links are between social support, social networks and ultimately their impact on behavioural outcomes. Heaney and Israel (2008) conceived of the framework to examine the relationships between external and internal environments and the impact on patient behaviour in a healthcare context. They were particularly interested in how social networks and social support impacted behavioural change where healthcare professionals

were educating patients about chronic conditions. Their conceptual model also emphasised the role that social networks and social support played in influencing the exposure to stressors. Having previously explained my motivation for this research project in Chapter 1 in terms of my interactions with students who had caring responsibilities, and how this had impacted their opportunities to socialise, this was therefore of particular interest to me. It resonated with how social networks and social support for student carers in HEIs might enhance their ability to deal with stress and impact their academic behaviour and persistence on their programme of study. It also brought the concepts of social networks, social support and stressors to the forefront of their impact on social integration and the relationship on positive behavioural change in an educational context. Heaney and Israel's (2008) framework is illustrated in figure 3.1 below:

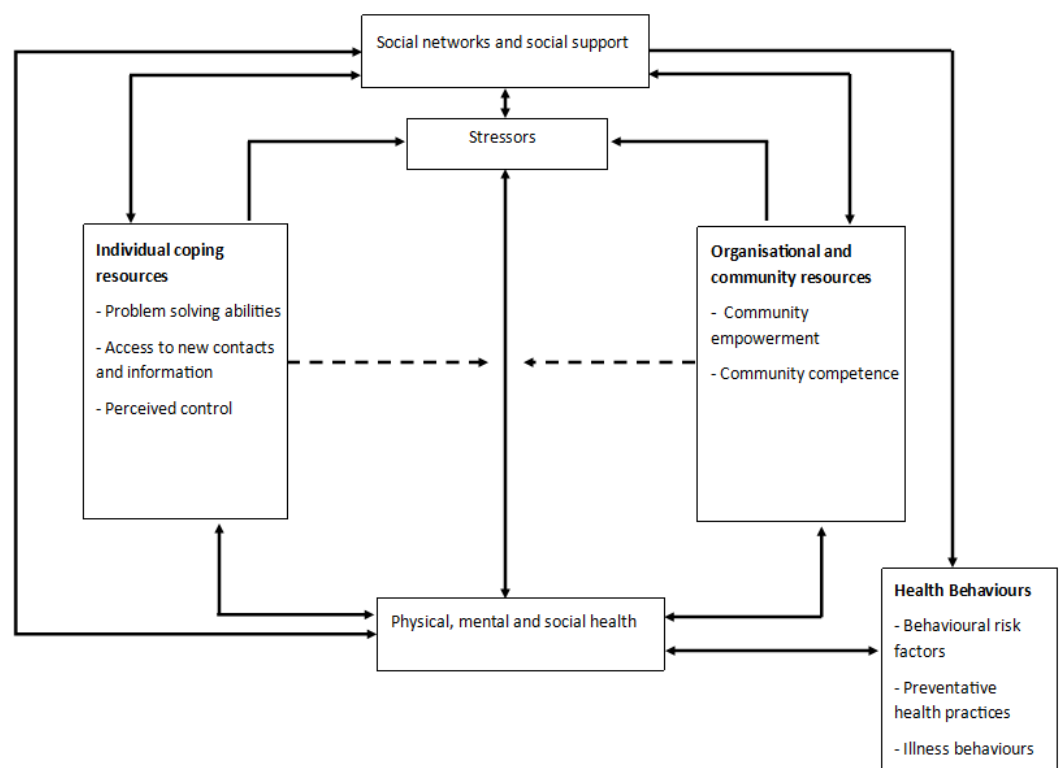


Figure 3.1: Conceptual model for the relationship of social networks and social support to health (Heaney and Israel, 2008:194)

Therefore Heaney and Israel's (2008) framework was used as a basis for this research project, but was adapted to be more representative of an academic context in terms of applying it to students, rather than patients. The potential relationship between the students and the university staff is represented on the framework in figure 3.2 below, showing the concepts of social support, social networks, stressors and social integration and the links between them. In each of the individuals' and HEIs' boxes, the resources available to them to facilitate their roles in the HEI environment are also included. I have included social integration as a central concept as this is the focus of this project; it is omitted from Heaney and Israel's (2008) conceptual model in figure 3.1, but is referred to in their chapter using Gottlieb's (2000) definition of the existence of social ties. I therefore inserted it as a key focus in my adaptation of the original model taking into account Tinto (1975) and Braxton and Hirschy's (2004) theories. The conceptual framework for this research project is thus illustrated below in figure 3.2.

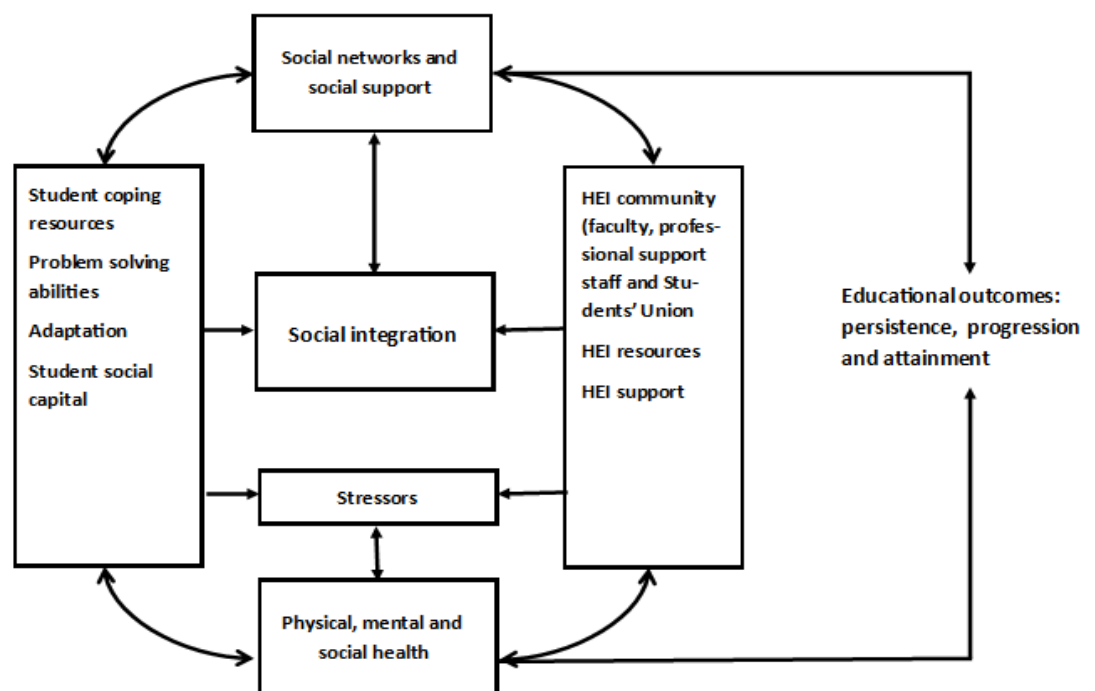


Figure 3.2: Conceptual framework

Table 3.1 clarifies the seminal theorists reviewed in Chapter 2 and which are included in the conceptual framework:

Seminal theory	Theorist(s)	Justification
Relationships of Social Networks and Social Support to Health	Heaney and Israel (2008)	This framework brought the elements of social networks and social support together in the context of how communities can support positive behavioural change. This resonated with the context of students in an educational setting and how social networks and social support can precipitate positive behaviour.
Social capital	Coleman, J.S (1988)	This theory focuses on family and social networks as being instrumental in educational success.
Social integration	Tinto (1975); Braxton and Hirschy (2004)	The models clearly indicate social integration is an important element in terms of students' educational journeys.

Table 3.1: Seminal theories included in the conceptual framework

The conceptual framework brings together the impact of social networks, social support and student physical, mental and social health on social integration within the social space of the students' HEI. It incorporates the student's social capital and their agency in terms of their own motivations to socially integrate, as well as the agency of the HEI employees in terms of their ultimate impact on persistence or retention and progression. The final element in the framework is the presence of stressors. Stressors may be defined as any internal or external environmental event that influences behaviour (Holmes and Rahe, 1967). Stressors can overload individuals and affect their coping abilities. Thoits (1995) discussed that disadvantaged groups of people were less able to deal with stressors or

stressful life events. However, supportive individuals or social networks may reduce adverse reactions to stressors (Heaney and Israel, 2008).

In the context of this research project and from personal experience of working in higher education as an academic I have observed that stressors appear to increase at certain points during the student life cycle. These may be transitioning into higher education for first-year students, and transitioning from first to second and second to final year for continuing students. Additional stressors for YACs may also include their caring responsibilities, commuting if they still live at home, lack of time, and financial concerns.

The conceptual framework informed the design of the data collection instruments, specifically the interview protocols (Appendix B) and visual network diagram template (Appendix D) to ensure the resultant data would address the research objectives. The way in which it informed the interview protocols was in the order and inclusion of questions and topics for discussion; starting with the participants' characteristics (Tinto, 1975), including their social capital and then the subsequent opportunities to build social networks and seek social support. This then culminated with questions around barriers and challenges i.e. stressors, to social integration and finally an examination of the participants' decision to persist on their educational journey. These topics were developed across the 3 interviews with each participant. The conceptual framework was used to inform the design of the visual network diagram template by ensuring data was collected regarding the participants' social networks and their relative levels of support, and which extracurricular activities were deemed current and useful. The theoretical perspectives included in the conceptual framework were then also used to inform the findings, discussion, conclusion and recommendations.

3.3: Ontological and Epistemological approach

It was the intention of this project to examine how young adult carers (YACs) perceive their social integration and how universities may facilitate this. Social integration was discussed in the literature review as how individuals interact with their environment and the other people in that environment. It has also been suggested that how students seek and use support, and access social networks are elements that contribute to social integration. In terms of the research objectives, the paradigmatic perspective of this project was social constructionism. This ontological approach drew on Papert and Harel's (1991) development of Piaget's (1959) constructivist theory in terms of interpreting how individuals make sense of their learning environment. In this respect the study investigated how YACs socially constructed their own reality and how they interacted with the various agents and actors that were important to them in their lives. Gergen (1994) supported this as he posited that reality is a social construction and is a result of how individuals interact with and interpret their environment. Social constructionism may be a collective construction of a person's world, as people actively seek to make sense of their own situation (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018). It is also likely that researchers have to interpret the process of construction from a number of different perspectives, which were, for me, HEIs and the YACs.

Arguably, social constructionism was also the epistemological approach of this project. It has, however, been widely criticised as an epistemology (Pernecky, 2016).

Constructionists have battled with reaching agreement about what counts as real and what is not real; this has also impacted the credibility of constructionism as an epistemological approach for qualitative research. Returning to Searle's (2010) linguistic philosophy of social reality, he claims that social facts e.g. students or young adult carers are ontologically subjective, but that they may also be epistemologically objective. To reiterate, as described in chapter 2, the fact that students are students is an objective

social fact, but only in the context of the environment in which they find themselves, in this instance, university. This may also be compared with the subjective social fact of a young adult carer; it may be that individuals do not view themselves as carers until society labels them as such. The challenge of identifying and recruiting participants for this study resonated with this idea. Therefore, social constructionism was deemed a suitable paradigm for this project, as it posits that social reality may be simultaneously subjective and objective. It is 'possible to have objective knowledge about socially constructed social facts' (Pernecky, 2016:14)

As this study examined YACs' perceptions of their own social integration into their HEI, it was largely subjective in nature and therefore adopted an interpretive theoretical perspective (Crotty, 1998). Additionally, as I interpreted the data according to my own limits of understanding and experience, this also indicated an interpretive epistemology and one I was mindful of as I analysed the findings.

3.4: Methodological Approach: Narrative Inquiry

3.4.1: Introducing Narrative Inquiry

Social constructionism has frequently been applied to the context of narratives in that they are stories retold from memory. These stories are stored in the individual's mind until they are required to be recalled verbally or in writing (Gergen, 2002). My intention was to investigate how YACs construct their own reality regarding social integration into higher education (HE), my methodological approach drew on narrative inquiry (NI). I wanted to be able to invite the participants to tell me their story. Polkinghorne (2007:472) suggested that narrative research investigates the "temporal unfolding of human lives", which was appropriate as I intended to understand the YACs' narratives over the course of one academic year. I invited them to take me on their journey and share their experiences with me in order that I could give them a voice.

3.4.2: The Three Dimensions of Narrative Inquiry

Narrative inquiry examines the three-dimensional narrative space, which includes place or space, interpersonal relationships or interaction, and temporal dimensions (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). Narrative inquiry has been used in education to better understand events or experiences through which individuals live; it has also been used extensively outside of education including the fields of anthropology, counselling, history and nursing (Connelly and Clandinin, 2006). Narrative inquiry can be used to research events or experiences. Events in this framing are defined as having a defined beginning and end, whereas narratives of experiences are 'sequential and meaningful; are definitively human; 're-present' experience, reconstituting it as well as expressing it; and displaying transformation or change' (Squire, 2008:42). The dimensions of an experience are temporal, representing a continuity or sequence of occurrences; personal and social, representing human interaction; and are defined by a space or situation (Squire, 2008). A narrative experience then, can be identified as occurring continuously over time, in a sequential manner; involving one or more individuals interacting and taking place in a specific space or spaces. The experience is also defined as being inward in terms of internal feelings and hopes, outward in terms of the external environment, and occurring both historically and currently, with a view to influencing the future (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). The life narrative of young adult carers and their social integration into higher education can therefore be defined as an experience and was investigated as such. In this project, the places of NI included the university and the YACs' own social spaces, the interpersonal relationships were the relationships the YACs had with other individuals in their own social network, and the time was initially represented as an academic year, but this became a variable parameter as discussed below.

As previously stated, a dimension of narrative inquiry is that of temporality, but as the interviews progressed, it was apparent that narratives of experience are often difficult to interpret from a chronological perspective. In the retelling of an experience the participant

often 'jumped around' in their account, so it was only later during the interview that it became clear what was implied in terms of what happened and when. This might bring into question the validity of narrative inquiry as a methodology in terms of what is or is not to be believed. Narratives are a collection of statements and as the researcher I had to trust the participant's account of their experience, and to use additional probes to further understand the temporality of their story. If the human experience is narrated using clear, plain language and the analysis carried out in an inductive manner then validity may be claimed (Polkinghorne, 2007). The hermeneutic philosopher, Ricoeur (1980) posits that narrative and time are inherently linked, but that it cannot be assumed that the retelling of experiences is a logical chronology of events. The timeline of the participants' accounts was therefore revisited during data collection. It was also evident that during the retelling of experiences the YACs were often going back beyond their current experience of education in their HEI to earlier times, when caring had impacted on their educational journey, and that meant that I had to be mindful not to assume I understood a particular order of events being recounted.

I began to understand that the narrative matrix is complex (Ricoeur, 1980) and I realised that requesting participants to recount their experiences as a linear narrative was naïve. Likewise, Gergen (2002) also described the challenge of interpreting narratives of experiences, rather than events which often have a chronological beginning, middle and end. It was evident to me that the data for narrative inquiry are stories and these stories may be retold in a number of ways (Butina, 2015; Spector-Mersel, 2010). In terms of this it must be acknowledged that stories may vary in the telling and retelling, and also vary when retold by different individuals; researchers using NI need to be mindful of this variability. Additionally when a story is retold and the storyteller is temporally distant from the story, the phenomenon of false memories may arise, in which case the memories may be distorted (Mollon, 1998). The researcher has no way of knowing how accurate or

otherwise a story is and therefore must trust in the participant's account of their experience.

Heidegger (1962) offers a foundational account of the phenomena of being and time and suggests that entities are encountered "within-timeness", but that time and the being-in-time may be subjective. The concept of Dasein is Being; and that "Dasein, "has the time" or "does not have it"; it can "take time" or "lose time"; so where does Dasein take time from?" (Heidegger,1962:456). There is an existential-temporal conception of the world, as we count time and measure it, and apply it to our Being and our memories of ourselves as actors within our own experiences and events. In essence the YACs' experiences existed at a point in the past; they are retold from memory and reinterpreted by the participants in the retelling. Additionally, it became clear during the interviews that my interpretations of the place or space in which the experience took place was often an assumption, that when clarified during the course of the interview was sometimes incorrect; so the being and time elements of NI were difficult to contextualise. Thus in applying narrative inquiry, it was essential not to make assumptions as the field texts were interpreted and analysed.

3.4.3: Researching Sensitive Topics

As this project was an investigation that involved the sensitive topic of caring for a friend or a relative with a long-term requirement for care, I had to be mindful of this as I invited participants to share their experiences. When narrating sensitive topics researchers need to be aware that this brings a new perspective into data collection and more precisely when using interviews as one of the data collection methods. The power dynamic between researcher and participant needs to be explored in a sensitive manner. The participant may find it easier to discuss their situation as they are familiar with it, whereas the researcher might have very little experience of the topic and may find it difficult to navigate the interview objectively. Hyden (2008) described the research she undertook with sex workers and how one participant was particularly interested in Hyden's own sex

life; for the participant talking about sex was not a sensitive subject. Hyden (2008) realised then that the power dynamic between researcher and participant had changed, as she became the dependent one in the interview as she was the information seeker.

This made me reflect on my own positionality with respect to this project as I needed to understand that for the participants their experiences were normal for them, but perhaps not for me. Accordingly, I aimed to familiarise myself with the sort of experiences young carers and young adult carers go through by initially following a number of YAC support groups on Instagram and reading their stories; by reading any online blogs written by YACs and also by volunteering at Study Higher sessions that ran outreach days for young carers in year 9 of secondary schools in England. Study Higher is a collaborative regional partnership of HE providers that provides outreach activities for students across Berkshire, Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire and Swindon in England as part of the OfS' Uni Connect programme (Study Higher, 2023). Additionally, as I was an academic advisor for some students with caring responsibilities, I had also had the privilege of hearing their stories when they came to me for advice. In doing so, I became more aware of the challenges and pressures on these young people and was more prepared for the interview phase of my data collection.

Birch and Miller (2000) discuss the challenge of inviting intimacy in interviews and found that researchers should be wary of the interview morphing into a therapeutic or counselling session, but that authentic storytelling may only be realised when this intimacy is indeed reached. It can be surmised that researching sensitive topics needs to be a joint enterprise between the researcher and participant and that the power dynamic should seek to be a balanced relationship. The British Educational Research Association (BERA) publish ethical guidelines and these serve to remind educational researchers about the importance of being mindful of structural inequalities (BERA, 2023). In the context of this study, interviewing young people about their caring responsibilities may have the potential

to manifest as a structural inequality. I therefore ensured that the participants were well informed before each interview and started by sending them the participant information sheet. I also explained that if, at any point during the interviews, they wished to take a break or withdraw from the interview, it was acceptable to do so. I wanted to reassure them that the interview was a safe space.

It has been suggested that when using interviews to gather narratives of experiences the researcher is advised to interview each participant at least three times in order to build a trusting relationship (Seidman, 2013). In this way the stories that are told become more revealing as the narrator feels more confident in the interviewer. This was an additional benefit of interviewing the participants in this study three times over the course of an academic year. I attempted to ensure I had a good relationship with the participants by building rapport at the start of every interview; I also kept in touch with them via email in-between interviews to strengthen each relationship.

3.5: Participant Recruitment

In this study the participants invited were undergraduate students between the age of 18-25 years who cared long term for a family or friend and who were studying at an English HEI; they may have been in any year of their programme. The exclusion criteria were postgraduate students; any students over the age of 25; students who were working as paid carers; students who were studying at a college of further education or a private institution; and students who were caring for a typically developing child or sibling.

The sampling strategy for this project was non-probabilistic and purposive. Non-probabilistic samples cannot claim to represent the whole population, and so are not used in studies which require statistical rigour. As this project took an interpretive approach, a non-probabilistic strategy was deemed acceptable. Purposive sampling involves actively

recruiting the type of participant required for a study until the number of participants is reached (Thomas, 2013) and also seeking those participants that fit certain criteria (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018). Additionally, purposive sampling was used because of young adult carers (YACs) being a hard-to-reach population. YACs are a hard-to-reach population for various reasons. As discussed in Chapter 2, they may not identify themselves as being part of the group of young people aged 18-25 who care long-term for a family or friend. Anecdotal evidence based on my own experience suggests that there may be many young people who do not realise they are recognised as having a “formal” role as a YAC. They may not want to participate as potentially any research into their lives may touch on sensitive issues; even the process of sharing these challenges may cause them distress (Kettell, 2018). University students are frequently approached by faculty researchers and fellow students to participate in research and for this reason are hard to engage and retain in a research project (Khatamian Far, 2018). I was mindful of this as I designed my study and particularly the participant information sheet (Appendix F), which was the first document potential participants would encounter; therefore the benefits and indeed the pitfalls of belonging, and being labelled as belonging, to the YAC community had to be apparent at all times.

When recruiting participants from hard-to-reach populations for face-to-face studies it helps if recruitment methods are strategic, but sensitive (Bamidele et al, 2019). In terms of YACs, this meant working hard to engage gatekeepers to enable them to understand the relevance of the study and that it would be undertaken within strict ethical guidelines and with empathy. A number of strategies were used in this project to recruit participants including advertising, networking and accessing professional contacts (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018). Initially the project was investigating the population of YACs from one post-1992 HEI based in the South East of England and recruitment was approached using posters around the University, contacts in the University’s Wellbeing team and the Students’ Union. Emails were sent directly from the professional contact in Wellbeing to

known YACs, of which there were ten. After six weeks this had elicited one participant. Following discussion with the supervisory team and after gaining further approval from the University Research Ethics Committee, a decision was made to expand the scope of the research to UK-wide HEIs.

These were approached via a network of universities known to me, namely the Network for Evaluating and Researching University Participation Interventions (NERUPI) and a number of not-for-profit organisations including The Carers' Trust and Study Higher. I emailed my contact at NERUPI and they agreed to send out an email to the 70 member organisations, all of whom are HEIs. This resulted in 3 responses from individuals in HEIs who said they would send out an announcement internally to known YACs at their institution. One person offered to send the information out to their contacts who supported YACs in other HEIs in their region; a further example of snowball sampling (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018). Regarding The Carers' Trust, I contacted all the regional Carers' Trust offices across England via email explaining the project. I received 2 positive responses from this activity, both of whom agreed to share the details of the project on their social media accounts. Finally, I also used my own LinkedIn network and the Twitter accounts of some colleagues to further promote the project. At all points, gatekeeper permission was sought and sometimes this involved online meetings with these individuals to explain my research and how it would potentially benefit YACs' educational journey through higher education. The importance of building interpersonal trust with gatekeepers was acknowledged; particularly when researching a sensitive or ethical subject (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018). During the recruitment I kept a spreadsheet log of activities regarding who I had contacted, when and their response. This helped me keep on track with my recruitment strategy. After 12 weeks of intense recruitment activity five YACs who fitted the sample profile of undergraduate students aged 18-25 with a long-term caring responsibility were recruited. Three additional students showed interest in participation but were unable to participate as one of them was a PhD student, one was

34 years old, and the final one was very time poor. The final group of participants are described in table 3.2 below, all were invited to identify a pseudonym with which they would be happy:

Participant number and self-elected pseudonym	Description
1 Chloe	Final-year undergraduate on a Health Promotion & Public Health programme at a university in London. Commutes to university for lectures and lives with the relative for whom they care.
2 Yusra	Final-year undergraduate on a Psychology programme at a university in the home counties. Commutes to university for lectures and lives with the relative for whom they care.
3 Rae	Final-year undergraduate on an English Literature programme at a university in the home counties. Lives at university, but maintains contact with the person they care for by returning home and daily calls.
4 Kaya	Second-year undergraduate on a Psychology programme at a university in the East Midlands. Lives at university, but maintains contact with the person they care for by returning home and daily calls.
5 Ally	Second-year undergraduate on a Business and Enterprise programme at a university in the home counties. Commutes to university for lectures and lives with the relative for whom they care.

Table 3.2: Participant profile (NB: Participant 1 withdrew from the study in January 2022 owing to the pressure of caring responsibilities but consented to the data being used for the study.

Finally, from an ethical perspective, as an employee of my own HEI and as a lecturer in the Business School I needed to be mindful of not engaging students I had taught, was teaching, or for whom I was their academic advisor.

3.6: Collecting Narrative Data

Employing NI as a methodology utilises data collection methods that may include interviews, focus groups, observation, personal journals, diaries, and examination of archived documents (Butina, 2015; Clandinin and Connelly, 2000; Spector-Mersel, 2010). In this project interviews were used as the participants are more likely to share their story in a one-to-one situation than in a focus group with other YACs; additionally, as it was challenging to recruit participants, there would not have been enough people to use focus groups as a data collection method. Observation would be impossible as it would involve shadowing the participants continually throughout the semester, both on and off campus; which is intrusive and unrealistic, particularly when researching a sensitive topic such as caring. Therefore, interviews and reflective journals were deemed to be two of the most effective data collection methods for this project. This meant there was both spoken and written narrative data. The interview protocols and reflective journal template are attached as Appendices B and C respectively. Additionally visual materials may be used to stimulate discourse during interviews (Squire, 2008). In this project the visual material took the form of a visual network diagram (Appendix D) that requested the participant to consider their social support network, the individuals in it, and identify social activities in which they may have been involved.

It should also be noted that interviews involve the researcher potentially influencing the narrative simply by being involved in the data collection as the interviewer. Therefore narratives in these situations also encompass the researcher's voice being part of the data itself (Holliday, 2016; Shabini Varaki, 2007; Spector-Mersel, 2010). Initially this may appear to be a limitation of narrative inquiry, however, it may be suggested that the researcher's voice allows others' previously unheard voices to be heard, which, in this project, includes YACs. On more than one occasion the participants thanked me for giving

them a platform through which they were able to feel they were being listened to; this was a positive outcome of the project.

3.6.1: Data collection methods and links to research objectives

In order to clarify the links between the research objectives and data collection methods it was considered useful to illustrate this in table 3.3 below.

Research objective	Data collection method
RO1: To examine YACs' perception of their social integration into an HEI.	Semi-structured interviews Reflective journals Visual network diagrams
RO2: To explore how university networks and support impact social integration for undergraduate students who are YACs.	Semi-structured interviews Reflective journals Visual network diagrams
RO3: To identify which University-organised events have the greatest impact on social integration from the perspective of undergraduate students who are YACs.	Semi-structured interviews Reflective journals Visual network diagrams
RO4: To examine the main barriers to social integration and building social networks from the perspective of undergraduate students who are YACs.	Semi-structured interviews Reflective journals
RO5: To comprehend the impact of social integration on persistence and progression of undergraduate students who are YACs at an HEI.	Semi-structured interviews Reflective journals

Table 3.3: An indication of the links between the research objectives and the data collection methods

3.7: The Data Collection Methods in Detail

3.7.1: Visual network diagrams

Concept maps have been used widely in education to communicate ideas and promote effective learning through reflection (Wheeldon, 2009). A concept map allows presentation of ideas in context and is a useful visual representation that may simplify a complex situation. As my research aim was to examine the social networks of YACs and how these impacted their educational journey, I decided to use the idea of concept maps for the participants to start to visualise their networks. I called the concept maps visual network diagrams (Appendix D), and they were intended to act as a prompt for discussion in the semi-structured interviews. Visual artefacts, such as these, have been previously advocated as adding more depth to the narrative landscape (Chase, 2013). The visual network diagrams in this project were intended to allow participants the opportunity to visualise their social networks outside the confines of the interview; in this respect the participants were able to frame their social networks, places and events in an unsolicited manner (Wheeldon, 2009). The central word of the visual network diagram was “me”; I wanted the participants to think about themselves and how they were central to their own social network. In this respect the diagrams in this project were almost a mind map as these also frame experiences around a central word or idea. Wheeldon (2011) discovered the challenge of encouraging participants to fill in mind maps, and found that those participants who had fully engaged in the process were able to describe their experiences in greater detail. I also found this to be the case where some participants filled in the diagram during the interview, or had only partially completed it, and so were prompted to add to it as the interview progressed.

Visual network diagrams were used prior to each interview to prompt the participants to consider the individuals in their social networks and who, out of their networks, were most supportive of their educational journey. They were also prompted to think about where

they chose to socialise, either online or in person or both, and what events the university had put on that facilitated their social integration. Example of a completed diagram can be seen in figure 3.3 below.

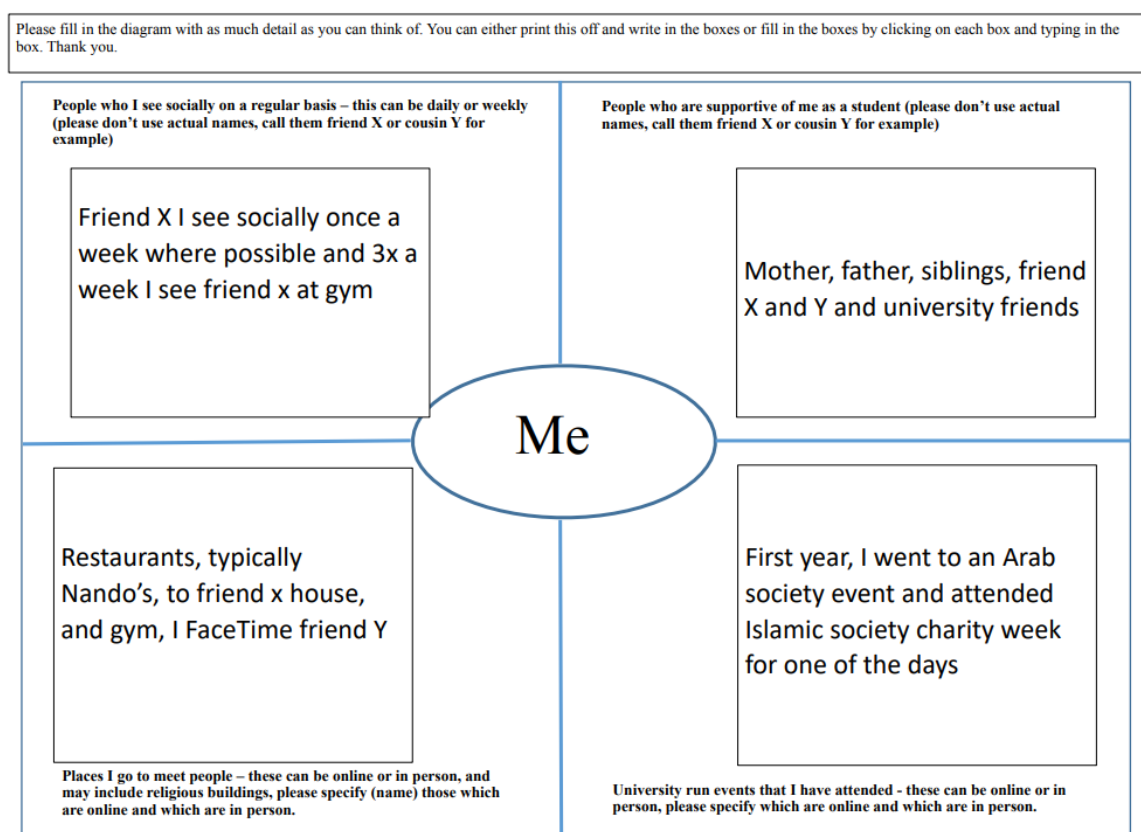


Figure 3.3: Initial visual network diagram from Participant 2

Using these diagrams as a visual aid during the interviews meant the participants were able to talk in more depth about the individuals in their networks and often, during the interviews, the diagrams prompted more detail regarding individuals who had not previously been mentioned. The participants all said it was a useful exercise in helping them think about who, and what, was important to them socially in the context of their educational journey. As some of the interviews were initially online owing to COVID-19 restrictions, it was also important that these diagrams were easy to fill in online. Consequently text boxes were inserted into the diagram, in order that the formatting of the

diagram was preserved after the participants had completed them and emailed them back to me.

3.7.2: Semi-structured interviews

Wellington (2015) suggested that interviews are able to give researchers a depth of insight into participants' opinions, perceptions, attitudes and feelings. However, according to Usher and Edwards (1994) there are "multiple truths" and that one person's account of an event or experience may change in the retelling; this was something of which I had to be aware. In inviting the participants to retell their stories, the interviews were used to probe an experience in alignment with a narrative inquiry approach. In narrative inquiry the phrase oral history interviews is frequently used, and in this project, the participants were invited to retell their journey into higher education and how caring had impacted this. Oral history interviews may be free form or semi-structured with the latter being appropriate when there is a requirement to focus on specific questions (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). Unstructured or free form interviews can also be hard to analyse and require a high level of experience on the part of the researcher as the direction of the interview can be unpredictable (Chase, 2005; Clandinin, 2007). So arguably, the approach to use semi-structured interviews to gather oral histories was appropriate, as I was a relatively inexperienced researcher.

Using semi-structured interviews also meant the topics and themes could be planned in advance and shared with the participant in order to alleviate any concerns regarding the content of the interview. An interview protocol was designed for each phase of data collection (Appendix B) and the topic areas aligned with the research objectives to ensure the data collected would be relevant. Referring to the interview protocol meant the conversation progressed naturally, whilst at the same time ensuring no topic areas were inadvertently omitted (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018). Additionally, using topic areas rather than structured questions meant the participant could be invited to expand on their

response by using gentle verbal or visual probes, in this case the visual network diagram (Thomas, 2013). The purpose of the semi-structured interview in this research study was to give YACs a voice. They were being given an opportunity to raise the profile of YACs in higher education. Wellington (2015) claims interviews empower people and that the dynamic in an interview should allow the participant to play the leading role.

In line with Seidman (2013), three interview points were decided upon across the academic year. It was the intention of the project to interview the participants in week 1 or 2 of semester one, week 13 or 14 of semester one and again at the end of the academic year after semester two has ended. The justification for doing this was also to align with potential stressor points in terms of transitioning into, through and out of an academic year. Transitioning into a new academic year involves re-familiarisation with the institution and a new timetable. The latter might have more of an impact on a YAC compared with a student without caring responsibilities, as they might have an established caring routine. As the academic year progresses, assessment points will likely increase stress on students and also, again as the academic year comes to an end. In addition to these stressors the pressure of reacquainting with peers, and perhaps making new acquaintances might also be challenging.

As the research project began, I realised that recruitment of participants was particularly challenging. My original data collection points of week 1 or 2 of semester one, week 13 or 14 of semester one and again at the end of the academic year had to be revisited. The final challenge of interviewing this particular group of students was their availability over the academic year. As carers they obviously have a lot of extra demands on their time, so there were frequent occasions where interviews were rearranged as they were called away at the last minute to deal with something related to their caring responsibilities. This was completely understandable and meant that I had to ensure they did not feel pressured into participating; when I emailed them I ensured I repeatedly checked if it was

a suitable week/day/time and often asked them to suggest times that would work best for them. The interview dates and times are shown in table 3.4 below:

Participant number and self-elected pseudonym	Interview dates and times
1 Chloe	Online interview on 12/10/21 @5pm
2 Yusra	Face-to-face interviews on 13/10/21@12.30pm; 2/2/22 @3pm; 17/5/22 @12pm
3 Rae	Online interviews on 18/11/21 @9.30am; 10/2/22 @11.30am; 30/5/22 @11am
4 Kaya	Online interviews on 30/11/21 @11am; 9/2/22 @11am; 17/5/22 @10am
5 Ally	Online interview on 9/12/22 @1.30pm; face-to-face interviews on 17/3/22 @3pm; 7/6/22 @3pm.

Table 3.4: Interview dates and times

Participants were asked to return the consent form (Appendix E) at least 48 hours prior to the interview. Once they had consented to participate, the participants were sent the visual network diagram (Appendix D) and asked to fill this in at least 48 hours prior to each interview. It was envisaged that these diagrams would only take a maximum of 10 minutes to fill in. Sometimes the participants did not fill in the diagram until the day of the interview, which meant I had little time to review it; on two occasions the diagram was filled in during the interview. There were also times when participants had forgotten to add someone from their network, but were prompted to remember these people as the interviews progressed. Each interview was approximately 30 minutes long and they were audio recorded.

It was intended that the interviews were to be face-to-face, but initially the COVID-19 situation prevented face-to-face contact, and so some of the interviews were carried out using Zoom. Those interviews that were carried out face-to-face were slightly longer in length than those carried out on Zoom; on average each interview was 30-40 minutes long. This is in contrast to findings by Howlett (2021) who found that online interviews were, on average, 1500 words longer in length than face-to-face interviews once transcribed. The participants were eager for the interviews to be relatively short, as generally they were fitting these in-between classes and/or rushing off to attend to their caring responsibilities. As the COVID-19 situation and legislation changed, two participants requested face-to-face interviews, which were carried out wearing masks in a ventilated room on campus in order to comply with University regulations regarding on-campus meetings.

On reflection, the interviews that were conducted face-to-face were much more relaxed and natural than those carried out online. For example, during one of the online interviews it was apparent the participant was in their bedroom in the family home; she was distracted by the noise in the home and my perception was that she was not able to concentrate on the quality of her responses to my questions as a result of this. Howlett (2021) also found that participants were easily distracted during online interviews, particularly by notifications from mobile phone applications; but in contrast to the current research study, found the online interviews were more relaxed than face-to-face interviews. In the face-to-face interviews, body language was useful and this appeared to be open and friendly, and not at all defensive. It was difficult hearing some of what was said though, as masks were worn by both interviewer and interviewee, and this also caused an issue in terms of the clarity of the recording. To minimise the risk involved with an indistinct recording, both a smartphone and a laptop were used to record, so the content could be cross referenced during transcription. Both the smartphone and laptop were password-protected. All interviews were recorded using a university Zoom account,

whether they were face-to-face or online; in the face-to-face interviews a laptop was set up without a camera to capture the audio from the interview; in addition to the consent forms, I checked that the participants were in agreement with this before I began, and all of them said they felt comfortable with this approach. The benefit of this was that the captions were transcribed automatically, however, the software did not differentiate between which individual was talking, so although the content was available, I had to ensure that the transcription was accurate by adding the names of the participant or me at the correct point. In addition, I used my smartphone voice note recording app to record the audio in the face-to-face interviews.

The recordings were processed by Zoom and automatically transferred to PanOpto; the recordings were therefore transcribed, edited and eventually stored on the university password-protected secure drive. The voice note recordings were downloaded from my smartphone as m4a files, emailed to my student email account and stored securely on the university password-protected secure drive. The recordings on Zoom and my smartphone were then deleted. All of this activity occurred within a maximum of 24 hours after the interviews.

In terms of evaluating the use of online interviews, they are more accessible and easy to organise. It also allowed me to interview those participants who were from other HEIs and therefore offered me the opportunity to extend my recruitment across England. The participants could also choose the location of their interview, and therefore may have felt more comfortable and relaxed in their own rooms (Howlett, 2021; Pocock, Smith and Wiles, 2021). In addition, as previous periods of lockdown during the pandemic had restricted travel across England, this also meant that if I were to be in this position again, online interviews meant I could carry on with data collection. The online interviews were also a lot simpler to transcribe as Zoom automatically captioned the recordings; however, this still required a lot of editing to ensure accuracy. The limitations of online interviews

are the fact that it is more difficult to build rapport with the participants, as body language is hard to read. As previously mentioned, there may have been distractions locally for the participants too, making it difficult for them to focus on the questions they were being asked (Howlett, 2021). Technology was also an issue with the online interviews, as often the broadband signal was not very strong which interfered with the quality of the recordings.

In contrast to online interviews, face-to-face interviews were more difficult to organise in terms of time and location (Pocock, Smith and Wiles, 2021). The first being that the participant was required to travel to an agreed location, so that involved extra time; the location also needed to be agreed, and finding somewhere quiet enough to carry out an interview was often challenging. The face-to-face interviews were also slightly longer than the online interviews; this was likely because both individuals felt more relaxed in a face-to-face context. The participants were also away from their home setting, therefore did not have to be aware that they may be called away to attend to immediate caring responsibilities. As previously mentioned, the data collection occurred during the pandemic and therefore some of the face-to-face interviews were carried out with both researcher and participant wearing masks. Meeting someone for the first time whilst wearing a mask made building rapport difficult, it also made it difficult to hear what they were saying at times. The masks also impacted the recordings and these were quite indistinct in places; however, the fact that there were 2 methods of recording each of the face-to-face interviews meant that these areas of uncertainty could be interpreted more accurately by cross referencing the recordings. The overall benefit of the face-to-face interviews was that it was rewarding to meet the participants in person, and both researcher and participant agreed that it was refreshing to do so following the social isolation of the various periods of lockdown during the pandemic.

Both approaches to the semi-structured interviews elicited good quality data that became richer after the first phase of interviews, perhaps this was because the participants were more relaxed discussing their situation with me as the dynamic between us progressed and rapport was built.

3.7.3: Reflective journals

Inviting participants to fill in a monthly reflective journal could be termed participatory research. There has been discussion about the benefit of giving YACs a voice through research projects, so that they are able to feel as if they are contributing directly to improving a future for other caregivers (Joseph et al, 2019). The reflective journals used in this project were interval contingent in that they were required to be completed once a month for the duration of the study (Thomas, 2013). Monthly reflective journals allowed me to be “in the field” with the YACs, therefore, addressing the relational aspect of NI. Journals or diaries related to a research project are unique in that they are produced specifically for the research, in comparison to other documentary sources that pre-exist the project (Wellington, 2015). Using spoken (the interviews) and written (the journals) narratives allowed for richer data to be collected and cross analysed for recurring themes. Both data collection methods gave the participants different channels for their “voice”, some individuals may have felt more comfortable with recounting their experiences verbally, whilst others may have been more confident writing things down. Additionally, there is thinking around the fact that people are more likely to disclose different thoughts in writing, as opposed to verbally (Thomas, 2013).

The journals were pre-populated with prompts or questions that linked to the area of investigation and focused on social networks, social support, support from the participant’s university, and any other challenges that had arisen during the month. This is a unique approach to this specific field of study, because no other studies could be found that used this data collection method with YACs. The journals were electronic and the

template (Appendix C) was shared as a collaborative document with the participants after the first interview. The students were invited to write one journal entry at the end of every month during the course of the study. The entries were as long as the participant wished. The important point here was to ensure there were regular contributions to the journals to document the participants' journey, so making the task as accessible as possible was vital. The journals were shared electronically via GoogleDocs on the University shared Google Drive. This meant I could easily view them regularly without troubling the students by email, and I could also advise the participant to seek support if any safeguarding issues arose. The support was detailed on the Participant Information Sheet (Appendix F). Using Google Drive rather than emailing attachments also means the journal entries were more secure and password protected. Journals were checked at the end of each month and if an entry was incomplete, the participant was emailed with a gentle reminder. Some of the participants had requested that I remind them, so the emails were not viewed as intrusive and it was a good way to maintain contact with the students. All students completed their reflective logs and also commented on how useful they had been in terms of offering them the opportunity to record their educational journey for the academic year; one student said she would keep her journal as a reminder of her final year at university.

3.8: Data Analysis

3.8.1: Thematic Analysis

Narrative analysis is a form of discourse analysis (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018) in which experiences are recounted and interpreted to construct an understanding of social reality. Analysis of narratives is where the researcher analyses the narratives of others; this is what was done in this study, as opposed to the researcher constructing a narrative to analyse an event (Polkinghorne, 1995). Narrative analysis can also use thematic analysis to produce categories or themes, therefore rather than a more detailed discourse analysis, I decided to use reflexive thematic analysis (TA). TA uses language as its central

focus, and therefore links to the ontological and epistemological approach of social constructionism used in this study. I applied the 'Six Stage' approach of reflexive thematic analysis (1) familiarising myself with the data; (2) generating codes; (3) constructing themes; (4) reviewing potential themes; (5) defining and naming themes; and (6) producing the report (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This was an organic method of analysis and meant I had to immerse myself in the data, reading, rereading, coding and recoding until I was ready to develop the themes. I started the analysis of the transcripts soon after the final interview in June 2022; I spent a number of days simply reading the transcripts and marking up passages of interest according to Seidman's (2013) approach. I then used a wall in my office space, post-it notes and string to build a network of ideas and potential codes (Appendix G).

Finally I moved across to NVivo importing the interview transcripts and reflective logs to start some initial coding. Following an intense few days of doing this, I stepped back from the process for another week or so to allow my thoughts to develop. I found doing this immensely useful, as was the wall in my office, every time I walked past the post-it notes I had new thoughts! I also sat in the garden with paper copies of the transcripts and found being away from the computer really helped me have a different perspective on the data. After a period of intense reflection I decided to move away from NVivo and concentrated on re-coding manually; I realised that I am a very visual person and although NVivo was useful in terms of organising the data, for me, it was too removed from the organic memories of the interviews.

Braun and Clarke (2022) discuss semantic and latent coding and as I progressed through my analysis I moved from using semantic codes (explicitly-expressed meaning) to also using latent codes which have a deeper, more implicit meaning. Both types of coding can be used simultaneously, this approach adds more meaning to the data. Adhering to one or the other may mean the analysis is limited and superficial. I did find that it was easier for

me to look for semantic meaning first, and then revisit the transcripts and look for latent meaning too. When looking for latent meaning, I was looking for underlying implicit statements that did not explicitly include the words in the code. Looking for latent meaning is obviously more subjective than using semantic codes, as I was applying my own interpretation to the data. Latent themes also tend to align with the constructionist epistemology of this study; as the themes are sociocultural contexts and structural concepts that enable the individual narratives rather than individual psychologies (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Table 3.5 presents the themes as related to the chapters and the sub themes within each overarching theme. I have related these to the final codes I used and where relevant aligned them with the literature to show a priori codes.

Theme	Sub theme	Codes	References
They are such lovely people - sometimes	The role of academics	Academics Tutors Supervisors University support	Kettell (2018) Day (2019)
	The importance of friends in and out of university	Friends Peers	Buote et al. (2007) Eggens et al. (2008) Friedlander et al. (2007) Kettell (2018) MacKinnon (2012)
	The dual role of family	Siblings Father Family support Partner	Barrera, Sandler and Ramsay (1981) Coleman (1988) Cutrona et al. (1994) Mishra (2020)
	Mother is so supportive	Mum/mother	Mishra (2020)
The power of socialising	University-organised events	University events	Dickinson, Griffiths and Bredice (2021)
	Extracurricular works for me	Volunteering Extracurricular activity	Dickinson, Griffiths and Bredice (2021) Gallagher et al. (2022) Haugland, Hysing and Sivertsen

			(2022) Putnam (2002) Yosso (2005)
	Virtual worlds are an option	Virtual reality VR	Emergent theme
	It's an escape from everything	Escape Sacrifice	Emergent theme
What's stopping you?	Reluctance to share	Reluctant to share	Day (2019) Kettell (2018) Sempik and Becker (2014)
	Money is a worry	Finance Hardship Work Bursary	Haugland, Hysing and Sivertsen (2019) Tinto (2017)
	There's never enough time	Time Sacrifice	Kettell (2018) Kirton et al. (2012)
	My own health isn't great	Tired Health Mental health Exhausted	Becker and Sempik (2019) Joseph et al., (2019) Kaiser and Schultze (2015) Wayman, Raws and Leadbitter (2016)
	The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic	COVID-19 Pandemic	Emergent theme
Staying or going?	I felt so isolated	Isolation Loneliness	Goncalves and Trunk (2014) Johnson-Ahorlu (2013)
	Dropping out was always an option	Dropping out Temporary withdrawal Suspending studies	Braxton and Hirschy (2004) Tinto (1975)
I feel so guilty		Guilt	Cherry et al. (2017) Kettell (2018) Kirton et al. (2012) Martin et al. (2006)

Table 3.5: Themes, sub themes and codes

As I coded, I started to consider grouping the codes into three main categories. Extrinsic factors that affected YACs and were outside their control; intrinsic factors that were within their control and the barriers to social integration. However, as the analysis progressed, I realised that there were links between all three categories as illustrated in figure 3.4 below and that this would be difficult to present in a discussion of the findings, this approach was therefore disregarded.

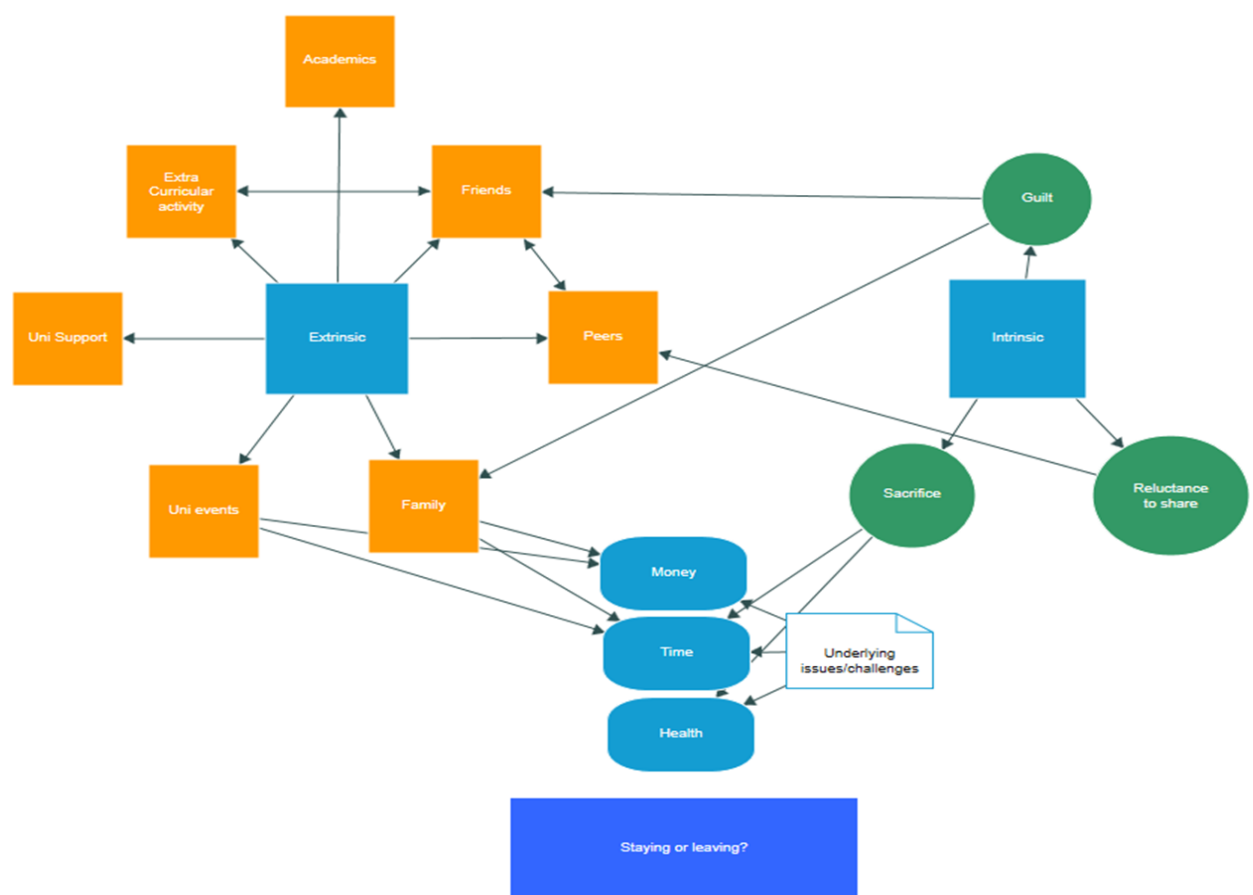


Figure 3.4: Extrinsic and intrinsic factors and underlying challenges or barriers to social integration

Accordingly, I finalised the themes and sub themes as presented in table 3.5 above aligning the order of the themes with the student life cycle. As students transition into

higher education (HE) friends and family are already present in a student's life; then academics closely follow in terms of becoming part of a student's social network. As students transition through HE they might engage in extracurricular activity, and then may encounter barriers or challenges in doing so. They then may consider their own positionality in terms of persistence on their educational journey; hence this theme being presented last and, potentially as they transition out of the academic year or HE altogether. Chapters 4 to 7 are therefore presented using the student life cycle stages. Finally the data collected from the visual network diagrams was collated into a table (Appendix H) in order to be able to analyse the changes to the participants' social networks and activities across the academic year.

3.9: Research Ethics

This project has been approved by the University Research Ethics Committee and allocated registration number 201488. Whilst some ethical considerations have been woven into this chapter, it is pertinent to add some other points. I was very aware that this project was going to involve recruitment of participants with multiple demands on their time, and who were potentially experiencing additional stress as a carer at various points in the academic year. The recruitment has already been discussed as being difficult, and the other point to consider is the retention of the participants. In any research project, participants should be given the opportunity to withdraw from the study and indeed Chloe, participant 1, did withdraw in January 2022 owing to the increasing pressure of her caring responsibilities.

I was also aware that I was entering a world that was quite unfamiliar to me and so needed to prepare myself mentally for the stories I might hear. I immersed myself by reading a number of blogs from young carers and also by following a number of Instagram accounts for young adult carers across the country; some of these allowed me to

familiarise myself with the challenges they encountered on a daily basis. By the time I started my data collection in October 2021, I felt ready. Despite this preparation it was still painful to listen to some of the accounts, and then relive the accounts as I transcribed the interviews. Nevertheless, it was an eye-opening experience for me as the researcher, and I felt humbled by the fact that my participants were so willing to share their stories with a stranger. At one point I had to refer a student for wellbeing support as she was obviously struggling; although there were sources of support detailed on the participant information sheet (Appendix F), she asked me if I would refer her, which I did. I also found that almost all of them shared details of their home life and their caring responsibilities, this again despite not asking them directly about this, they seemed comfortable with telling me about their experiences.

Owing to the sensitive nature of some of the discourse, I was mindful during analysis to not directly cite any particular details from any one participant. I realise that the students all chose pseudonyms for the purposes of the study, but I wanted to give them an extra layer of protection by not identifying them when talking about things such as debt and loan sharks, for instance; or when social workers were involved with their home situation; or when they had experienced distressing situations during their caring responsibilities. The aim of this research project is to investigate social integration, however in the discussion of social networks and social support, the boundaries between education and home life often became blurred.

As the end of the data collection phase approached, I realised that some of the participants had become quite attached to the opportunity of regular meetings; some suggesting that involvement in the research, while consistently framed and bounded as a research activity, had included a therapeutic dimension for them. From an ethical point of view; in narrative inquiry the researcher has to carefully negotiate a way into the field of investigation and then negotiate a way out (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). The

participants may become too reliant upon their relationship with the researcher and so the exit strategy is as important as the entry into a field of investigation (Birch and Miller, 2000). As the data collection came to a conclusion, I reassured the participants that there were still other avenues of support from their universities. I said I would be in touch at the end of the project to share my findings, and they all seemed happy with this. Additionally they all seemed to have good plans for their next life stages and I left the interview phase feeling they were all in a relatively good place.

3.10: Reliability, validity and limitations

Interpretive research is, by its nature, not reliable. In other words, the findings of an interpretive project cannot be replicated exactly and precisely every time it is carried out. Thomas (2013) is of the opinion that reliability is irrelevant in interpretive research. This project is no exception; as the data collection tools allow free-form oral and written narrative to be generated, the reliability of the data is low. Even if the same interview protocol and reflective log templates are used in a replica study, the data will differ as the participants will respond with different stories. Additionally, narrative experiences can never be recounted in exactly the same way twice; they are also limited by the language skills of the narrator which means the actual account might not entirely accurately reflect the experience (Polkinghorne, 2007). Arguably, validity is also not applicable to a qualitative research study, as validity may be described as instrument-based validity, such as a test or experimental validity, both of which are more appropriate for a quantitative research study (Thomas, 2013). In contrast, Polkinghorne (2007) posits the validity of narrative research is about being able to convince the reader that the knowledge claims are persuasive, and that the inductive thought processes should be clearly demonstrated and include direct quotes from the data illustrating links and context of the analysis. In qualitative or interpretive research, what is more important is to understand the positionality of the researcher, in terms of what experience and tacit knowledge of the

phenomenon is brought to bear on the research. My positionality, as the researcher, has been presented earlier in the Introduction Chapter 1.

A limitation of the study was not piloting the data collection tools. Owing to the difficulty of recruitment, and having taken 12 weeks to recruit just five participants, it was not possible within the timeframe of the doctorate to take any more time recruiting extra participants who could participate in a pilot study. Additionally, the reflective log could not be piloted, as this is an 8 month data collection tool and so, again, the timeframe of the study prevented this. However, the questions in the reflective log template were also cross referenced to the research objectives, and guidance from the supervisory team sought on these prior to submission to the University Research Ethics Committee.

In place of a pilot study, the interview protocol and visual network diagrams were trialled in a feasibility study with a group of peers on the doctoral programme. The interview was undertaken with a participant who had experience of caring whilst studying at university. The feedback was positive and the only comment was really about overuse of the word “social networks”, as the participant said it was a confusing term, so this was reworded in the interview protocols.

With regard to the visual network diagrams, initially the proposed research design was to include the use of spider diagrams, inspired by Cooke (2011) in her study of the learning journey of students in higher education. Following the feasibility study it was evident that the name “spider” diagram was inappropriate, as some of the group felt it conjured uncomfortable images for them. Therefore the initial proposed diagram was developed from what was essentially a mind map with some prompts, to a more useful visual network diagram (Appendix D).

Another limitation of the study may be that some of the interviews were required to take place online, this was because of COVID-19 restrictions and the various guidelines issued by the Government regarding working from home where possible. Not carrying out interviews in person means that rapport-building is more difficult. However, by the time the data was being collected in this project, all participants had experienced at least a semester of learning online and were therefore familiar with online interactions and the technology. Wellington (2015) argues that interviews carried out virtually are as good as face-to-face interviews. In some respects the data elicited may be better as the participant may feel more comfortable when not physically sitting in front of the interviewer. However, as the pandemic situation developed and it became safer to see people without social distancing and masks, I was able to offer some of the participants the opportunity for a face-to-face interview, which they said they would prefer.

3.11: Conclusion

This chapter outlined the methodological approach for this project. It examined the ontological and epistemological approach of constructionism and why this was an appropriate paradigm in the context of investigating YACs perception of their own social reality. NI was introduced as a methodological approach and critiqued in terms of the time and place dimensions. NI was positioned as a realistic approach to take as it offered the opportunity to examine participant experiences in depth. The data collection tools were described and justified; these being a visual network diagram, semi-structured interviews, and a reflective journal. Ethical considerations were addressed by being interwoven throughout the chapter, in addition to being presented as a discrete section. Limitations were described, as were validity and reliability in terms of them not being applicable to interpretivist research. Finally an overview of the analysis of the findings was described; these are now presented in Chapters 4, 5, 6 and 7 as combined findings and discussion in order to represent a more coherent and representative narrative of the students' voices.

The order of these chapters is intended to follow the student life cycle of transition into, through and potentially out of higher education.

Chapter 4: On the Role of Academics, Friends and Family

4.1: Introduction

Findings and discussion have been placed together with the intention of presenting a more coherent narrative as opposed to writing them as separate chapters. Additionally, a decision was taken not to write each participant's narrative separately as clear themes emerged from the data analysis. Therefore, in the interests of clarity, and whilst also mirroring the student life cycle, the findings and discussion are presented as chapters 4 to 7. This is the first chapter of the findings and discussion; the reason for this is that the participants all had existing social networks that included family and some friends, and they essentially brought these pre-established networks to university as they transitioned into higher education (HE) or into their new academic year. Therefore, in the context of the student life cycle, it was logical to discuss this theme first. This also aligns with Tinto's (1975) and Braxton and Hirschy's (2004) models of student persistence, as both theories recognise that students transition into HE with pre-existing characteristics. Both theories informed the conceptual framework for this research project. Academics, new friends, and peers were additions to the participants' social networks as they transitioned through their respective educational journeys; increasing their social capital (Coleman, 1988).

This chapter will therefore present the construed impact that academics, friends and family would appear from the data to have on young adult carers and how the support from within each of these social groupings is important. It will also examine how variability in this support has the potential to affect the students' mental health and motivation. Received, rather than perceived, social support will be discussed; received social support being what provision the students actually get, compared with the perception of what support is available to them if necessary (MacKinnon, 2012). Interestingly, MacKinnon's (2012) study discusses perceived social support and finds there is no positive correlation

between this and academic performance. However, this chapter will examine how received social support motivates and impacts academic performance.

The influence of the pandemic will also be discussed in the light of how it impacted everyone's freedom to socialise when lockdowns were imposed upon us at various points during 2020 and 2021. An interesting finding will also be considered in terms of the perceived difference between support from peers (those they have socialised with through meeting at university) and that from friends (socialised with, for example, before attending university), and how peer networks created since entering higher education can be a source of friendship (Eggens et al., 2008).

This chapter partially addresses research objectives one and two. Research objective one is: 'To examine YACs' perception of their social integration into an HEI.' This chapter will partially address this objective by exploring the role that academics, friends, peers and family have on the participants' perception of the impact of these groups on their social integration. As the support role of each group is further discussed, research objective two, 'To explore how university and support networks impact social integration for undergraduate students who are YACs.' will also be partially addressed. The themes, sub themes and links to the literature are summarised in table 4.1.

Theme	Sub theme	Codes	References
They are such lovely people - sometimes	The role of academics	Academics Tutors Supervisors University support	Kettell (2018) Day (2019)
	The importance of friends in and out of university	Friends Peers	Buote et al. (2007) Eggens et al. (2008) Friedlander et al. (2007) Kettell (2018) MacKinnon (2012)
	The dual role of family	Siblings Father Family support Partner	Barrera, Sandler and Ramsay (1981) Coleman (1988) Cutrona et al. (1994) Mishra (2020)
	Mother is so supportive	Mum/mother	Mishra (2020)

Table 4.1: Themes, sub themes and links to the literature

Throughout the subsequent sections in this chapter these sub themes will be discussed and developed.

4.2: “They are such lovely people – sometimes”

4.2.1: The role of academics

Being part of an academic community is an important element of social integration; as students transition through university they may have expectations of the institution and feel a growing amount of commitment to the HEI (Braxton and Hirschy, 2004). The role of academic staff when helping students integrate into an educational environment is important for all students, but particularly those from underrepresented groups (Kasworm and Blowers, 1994; Kasworm, 2005).

Regarding academic advisors, some of the participants had been fortunate to have effective personal tutors, who were instrumental in helping them find the right sort of support when joining the university. However, some of the students did not regularly access this support. Yusra was aware of her personal tutor or academic advisor, but did not really talk to them very often as she stated:

“I just don’t feel there’s a need for her.” (Yusra, interview 2)

One student, Ally, was reluctant to build a relationship with her academic advisor as she felt:

“He was just very serious, so I was just like, oh OK, and I just got scared of him the whole time since then. Even like the thought of talking to him about careers and stuff, I’m like oh that’s quite scary.” (Ally, interview 2)

This relationship improved though as Ally enrolled on a module that her academic advisor led and she had more direct communication with him. As she got to know him, her fears reduced and her confidence grew. She then felt better supported as she approached the final year of her programme. Previously Ally had to retake her first year, and considered that retaking her first year also had a negative impact on her social integration, as the friends she had made in her first year were now a year ahead of her. As Ally perceived her academic advisor as ‘scary’, she did not seek help from him during this challenging period; her experience was a negative one. In line with Cohen and Wills’ (1985) theory of the ‘Buffering Effect’ discussed in Chapter 2, Ally only sought and received support when it was required; rather than being an active part of the university community and gaining support from the outset.

Two participants used the word ‘supported’ when referring to the relationship with their personal tutor and further mentioned the fact that this person was sensitive to their caring situation. The tutors were also good at keeping in touch with their tutees and encouraging

them to persist with their studies. For some students it was just knowing there was support there if they needed it, again a link to the 'Buffering Effect' (Cohen and Wills, 1985). Despite not seeing her personal tutor very often, Kaya commented on how helpful she was:

"My personal tutor who has by far been the most helpful person in the situation. She's lovely, without her, I think I would have struggled a lot...she has been good to me...., in terms of university she's the only person I can think of, that, in terms of staff, who's actually been of help to me." (Kaya, interview 3)

For the two participants in their final year, one relationship that seemed to become even more important than that with a personal tutor or academic advisor, was the one they built with their dissertation supervisor. Yusra and Rae both had positive experiences to report:

"The most supportive is my dissertation advisor [sic]... she's really understanding" (Yusra, interview 2)

"My dissertation supervisors have been the most important people in this process - they have been patient, kind and accommodating of my needs and have supported me academically, as well as asking how I am doing in a personal sense." (Rae, reflective journal)

In one case the dissertation supervisor was very flexible, being mindful of the additional pressures on the student's time. The supervisor was always understanding of the need to accommodate the demands of caring and commuting. As students embark on a dissertation, it may be suggested that the relationship they have with their supervisor is closer than that which they have with their academic advisor or personal tutor. It is of concern though, that in this scenario, the strength of this relationship with an academic does not manifest until the final year of the students' programmes. This is interesting

because it has been previously acknowledged that student-faculty relationships are an important part of social integration (Dwyer, 2015).

Flexibility was even more important during pandemic lockdowns as teaching and learning moved to online delivery. Similarly, Larkin and Kubiak (2021) suggested flexible study programmes would be helpful for YACs. Rae commented:

“this time last year, when I was everyone and everything's online I really wasn't doing well with my academic studies and my caring role was full on as I was at home and everything and it was just, there was a bit too much, and I think at that point, the flexibility I had with tutors was so instrumental in making sure that I could just get through the term.” (Rae, interview 2)

For the student participants in this study, being able to see faculty members in person rather than online was much more helpful and made them feel a part of the university community. In terms of students forming an identity as they transition into HE, it has been found that access to academics is vitally important (Scanlon, Rowling and Weber, 2007). Kaya found it difficult to seek support when learning was all online during lockdown:

“I think even last year, when everything was online, that was very difficult. But yeah, I think that going into campus... I can actually see the lecturer and actually ask them questions in person rather than try to type it out and that just those small things are really useful.” (Kaya, interview 2)

As well as comments about how supportive academics had been, there were also references to advice which may not have been considered carefully, given the students' caring situation. Rae related that she was told to reduce social activity and concentrate on her studies by her tutors. She did not find this particularly helpful as socialising was helping her mental health and therefore actually acted as a motivator for studying. She also noted the intractability of some members of the academic community:

“certain people who just haven't really committed to trying to understand my perspective, in the way that I probably want them to. They have, you know, just been a bit inflexible, from my perspective, so when I reflect on that lack of support, it was the people who have influence in my life and my kind of university experience who haven't budged.” (Rae, interview 2)

Yusra described a time when she found it difficult to attend seminars as a result of her caring responsibilities and when she sought help from the seminar leader, she considered that they were not particularly helpful. Yusra had authorised absence and she felt this should have been recognised. Eventually she did receive support from the module leader, but only after she had approached this person directly. Yusra felt judged by the seminar leader, but also wondered if this person was a new member of staff and needed to be informed about how support plans worked for students.

On overall support during her educational journey, Ally reflected that:

“I don't really receive support on my academic progress. It feels like it's just me, myself and I.” (Ally, reflective journal)

The variability of academic support is not only of concern in the context of this study, but also from a wider perspective. This will be discussed further in a later chapter when making recommendations to HEIs. Ultimately, it is suggested that academics should be more aware of the impact they have on students and how students can be supported to become integrated into the educational community. Kasworm (2005) found that relationships outside of the classroom, and notably with faculty, were likely to encourage student persistence. Likewise, Mishra (2020) emphasised the role of faculty in enhancing the social capital of students, therefore it may be construed that academics have an important role to play in the social integration of young people into HE. Guiffrida and Douthit (2010) also supported these studies and further suggested that recruitment of

diverse faculty also had a positive impact on underrepresented student groups. They concluded that students need to be able to identify with faculty members and in doing so are more likely to build stronger relationships with them. In the context of this study, this therefore implies that recruiting or training faculty with an understanding of carers' needs would be helpful to the students. HEIs that actively seek to socially support and engage with underrepresented groups are more likely to retain these students (Museus, 2011). Whilst all this is acknowledged, in the current study, none of the participants highlighted faculty being more important to them than friends.

It is interesting to note that the increased use of hourly paid lecturers to varying degrees across different disciplines and programme areas, has led to a culture where academics are infrequently on campus and have no telephone or even office, so students struggle to access them for support (Scanlon, Rowling and Weber, 2007). According to Scanlon, Rowling and Weber (2007), students' experience of school may be that teachers are readily available and so they bring this expectation with them as they transition into HE. The fact that students then struggle to access academics in HE may impact their perception of the level of support available to them.

Heaney and Israel (2008) debate whether professional staff are effective sources of social support, the perception of those they support being that the emotional relationship is not reciprocal. They further posit that professional staff may be useful sources of informational support, rather than emotional support. This may be the case for students' perception of the support they receive from academic staff. Heaney and Israel (2008) state that social support is viewed as strong when emotional, instrumental, informational and appraisal support are all provided. This also partially aligns with Coleman's (1988) social capital theory in that informational capital has a role in creating and facilitating social capital. Therefore the students may perceive the academics with whom they are in contact as a useful source of resources and information, but perhaps less useful in the context of

building a reciprocal relationship that provides emotional support. In brief, there was a range of experiences for the participants in this study, support ranged from having a good connection with academics generally to having a less good relationship.

4.2.2: The importance of friends in and out of university

The role of friends in social integration emerged as paramount for the participants in this study. Eggens et al. (2008) found the average number of individuals in a student's personal network was five; the social networks of the students in this project are largely in line with this. Chloe, Yusra and Rae cited four friends; Kaya and Ally cited five, although this number changed during the year for Ally with friends not being cited in the second interview, and new friends appearing in the final interview (see Appendix H for details). Eggens et al. (2008) went on to examine the strength of the students' personal networks, finding that a strong peer group was positively impactful of the educational journey of the members in the group. This was also in line with Tinto's (1975, 1993) theories on social integration and the impact of peer-to-peer relationships on academic persistence. Students adapt to HE by actively shaping their own experience and creating their social reality; making friendship groups with their university peers is one way of doing this (Scanlon, Rowling and Weber, 2007). Without exception the participants in this study found the same. As Yusra completed her degree programme, she wrote that:

"My friends were the most supportive in helping me achieve my grades, especially my uni [sic] friends. When we sit together and study together it's so helpful and makes it so much easier." (Yusra, reflective journal)

Kaya was grateful for her friends in terms of motivating her to study:

"They really encouraged me to attend university like, I love going, but sometimes with everything going on it's a bit hard to get the motivation to get out of bed. Yeah, but one of them I actually live with, so if I don't, if he doesn't see me for a while, he comes knocking on my door and says let's go to the library or something like that.

So that really gets me going to actually do work, and you know it's really nice.”

(Kaya, interview 1)

Ally mentioned a similar situation in terms of support from one close friend in the year above. He had been to her home and seen what her caring responsibilities entailed and so she felt closer to him because of this. He was instrumental in encouraging her to come to university, even if it was just one day at a time. He also provided some respite for Ally in terms of inviting her to his home to cook food with his family. She also mentioned how she did not have to explain to him; he just knew:

“He's my best friend because of all that we've gone through together as well, and I was like crying and just saying sorry, coz [sic] he shouldn't have to see all that and he's like nope. So that's why now he knows,... and it feels like I don't have to tell him why; he just goes, okay, let's meet up, let's go talk and I'm like OK.” (Ally, interview 1)

Further suggesting how the supportive role of close friends is so important to YACs, Yusra reiterated on more than one occasion about how thankful she was for her friends, particularly mentioning one person that she studied with at university who was key to helping her persist with her studies. Other close friends who understood Yusra's situation would come and drag her out of the house, providing a brief respite from caring. The support from friends was very motivating and vital for the participants, Yusra said they “*are just keeping me going.*” She went on to say that:

“Yes, they sort of get me and they know what it's like, and how I can cancel my friends last minute and they'll understand. I've had instances where my sister has acted up and I've had to be like I'm sorry, I can't come out anymore, she'd be like, oh my god, no; you don't need to apologise. Do you want me to come around and help and stuff like that. That's how I know they'll be old friends.” (Yusra, interview 1)

Rae also talked extensively about the support from her friendship group:

“Friends have probably been even more supportive, just because I’ve been more vocal about my struggles than ever before; and so they’ve really risen to the occasion and just like given a lot of counsel and lots of support which has been amazing.” (Rae, interview 2)

In the context of juggling many responsibilities, Rae thought it was important to spend as much time with friends as possible. She described this as a “*constant thing that you’re... enjoying.*” Rae really loved the people she lived with and realised that because this was her final year it was even more important to spend time with them. She viewed her student accommodation as being somewhere she could relax and momentarily escape, Braxton and Hirschy (2004) also state how communities emerge from student accommodation. Rae met Friend A in her accommodation and this friend was particularly key for Rae, as they knew the most about her home situation and worked to think of ways to support her when times were difficult. Friend A was not on Rae’s course, but they still lived and studied together.

Sometimes however, friends could be less than understanding, as Yusra recounted:

“I’m just grateful for the few friends that I do have, because of my situation, it’s not been easy to have friends that understand. Because I’ve had situations where our friends have thought that just because I’m at home, I am lying about not wanting to meet up or hang out or study together, and it’s really because I’m just caring for my sibling.” (Yusra, interview 1)

Kaya also recounted a situation where she had considered Friend K as a good friend; however, the dynamic changed quite considerably as Kaya came to perceive that Friend K was only interested in what Kaya could give her emotionally. When Kaya was ill at the end of the semester, she felt that Friend K was not particularly supportive. Kaya thought

this was a cause for regret as she already struggled to make good friends at university; she realised that she did not talk to many people and was very self-aware of this:

“I knew for a fact I don't put myself out there as much as I could. That's one of the biggest things and it seems to me that when I do put myself out there, that I tend to get situations like friend K. And then it becomes a situation where I have to decide, do I want to persevere with this friendship, where it's quite unbalanced or do I want to try and get some more well-balanced friendships, where I feel as if I'm just a friend, like with friend A and my best friend.” (Kaya, interview 3)

At times the difference between peers and friends could be observed in the data. Yusra described how her “*uni [sic] friends*” were those people with whom she sat in lectures and studied with, but that they did not know about her caring responsibilities. She said she did not want to be completely open with them. Kaya made some friends as a result of some intense group work on one module, so peers became friends and she recalled that that was one of the best things about studying. She spent some time describing a new friendship with Friend R that had blossomed from this group work, and how this had grown from a peer relationship. She was hopeful that this friendship would develop over the summer, as they had arranged to meet up and that this would get stronger over the next academic year:

“She's a peer that I study with and she's very nice and we wish each other good luck when exams come about. She was a part of the study group that I was saying that we did research on. And I'm hoping that eventually that will develop into a friendship, but again, that takes time for me, to take several months to nurture that into a friendship. My peers have been very good and I've enjoyed studying with them, but again I wouldn't call myself shy, but I do think sometimes I can be quite reserved, which is maybe why it's a bit more difficult for me to make those close friendships” (Kaya, interview 3).

Kaya's experience supports findings from Eggens et al. (2008) who suggested that when friendship grows in peer networks, students' self-esteem grows and it is likely this has a positive impact on their academic performance. This is also reinforced by Braxton and Hirschy (2004) who suggest communities emerge from the classroom and student peer groups; therefore demonstrating the importance of academics' roles in facilitating group work and encouraging student attendance.

The friends in each participant's social network did not necessarily have to be at university or even at the same university. Those YACs who regularly commuted into university tended to retain childhood friendships more than those living on campus. This supports the findings of Gilardi and Guglielmetti (2011), who suggested that "non-traditional students" i.e. students with external commitments who live off campus, are more likely to have other reference groups outside of campus. These friendship groups are often more stable as they have been established over a longer period of time, even though they may diminish in size as childhood friends go off to different university destinations (Buote et al., 2007). Chloe commuted to campus and commented:

"I think I would probably have more friends, if I was living in rather than living away. So all of my friends are kind of my friends that I've grown up with, friends from primary school, friends from secondary school, family, friends like that."

(Chloe, interview 1)

Similarly, although Kaya lived on campus, she still had a strong friendship from her hometown, and kept in touch with this person despite living away. This friend was now studying at Brighton University. The strength of the friendship and supportive nature of it was evident, as she said:

"So my best friend, we have been friends since we were about three, so she has been a big part of my life, and I tell her everything; so when my caring responsibilities got more full on, she actually physically helped me, as well as

emotionally helped me. So she came in and did stuff for me that I couldn't necessarily do." (Kaya, interview 1)

Kaya also made an interesting point about how this friend was obviously not a direct influence in helping Kaya socially integrate into her own HEI, but that it did help indirectly in terms of *"making me more social"*.

Yusra also commented in a similar vein:

"My friend who lives in Surrey, you know she really pushed me and she was like come on, you got this, just this little burst of motivation." (Yusra, interview 2)

Friends from outside university and particularly from earlier childhood were mentioned in all of the participants' networks; even for those participants who lived on campus. Rae talked about how easy it was when talking to friends from home as they already knew you well and speaking to them means *"they just have that part of you and whenever you call them you're right back there."* Even for those participants who had moved away from home to study, childhood friends and family continued to be socially supportive, this finding contrasts with those of Buote et al. (2007) and Friedlander et al. (2007) who suggested that contact with family and friends from home reduced on moving to university. However, both papers presented their research on traditional students as opposed to YACs, who, from necessity, have regular contact with home. As an example, Kaya returned home every other weekend and therefore had the opportunity to regularly reconnect with friends at home. Braxton and Hirschy (2004) describe this as social avoidance of the campus community and that it further impacts students' opportunities to socially integrate into their HEI. YACs who care remotely have little choice but to return home regularly, hence the value they place on family and friends at home. Some friendships were experienced as stronger where there was shared knowledge of caring. This allowed a degree of empathy not afforded from those friends who had not experienced a long-term caring relationship. Yusra reflected on a friend who had siblings

with disabilities. This friend was also at university and Yusra described finding this out as a “breath of fresh air” as they could relate to each other. His situation was slightly different though, as his parents wanted him to focus on his education, so his caring responsibilities were relatively less impactful than Yusra’s. The effective provision of support from individuals who are in a similar position to the participants is important, there is a shared understanding of the stressors involved (Thoits, 1995).

Not all friendship interactions take place face-to-face; online interaction would likewise appear to play an important role in facilitating relationships. Even when the lockdowns had ended, Kaya commented about how she would talk to her friends online, as it might be too late to meet up in person. Some of the online interaction involved studying, as Kaya explained:

“Then there’s another friend I have who is on my course. She does like a slightly different course, but we’re in a lot of classes together. And I study with her in the library or over Microsoft Teams quite often.” (Kaya, interview 2)

Ally used Snapchat and TikTok to communicate with friends internationally, specifically Australia and South Korea. These friends had shared interests and were also students in HE. Building remote friendships with these people was important to Ally. Additionally they were very “accessible” friends as they were online and Ally did not have to spend money to see them. Ally was constructing her own social reality using her “maker knowledge”, which is an underpinning principle of social constructionism (Papert and Harel, 1991). Online communication is really useful in the sense that it is readily available. Rae went through a difficult time during one vacation period and some new friends contacted her using Facebook messenger. She wrote in her journal,

“I went a bit off the radar I think this Christmas, but I did have a couple of calls with some lovely new friends, especially one who helped me pack up all my stuff to

move home. This was mainly through phone calls on Facebook messenger, and texting too.” (Rae, reflective journal)

Kaya is aware that she has finite time and energy to invest in new friendships and so tends to stay with the people she knows. Yusra also made similar observations; her social network did not grow across the year, as her time became more precious and the pressures of caring and completing her final year increased. She wrote:

“Nothing has changed, I still have the same social circles. I don’t like to change them or make new friends much, it feels like a lot of pressure, plus I am very content with who is in my life!” (Yusra, reflective journal)

However, when looking at the data from the visual network diagrams (Appendix H) it can be observed that Kaya’s network of friends decreased over the academic year.

Interestingly there is little in the literature regarding shrinking social networks. Eggens et al. (2008) does discuss the density of personal networks, relating strong network ties to positive academic performance, but not the changing size of network. The social capital of Yusra remained stable over the academic year and illustrated the importance of a strong friendship group and community (Coleman, 1988). Ally increased her social capital through engaging with a new virtual reality (VR) world and finding new people with whom she could talk. Rae also increased her social capital and this was directly linked to her social activity and interests afforded to her by her university. The latter indicates the potential of how important the role of the university can be when facilitating social opportunities for students.

Having discussed the importance of friends with the participants, it became obvious how they sometimes acted as an extension or even, in some circumstances, a surrogate for familial support. Coleman’s (1988) social capital theory posits that social exchange between groups of people facilitates communal potential, and that increasing social exchange then builds social capital. This is a development that has not featured in any of the literature pertaining to YACs and their social integration into HEIs. This was

demonstrated by Rae as she joined the Drama Society at her HEI and the casts supported and helped each other, participating in social exchange. The various casts then became “*like family*”, the fact that she was seeing them every day during rehearsals meant she got to know them really well over a short period of time. She recalled:

“...when you're part of a cast... they become like your family for a number of weeks, I mean like it's sad to say goodbye but that's a lovely thing, the lovely kind of support network and a lot of them were so supportive, about my exams as well, and this kind of general stuff about if you need anything.” (Rae, interview 3)

Ally felt similarly about her friends in the virtual reality world, and also described them as family. Ally received very little stable support from her own family and so finding her new VR family was important to her:

“...they were like no no no, we need to help you and we are family. And they all... really support me.” (Ally, interview 3)

In summary, all the participants were very certain that their friends had been instrumental in helping and supporting them through their studies. The evidence from these conversations is that friends almost certainly provide the emotional support absent in those relationships with academics or staff at an HEI (Heaney and Israel, 2008). These findings were generally in line with those from Friedlander et al. (2007) and MacKinnon (2012) who both reported that the support from friends was linked to improved adjustment to HE and to better academic performance.

4.2.3: The dual role of family

According to Barrera, Sandler and Ramsey (1981), the role that familial support plays in facilitating students' transition to HEI is paramount, they found that family members have the potential to provide social support and in doing so alleviate the stress of starting in HE. In this project all participants discussed the impact of various family members on their educational journey, and how their support motivated them to persist with their studies.

Data from the visual network diagrams (Appendix H) supported the findings from the interviews and showed that family support was important and consistent across the academic year; without exception all participants in this study referred to family across all three interviews. Three of the participants commuted into campus and cared on a daily basis for a family member; they discussed their families in more detail than those participants who lived on campus and cared remotely. It should also be noted that all of the participants were female and in line with findings from Cutrona et al. (1994) and Cheng, Ickes and Verhofstadt (2012), family support has a positive effect on female students.

The familial support for those YACs living at home was greater than those who cared remotely. Ally talked about the influence her father had over her choice of degree programme, but then later said he was not really much help when it came to the caring situation at home. She relayed that he put pressure on her regarding her grades, not acknowledging the fact that she was the primary carer at home, and that she had financial worries too. The role that Ally's father played in her life was dual; sometimes he was supportive, sometimes less so. He lived away from the family and did not help with the caring or any financial elements of the household. He wanted her to go to university, but did not have any empathy with her situation. Ally reported that she found this all very stressful.

Yusra considered that she was lucky to have a very consistently supportive family; both parents and siblings supported her. The family socialised together during religious festivals, which Yusra really enjoyed. However, Yusra still lamented the difficulty of balancing caring and studying:

“It's just really hard trying to find a balance and sometimes it does affect your familial relationships. Sometimes I find myself snapping at my brothers, they have

come home to visit and I'm like, you guys are literally doing nothing." (Yusra, interview 3)

Yusra also discussed her extended family; she had grandparents that lived just down the road from her family home, but she perceived that they were not supportive at all. So even if a YAC has a close family, it cannot be assumed that these individuals are supportive of their caring situation. Yusra compared her situation with another friend who was also a YAC and how his extended family was very supportive of him and his studies.

Kaya's situation was slightly different, she lived away from home and cared for her mother remotely. However, when she became ill during her final semester her mother and brother visited her at her HEI, which she found touching as she realised how difficult this was for both of them to travel by train. Kaya returned home regularly to check on her family and that impacted the routine she was trying to maintain, and the social activities she could attend.

Yusra shared the caring responsibilities for her younger sister with her mother and another sibling. Her brothers have moved away from home, but when they visited they brought her food and tried to ease the situation somewhat. Rae also had siblings and one of her brothers helped care for her mother when she was away at university. This is a similar situation for Kaya, when she left home to go to university, she said of her brother:

"He stepped up to caring responsibilities as well." (Kaya, interview 1)

For Kaya though, she realised how difficult things were for her brother as he took up the caring responsibilities in her absence, and wished she could be there for him more often. This puts additional pressure on YACs living away from home whilst at university and is yet another stressor for students that care remotely. It has been suggested that events outside the HEI may have a considerable impact on students persisting with their studies (Yorke and Longden, 2004). Retention and success are influenced by sociological,

psychological and economic factors, all of which are experienced in one way or another by YACs.

For Ally, her younger brothers were her motivators with respect to her education, she recounted:

“My brothers are definitely my motivators, because they've always said stuff to me like Ally, if you were to move out we will come live with you.” (Ally, interview 1)

She continued:

“They are the reason why I’m alive today.” (Ally, interview 1)

This final powerful statement illustrated how much pressure YACs are under and how it affects their sense of self-worth. It was apparent that Ally had felt very depressed at times and during the interviews it came across that the only reason she was still alive was because of her younger brothers. That she was staying alive for someone else rather than herself, is potentially an indication of low self-esteem. This also demonstrates how social networks and social support buffer the effects of stressors on health (Cohen and Wills, 1985); they also build an individual's confidence to access new contacts and information thereby growing social capital (Heaney and Israel, 2008).

4.2.4: Mother is so supportive

In addition to the theme of general familial support, the role that the maternal figure in the family played was apparent in the data and was deserving of a separate theme. This was the same whether or not the mother is the person being cared for. For example, Chloe's main support came from her mother; she strongly advocated and supported Chloe academically as she had also attended university. Kaya's mother, also university educated, was also influential with respect to her choice of degree; the psychology books which lay about the house inspired her to pursue this subject. This supports what Hoffer

(1986) and Coleman and Hoffer (1987) found regarding parents who have university qualifications, and how their children are more likely to attend an HEI and persist with their studies. Mishra's (2020) review also includes papers that support this view.

Chloe described her mother as being her main support, as did Yusra. Rae felt similarly and even though she was caring for her mother, she was still a key support. Rae describes her mother as being "*really lovely*" and that her mother checked in with Rae frequently. It was difficult for Rae though, when she had to learn online and was the primary carer for her mother; she described the situation:

"It was very hard to do work because of the, I guess, the emotional aspect; also just the practical aspect of I needed to keep an eye on my Mum all day and it made it hard to get in the mindset of working." (Rae, interview 1)

Post pandemic brought risks associated with socialising for the YACs. Rae, for example, was free to socialise, but was still reluctant to do so as her mother was vulnerable. She said:

"My Mum was vulnerable in more than one way; seeing people...in person felt like a very dangerous prospect, so that was kind of another kind of barrier to face-to-face interaction." (Rae, interview 1)

Ally cared for her mother at home, but her caring responsibilities are different in that her mother was diagnosed with bipolar disorder and Ally never knew what each day held. When her mother had a manic episode, she was sometimes admitted to hospital; that was when Ally described her and her brothers as going into "*panic mode*". Ally's additional stressors included the fact that her mother did not want her to seek help, as it would have been putting "*her [mother] in that position*" of admitting that her daughter was a YAC. This is underpinned by Aldridge (2006) who posits that parents with caring needs are reluctant

to seek help for their children with caring responsibilities, as they anticipate negative interventions from social services. This impacted Ally's life in a huge way as she reflected that it was very inconsistent and stressful living day-to-day, not knowing what would happen, and not being able to seek support. It also made it difficult for Ally to invite anyone to her home to socialise, so all of her socialising happened outside the home. Ally did not share anything with her mother, including their financial position, she wrote in her journal:

"My Mum knows bits and pieces... I don't like to burden her and I feel like a burden just by being her daughter." (Ally, reflective journal)

This is therefore potentially an additional stressor for Ally, who appeared to carry the financial responsibilities of the household on her own. However, when Ally's mother was in a good place mentally, she was supportive of Ally and her studies.

Yusra's mother facilitated opportunities for Yusra to socialise and encouraged her to go out, saying that she could not stay home all the time. Sometimes Yusra took her little sister out in her wheelchair just to give her mother a break too. Here both family members were supporting each other in a reciprocal relationship (Heaney and Israel, 2008). Yusra commented:

"It's also trying to be that support system for my mum, as she doesn't really have anyone, so when my Mum's down I have just got to hold the fort, and just be like it's alright, you've got your children." (Yusra, interview 3)

Despite caring remotely, Rae still considered her mother when she was making decisions at university. When comparing caring at home with caring from a distance, she said:

"Because it doesn't affect me as much when I'm here I can have other priorities. Whereas at home it's harder to have other priorities, like I see things through that lens. I do still see how it does affect me here. My Mum does factor into a lot of my

decisions when I'm here about what, you know, what I should be doing when and how. I think, especially the biggest thing, is just like minimising her stress." (Rae, interview 2)

Kaya also recalled how she felt when her mother was admitted to hospital and how this impacted her desire to go out socialising:

"I got a call, as I was ready to go out saying that she had to go to hospital again there was nothing I could do, and she told me just go out have fun, but how can you do that when you know your Mum's in hospital, so I guess it's just been hard you know my caring responsibilities have been now from a distance, which is weird. Very weird." (Kaya, interview 3)

The impact of parental support on the student's persistence is clearly relevant and the findings from this study are in line with studies by Hoffer (1986) and later, Coleman and Hoffer (1987) who both found that this was the case. The role of the maternal parent figure is evident in the narratives from all three participants as they repeatedly mention the support of this person, both Yusra and Kaya wrote in their reflective journals:

"My Mum, she's been super supportive with my stress of the dissertation that was due this month, she's been encouraging and helping me throughout." (Yusra, reflective journal)

"My mum checked in on me throughout the year to see how I was getting on, which was nice because it showed she cared about my academic progress."
(Kaya, reflective journal)

4.3: Conclusion

This chapter addressed the following research objectives either fully or partially by examining the relative roles of different groups of people in each of the participants' lives from both home and university environments.

RO1: To examine YACs' perception of their social integration into an HEI.

RO2: To explore how university and support networks impact social integration for undergraduate students who are YACs.

This chapter was informed by the seminal theorists used in the conceptual framework i.e. Coleman (1988), Braxton and Hirschy (2004) and Heaney and Israel (2008). It addressed the student role in social integration, their pre-existing characteristics as they entered HE and the impact of the HE environment on their social support and networks. The findings illuminated the importance of key groups of people and the support they provide for the participants in this study. Academics or faculty members are important in terms of ensuring students feel part of the community of a university. According to Braxton and Hirschy (2004) in their model of social integration and persistence of students', institutional commitment to welfare, and institutional integrity are two of the antecedents to social integration. Therefore, the academics who demonstrated these characteristics were contributing to social integration. However, this was not consistent across all the universities represented in this study, because academics exhibited differing levels of empathy and understanding of various situations.

Friends were perceived as being vitally important to all the participants in supporting them both physically and emotionally. The social networks of all participants were however relatively small, which is in line with Eggens et al. (2008) comment on network size.

Friends included groups at university and groups from home, these were all mentioned in the visual network diagrams, a summary of which can be found in Appendix H. There was a notable difference between peers and friends mentioned in this study, with only one participant describing how a peer had become a friend. However, Friedlander et al. (2007) and MacKinnon (2012) do not differentiate between these two reference groups. Peers were not specifically noted on any of the visual network diagrams as being part of the social capital of any participant in this study.

Family support was variable for the participants, with key mentions of the maternal parent and siblings as the most supportive family members. Literature found that the role of family as a support group diminished in second and third years of study. However, for the participants in this study, family continued to be an important support group which was in contrast to the literature, with one participant claiming her brothers were the reason she was alive today. The findings from the visual network diagrams (Appendix H) also supported the narratives from the interviews and journals showing that for all participants, family support was important as a motivator and sometimes as a facilitator of social activity.

Having examined the role of academics, friends and family, the next chapter will analyse the data around the theme of socialising and how HEIs may, or may not, successfully facilitate this for YACs.

Chapter 5: Socialising inside and outside the university

5.1: Introduction

Following on from an analysis and discussion of the participants' social networks both inside and outside their respective HEIs, this chapter will examine the theme of socialising and how this was manifested in the data. Socialising is a way to keep in touch with people, to make new friends and help form social networks. In terms of social integration into HE, Tinto (1975) and later Braxton and Hirschy (2004) have both stated that social integration is an important element of a student's likelihood to persist with their studies. Both theorists informed the conceptual framework used in this research project. This chapter will address the following research objectives:

RO1: To examine YACs' perception of their social integration into an HEI.

RO3: To identify which university-organised events have the greatest impact on social integration from the perspective of undergraduate students who are YACs.

It will do this by introducing sub-themes, including an overview of the role university-organised events appear to play in social integration, and the role of extracurricular activity in terms of facilitating good mental health. Other sub-themes include the value of virtual worlds and technology as they help students connect with friends in a more accessible way, these helped overcome some of the barriers to socialising discussed next in chapter 6. Finally, an interesting sub-theme of escape will be briefly covered, this emerged from the discussions and illustrates the role of socialising for YACs. The themes, sub themes and their links to the literature are summarised in table 5.1.

Theme	Sub theme	Codes	References
The power of socialising	University-organised events	University events	Dickinson, Griffiths and Bredice (2021)
	Extracurricular works for me	Volunteering Extracurricular activity	Dickinson, Griffiths and Bredice (2021) Gallagher et al. (2022) Haugland, Hysing and Sivertsen (2022) Putnam (2002) Yosso (2005)
	Virtual worlds are an option	Virtual reality VR	Emergent theme
	It's an escape from everything	Escape Sacrifice	Emergent theme

Table 5.1: Themes, sub themes and links to the literature.

These sub themes will now be discussed and developed in the forthcoming sections in this chapter.

5.2: The power of socialising

5.2.1: University-organised events

The impact of university-organised events on social integration for YACs addresses research objective three. As I investigated this aspect of the participants' educational experience, I found that there were varying perspectives on the availability, usefulness and relevance of events organised by the university and students' unions. In terms of participation in university-organised events, they have been shown to add value to a student's curriculum vitae as new skills may be learnt. Employers actively look for what the student has pursued in addition to their studies when recruiting graduates (Dickinson, Griffiths and Bredice, 2021).

Chloe was very aware of the social activities, but commented that, because she commuted to campus, many were not really available to her. Very early on in the first interview, Chloe made a revealing point about how she was tempted to create her own society for YACs, but reflected that she should have done this in her first year and now she was in her final year would have found it impossible to do:

“I wanted to create a carers’ society for other people, not only for young carers but people, say people who had a caring responsibility or people who were carers, and just so that it was kind of another opportunity, but unfortunately I don’t have the time to do that.” (Chloe, interview 1)

The fact that she considered organising a society specifically for YACs was precipitated by the absence of such a society at Chloe’s HEI. In terms of societies related to students’ unions, Yusra was aware of the Arab and Islamic Societies and tried both, but said:

“...the Arab Society just wasn’t for me, I think that’s why I kind of never went back after the first year, but then the Islamic society charity week was actually really nice. I really like that it was just nice to see obviously my Community of Muslims and stuff come together ...and it was in my first year and I liked that one, but again coz [sic] a lot of events are in the evening, which is understandable and where we haven’t got any support or any respite at the moment, it’s not feasible for me to be just to be like, ‘Yes, off I go’, do you know what I mean?” (Yusra, interview 1)

Some of the participants recalled Freshers’ Week and how they had heard of some societies and events through this channel, but had not really pursued many opportunities as a result of this. Kaya was part of the University Anime club that holds events, but had not been to many of them. Ally found respite in her love of Korea, K-pop and dancing. She was in her second year before she realised there was a K-pop dance society at her university, and had only found out by pure chance. She became the events coordinator in

the society and made new friends through joining. As a spin-off from the society, Ally started her own dance crew outside of the university; she talked about the benefits of dancing for her mental health:

“Dancing is my stress reliever; my stress used to be really bad, it used to be hard and stuff, so to get out of that I do dance now, it is very beneficial.” (Ally, interview 1)

Rae was invested in the social activities at her university, and found them invaluable in terms of putting what was happening at home into perspective:

“I am also invested in the theatre community at this uni [sic], and that's really been quite positive as well and it's where I find a lot of the reprieve and escape, which is, which is just invaluable to me to be able to so carry on and then come back to my degree with a bit more perspective.” (Rae, interview 2)

Rae was also the welfare representative for one of the societies and organised a lot of events; she enjoyed representing the students. The committee members all supported each other and Rae recalled how positive it felt. The value of joining societies and social activity groups at university has been previously researched by Kuh and Love (2000) and later Kuh (2002), who confirmed that they helped foster a sense of belonging. Social integration is defined by students' levels of psychological and social comfort with their immediate environment, and their acceptance by other students as they join in with a common cause; in this case, these were societies and other extracurricular interest groups (Kuh and Love, 2000).

Kaya mentioned how overwhelming all the communications from the university were. She recalled too many emails, and how she did not have the time or energy to filter through them all to find things to engage with. Her way of managing the mountain of emails was to largely ignore them and rely on friends to tell her what was going on in various clubs; she

could then choose whether or not to attend. Following her return to campus as the pandemic progressed, Kaya said she did feel as if she was part of the university community. However, she commented on how a lot of societies did not seem to exist anymore:

“I wanted to join certain societies and certain things like that, but they don't seem to have what I want or because of COVID, what I was going to join doesn't really exist that much anymore. So it's been quite hard for me to be a part of the societies and feel involved in that way. In terms of student life, yeah, the studying part I feel a part of, but like the extracurricular stuff, maybe not so much.” (Kaya, interview 2)

Kaya went on to say that maybe prior to COVID-19 it would have been a bit easier to socialise as people would have been in more clubs. She felt that people who started university during the pandemic really suffered for not being able to join a club or society. Kaya did persist with the Anime Society during the pandemic, but it was all online, and on return to campus seemed to disappear. All participants in the study felt the impact of COVID-19 on their university experience; this is supported by Andrewartha and Harvey (2021). At Rae's HEI, the university organised a party for those students who had been negatively impacted by the pandemic in terms of opportunities to socialise. This event was held to try and bring the students together. Rae described the party:

“There's a ...party that's going on at the... museum to commemorate [sic] COVID and what COVID has done to our year group particularly and the year below us as well.” (Rae, interview 3)

The participants that did engage in university or union-led events spoke about the positive impact these had on them. Ally was overjoyed to receive some society merchandise in the shape of a T-shirt with her name on it:

“Finally I have got society merch, so I can actually say I was in one!”

(Ally, interview 2)

Being able to demonstrate belongingness by owning or wearing merchandise was also discussed in Kuh’s (2002) paper on campus culture; it made the social activity tangible to society members. Rae was also very positive about the benefits she had gained from socialising through university-led events, she thought they provided a much needed sense of camaraderie and escape. Rae also wrote:

“They [societies] provide essential spaces created for the purpose of being separate to all the other stresses that student life may bring. This is the same for more interpersonal social activities, as they provide a much needed release.”

(Rae, reflective journal)

In addition to the barriers discussed in Chapter 6, another area that was experienced as impeding the students’ ability to engage with university-organised events were clashes of timings between societies, which meant the students were forced to choose between events. Ally commented on the Anime society and K-pop dance society happening on the same day, so she had to decide which one to attend. Yusra also mentioned timings of events and how they happened in the evening when her caring responsibilities were at their most intense. Finally Ally also said that lack of awareness of the clubs themselves was an issue. This implied poor communication from the various society committees, which is not a direct responsibility of the universities per se, but is instead linked to the students’ unions who facilitate societies in HEIs.

The university-organised events that had the greatest impact on social integration from the perspective of the students who did engage with them were those that were directly related to an existing interest. For Ally it was dancing, and for Rae it was singing in the Gospel choir and participating in the Drama Society. For Kaya it had been Anime and she

really wanted there to be a band she could have joined, but these had either disappeared on return to campus or had not been available in the first place. This aligns with Heaney and Israel's (2008) theory surrounding the importance of creating communities of like-minded individuals and also addressed the antecedent of communal potential from Braxton and Hirschy's (2004) model of student persistence. There were, however, varying perceptions of the usefulness of university-organised events in terms of facilitating social integration for the participants. One participant, Chloe, had suggested starting up a society specifically for YACs, which would be a good idea in terms of shared understanding between peer YACs. This idea also potentially mitigates the anxiety surrounding reluctance to tell new friends about their caring situation, which in essence is a potential barrier to joining in. Membership and participation in societies allow individuals to build community and facilitate ongoing problem solving (Heaney and Israel, 2008). They also create new network ties and enhance social capital (Coleman, 1988). Reluctance to share is discussed in Chapter 6 in section 6.2.1. Overall, university-organised events would indeed appear to have a role in social integration and this will be discussed further in the recommendations chapter in terms of ensuring they are accessible for YACs.

5.2.2: Extracurricular works for me

In addition to the impact of university-organised events, there was strong evidence that external extracurricular activities worked effectively for the YACs too. Yusra occasionally went out to eat with her friends in the evening, when her mother took over her caring responsibilities and she also found the gym an invaluable break from her home situation. Yusra described being able to release endorphins at the gym, which undoubtedly helped her physically and mentally.

Kaya went to a Dungeons and Dragons club and she also went to a skateboard park with her boyfriend, who was not at university. None of the people at the park were at university, when asked what social benefit she got from this activity, Kaya reflected:

“It’s just nice to speak to different people. I do like talking to people quite a lot and I get to improve my skateboarding skills as well, but just different to other people I normally socialise with so it’s quite nice.” (Kaya, interview 1)

It might be suggested that Kaya could be a different person at the skateboard park, and perhaps found a little reprieve from her life when she skateboarded and interacted with a different group of people. Ally also had a key group of friends outside of the university; her dance crew. She found them very supportive of her:

“...they have definitely contributed to my happiness this year. I lead the dance crew and I love helping people and I love these people.” (Ally, interview 1)

The support Ally received made her feel very positive and she said it really helped her do her academic work as she was in a good mental state. The dance crew helped her feel less stressed. She talked at length about how they went to London every two weeks to perform and film a new dance routine and said that she felt it was good for her mental health; the dance crew is key to her, Ally commented:

“They were sending me messages about how they are so happy about being in this group, and that was a very fulfilling conversation. I was like yay, I’m glad I can hold onto this, because I was so scared that every time I have these dips in emotions and everything, that I would cut that off, and I was like this is the one thing I can’t cut off.” (Ally, interview 2)

Rae discussed her extracurricular drama activity and performed in a musical at a local theatre, saying it was wonderful. Various other events and socialising were described by the participants. It appeared that these were a good mental prop for them, an outlet for

their emotions, and also an important element of their lives whilst at university. Finding some sort of accessible, relatable social activities are vital for good mental health, which then means students are able to study more effectively. Extracurricular non-university-related events appeared to be more accessible for the YACs in this study. Accessibility is therefore an important consideration, if universities are to provide more events for non-traditional student groups. In terms of the conceptual framework for this study, it could be suggested that the extracurricular activities external to the universities were part of the students' coping resources. This also demonstrated the importance of acknowledging the links between communities that are external and internal to the HEI (Heaney and Israel, 2008). Although the HEIs in this study did not have a role in the provision of external activities, as the YAC participants' mental health was positively affected by them, the HEIs benefited indirectly as the students were in a better place to further engage with their studies.

5.2.3: Virtual worlds are an option

As many people now build social connections online, the impact of virtual worlds was always likely to be evident in the related experiences of the participants. In terms of the literature, few studies mention the impact of socialising virtually at university. It is of interest to me that the social theories discussed in the literature review all arose in the absence of online technology, and therefore to write about the influence of social media and virtual reality (VR) on the social integration of young adult carers (YACs) into HEIs is a new contribution to knowledge.

For HEIs, the pandemic propelled online technology into the world of education possibly sooner than it would otherwise have happened. HEIs were required to find ways to deliver teaching and learning safely and effectively to students who were remote from campus. From my own experience I also observed that HEIs had to deliver Induction programmes and Freshers' events virtually; this obviously impacted the students' educational

experience and their transition into HE. Additionally, I observed some student societies in my own HEI organising virtual events using a variety of online event management technologies. Universities were compelled to source new technology in order to be able to deliver successful experiences to all students.

These online channels facilitated social interactions; Rae mentioned how thankful she was to be able to meet up socially online:

“The kind of few social meetups that we could have online at that point because it was in lockdown was really, really helpful. Yeah I think I definitely would have just had to stop things and reroute them which wouldn't have been a failure, although I think it could have been hard not to see it that way at the time.” (Rae, interview 2)

I personally noted that some students stopped engaging and attending university as a result of the pandemic, and from talking to a range of academic peers across a number of different HEIs, many of them also observed this new ‘trend’. Ally commented that:

“I don't even think about the benefits of going to Uni [sic] anymore. I don't want to be around new people, I want to feel safe but I am constantly anxious. I feel like I would prefer to just be sat on Zoom than to go to class.” (Ally, interview 2)

Other participants had found new things to engage with outside of their core programme of study; Kaya started to learn Japanese online,

“I've been doing it for about two, maybe three years now and then every week. It's just some retired Japanese man who wants to learn English and practise it. I'm usually one on one, but every second Friday, we have a group meeting with all his English-speaking students.” (Kaya, interview 1)

As a result of this online class, Kaya made a new friend and had driven up north to see her; this resulted in a strong friendship, which was a benefit for Kaya.

Yusra also found new friends online as she wanted to find Muslim friends; living in a non-diverse town meant this was difficult locally, so online opened a new world for her. The contact with these friends increased during the pandemic. Yusra has a very close friend whom she had known since she was 16; this friend lived in Surrey now and they kept in touch daily via social media. Yusra described online communication as “*really helpful*” and used a wide range of platforms to contact friends. Rae also kept in touch with a childhood Friend C via online calls; she also said they studied together in this way, therefore motivating each other.

One development that was entirely unexpected from the interviews was the discussion around virtual reality (VR). Ally had decided to invest in a VR headset having spoken to a gamer friend and watched some videos about what it was. Initially Ally felt wary of it, but she had the opportunity to meet people from around the world and called them her VR family. Ally really purchased the headset to see if it would help her mental health and discussed how she now has people she can talk to regularly. She said:

“It feels like there’s a whole different community there, my VR family, genuinely I have a brother, a sister-in-law, I have a nephew, I genuinely care about all of them and they all care about me, they are there when other people physically can’t be.”

(Ally, interview 3)

I commented on how VR is a totally different slant on social support, Ally agreed and replied:

“It really is especially with money, I mean I can’t physically go and travel anywhere, I want to go and see all my friends, or my friends here might be like ‘oh let’s go out to eat’ and I can’t, so it feels like there’s finally a way that I can do so much without having to go anywhere, so it’s making me feel like I’m not missing out all the time.” (Ally, interview 3)

She went on to say that some of the people she interacted with in her virtual world, have finished university and so understood the pressures of academia. For Ally this is a whole new social network for her that is accessible, both from a time and money perspective, and also empathetic. It is her way of escaping her home situation as she dealt with the unpredictability of her mother's mental illness and increasing financial pressure.

5.2.4: "It's an escape from everything"

For three of the participants, their social activities and networks were really important to them in terms of being able to escape their caring responsibilities. Rae mentions escaping more than once, for her it is important to have "*things I can escape into*" and to be able to "*escape the College environment*". She also described her friends as an escape from thinking or talking about her caring responsibilities,

"You wake up, you kind of have your responsibilities which might take up most of your day and it just means that you don't really want to spend the rest of the time talking about it, or you know it's like you want the time with friends to be kind of that escape." (Rae, interview 1)

Rae went on to say that the theatre community she invested time in was another opportunity for escape and reprieve. She commented that this allowed her to be able to carry on with her studies with more perspective and just to think that life was fine.

Yusra also described her social life as an escape from her home situation and the fact that she needed that "*bit of an escape*", she commented:

"Knowing that I can still have a kind of social life even if it's not the same as everybody else's, I can still kind of have that little escape." (Yusra, interview 2)

Ally told me that school was her escape when she was younger, however she eventually felt that her home situation started affecting her schoolwork. School was no longer a

reprieve from caring; she described how her “*mum’s things*” started affecting her schoolwork and that when her Mum had an episode everything else in life became difficult too.

Finally, and linked to the use of virtual reality, Ally made an insightful comment from one of her discussions with her VR family:

“if you get a headset, chances are you’re escaping something and I was like yeah, we all are. So it feels like... group therapy sessions. So that’s why we all treat the VR family as a real family.” (Ally, interview 3)

Escaping their caring situation, through whatever social means or channels are available to them, appeared to be important for the participants in this study. It is likely that it helped alleviate the mental and physical pressures on them that occurred as a result of their responsibilities at home. Escaping can be construed as a coping mechanism and perhaps a way of problem solving, therefore enhancing the students’ resources and aligning with the conceptual framework.

5.3 Conclusion

This chapter addressed the following research objectives:

RO1: To examine YACs’ perception of their social integration into an HEI.

RO3: To identify which university-organised events have the greatest impact on social integration from the perspective of undergraduate students who are YACs.

It is clear that socialising is vitally important for the mental health of YACs and that for the participants in this study this was achieved in a number of ways. The perception of the participants’ social integration into their respective HEIs was varied. In some respects, the various universities represented here were somewhat effective in providing social

opportunities for the students, but these needed to be better publicised and made more accessible. External extracurricular activities remained an important part of these young people's lives and perhaps were more accessible to them than university-organised events, as they were not necessarily constrained by time or place. The benefits gained from this type of socialising included positively impacting the participants' mental health and being more accessible than attending events at their various universities. Online was always going to be apparent in a study in which the participants were Generation Z and for whom technology is the norm; however, the revelation of virtual reality being used by one participant to increase her social network and seek social support was a surprise to me. Finally the fact that socialising offered an avenue of escape, somewhere to forget about caring for an hour or two, was also evident in some of the participants' narratives. The next chapter will now examine the barriers and challenges the participants faced in terms of being able to socialise and integrate into their HEI.

Chapter 6: Barriers and challenges to social integration

6.1: Introduction

This chapter will explore the barriers and challenges that young adult carers report regarding participating in social activities. These barriers can be construed as the stressors that impact physical and mental health and impact social integration; the links between these three elements are indicated in the conceptual framework of this research project. This chapter will also aim to address research objective four: ‘To examine the main barriers to social integration and building social networks from the perspective of undergraduate students who are YACs’.

It will introduce a main theme of “What’s stopping you from socialising?” and look at the sub-themes of reluctance to share, money, lack of time and health. Some of these issues have been evident in previous research (Becker and Sempik, 2019; Haugland, Hysing and Sivertsen, 2019), but here I am particularly interested in how they act as a barrier to social integration. Additionally, the impact of the pandemic on the participants’ social integration is also explored. The themes, sub themes and links to the literature are summarised in table 6.1.

Theme	Sub theme	Codes	References
What's stopping you?	Reluctance to share	Reluctant to share	Day (2019) Kettell (2018) Sempik and Becker (2014)
	Money is a worry	Finance Hardship Work Bursary	Haugland, Hysing and Sivertsen (2019) Tinto (2017)
	There's never enough time	Time Sacrifice	Kettell (2018) Kirton et al. (2012)
	My own health isn't great	Tired Health Mental health Exhausted	Becker and Sempik (2019) Joseph et al., (2019) Kaiser and Schultze (2015) Wayman, Raws and Leadbitter (2016)
	The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic	COVID-19 Pandemic	Emergent theme

Table 6.1: Themes, sub themes and links to the literature.

These sub themes will now be further developed and discussed in the next sections in this chapter.

6.2: What's stopping you?

6.2.1: Reluctance to share

Carers often experience emotional over-involvement with their caring responsibilities and the people for whom they care. Emotional over-involvement has been linked to the shame and guilt that carers feel (Cherry et al. 2017). This may precipitate a feeling of reluctance to share their situation with others. Previous studies by Andrewartha and Harvey (2021) and Day (2019) regarding students in Australian HEIs stated that between 20 and 25% of YACs were reluctant to share their caring status with their HEI. Likewise, it would appear that the participants in this study who had longer-term caring responsibilities had formed a

reluctance to share their situation with anyone outside of their close network of friends and family. This is possibly a legacy from how they felt as a young carer at school and how difficult they found it to make new friends. In terms of the participants in this study it was acknowledged that their stories did not necessarily start as they entered higher education (HE). Young adult carers have often had caring responsibilities for a number of years before they transition into HE and this was no exception for three of the participants in this study. One participant, Kaya, recalled being reluctant to share her situation at school:

“Actually it took me about three or four years to realize that I was a carer. And then, when the situation got to the point where I was doing everything, it still took me a whole year to then tell my teachers why I was behind on work and behind on everything, and they were like, you should have told us earlier, but even then, I still didn't want, I don't know because I didn't want people to pity me.” (Kaya, interview 1)

As Kaya was now in HE, she cared for her mother remotely, returning to her home city regularly to give her younger brother a break from the caring responsibilities he took on when Kaya went to university. Ally commuted to university and still lived at home with her mother, caring for her on a daily basis, when she was 16 Ally realised that this was now her life:

“...because when I was 16 and I was really getting into this whole 'oh I am a young carer, oh my gosh, this will be my life'... because of being a young carer finding myself having to leave class because I can't concentrate.” (Ally, interview 1)

Other participants recalled not feeling confident enough to ask for help at school and bringing that feeling to university with them. A third participant, Yusra also commuted to university and cared for her younger sister on a daily basis, she recalled how she felt on starting university and needing to seek support. The whole situation reminded her of sixth form when she was reluctant to ask for help and that her mother had to facilitate the

telephone call to the school. Students who perceive that they matter are more likely to seek help as they feel more connected to their HEI (Braxton and Hirschy, 2004). Heaney and Israel (2008) discuss the benefits of “natural” helpers, in the context of an HEI these individuals are likely to be professional support staff and academics. Seeking support from these groups of people potentially enhances networks. This demonstrates the significance of this project being able to identify recommendations to HEIs and how they might support this student group.

These findings underpinned earlier research that found YACs are reluctant to tell other people that they are a carer, perhaps because 31% of young carers were bullied at school as a result of telling people they had caring responsibilities (Becker and Sempik, 2019). This figure reduces to 6% for students in HEIs. None of the participants referred to bullying, however some of them found it tiring to keep explaining to new people they met, and this impacted how many new connections they were able to build relationships with. Yusra commented:

“I find it quite hard to let people in and because I find it draining to explain my whole life to new people so when I do meet an odd person here or there I kind of don't mention it, I just leave it as that really.” (Yusra, interview 1)

Reciprocity is foundational to building friendships in adolescence (Hartup and Stevens, 1997) and so not being able to share is clearly a barrier to making new friends. Social exchange between young people generally focuses on intimacy, and it is this intimacy that enables friendships to grow (Hartup and Stevens, 1997).

One participant, who had only recently become a YAC at the start of the pandemic, took some time to assimilate the enormity of what had happened to her family and so she initially wanted to retain some privacy:

“I actually didn't tell that many people, especially kind of immediately after it happened, then like there's that kind of thing of like, oh, this huge thing's happened to me and quite a lot of people still don't know, because you kind of want to keep it within the house for a little while.” (Rae, interview 1)

Rae was also caring remotely, although the pandemic had meant that she was living at home during the lockdowns and caring for her mother whilst simultaneously studying online. On discussing the potential for socialising, Rae stated that reaching out and engaging socially was suddenly not so much of a priority; she felt it “*undermined my role in the house*”. When I probed about this she explained that it felt less important to be making friends and engaging and more important to concentrate on her caring responsibilities. Rae also mentioned not wanting to share as it felt as if talking about the caring responsibility used up valuable time with friends, which she described as an escape:

“You wake up, you kind of have your responsibilities which kind of might take up most of your day and it just means that you don't really want to spend, like the rest of the time talking about it, or you know it's like you want the time with friends to be kind of that escape.” (Rae, interview 1)

Kaya also supported what Yusra and Rae had felt. When she was discussing her social network, she stated that:

“I don't like to talk about my caring responsibilities with a lot of these people, in fact, a lot of them don't know. It's probably only a handful maybe like two or three people that know about my responsibilities” (Kaya, interview 1)

She went on to explain the reason for not sharing about her caring responsibilities was because initially she did not want to accept the situation, but now that she had, she still did not feel entirely comfortable sharing with people. Another participant, Ally, also discussed her reluctance to share, the reason being that when she starts explaining, she

is thinking too much about it. When people asked Ally why she lived at home and commuted to university she briefly told them:

“I’m a carer... my mum has bipolar disorder, that’s all that’s what you need to know, that’s as far as we’re going to go into.” (Ally, interview 1)

Kaya talked about how her friends asked her why she was always going home to London; she visited her mother twice a month and said her friends just had to accept this. She did not tell them why she was going home, just that she was going home. Kaya did go on to suggest that young carers should take more responsibility to reach out, but that it is difficult as inherently it is viewed as a private situation and it may be that *“it’s not something that most people are particularly proud of, we don’t want to be young carers”*. The fact that all the participants in this study were reluctant to share their caring situation with friends who are not carers, reinforces the value of connecting YACs with each other. This allows them to gain a shared understanding and create a supportive community of individuals who have similar life experiences and who encounter similar problems and challenges (Heaney and Israel, 2008). Taking this approach would facilitate the element in the conceptual framework regarding student coping resources and problem-solving abilities.

Kettell (2018), Kirton et al. (2012) and Day (2019) found that YACs are reluctant to share their situation as they assume people will judge them negatively for being a carer. However, all articles focused on academics as the people with whom students were reluctant to share, rather than friends or peers. Supporting these findings, Ally said she did not know how anyone could support her, as she did not tell anyone anything. To reiterate, developing new social networks of YACs would likely reduce the students’ reluctance to share.

Despite there being extracurricular support groups for young carers, there is reluctance to sign up for these until the situation requires it. The benefits of these groups have already been discussed in the literature review (Yosso, 2005). Many of these extracurricular support groups are run by not-for-profit organisations whose focus are individuals with caring responsibilities; it may be useful for these groups to be more closely affiliated with HEIs to better support students who are YACs. This aligns with Heaney and Israel's (2008) model in terms of identifying overlapping networks and bringing them together; it also reinforces the links between the areas of professional support staff and students in this study's conceptual framework; strengthening the relationship through social support groups and social networks. Kaya joined one of these support groups when she was living at home, but found that her brother refused to join as he was reluctant to reach out for help. This is, again, in line with the 'Buffering Effect' described by Wills and Cohen (1985) where individuals only seek support when required.

Chloe lived at home and helped care for her father. She realised that it was important to share information about her caring responsibilities, as she had previously started on a midwifery degree programme and not shared her situation. This had impacted her ability to cope with the demanding nature of the course, as a consequence she changed to another subject. On changing programmes, she realised that sharing was a positive thing to do:

"I was more open and honest with [sic] my situation with my lecturers this time around." (Chloe, interview 1)

In conclusion, reluctance to share is a barrier to making strong friendships and also to seeking support. Being able to share is a way of reaching out to people and building trust; part of building social networks is about exchanging information and experiences, and if

an individual is reluctant to do that then this will likely impact their opportunities to make new friends.

6.2.2: Money is a worry

Inevitably money can be a barrier to socialising, as travelling to and participating in social events have associated costs. Andrewartha and Harvey (2021) and Haugland, Hysing and Sivertsen (2019) all noted that YACs are more likely to come from low-income households and therefore struggle financially, which may impact their propensity to participate in social activities whilst at university. Additionally, for those students who were awarded a bursary, the amount was so small that it barely made a difference to them. Chloe wrote:

“The opportunity is available to me but getting to the events is just too inaccessible. I do have a £500 bursary to help with my travel costs to get to the events but that barely covers my travel for lectures let alone anything additional.”
(Chloe, reflective journal)

For young carers money is a concern. Sometimes the person being cared for was previously the main income earner for the family, therefore the loss of income associated with a long-term illness was devastating for the household. This often necessitated understanding the bureaucracy around disability benefits and carers allowance. Additionally, carer's allowance cannot be claimed if a young carer is studying for 21 hours or more per week in England, putting further financial strain on families (Gov.UK, 2022). Rae noted that her mother's illness precipitated a house move as they coped with new financial pressures:

“Money became a huge concern, which is why we had to move house... find somewhere cheaper to live.” (Rae, interview 1)

Rae went on to explain that the financial worries became so pervasive that it caused her some anxiety, particularly around socialising with university friends and the impact on her ability to do anything. She stated:

“Lack of money kind of makes you feel disconnected from your friendship group or your community and, yeah, financial freedom is so important.” (Rae, interview 2)

Other participants discussed the help and support from family with respect to financial pressures. Kaya mentioned the role of her aunt helping with financial support and how helpful that had been for her. The impact of having to work on top of studies to earn money to survive was also evident from the participants. Rae had been advised to apply for the College Hardship Fund, but mentioned that this only covered accommodation, so she would have had no money to do anything else, such as socialising. She therefore pursued the opportunity to work. Rae also commented on the fact that some students were reluctant to apply to the College Hardship Fund, as it was akin to admitting that things were “*not quite right*” and that they were not sure they “*deserved it*”. The lack of money notably impacts being able to socialise:

“I think socially it does impact me a little bit more ... because I know that I’m not in a position to ask my mum for money. I need to make sure that I’m budgeting or I need to make sure I’m finding little bits of [paid] work to do, around my degree, while not impacting my ability to do my degree.” (Rae, interview 2)

Ally discussed her financial situation at length, how she was in debt from helping her mother with bills, and how she was unable to work due to the pandemic. She took out numerous loans to maintain the household and was worried that “*so much was going out and nothing was coming in*”. She managed to secure a job once the pandemic had settled down a little in England, which meant she could apply for hospitality jobs. She was

overjoyed at being able to earn money and remembered saying to her mother, for whom she cares:

“Mum, this means I can help you with rent and stuff, this means I can help you with finances and everything. I am finally going to get out of this flipping debt, it’s been bugging me.” (Ally, interview 2)

In terms of having to work, study and care for a relative; all the participants mentioned the impact this had on the time available for social activity. There is a real conundrum here around needing money to live and potentially socialise, but then not having the time to be able to fit socialising in alongside other responsibilities. The potential tension between the various responsibilities YACs have when studying in HE was evident in the participants’ narratives. In one case, Ally reported losing her job as her caring responsibilities had impacted her ability to work when required, further increasing her stress levels. Where family were unable or unwilling to help financially, Ally mentioned how her friends started to contribute:

“A couple of days ago I was telling them about the financial thing literally 2 days ago and one of them was like here’s £20 get yourself some food today, they’ve been doing that and someone yesterday gave me £200 to pay off the loan sharks and I was just like thanks guys, you don’t have to, but they were like no no no, we need to help you. And we are family. And they all contribute little bits and really support me.” (Ally, interview 3)

In her reflective journal, Chloe wrote in a similar vein:

“...any social activities organised by the university are usually too difficult for me to attend as I would either have to already be present on campus, or spend extra money and time to travel to university in order to attend... getting to the events is just too inaccessible.” (Chloe, reflective journal)

Rae's university offered her financial support to carry on with singing lessons, which she really appreciated, as she was able to use this skill in the university drama productions and join the Gospel choir, affording her positive social interactions. She wrote in her reflective journal that it really "*validated that social support is good*".

For the participants in this study, lack of money was a barrier to socialising. Having or needing to work to subsidise the household income or alleviate the pressure on those being cared for, also meant that this impacted the time available to see friends and participate in activities and events.

6.2.3: There's never enough time

Time, or lack of it, was another common theme arising as a barrier to social integration from all participants. Previous research by Kirton et al. (2012) and later, Kettell (2018) has highlighted time as an issue for student carers, however, this was in relation to the students' academic studies, rather than socialising. Occasionally the YACs were afforded time when respite care was available; this gave the students an opportunity to be able to balance their social life, working and academia a little more effectively. However, despite the care companies' help, some students still mentioned that time was a barrier for them in terms of socialising. Chloe's family had support from external carers which she appreciated, however, although she was aware of the students' union at her university, she still did not have much involvement because of her lack of time. Chloe had also wanted to create a carers' society at university for anyone with a caring responsibility, but did not do this, as again, she had no time. Yusra's family eventually managed to access some respite care, but even with this help, Yusra still found it hard to manage studying and caring, describing it as "*hectic*".

Yusra went on to talk about how she constantly needed to be home by 3pm, as she cared for her little sister who came home from school at that time. Consequently Yusra had to go into university early, attend lectures and study and then leave promptly, so she was home in time to care for her sister. This obviously indicated very little time to socialise. In respect of easing time pressures, all the participants' universities represented in this project had helped the students by giving them automatic extensions or support plans for their coursework submissions. These were only used by the participants occasionally, as they preferred to try and manage their time where possible.

One comment from Yusra made me realise how difficult it must be for young adult carers to see other people socialising when they cannot join in:

“...because a lot of the time with social clubs is that they have so many events I know in the back of my head I can't attend the events and I know that my time is really limited like I wouldn't be able to do the thing that they were doing, I think it would make me even more sad, I think you know, seeing people just living their lives, living the uni [sic] life that they obviously should live, it make me feel a bit like sad that I can't live that.” (Yusra, interview 1)

YACs develop a unique skill set that is also transferable into the workplace, such as time management and the ability to negotiate bureaucracy (Andrewartha and Harvey, 2021). I have personally observed that some students appear to struggle with time management, but this is something that young carers learn in the early stages of their caring responsibilities as they juggle school and home. Ally wrote in her reflective journal that she had been managing her time well, and it appeared as if this made her feel good about her situation. Kaya described how she learnt to manage her time between university and returning to London to resume caring responsibilities; initially she had been going back and forth constantly and found it too demanding on her time. Kaya went on to describe

how her time at school had been easier to manage, as timetables were more structured than those at university; she described balancing increasing caring responsibilities and studies at university as “juggling”. A participant in Kettell’s (2018) study also used this word to describe how they felt as they managed their time between home and university. As the YACs entered HE they realised that the responsibility was on them to self-manage; it is likely that they realised this faster than more traditional students.

Yusra also commented on the value of learning time management skills and that caring for her sibling had been *“a good thing and taught me good time management, it was very stressful but yeah. That was good, I still managed to make time for myself here and then see my friends”*. She went on to say that she hadn’t met up with her academic advisor as she had to be very strict with her time management. Yusra was very aware that she needed to take time out from everything in order to be able to cope with what is going on in her life. She was also thankful that her dissertation supervisor was very flexible with time allocated to see her. As Yusra progressed through her final year at university she became increasingly aware of the impact caring was having on her time:

“...the demands of third year have increased, but the demands at home have still been the same with my sister.” (Yusra, interview 2)

For YACs, the caring responsibilities have to be fitted in with a dynamic external environment in terms of work, education and socialising. Very often the caring responsibilities have to come first if the student is the primary carer. Student carers realise that time is very precious and so they are selective with whom they spend their social time. Yusra chose to spend her time with individual friends rather than attending events. Kaya found that even when she was hanging out with friends, she spent a lot of time thinking about home and *“the problems there and stuff”*. Kaya realised that her caring

responsibilities have impacted her social life more than she thought they would. She often had to return home to London and said:

“...it always seems like whenever I need to go down, someone's asking me to go somewhere and do something with them, and I have to be like, ‘Oh no, sorry, I can't, I'm going back to London to do this now’... definitely a lot of the time was like, ‘Oh, I would have liked to do this with this friend, but now I can't, I have to do it another time’.” (Kaya, interview 2)

Kaya was pragmatic about the situation and said she was used to it; she knew that she could wait to see the friend at a later date, but that her caring responsibilities could not be put aside. She commented on how she felt:

“...when you're invited and you have to say no and you want to go, you do feel a bit upset about it.” (Kaya, interview 2)

The overwhelming feeling reported by the participants was how they had learnt to manage their time by adapting to the changing needs in their home environment. Yusra mentioned how she had not really considered that her sister's needs would increase. As she had transitioned into higher education and been offered support, she had not predicted that her own needs would change accordingly. This implies that perhaps there is an onus on the university to work more closely with YACs as they transition into HE, to understand their unique situations more closely and provide appropriate levels of flexible support. On learning remotely during lockdown, Rae commented that as her caring responsibilities were quite intense, she had to manage her time quite strictly; this was also noted in a recent study of Australian students with caring responsibilities during the pandemic (Andrewartha and Harvey, 2021). However, since being back on campus, she said the caring became more of an “emotional toll” when she was remote from the home environment. Kaya also described the impact of a remote caring situation as being too tiring emotionally, which meant she could not make an effort to socialise, even when she

had the time. Even on returning to London to resume her caring responsibilities, Kaya found it hard to meet up with old school friends as time was so scarce.

Finally, the other element that the YACs discussed was volunteering. Volunteering is a valuable addition to a curriculum vitae, especially in the absence of paid work experience; from my own experience I have observed academic colleagues telling students that volunteering will enhance their employability. However, the increasing pressure to volunteer is also yet another thing YACs have to fit into their already hectic lives; even traditional students struggle to fit in 'useful' extracurricular activity (Dickinson, Griffiths and Bredice, 2021). Volunteering is another thing that impacts the time students have to socialise. Chloe wrote about this in her reflective journal:

“[W]ith volunteer work as well, I haven’t had the chance to attend many social activities or events.” (Chloe, reflective journal)

In conclusion, time management is a skill that YACs acquire early on during their life as a young carer; this is likely from necessity. They learn to juggle multiple responsibilities and have to prioritise constantly between caring, studying, working and socialising. Some of the participants realise that socialising is good for their mental health and try to fit this into already busy lives; others were less likely to do so depending on their home situation.

6.2.4: My own health isn’t great

The physical and mental toll of care-giving on young people is well documented (Joseph et al., 2019; Kaiser and Schulze, 2015; Wayman, Raws and Leadbitter, 2016) and young adult carers are no exception. Becker and Sempik (2019) found 45% of YACs reported mental health issues. All the participants in this study commented on being too tired or exhausted to participate in social activities, with this sometimes leading to health issues.

Kaya's university sends numerous emails about events she could attend, but she seldom goes because they either do not interest her or she is too tired.

Rae had been diagnosed with chronic fatigue syndrome and described how this had affected her studies and other activities. She was taking medication for the fatigue which had helped a little. Kaya had been diagnosed with depression and prescribed an antidepressant that caused a severe side effect that impacted her ability to study and socialise. As a result, she was unable to leave her student accommodation, as she simply could not function. Kaya recalled how supportive her boyfriend and family members were during this time. Indeed her mother and brother came to see her, despite her mother being the person for whom she cared. Kaya said how lovely it was to see them both in a new environment. The care giver temporarily became the care receiver. The impact of poor health on social activity is evident. In her reflective journal, Kaya wrote:

“Due to my health taking a rapid decline this past month... I am struggling to keep much social contact, but this is only a recent occurrence and I suspect once I am better I will talk to more people again.” (Kaya, reflective journal)

Kaya also discussed how she felt anxious about the situation at home with her mother; mentioning that her mother had been admitted to hospital but because of the pandemic, she was unable to travel to London to visit her. The remoteness of Kaya's situation made her reluctant to socialise, as she reported just wanting to stay in her accommodation, be by the phone and not be distracted by anything. This is in line with findings from Greene et al. (2016) who reported higher levels of anxiety in young caregivers at college in the USA. In her reflective journal Kaya wrote that:

“I've found that when I am living away I do less uni [sic] work but I manage my mental health a bit better, but when I'm back at home I spend my time doing lots of university work, but I don't look after myself as well.” (Kaya, reflective journal)

The direct correlation between caring and poor mental health was also mentioned by Chloe. She had changed degree programme as a result of this:

“Six months into my midwifery degree I'm starting to show signs of poor mental health and wasn't really getting on well due the pressures of my home situation.”

(Chloe, interview 1)

Ally mentioned her own mental health struggles on more than one occasion across the three interviews, the impact on her education and her own ability to care for her mother. She became increasingly isolated:

“...all of a sudden I just stopped going to university. I was, I can't mentally hack it myself anymore, and then I call it a depression and I remember speaking to people anonymously about it, and everything, and it was like I couldn't help my mum anymore either, because I was in a really bad state myself.” (Ally, interview 1)

Dealing with a number of responsibilities is difficult for many individuals. In terms of being a student in HE the expected stressors include those associated with transitioning into HE, such as finding your student identity, and pressures of coursework and examinations (Friedlander et al., 2007; Scanlon, Rowling and Weber, 2007). However, for YACs there is the additional stressor of caring, which impacts energy levels, Yusra noted:

“It does impact my education even now, and it's made me feel very tired, especially the past few weeks, coming into third year and just being chunked at with dissertation work and everything. I feel like I am in a constant state of exhaustion.” (Yusra, interview 1)

Yusra had not shared any details of physical or mental health difficulties, but just discussed her general energy levels. She was also keen to mention how the support of her friends was invaluable and that without them she might have stopped her education. She commented:

“If I didn't have that, like the social networks like internally with my university advisors and stuff and externally with my friends, I think I would probably just have left Uni probably like back in second year or first year. Because it would have just been too much, it probably would have caused me to mentally break down.”

(Yusra, interview 1)

Kaya also mentioned how her mood affected her propensity to socialise and said she felt happier socialising with smaller groups of people. She was more comfortable socialising with people who already knew her and her situation as she found getting to know new people in larger groups required a lot more energy and effort. This is in line with Eggens et al. (2008) who found that the average group size for student networks consisted of five peers. Ally discussed the positive impact that socialising had on her own mental health, and described how dancing is good for her:

“Every single Saturday I'm in London dancing, but it's the same way people feel about going to the gym for mental health. That's how I feel about dancing for mental health and everything.” (Ally, interview 2)

At times the participants would discuss how they had friends who positively impacted their mental health. Ally mentioned a friend who knew everything about her caring situation. This friend was instrumental in encouraging Ally to engage with her studies when she was depressed. Yusra also discussed the effect of friends on motivating her to keep going when she was exhausted:

“I just can't, this is too much. I'm so exhausted all the time, and then they would be, come on, you're halfway there! Imagine when you finish third year, and you get your degree, and then you're like I did all of that as a carer, and I would be like, OK fine [LAUGHS].” (Yusra, interview 3)

In addition, Kaya wrote about how her friends continued to invite her out despite her being too tired to participate in any social activities. She said it meant a lot to her that they also came to her accommodation to see her. She continued in her reflective journal, that she wished she was able to speak to a few more people, but that she felt too exhausted to do so.

I referred one participant to her university wellbeing support service, as she said she felt very mentally unwell and that no one was supporting her. The service did contact her via email and then tried to phone her, however, she was reluctant to speak to a stranger about her problems. She felt that the phone was not a safe space, as she would not be able to see the counsellor's reactions. Even when support was made available, for the participant YAC, accessing it was problematic. Additionally, the same participant mentioned how difficult it was to see a GP to help with mental health; she said this had changed with the arrival of the pandemic.

The findings in this study are underpinned by previous research on the impact of caring on mental health issues for YACs. Becker and Sempik (2019) and Haugland, Hysing and Sivertsen (2019) all found a positive correlation between the amount of time spent caring, the level of stress and negative health outcomes for young adult carers.

6.2.5: The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic

This project was carried out during the COVID-19 pandemic. Not only did this impact the data collection, but the narratives from each participant also included mentions of how being socially isolated during the three lockdowns of 2020 and 2021 had affected them. Kaya recalled being in student accommodation at the time and that she was living with three other people during the first lockdown in 2020. Two of these roommates left in the first two months, and so she only had one person with whom to socialise and understandably commented that it was not what she was expecting of university. This

would have been Kaya's first year at university and so it really hampered her opportunity to socially integrate. It has been previously researched that networks and communities grow as a result of students being in university accommodation and that this is vital part of the transition into HE (Braxton and Hirschy, 2004). Obviously, the pandemic impacted this for Kaya and Rae, who both cared remotely; but also impacted social integration for those YACs who commuted to campus, as this opportunity was not available to them. Despite this, Ally, who commuted to campus, reflected on how she was lucky to have made one friend, as she retook her first year of studies. All of Ally's peers and friends from her initial first year were in second year at that point, and thus distanced from her in terms of shared academic experience, albeit still studying on the same campus. The pandemic had impacted friendships, with many having to be carried on using social media platforms. Yusra wrote that:

"It was also nice to actually be back on campus with my friends, seeing them and being in their company!" (Yusra, reflective journal)

Yusra's final year was important to her as she felt that she had lost so much time because of the pandemic. She frequently commented on how it was good to be back on campus and how the group dynamic with her friends had changed for the better. The group had decided to make the most of being back on campus in 2021-22, and so met up more frequently than maybe they might not have otherwise done in the absence of a pandemic. Yusra used the phrase "*we're all in it together*", and reiterated how close the group had become and how supportive they were of each other, making time for each other inside and outside of university. Yusra's friendship group were particularly supportive of arranging social activities to ensure she was able to attend and she was thankful of this:

"in terms of like the social side, yes, so everything is like built around me, which sounds really like it's all about me; thankfully they're very understanding and like

they're like all the time, 'okay cool, Yusra can do like every Monday Wednesday let's do something on Monday or Wednesday'." (Yusra, interview 3)

6.3 Conclusion

This chapter outlined the barriers to social integration experienced by the participants in this study and is aligned with the stressors and health elements of the conceptual framework. The chapter addressed research objective four, regarding barriers to social integration for YACs. The themes were in line with the literature and elucidated the difficulties of not being able to afford to socialise. It finished with an overview of the impact of caring on the students' own physical and mental health, and the increasing pressure of this on being well enough to actually socially integrate. The supportive role of friends and family and their influence on the students was noted, again this was in line with the literature. It was also important to note that this project was undertaken during a pandemic, which also proved a barrier to social integration. The impact of the barriers and challenges of socially integrating had the potential to negatively affect the participants. The following chapter will therefore now examine the themes related to the students' decisions to persist with their studies.

Chapter 7: Achieving educational goals and student perspective on HEI policy and provision for YACs

7.1: Introduction

This chapter brings together the final theme arising from the data regarding the students' decision to persist with their educational journey. This is also the final stage in the conceptual framework that informed the design of this project. The chapter addresses the final research objective five: 'To comprehend the perceived impact of social integration on persistence and progression of undergraduate students who are YACs at an HEI'.

The first theme of 'Staying or Going?' encompasses the sense of isolation some of the students reported feeling during their studies, sometimes because of the impact of the pandemic, but mainly because of their caring responsibilities. The second theme in this chapter is regarding the guilt that was mentioned by the participants. The themes and their links to the literature are summarised in table 7.1.

Theme	Sub theme	Codes	References
Staying or going?	I felt so isolated	Isolation Loneliness	Goncalves and Trunk (2014) Johnson-Ahorlu (2013)
	Dropping out was always an option	Dropping out Temporary withdrawal Suspending studies	Braxton and Hirschy (2004) Tinto (1975)
I feel so guilty		Guilt	Cherry et al. (2017) Kettell (2018) Kirtan et al. (2012) Martin et al. (2006)

Table 7.1: Themes, sub themes and links to the literature.

Following the development and discussion of the themes and sub-themes in table 7.1, the final section of this chapter incorporates the participants' perspectives on the policies and provision of support for YACs in their respective HEIs. Each of the final interviews concluded with a discussion concerning the participants' thoughts on what could be changed or improved to better support students who are YACs, as they transition into and progress through HE. Whilst it is acknowledged that this is not a theme per se; it was considered pertinent to include evidence of these discussions here in order to further recognise the importance of the student voice in this research project.

7.2: Staying or going?

Supporting Tinto's (1975) initial research on student retention or persistence and the role that social integration plays, this project also finds that social integration is key. However, the additional pressures on YACs in terms of balancing their many responsibilities and having to prioritise, meant that often they had to refrain from social activities as other demands on their time were more urgent and important. This impacted opportunities for socialising and led to a feeling of isolation for the participants in this study. A sense of isolation and not fitting in has been directly related to lack of academic success (Goncalves and Trunk, 2014).

7.2.1: I felt so isolated

Not being able to socialise leads to an increasing sense of isolation. All of the participants were asked what would have happened without their social networks and support. Rae talked about a prolonged sense of isolation and how this might have prompted her to take a year out, just to take some time to adjust to her new caring responsibilities at home. Rae's feeling of isolation was perpetuated by the fact that her family had to move home during the pandemic, as her mother's income disappeared following the onset of her health problems. She remembered:

“Because we moved house and so, which was like another like (sigh) huge huge thing and so that was another thing because I didn't live close to anyone anymore. Another thing that added a sense of further isolation.” (Rae, interview 1)

Kaya remembered moving away from home and feeling very lonely, especially in the first few months of her programme. This does not necessarily just apply to YACs; the literature discusses this as a potential issue during transition into HE for all students (Fisher and Hood, 1987; MacKinnon, 2012; Scanlon, Rowling and Weber, 2007). Kaya did however state that she would have felt very alone without her social networks. She also described the constant worry and anxiety she felt about her Mum, for whom she cared, and sometimes did not want to socialise as a result. She commented:

“And I think it's that anxiety that sometimes makes me a bit nervous to put myself out there, because I'm just a bit wanting to stay at home and be by my phone and you know not be distracted by anything.” (Kaya, interview 3)

Ally talked about the way in which her peers had treated her following a group work assessment; following a good result for their assessment, they had organised to go out for a celebratory dinner and did not invite her. She reflected:

“...then they were all like, let's go eat and have a celebratory dinner or something and they didn't invite me, so I was like OK..... So I just block and delete everyone's numbers after the group work” (Ally, interview 2)

Ally appeared to shrug this off, but as a result she disliked participating in group activities, preferring to do individual coursework assessments instead. Additionally her peer group were not very understanding or flexible regarding her home situation, as they would organise meetings at times that she could not attend, further adding to her sense of isolation. However, having invested in the VR headset, Ally commented that *“it's only now I'll feel like I'm not alone, but better now than never I guess.”*

Ally coped with her various responsibilities by frequently removing herself and staying at home in her room. She remembers how her brothers would worry about her, and how her friends would try and contact her to ask if she was still around. Ally relayed that she tended to deal with her situation in silence, rarely reaching out for help. Yusra's account also validated this sense of isolation as she described how a lot of YACs dealt with their situation in silence, but that more fortunate YACs had access to help from extended family. She did not mention a sense of isolation directly, however, the feeling of isolation was implicit in her narrative, she reflected:

“But literally it was me, my mum and my sister, my other little sister like that's it; because my dad would be working and my brothers had moved out. My older brother has got his own disabilities and we would have to help him and my other little sister is too little.” (Yusra, interview 3)

Yusra was intending to go on to teacher training following graduation; I asked her how she felt about starting a new educational journey and how she would make new friends. She said she was not necessarily concerned about making friends, and that she was good at being alone. Yusra felt that making friends on her new course would be a bonus, rather than an aim. All of the YACs in this study had a sense of isolation at some point during the academic year and this was mitigated in some way by the presence of friends and family who understood their situation.

7.2.2: Dropping out was always an option

The influence of social networks on all participants' propensity to stay at university was positive. All of the participants had considered leaving university at some point during their educational journey. Without exception they all said how important their social networks had been, Chloe said:

“I think if I hadn't had those social networks in place, I potentially might have followed the same path as I did with my midwifery degree and lost my confidence again, maybe my mental health might have dipped quite dramatically, and I might have ended up dropping out of this degree too.” (Chloe, interview 1)

Yusra thought she would have “*stopped my education*” without someone being there for her. She described how she felt:

“I think my educational journey would have been a big struggle and I think my grades would have slipped massively because I have to work that extra bit harder and if I didn't have the social networks internally with my university advisors and stuff, and externally with my friends, I think I would probably just have left Uni probably like back in second year or first year. Because it would have just been too much, it probably would have caused me to mentally break down.” (Yusra, interview 1)

Rae dealt with the onset of caring responsibilities during the pandemic and found that her social networks were invaluable. She commented:

“When all of that kind of happened I think if if through that I didn't have any sort of like support or feelings of escape or social networks, I probably would have just had to like recoil from everything and take a year out and just kind of yeah I think mentally as well, I don't think I would have been very good at all.” (Rae, interview 1)

However, Rae realised that if she had taken a year out, she would have felt that she was behind her peers, and that reintegrating into university would have been even tougher than staying. So the support she received from her social networks was key in helping her make the decision to persist with her studies. Ally had already had to retake her first year at university due to the pressures at home, but still commented on how she struggled to

engage with her studies. She talked about how she had thought about withdrawing and never coming back. Later on in a separate interview, Ally referred to how happy her mother was that she stayed at university and carried on studying. Yusra also mentioned the role her mother had played in terms of the influence on her decision to remain at her HEI. In addition, Kaya was influenced more by her mother than anyone else in her networks, with regards to staying at her university. However, she described how the people she was in contact with had been very supportive of her, but that they had not played a role in her decision to persist with her studies, she reflected:

“Although the people I have been in contact with have been very supportive and have made my time at university easier, they haven’t played that big of a part in my decision to keep going on with my studies, as it is something that I decided to do for myself. ” (Kaya, reflective journal)

The evidence of the impact of all participants’ social networks and in particular the maternal parent in encouraging them to remain at university is clear. However, the various universities represented in this study and the support they offered, were not specifically mentioned in terms of their influence on persisting with the participants’ educational journeys.

7.3: “I feel so guilty”

An underlying theme of guilt emerged from the interview data. The guilt that young adult carers in HE experience has only been briefly mentioned by Kettell (2018) and Kirton et al. (2012). This relates to the guilt experienced by YACs as they balance numerous responsibilities and for not being omnipresent. This is different from the guilt experienced by individuals caring long-term for a partner with long term mental health illness, such as dementia where carers feel entrapped by their situation and then feel guilty for doing so (Cherry et al., 2017; Martin et al., 2006). Kettell (2018) mentioned guilt attributed to friends

and how YACs felt guilty for not being able to socialise more freely. Earlier, Kirton et al. (2012) discussed the impact on YACs as their peers expected them to maintain a 'normal' social life. Kirton et al. (2012) also mentioned the guilt experienced by YACs in HE not being at home to care for their relatives, but being away from home and caring remotely. Accordingly, the participant YACs in this study who lived on campus felt similarly compared with those in the paper by Kirton et al. (2012). They mentioned feeling guilty for not being at home to care for their relatives, but that, interestingly, and in contrast to the participants in previous studies, this was a motivator for them to persist at university and carry on studying. Kaya described how she constantly worried about what was happening at home, but that her boyfriend put her guilt into perspective by encouraging her to remain at her HEI. Eggens et al. (2008) discussed the role that romantic partners play in encouraging persistence in HE, as both parties have high emotional involvement in the relationship, and so perceived support is strong.

Yusra reflected on how far she had come and how hard she had worked. She said that it all had to be worthwhile in the end, but still related this to a feeling of guilt:

“All the times I’ve had to come in late, all the times I’ve had to leave my sister with just my mum and my other sister. Because I don’t know what it is, I feel so guilty. I’ve seen that mother’s guilt, carer’s guilt if that’s a thing.” (Yusra, interview 2)

Rae introduced the concept of ‘imposter syndrome’ and wondered if she was actually “*enough of a carer*”, and how she thought she should be doing more. However, as she lived on campus this was hard for her. She specifically mentioned feeling guilty about not being at home, and also said that she feels a lot busier when she is at home during the vacation when she had to care directly for her mother.

Regarding other links to guilt and studying, the impact of caring on YACs’ mental and physical health means they are sometimes simply unable to engage with the process of

learning. Ally mentioned feeling 'bad' for not attending lectures because of her mental health, and then described how not attending made her feel worse and less motivated than ever; in effect she was in a cyclical situation from which she found it difficult to escape. Kaya also described feeling too tired to attend lectures because of the anxiety of worrying about her home situation and that she then felt as if she was wasting people's time and money. In this context, her boyfriend was supportive and reassured her that she had a lot of responsibilities and that she should be less hard on herself. In support of these findings, it has been hypothesised that the guilt carers feel is differentially associated with their emotional over-involvement in the familial environment (Cherry et al. 2017).

7.4: Young adult carers' perspectives on HEI policies and provisions

The final interview with all participants concluded with a discussion regarding their perspectives on the policy and provision of support for YACs in their own HEI. The arising responses cohered into a sustained body of participant insight on how they considered their institution could best support them as a YAC. All participants proffered some very practical ideas and these are discussed here, and compared and contrasted with the overview of extant HEI provision for YACs included in Chapter 1. For example, Chloe made a comment very early on in her first interview about the lack of student parking at her university; for student carers, parking is potentially important. If they are suddenly called away to deal with a situation at home related to their caring responsibilities they need to be able to leave immediately; in addition, if they need to tend to demands at home before lectures, they may arrive late and so being able to park a car on campus would make this less stressful for them. In the scoping review of the universities in Chapter 1, three HEIs offered car parking to YACs; there may have been more, but only three institutions specifically mentioned this as a benefit for YACs.

7.4.1: Wellbeing and academic support

A good wellbeing support system is paramount for positive mental health. Some of the participants had engaged with the availability of this at their respective universities, however others found the system less helpful and unwieldy. In line with the 'Buffering Effect' (Cohen and Wills, 1985) the students only sought support when they needed it, sometimes waiting until the situation had become very difficult indeed.

Support plans in place for the participants, where they could leave lectures early, arrive late or get extra time with exams or for handing in coursework were all deemed useful. From the analysis of the documentary evidence gathered from 50 HEIs, overt communication of academic support plans was not particularly evident; there were only 13 mentions of 'academic support' per se. Prior to coming to university YACs may wish to see that their intended university is able to support them academically. One of the participants, Yusra, commented that although a support plan had been put in place during her first year, her caring responsibilities had increased as her sister's needs became progressively more demanding. This meant that Yusra would have liked the opportunity to revisit her support plan, but felt this was not something that was available to her. She said that it would be good if universities were more understanding about how YACs' situations could change over time and that, in retrospect, she should have been mindful that things were likely to get worse at home. Yusra remembered her first year:

"I wasn't really thinking about three years, my sister could get worse, but that's the trouble isn't it, you can't predict my sister and how it would go. I am trying to think back to first year. She wasn't too bad in first year but I think, with the pandemic and everything, it just took it from zero to 100." (Yusra, interview 3)

In her reflective journal Kaya wrote in a similar vein about increasing caring responsibilities:

“I think I would have liked to know more about the emotional support they [sic] have to offer, because the main reason university has been as hard as it has for me is because my caring responsibilities have gotten more intense than before. So it might have been nice to receive information on where I could go for support.”

(Kaya, reflective journal)

In terms of academic support, Kaya also described how she had to ask for an extension at one point and how it was readily given to her by the relevant module leader. Academic support was present at all the participants' HEIs, but they had to make an effort to seek it. Rae suggested a centralised support system would be useful, so that she did not have to keep explaining to every tutor about her situation and why she needed extra time, support or leniency. Rae attends an HEI with a collegiate system, so this is more relevant in this context. She also commented on the amount of bureaucracy that she had encountered whilst trying to access support, and posited that this might be simplified for future students. For Rae the college counsellor and welfare dean were both really supportive of her situation.

Ally lamented the lack of consistent support at her HEI; she said she was aware the help was available, but accessing it was a different matter. She later commented that too much help was overwhelming, which contradicted her earlier statement. When I asked if she had reached out to wellbeing, she said she did not know how to do that. I facilitated access to support, but Ally's experience was not very positive; she spoke to them once and rearranged a second call, which did not happen as she was not available on the day the support team called her. Consequently she abandoned any intention to seek support through the university. Ally commented:

“I think it was better speaking to you than it was speaking to them. I am not going to lie, it felt almost I think, as if it was just their job rather than they really care, type

of thing, and they would just be like, 'Oh I'll give you NHS links', and I was thinking I have seen them all. Because that's what the GP did." (Ally, interview 3)

Ally also suggested that it would be better to be able to speak to the counsellors in person, rather than over the telephone, as she felt this was too impersonal. She also observed that when they called, she was not in a confidential place, so was unwilling to share details of her situation with them. Ally described this as making her feel uneasy and felt as if the support staff should have made an effort to understand her home situation in more detail. Yusra remembered feeling similarly about the impersonal nature of the university communications, she commented on an email from a member of the wellbeing team at her HEI:

"He would send an email at the start of second year and like saying 'always here'. But sometimes when you get that, you think, well you're not always here are you? You get the email and it feels like more of a – oh what's the word?" (Yusra, interview 3).

I suggested it felt like a 'tick in the box' and Yusra agreed. She went on to say that it would have been helpful if the wellbeing team had understood about the changes from semester-to-semester and year-to-year of an undergraduate student's educational journey. She recalled not reaching out for help, because although she was struggling, she was so focused on her studies that she failed to think about herself, and how she could have benefited from some guidance. Yusra's mind set was one of "you don't really think how can they help me, you think I just need to get this done."

Kaya said she was aware that she could reach out for help; her HEI was very good at emailing regularly about the support for students. She commented that emailing regularly throughout the academic year was useful, rather than just once at the start of semester, as she said otherwise she tended to forget what was available.

7.4.2: Financial support

Financial support was the area mentioned most frequently in the analysis of the documentary evidence. However, in terms of actual bursaries for YACs, only 16 of the 50 universities whose provision was surveyed in Chapter 1 offered this. It might therefore be interpreted that 'financial support' is available, and might be provided if students encountered financial hardship, but that it is not consistently available to all YACs across all HEIs. Four of the participants mentioned financial support. Chloe was in receipt of a YAC Bursary of £500 per annum which helped with her travel costs. Rae had some support for social activities, and Kaya also mentioned a Bursary for YACs from her HEI. Ally had no financial support and felt that she would have benefited from some advice, as she was in serious financial difficulties, as detailed earlier in Chapter 6.

For YACs who already have extra responsibilities, trying to fund themselves through university adds an extra level of pressure. In terms of potentially juggling a job, caring responsibilities and studying, almost inevitably one of these areas will suffer. Bearing in mind how few student carers self-identify to their HEIs, it is recommended that more financial help that is readily available would be a welcome intervention. As the number of YACs is so low, this would not appear to be a huge drain on university resources, but might make a difference to this student group.

7.4.3: A single point of contact

All participants commented on how it would have been good if there was a single point of contact. Somewhere where the YACs felt that the individual or specialised centre really understood their situation, however, it is recognised that they all had different pressures and challenges to deal with at home. Only 22 of the 50 universities examined in this project made it clear that there was a named contact for student carers. Kaya felt that as

soon as they had given her the bursary that was it for the university. She commented about how social and academic support was so much more important:

“Most of the time, it’s not the money we struggle with the most, it’s the social support, it’s the academic support, the fact that we struggle to have the motivation to meet new people you know it’s that type of thing that I think we need help with most. I wish that the carers group would put more emphasis on maybe having meetings that people could go to or and if there are meetings, make them more visible for people who are carers, you know. And I thought about that and just having more organised clubs.” (Kaya, interview 3)

Rae concurred regarding a single point of contact, and how HEIs could really attempt to get to know each YAC. Ally also said she felt as if she was labelled a ‘young carer’ but that the university did not really know who she was:

“I wish from the beginning they knew who we were and tried to know us, because it feels like the label is there but they don’t know who I am. And if someone were to say to them ‘Who are your young adult carers?’ and they would say, ‘Oh Ally is’, and they would say, ‘Who does she care for?’ and they would be like ‘Oh I dunno’, that’s how it feels. They don’t actually know who we are at all, they just know the label, coz it moved with us from school.” (Ally, interview 3)

In her reflective journal, Ally reiterated the point about the difficulty of finding the right person to talk to. Having a person that YACs could talk to at their HEI would enable them to feel more socially integrated; this would also address the antecedent to social integration of institutional commitment from Braxton and Hirschy’s (2004) model reviewed in Chapter 2.

The participants tried to get involved in their educational journeys as much as possible, for example, by being a course representative, their involvement was again hampered by lack

of time or the fact that some of the meetings were at times which meant they were inaccessible. After Rae graduated, she went on to a year-long sabbatical as a student union officer for welfare and wellbeing; in terms of this she reflected:

“And you know students have to really, really fight for certain things and I think that's probably influenced why I want to be in the role and try and campaign for student issues, because what I observed, is just that there's just things to improve.” (Rae, interview 3)

It is thus striking that all participants offered some pragmatic suggestions and recommendations based on their own experience during their educational journey. These suggestions will be developed in the recommendations section in chapter 8, as I discuss what the evidence suggests that HEIs and practitioners might seek to do to positively support this student group by means of curricular, pedagogic and support arrangements.

7.5: Conclusion

This chapter relates to the final stage in the conceptual framework of whether or not the students would persist with their studies and graduate and what was perhaps influencing their thoughts around this. It also addressed research objective five: ‘To comprehend the perceived impact of social integration on persistence and progression of undergraduate students who are YACs at an HEI’. It did this by considering how their sense of isolation and feelings of guilt had impacted them, and how these were mitigated by their social integration. For all participants, reducing the feelings of isolation and guilt supported their decision to persist and progress on their relative programmes of study.

All of the participants had considered leaving university prematurely over the course of their programme, but stayed to progress or complete their studies finding that social networks and university support were key to their decision to do so. The chapter

concluded with a section that presented the participants' thoughts on what HEIs could do to facilitate YACs' journeys through HE; these included wellbeing and academic support, financial support, and a designated member of staff for YACs. These perspectives will be cross-referenced with pre-existing and new recommendations in Chapter 8 for clarity of demonstrating the contribution to knowledge of this research project. Chapter 8 will now present the conclusions, recommendations and contribution to knowledge of this research project.

Chapter 8: Conclusions, recommendations and reflection

8.1: Introduction

This chapter brings together the conclusions, recommendations for higher education institutions (HEIs) and my reflection on the journey through this thesis. The conclusions will discuss how the research objectives have been addressed through the findings and discussion from Chapters 4 to 7. The research objectives that will be addressed are:

RO1: To examine YACs' perception of their social integration into an HEI.

RO2: To explore how university and support networks impact social integration for undergraduate students who are YACs.

RO3: To identify which University-organised events have the greatest impact on social integration from the perspective of undergraduate students who are YACs.

RO4: To examine the main barriers to social integration and building social networks from the perspective of undergraduate students who are YACs.

RO5: To comprehend the perceived impact of social integration on persistence and progression of undergraduate students who are YACs at an HEI.

The recommendations will connect the participants' insights regarding their opinions on what HEIs could do to better support YACs, prior recommendations to HEIs from the extant literature and new recommendations arising from the findings. The detailed recommendations will include practical solutions that HEIs might do well to implement in order to improve the recognition of, and provision for, young adult carers (YACs); where these have been previously suggested in the extant literature, more detail and context will be added in order to establish an original contribution to knowledge. Where recommendations are more likely to influence policy these are indicated in the section regarding contribution to knowledge, which will be presented as theory, policy and practice. Finally, the reflexive piece at the end of the chapter will present my thoughts and learnings from the process of embarking on this research study.

8.2: Conclusions

This section will present a summary of how each of the research objectives were addressed and in doing so will present the conclusions in a logical manner. For clarity and ease of reference, the conceptual framework that informed the design of this research project and guided the findings and discussion is included again here as figure 8.1:

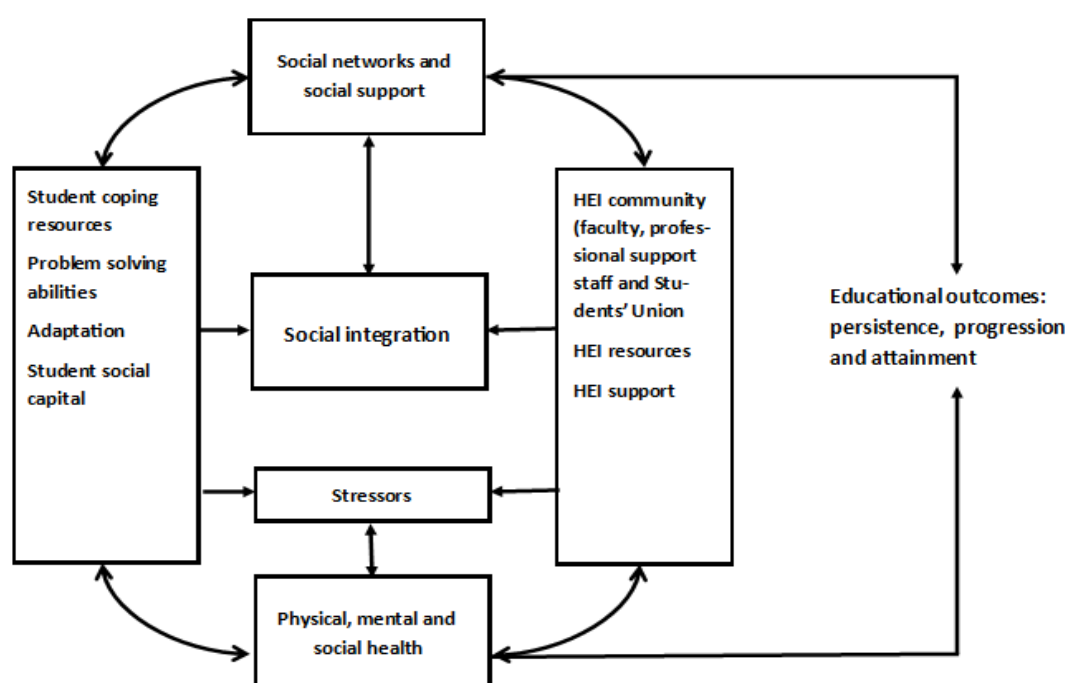


Figure 8.1: The conceptual framework

The theoretical perspectives that informed the conceptual framework will be used to contextualise the conclusions. To recap these were Heaney and Israel's (2008) model for the relationship of social networks and social support to health, Coleman's (1988) theory of social capital, and finally Tinto (1975) and Braxton and Hirschy's (2004) models of the journey that students take towards persistence in higher education, with specific reference to the antecedents that impact the student perception of social integration.

RO1: To examine YACs' perception of their social integration into an HEI.

RO2: To explore how university and support networks impact social integration for undergraduate students who are YACs.

Social networks are important to YACs in terms of supporting their social integration into higher education institutions (HEIs). Heaney and Israel (2008) discuss how the strength of ties in a social network demonstrate the existence of social integration; they further suggest that social ties then provide social support. The social networks in this study consisted of a range of groups and individuals, both online and in person, and the participants were clearly thankful that they had these people in their lives. The range of social support varied from person-to-person and group-to-group; sometimes it was due to the length of time the relationship had lasted, e.g. friends outside of university; and sometimes it was due to the context in which the relationship developed, e.g. groups associated with an extracurricular activity. Tinto (1975) stated that students enter HE with pre-existing characteristics, and that these include family background and school experience. The social capital that the participants already possessed as they began their HE journey included family and friendships that pre-existed university; the support from these connections was instrumental in motivating the participants to persist with their studies. According to the participants in this research project the friendships that pre-existed university were all very strong and necessary in providing social support. This aligns with Heaney and Israel's (2008) theory that long-standing intimate social network ties are unique in their propensity to provide support; accordingly, all the participants talked about one or two close friends with whom they shared most experiences. This is also supported by Coleman (1988) who describes personal interactions in closed communities as an important part of social capital. Heaney and Israel (2008) also posit that, during times of transition and change, social networks may increase and become more diffuse. With the participants in this study it could be observed that as they

transitioned into and through university, this did occur. All of the participants in this study retained friends from home, whether or not they were commuting students, as well as making at least one or two new friends within their respective HEIs. However, in line with Eggens et al. (2008) the participants' networks did not expand beyond an average of five key individuals. This may well link to the reluctance of the YACs to share their situation with new peers and forge new friendships.

In this study, the participants described peers as students who were studying on the same programme as themselves, rather than friends per se; therefore from the data it was not apparent that peers enabled social integration. However, in the literature, peer support was found to be important (Eggens et al., 2008; Kettell, 2018; MacKinnon, 2012; Tinto, 1993); what might be concluded here is the differentiation between peers and friends. In terms of developing the role of peers for YACs, Heaney and Israel (2008) suggest that new social network linkages can be formed through mentoring and buddy systems. They differentiate between mentors and buddies as the former being individuals who have previous experience of a situation, and the latter being individuals who have current experience of a situation. Heaney and Israel (2008) suggest that these systems may facilitate the formation of self-help groups and provide an opportunity for members of the group to form new network ties. In universities these groups may manifest as peer support programmes and are deemed potentially useful.

From the survey presented in Chapter 1, U3 had a peer support programme in place to help YACs integrate into their place of education. Other university peer support programmes were described as academic support, but not related to YACs specifically. It was not possible to establish the success of these programmes from the data. What can be construed from the interview data is that when the peers on the support programmes are not YACs, they are less likely to be aware of the pressures YACs are under as they travel along their educational journey, and potentially less likely to be classified as friends.

Barrera, Sandler and Ramsay (1981) found that family support was most important for first year students as they transitioned into university. However, despite the participants in this study being in their second and final years of their programme, they stated that family support continued to be key for them. This is possibly because of their strong family ties, as they are still caring for a family member; even if this caring role is remote. The importance of family support did not diminish across the academic year for the YACs in this study. This contrasts with the findings of Friedlander et al., (2007) and MacKinnon (2012) who found that, for the students in their studies, peers and friends became more important than family as their academic programme of study progressed. All the YACs stated that they would probably have not persisted with their studies without the support of family and friends.

Academics were less important to the participants in terms of the influence on their social integration; although Kasworm and Blowers (1994) and Kasworm (2005) had reiterated the importance of faculty relationships for non-traditional student groups. Heaney and Israel (2008) posited that there was considerable debate on whether or not professionals were considered effective sources of support by those individuals seeking help. The perception of individuals who have access to professional support, is that the relationship is not reciprocal and that professionals may move on in their job role, which impacts the level of trust invested in a potential relationship. Conversely, professionals are perceived as having access to resources and informational support, this has the potential to create information capital and ultimately impact social capital (Coleman, 1988). In this research project, the participants viewed academics as necessary in their educational journey, but that their relationships with academics varied from person-to-person. Dissertation supervisors were deemed useful social contacts as they also provided valuable information and guidance surrounding the process of completing a research project. This informational exchange led to stronger relationships with dissertation supervisors,

compared with those the participants had with personal or academic tutors. Coleman (1988) discusses informational exchange as reciprocal and necessary in the precipitation of social capital. Personal and institutional networks are both deemed important for supporting the educational journey of students in HE (Mishra, 2020).

In summary, the YACs perception of their social integration into their respective HEIs was varied depending upon the support they received from individuals proximate to the university, such as family and pre-existing friends, and individuals considered part of their social networks, such as peers, friends at university, and some academics. Generally, the students in this study found coping mechanisms of their own; for example, relying on pre-existing friends to help support them. At no point were professional support staff discussed as being important in the participants' social integration into HE; this despite Heaney and Israel (2008) describing professional support staff as "natural" helpers. The HEIs were somewhat useful in facilitating social integration in terms of peer group work; for example, one participant had made a new friend as a result of this activity. Classrooms and group work are important elements in the formation of student communities (Braxton and Hirschy, 2004). In summary, largely there was very little evidence of the HEIs represented in this research project as being instrumental and active in the social integration of the participants.

RO3: To identify which University-organised events have the greatest impact on social integration from the perspective of undergraduate students who are YACs.

The pandemic impacted the opportunity to address this research objective fully. At the outset of the pandemic in March 2020, all social activities were curtailed including those at universities. Students either returned to their family home, or were locked down in student accommodation. The participants in this study were no exception. Yusra, Ally, Rae and Chloe were all isolated in the family home and therefore distant from their HEIs. Kaya was locked down in her student accommodation with one other student and unable to return

home. However, despite this, some data was collected with regard to university-organised events.

Freshers' week was mentioned as being somewhat useful in terms of providing information about potential societies; all of the participants had attempted to join at least one society and attended at least one meeting, but with little success. Rae was the most active participant of the societies at her HEI and had financial support from her university to help facilitate her participation. This was unusual in this study as none of the other students experienced this. One student suggested that the Students' Union might have organised a society for YACs, and that she might have taken the initiative on this, but was time-poor. Heaney and Israel (2008) suggest enhancing networks through community capacity building; which also aligns with Coleman's (1988) theory of social capital. This works by identifying overlapping networks in the community; in an HEI this may be student YACs, staff with caring responsibilities and the Students' Union. Problem-solving and support are the key focus of such groups, according to Heaney and Israel (2008) and they work to build social integration. The role of the university and links to students via social networks and social support is indicated on the conceptual framework; as is the problem-solving ability of students.

Being able to access social activities in order to socialise, was important to the participants. Some of the university-related activities were not accessible in terms of the location or time of day, particularly events organised by societies. This was evidenced in this study in terms of the fact that most of the participants sought social activity outside of their respective HEIs. Additionally, for the YACs in this study, making and developing social connections online was important, as this was deemed more accessible from the perspectives of time, money and location. Indeed, it has been previously found that for all students, barriers to participation in extracurricular university-organised events are lack of time, money and confidence (Dickinson, Griffiths and Bredice, 2021). It could be

concluded that HEIs and Students' Unions do not consider underrepresented student groups when planning events. All of the YACs socialised in one form or another, through both university-organised events and societies or through their own social activities independent of the university. The act of socialising improved their sense of wellbeing.

In Braxton and Hirschy's (2004) model there are three antecedents to social integration for students. One of which is communal potential. If students consider there are opportunities to join societies and communities with like-minded people, then their perception of communal potential is high. The effective provision of support from individuals who are in a similar position to each other creates a depth of understanding in a community (Thoits, 1995). A second antecedent in Braxton and Hirschy's (2004) model is institutional integrity. If, before joining the university, a student perceives that the HEI has created certain expectations through various communications e.g. the provision of societies and a great social experience, and then, according to the student, these are not delivered, institutional integrity is low. This impacts the student's perception of their own social integration. It is likely that the lack of communities and societies specifically aimed at the YACs in this research project impacted their perception of their own social integration.

Family support facilitated social integration in some respects, as the respite the YACs were offered from their caring responsibilities when another family member stepped in to help, allowed them to participate in social activities. Even when the social activities were not directly related to the university, most of them involved the participants socialising with other students from their respective HEIs, and therefore increased their feeling of belonging. Research objective three was not fully addressed as it was difficult to ascertain whether access to the limited number of university-organised events impacted the social integration of YACs. In the absence of the pandemic, this objective would have been more thoroughly explored.

RO4: To examine the main barriers to social integration and building social networks from the perspective of undergraduate students who are YACs.

This research objective was addressed in some depth through the data. It is apparent that the main barriers to social integration are financial, health-related and a sense of isolation that resulted from a reluctance to share. Lack of time also emerged as one of the barriers to social integration. The barriers to social integration are indicated on the conceptual framework in figure 8.1 as stressors, and physical and mental health (Heaney and Israel, 2008).

One of the main barriers to social integration was financial; any bursaries offered to the participants were viewed in different ways. For Chloe, her bursary helped with the cost of commuting; Rae had financial support to pursue singing lessons, but this was unusual in terms of HEIs generally. Kaya's bursary was welcome, but she felt that once the bursary had been awarded, she considered that her HEI felt that they did not need to support her in any other way. Ally was under severe financial pressure, and had to find employment to support her family and herself; but ironically, her caring responsibilities then forced her to cease her job as she was unable to commit to regular hours. The financial dilemma is of concern for YACs; whilst some HEIs offer a healthy bursary, many do not; only 32% of HEIs (16 of 50) reviewed in Chapter 1 of this study offered financial support to YACs.

Previous research has identified that YACs often come from low-income backgrounds and therefore, not only struggle to access HE, but also are often unable to afford to participate in social events once they are there (Haugland, Hysing and Sivertsen, 2019). Therefore, for many students, not only YACs, finance may be a barrier to integrating into HE (Tinto, 2017). Finally, the participants in this study had also mentioned the perceived stigma of receiving financial help, so this has been construed as an intrinsic barrier in terms of seeking support.

The participants' health was discussed as a barrier to social integration. This was both physical (one of the YACs suffered from chronic fatigue) and mental, with depression and anxiety cited as being the most debilitating conditions for them. This is clearly indicated in the conceptual framework in figure 8.1; Cohen and Wills (1985) suggest that social networks and social support buffer the effects of this stressor. Poor mental health of YACs has been found to impact persistence in education (Becker and Sempik, 2019) and also for young carers under 16 years of age (Joseph et al., 2019; Kaiser and Schulze, 2015; Wayman, Raws and Leadbitter, 2016). In this research project, some of the participants had sought medical advice, and not all of this was helpful. Whilst the students in this study were unwell, they were less likely to participate in social activities. However, some of them were in receipt of support from close friends and family, which helped them cope more easily with their illnesses, and enabled them to remain in higher education. This therefore, reaffirms the fact that social networks and the support they provide are key in terms of student persistence. Accordingly, Heaney and Israel (2008) state that when individuals experience stressors, having access to personal or community support reduces the impact of the stressor and allows the individual to cope more effectively with it.

What was apparent in this study, was that the barriers to social integration were all closely linked. The lack of money meant that the participants were often unable to socialise, this then led to a feeling of isolation, which then likely precipitated low mood and perhaps impacted mental health. The low mood and mental health issues then meant that the YACs were less motivated to make contact with friends and peers, so further isolating themselves. Indeed, Ally's narrative was a clear example of this. Thus this appeared to be a cyclical pattern and more research is required in order to understand how to break this cycle.

RO5: To comprehend the perceived impact of social integration on persistence and progression of undergraduate students who are YACs at an HEI.

This was the final stage or outcome of the conceptual framework for this research project. Based on the findings from this study, it is apparent that social integration does impact persistence and progression for YACs. When there are strong social networks and good social support from both individuals internal and external to the HEI, social integration is more likely to happen; likewise when barriers are managed or removed completely, social integration is more positive. Very low levels of social integration have been demonstrated to have negative effects on the mental health of individuals (Heaney and Israel, 2008). This is also in line with earlier theories from Tinto (1975) and Braxton and Hirschy (2004) and their models of student persistence and retention and the impact of social integration. Those YACs that had stronger social networks and good social support were more likely to persist with their studies than those who did not.

The participants who had considered leaving their university at some point, had all pointed out that it was because of their social networks and support that they had stayed. When asked what would have happened without these people and groups, without exception all participants said they would have left prematurely. The recognition the participants received from friends and family, less so from academics, was important to them in motivating them to carry on with their educational journey. None of the participants recalled their respective HEI being overly supportive of their situation. Each student had different perceptions of the support they had received, with some of them explaining how difficult it had been to actually access this support resource. It would be interesting to consider how much less stressed these students would have been if they had been in receipt of a clear programme of support that was directly related to their own, very different, situations.

This indicates that HEIs could further acknowledge the role that social integration plays in persistence and retention of students. It is also important to remember that an HEI exists as an institutional fact with deontic powers (Searle, 2010) and also provides the social space for students to grow and develop. HEIs are therefore in a powerful position to be able to facilitate more social initiatives for students than they currently do. The Braxton and Hirschy (2004) model describes three antecedents to social integration; these are institutional commitment to the welfare of students, institutional integrity and communal potential. When all three antecedents are perceived as being addressed by students, they may feel more socially integrated as they then have a stronger commitment to the institution. In this thesis, there were articulated perceptions of a lack of institutional commitment to the participants' welfare and varying perceptions of institutional integrity and communal potential. Therefore, based on Braxton and Hirschy's (2004) model it can be concluded that the participants in this study could have been more effectively socially integrated into their respective HEIs, had all three antecedents been addressed well.

The review of the support provided to YACs from a range of HEIs in England has demonstrated that it is wide, varied and, for the majority of HEIs, focused on academic and financial support, rather than including social support. From an HEI perspective the support available to YACs and other student carers may be deemed sufficient. This research project has demonstrated that, from the student perspective, what is considered helpful is sometimes in contrast to the provision available to them. It is clear there is still some work to do in regards to raising awareness of this student group and of supporting them during their time in HE. In 2015 the Carers Trust produced a document that is available to HEIs that recommended what they could do to support YACs through their educational journey. The document listed a number of areas such as flexible extenuating circumstances, bursaries and training for staff members around awareness of YACs; however there was nothing specifically about how to provide social opportunities for this student group. Also despite this document being written in 2015; from the evidence in this

review, only a few HEIs have adopted some of the suggestions made by the Trust. The following section on recommendations will discuss what could be done to improve the social integration of YACs into HEIs; any existing recommendations will be acknowledged and this research project's contribution to knowledge will be emphasised.

8.3: Recommendations

The recommendations in this research project have been informed by the conceptual framework and focus specifically on those initiatives that will help facilitate social integration for YACs as they transition into and progress through HE. The recommendations all incorporate ways in which to increase social support, social network ties and ultimately social capital (Coleman, 1988; Heaney and Israel, 2008). They are also framed by Braxton and Hirschy's (2004) model of student social integration into HE and the links to each antecedent in this model are highlighted throughout. With respect to the conceptual framework of this research project, the recommendations will also potentially alleviate the stressors and barriers to social integration.

There are numerous recommendations in the extant literature pertaining to this student group and their academic integration into HE, but few that focus specifically on social integration. Table 8.1 lists those recommendations arising from the findings and feedback from the participants, but that are already in existence in the extant literature. For ease of reference the student perspectives are referenced back to the relevant sections in this thesis.

Recommendation	Recommended previously in extant literature	Independently suggested by the participants in this study
Designated member of staff for YACs	Carers Trust (2015); Kettell (2018)	Yes – see section 7.4.3
Students' Union support	Carers Trust (2015); Kettell (2018); Sempik and Becker (2014)	Yes – see section 5.2.1
Peer support groups and/or self-help groups	Andrewartha and Harvey (2021); Carers Trust (2015); Kettell (2018)	No
Carer's Passport	Kettell (2018)	No
Raising staff awareness of YACs	Andrewartha and Harvey (2021); Carers Trust (2015); Kettell (2018); Sempik and Becker (2014)	Yes – see section 7.4.1
Flexibility across the students' support packages	Andrewartha and Harvey (2021); Carers Trust (2015); Larkin and Kubiak (2021) but not specifically with respect to well-being individual support plans.	Yes – see section 7.4.1

Table 8.1: Recommendations arising from this research project, but evidenced in the extant literature

These recommendations will be briefly discussed in the context of this research project in the following sections; there are some new details in terms of implementation of these existing recommendations. Following this those recommendations that are unique to this study will be discussed in more depth.

8.3.1: Existing recommendations and further enhancements

Designated member of staff: The recommendation for HEIs to provide a designated member of staff (DMS) responsible for YACs has been discussed previously in the extant literature. However, based on the findings from this research project, this suggestion has been developed and in this respect is a partial contribution to knowledge. Whilst 22 of the universities in the survey presented in Chapter 1 supplied email contact details for YACs, some of these were generic well-being email addresses. It was notable that only 15 universities had a named contact for YACs; prior to joining a university it may influence a YACs decision to join if they can see there is a specific person allocated to support YACs and help them integrate into HE. Some of the participants mentioned how helpful it would have been to have one person that understood their situation in detail and who could have helped them specifically navigate university. It is also of note that universities need to appreciate that for any young person transitioning into HE, it is an unknown, particularly if they are first in family and are unfamiliar with how to navigate the processes and procedures.

The institutional commitment to welfare and institutional integrity antecedents in Braxton and Hirschy's (2004) model would both be fulfilled if HEIs all identified a DMS and this person remained a constant for the YACs in that HEI. In terms of easing the transition into HE, it is recommended that the DMS contact the YAC once their place at the institution of their choice has been confirmed and accepted. The relationship between the DMS and YAC should be reciprocal and therefore potentially one of trust (Heaney and Israel, 2008). Staff with awareness of this student group could either be trained to understand YACs' needs and challenges, or even have had experience of caring, which would be useful in terms of a depth understanding.

If resources allow, it might also be useful for there to be a DMS for YACs in each faculty or school in the HEI; so not just one person in well-being. This person would better understand the YACs' programme demands and so be able to put more effective and flexible support in place. Additionally a named contact would likely be aware of other YACs within the faculty, and therefore have the opportunity to facilitate connections between peer YACs.

Students' Union (SU) and peer support: In terms of specific people who understand and empathise with the YACs' situation, peer support would be an excellent approach at all universities. U3 has the City Buddies scheme where YACs support each other; other peer support may also originate from the students' union (SU) in each university. The Carers Trust (2015) suggests that students' unions become more involved in supporting YACs; but does not detail how this may be implemented. With respect to further developing this recommendation, it is acknowledged that there are SU officers with various responsibilities such as well-being; societies; inclusivity and events; it would be useful for there to be a named contact for YACs inside every SU. This would mean the contact is affiliated with the university, but not employed directly by them, and perhaps if a YAC was aware of this person, they might feel that they were more accessible than a university employee. Also the SU could play a better role in socially integrating underrepresented students, such as YACs and encouraging specific societies for this student group. One participant wanted to start up a society for student carers, but did not because of time pressures.

Carer's Passport: Some universities offer a carer's passport scheme, this means that the student carers do not have to keep explaining to various university employees about their home situation. Kettell (2018) also recommends this. The fact that YACs are already reluctant to share details of their caring responsibilities, means that they will likely find it

too painful to keep repeating their story to people who are essentially strangers to them. If all universities simply made academics and other support staff aware of all YACs through class lists, then there would be no need for these students to keep repeating themselves. However, this does rely on student carers disclosing their situation on enrolment, and not all YACs are willing to do this. Perhaps if they understand that, by declaring they are a YAC, it will ease their transition into HE they might be more willing to self-identify. This also relies on the universities communicating clearly to each student that registers as a student with caring responsibilities, that they could be offered a bespoke support plan. Additionally self-identification on enrolment might also provide the universities with the opportunity to work with each student to ensure they know that there is a more accepting and inclusive environment in HE, compared with that they may have previously experienced at school or sixth form college. This would reassure the YACs that the HEI is fully supportive of their situation, and potentially ensure they are less reluctant to share their home situation with peers and staff.

Raising staff awareness of YACs: It will be recalled that one university in the sample surveyed in Chapter 1 had specifically worked to raise awareness of YACs with staff; this involved a training scheme that ensured staff were able to recognise when YACs needed support and how they could best help. The fact that some participants in this study had felt under supported by academics, mainly because the latter did not understand their home situation demonstrates that this is important. Raising awareness of this student group with staff would be an effective way to ensure YACs felt included in their HEI. Most HEIs have staff development programmes and raising awareness of underrepresented student groups, such as YACs, is something that could be embedded in new staff inductions. Potentially having a programme of events that linked staff and students who both have caring responsibilities might offer another opportunity to strengthen support networks.

Flexible support arrangements: One participant commented on how her caring situation had changed during the three years of her programme and that essentially she required more support in her third year compared with her first year. She was not aware that she could revisit her support programme to amend the details agreed in her first year; if there had been a consistent named contact (DMS) during her time at university she may have felt more comfortable approaching the support team for further meetings. The fact that a YAC's caring responsibilities may change across their time at university is another factor that is important for HEI staff to understand. If flexible support arrangements are to be offered, then these need to be publicised to the YAC community and there is requirement for faculty to be aware that support plans could change. If HEIs implement staff training to enable further understanding of the issues and challenges encountered by underrepresented student groups, then this is an additional inclusion to be considered in such programmes.

8.3.2: New recommendations

Referring back to the conceptual framework for this research project, it is potentially evident to see that those HEIs with bespoke programmes in place for YACs are more likely to fulfil all elements contributing to social integration, compared with those HEIs that do not provide such strong support. Institutions may consider they have commitment to the welfare of YACs by offering support through wellbeing, and facilitating social integration through events that the university and students' union (SU) organises; however, if the perception of the students does not align with the HEI's intent then this is likely not being met. Communal potential is also likely to be perceived differently by the HEI and the student; the former may consider there are opportunities to socialise and become part of a community of practice, but the student may think these are inaccessible. More therefore needs to be done to align the perceptions of both the HEI and YACs in order that social integration becomes a reality. The following recommendations may go some way to enabling this to happen. Table 8.2 lists the recommendations arising from

this research project that are new contributions to knowledge in this field. These recommendations will be discussed in detail in the ensuing section and will use the conceptual framework from this research project to inform the discussion.

Recommendation	Further comment
Accessible social events	Use of technology and a YAC Student Voice group to better understand what constitutes accessibility
YAC student voice	Arising as a result of the scoping review
Improved information on HEI websites prior to admission	Arising as a result of the scoping review and also addressing the antecedent to social integration of institutional integrity (Braxton and Hirschy, 2004)
Staff-student carer community groups	Arising as a result of the scoping review, impacted by the YACs' narratives, and addressing the antecedent to social integration of communal potential (Braxton and Hirschy, 2004)
Bringing external carer support groups into the HEI	Arising as a result of the power of enhancing networks through community capacity building (Heaney and Israel, 2008).
Recognition of the role of family	Arising as a result of the strength of social network ties evident in the findings in Chapter 4 (Coleman, 1988)

Table 8.2: Recommendations arising from the findings in this research project and considered a contribution to knowledge

Accessible Social Events and a YAC student voice: One of the areas that arose during the interviews was the inaccessibility of social opportunities for the YACs. University-run events were not widely mentioned as being useful socially. The students all preferred to be able to socialise externally to their HEI; largely because they found this was more accessible for them. The fact that they all managed to fit in social activities demonstrated that time might be an issue sometimes, but not always. Therefore the universities might be well advised to canvas the opinion of underrepresented students to ascertain what would be useful for them and when. U35 Cares runs Student Voice events for student carers, affording this group an opportunity to provide feedback to the university; therefore

more universities might also find this a productive activity. Heaney and Israel (2008) suggest enhancing existing network ties through training 'Focus' individuals. In the context of this research project, this means identification of a "champion" YAC who may be able to lead a group of YACs and champion their cause internally in the HEI with a view to enhancing policy internally.

Ensuring social events are accessible, fulfils communal potential (Braxton and Hirschy, 2004). Accessible and relevant social activity or events could be published on the HEI websites and social media as something that is available for YACs. It is important to note that if this type of opportunity was communicated on the university recruitment information, that it should actually occur; not only is this a legal requirement from the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA, 2023); but is also an indication of institutional integrity (Braxton and Hirschy, 2004).

Using technology to facilitate social interaction that universities support and run is strongly recommended. This study found that all students actively engaged with technology to connect with friends and participate in events, whilst one of the students even used a VR headset to connect with people. It is a possibility that, for a small subscription, HEIs could loan out VR headsets to students so that they could create their own social networks or clubs and keep in touch from home. It would also be useful for the SU officers to set up areas on social media platforms where groups of YACs could communicate with each other. Facebook pages, Instagram groups and WhatsApp groups are instantly accessible and are a way for young people to keep in touch. Another participant had commented on how useful it would have been to be introduced to other YACs as she was not aware of any other students with caring responsibilities. It was evident that the participants would be more willing to share their home situation with students who had similar experiences, and that if they felt part of a community of YACs, they might well feel more socially

integrated on joining the university. It is also likely that these peers might become friends over time and that this would further develop a sense of belonging.

Improved websites: In the interests of demonstrating institutional integrity (Braxton and Hirschy, 2004) it is also recommended that all HEIs work to improve their websites and accessibility to information pertaining to underrepresented student groups. Students who perceive that they matter to the HEI of their choice, are more likely to feel socially connected to their institution (Braxton and Hirschy, 2004). In collating the survey information provided in Chapter 1 of this study, it was difficult to find information for YACs on many of the websites; indeed if I had been a YAC I might not have persisted in my searches. The landing pages for many university websites are not particularly helpful or easy to navigate and they might do well to redesign their sites by researching user experience of various different student groups, including YACs. A single area on university websites for each of the underrepresented student groups as described by the Office for Students (2022a) might be very useful for these students and improve accessibility.

Staff-student carer community groups: Linking to some interventions that are already in place in some of the identified HEIs (from the scoping review in Chapter 1) are those that help develop new social network linkages (Heaney and Israel, 2008). These may be facilitated through a link to mentors, i.e. alumni who have already been through studying whilst being a YAC; or developing buddy systems which require pairing up YACs to support and understand each other. The buddy system could ultimately form a self-help group, this group will offer an opportunity to allow the members to develop new social network ties and increase their social capital. One of the parameters of Coleman's (1988) theory of social capital is that of community potential, where members of a community can support each other. In this study, the students all said they were keen to get to know other young adult carers and to be able to share their experiences. This could also be linked to the self-help group suggested above. Likewise the communal potential (Braxton and

Hirschy, 2004) is enhanced if students perceive there are groups to which they can belong. These groups can be small, but the importance of congruence between the member individuals is important in terms of shared values, beliefs and goals.

In line with Coleman's (1988) theory of social capital and the strength of community exchange, it is recommended that there is identification of overlapping communities related to caring inside and outside of an HEI to bring them together. This community could share resources and information to solve ongoing problems and to create positive experiences. In the context of this research project the overlapping communities might be the relevant Students' Union officer, student YACs and staff with caring responsibilities. One HEI from the scoping review already does this with some success and holds a Carers' Café regularly for individuals to meet. The benefit of doing this is that it breaks down the barriers between staff and students and also ensures the latter observe that there are some staff members who understand their day-to-day challenges related to their caring responsibilities.

Bringing external carer support groups into the HEI: In addition to the above recommendation of formation of a community of YACs inside an HEI, more could be made in terms of provision of support from external agencies. Rather than telling YACs what support is available to them externally, the recommendation here is to ensure the external charities have a regular presence on campus. Braxton and Hirschy (2004) discuss the importance of institutional commitment to welfare as an antecedent to social integration. If universities are able to demonstrate that there are relevant support groups for YACs, this antecedent is more likely to be met. Many of the universities included in the scoping review in Chapter 1 provided links on their sites to external, local support groups for YACs through such organisations as the Carers Trust. Whilst this is good practice, it might be more effective for such support groups to be positioned internally inside the HEI, therefore

making them more accessible. These groups could work to orientate their activities around the academic calendar and provide social support when it was most useful.

Recognition of the role of family: In this research project the role of family is evident. Referring back to the conceptual framework, the students all enter HE with pre-existing characteristics including social networks and social support. The findings suggested that family members, and particularly the maternal parent, were an important and consistent element of support for the participant YACs during their educational journey. The family also constituted social capital for each student (Coleman, 1988). In the context of this research project it is recommended that HEIs may benefit from seeking permission to reach out to families of YACs. The purpose of doing this would be for both parties i.e. the HEI contact and the family members to understand how to better support the YAC in their educational journey. The findings in this research study were that the maternal parents were very supportive of the participants' goal to achieve an undergraduate degree; and that perhaps more could be done to build a relationship between the HEI and the family. It is acknowledged that the family may resist approaches from the HEI, as they may view this as one more external agency being involved in their situation; however, given the positive support towards the YACs from the maternal parent, the approach may be welcomed. The Carers Trust (2015) suggests a whole family approach to understanding a young adult's caring responsibilities, working with supportive agencies to try and reduce them. The HEI could become one of the supportive agencies.

8.3.3: Conclusions

All of these recommendations require resources to be allocated by the HEI implementing them. These resources may be in the form of time, money, people or systems. In terms of those resources with a cost implication, it needs to be acknowledged that these recommendations are being made in the context of neoliberalist HEIs, under pressure to

hit various key performance indicators and generate financial surplus that can potentially be reinvested into the university. It is also acknowledged that in a post-pandemic environment, student mental health has deteriorated and that this has placed a huge burden on already overstretched wellbeing and professional support services in HEIs. Therefore it is advised that each recommendation be piloted on a small scale initially, and members of the HEI community who are keen to volunteer are sought out. In the interests of a more cost-effective approach to implementation, all of these interventions could also be facilitated virtually, in order to provide an environment that is acceptable to Generation Z (McKinsey, 2018). This has already been suggested in this study as something that is useful and accessible to YACs, in terms of circumventing the issues of lack of time and money to attend social events.

If the recommendations in this thesis are implemented, they may contribute to greater social integration of YACs. If YACs are aware that there will be emotional and social support for them, as well as academic support, they might feel less anxious about the transition into HEI. It is widely acknowledged that the HE student experience is a construct of both academic and social integration (Braxton and Hirschy, 2004; Day, 2019; Kettell, 2018; Tinto, 1975; Tinto, 1993; Tinto, 2006). Clearly it is an exciting time in any young person's life and it would enhance the YACs' journey for them to be able to feel the same as other student groups as they progressed through HE.

Finally, it needs to be recognised that universities will continue to prioritise resources towards recruiting and supporting those student groups that they consider to be most profitable in terms of fee provision; as well as those underrepresented student groups that have been identified as targets in their respective Access and Participation Plans. This research project is one of a growing number of studies that is helping raise awareness of young adult carers in HE and it is my intention to make sure that I am part of the community of researchers that continues to make this the case.

8.4: Contribution to knowledge

This research has contributed to knowledge regarding a distinct student group in the higher education sector – a group whose identity, educational journey and outcomes are increasingly accounted for in statistical and other outcome measures, but whose qualitative experiences and insights have until now awaited fuller investigation and representation. This research investigated the impact that social integration has on this student group as they transition into and through higher education (HE). The separate contributions to theory, practice and policy are detailed below.

8.4.1: Theory

This project has added to the extant literature on YACs in HE, by focusing more precisely on social networks, social support and social integration and their impact on persistence and progression. Previously social integration had been mentioned in a number of studies, but not as the primary focus. The results have built on the research that Tinto (1975) and later Braxton and Hirschy (2004) undertook with regards to social integration for all students in HE, but through the lens of YACs. This project was also foregrounded by a scoping review of 50 HEIs in England, this review was a contribution to knowledge and was useful in informing the recommendations regarding provision of information and support for YACs. This project also appears to be the first longitudinal qualitative project regarding YACs, as it engaged the participants over the course of an academic year. The project also used visual network diagrams to more fully understand the social networks of the participants; in as far as it can be ascertained, this had not been used before with this group of students in this context. One of the key areas that has been previously under researched was the role and importance of social media, and potentially virtual reality, in facilitating social integration in HEIs; this is an area of interest to me and one to be investigated in a future research project.

8.4.2: Practice

Carers Trust (2015) has already published a document for HEIs advising them about positive ways to support YACs. It would appear from the current research project that few of the HEIs examined have evidently implemented the recommendations from this report. The recommendations from the Carers Trust (2015) included identification of YACs, raising staff awareness of YACs, and promotion of better support systems. It is of interest to me whether the lack of adoption of these recommendations is because of a want of resources. The additional and new recommendations arising from this research project are as follows. HEIs are advised to ensure social events are more accessible, perhaps by utilising technology to do so. It is also advised that HEIs facilitate staff-student carer community groups and build communal potential in this way. Giving YACs a student voice and seeking their opinion on such initiatives would be useful; HEIs are increasingly using students as partners to inform many areas of practice and policy within the institution. Accordingly, it has been previously posited that giving students an input into decision-making surrounding institutional policies and rules positively affects social integration (Berger and Braxton, 1998).

8.4.3: Policy

With regards to ensuring there is a clear policy to move forward and embrace the change that is so clearly needed, each HEI needs someone internally to champion this group of students. This could be a member of staff and also a student, or a member of staff in each faculty or school, depending upon the number of YACs in the institution and size of institution. These people could work with Vice Chancellor Groups to identify what is required in terms of support for YACs and how change might be implemented. For example, it is recommended that it becomes policy to recognise that YACs need flexible support programmes that may change across their educational journey. It may also become policy that this member of staff is the outreach person with the families of YACs, seeking to understand how to best support each YAC.

Additionally, approaching the National Union of Students (NUS) would be recommended. This organisation could then work with Students' Unions across the UK to raise awareness of YACs, and identify a sabbatical officer within each SU with the responsibility to drive change. It should also be policy to have clearly signposted content on all HEI websites, so that YACs can access information prior to making a decision to join their HEI. Finally, it is recommended that HEIs should work with the Carers Trust to ensure that support groups are brought into the university environs across England.

8.5: Reflection

One of the most difficult areas to deal with during this project was participant recruitment. I had been very naive in my assumption that I would gain enough participants from my own HEI. Finding that there were only ten self-identified YACs was of concern to me, as initially I had been told there were at least forty. I turned to my supervisors for advice and to discuss the possibility of extending my recruitment campaign across England. They agreed and so I submitted an addendum to the University Research Ethics Committee to seek approval. I then experienced a rather stressful few weeks trying to recruit at least five participants. This made me feel very downhearted, but I persevered with my tasks of contacting people and reaching out. As I started to reach out to other HEIs and to charitable organisations associated with YACs, I received a lot of very positive feedback about the nature of my project. This motivated me to continue. Eventually I secured five participants and felt very excited about the prospect of starting data collection. This also meant my positionality in this research project changed from insider to insider-outsider. With respect to any participants from my own institution I was an insider researcher as I was aware of the support available to YACs; however with respect to the remaining participants, I was an outsider researcher with little or no knowledge of the support

available to them as YACs. This gave me a dual perspective on the data, and one of which I was consistently aware as I progressed through the project.

As I analysed the data I was interested to discover that the spoken and written narratives were very similar; this was of interest to me as it reinforced the participants' stories ensuring they were coherent and reliable. On further reflection this may mean that the data from the reflective journals did not add anything to this study, however, it did validate the spoken narratives and added some element of depth in places. In retrospect, perhaps populating the journals with pre-existing questions was not such an effective approach. However, I was guided by a colleague who had experience of using journals as a data collection instrument, and they recommended including questions as being more effective in terms of the data being aligned to research objectives. Some of the themes that arose from the written and spoken narratives were expected and some less so. I had not expected the theme of isolation to occur so frequently. However, unlike many students without caring responsibilities, for the participants in this study, the feeling of isolation did not disappear.

Another theme that was unexpected was guilt; although I read about this in the literature, it was mentioned more in the context of feeling guilty about being away from home as a student (Kettell, 2018). Two additional papers were sourced with regards to carer's guilt, the meaning of which is the guilt felt by carers when the person they are caring for is suffering; this was not the guilt felt by the participants in this study. Guilt is a strong emotion and one that the participants all battled with in one form or another; perhaps I ought to have anticipated it arising more frequently. The guilt that arose as a theme in this project was related to that experienced by the participants when being persuaded to socialise, and then seeing other family members taking on the caring role to allow the participant some respite. The other dimension related to guilt, was the guilt felt by the participants who cared remotely. This allowed me to reflect on my own situation as a

student who is a single parent and working full-time. I constantly felt guilty about either not doing a good job at work, not studying enough, or not being a good enough parent; so I could empathise with the participants.

The social network of each participant was illustrated by the visual network diagrams and I had considered further analysing these using spidergrams, as depicted in figure 8.1 below.

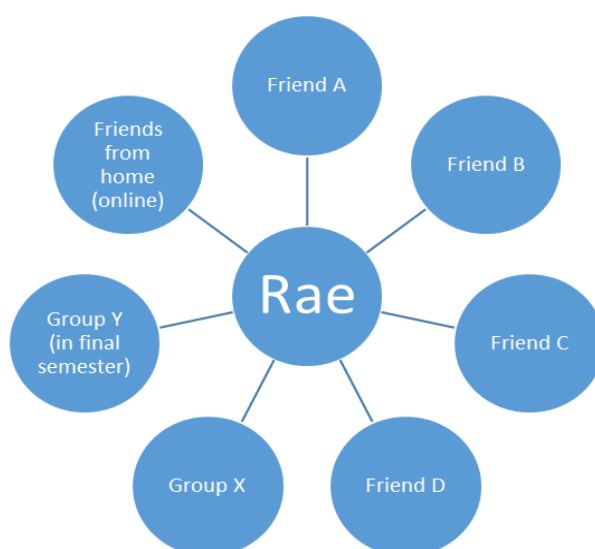


Figure 8.2: Rae's social network

In this way it might have been possible to show the social capital of each student. However, after attempting to present the data using spidergrams, it was evident that this did not really add any value to the overall findings and discussion. In order for such diagrams to add depth to the analysis, it would have been necessary to present each spidergram using different length spokes or different size circles to represent the relative strength of each network tie. If I had taken this approach, I would have been making a lot of assumptions, which would have essentially rendered the diagrams invalid. I would have had to ask questions during the data collection regarding the relative importance of each person or group in the participants' networks in order for the diagrams to be meaningful.

The research objectives were conceived as the acute phase of the COVID-19 pandemic began and as it progressed it was obvious that a study on students being socially integrated into their place of education was likely to be affected. We were all struggling to maintain social networks, as we were repeatedly put into lockdown situations and learning was delivered online. Additionally the events industry was also severely affected which meant Students' Unions across the country were also confined with respect to the sort of events they could put on for students. As students transitioned into higher education, many were confronted with an online Freshers' Week and online learning; not exactly conducive to social integration. This being the case it was impossible to explore research objective three in any depth; there was some data collected around this area, but it was minimal.

The journey I have taken through the Doctorate in Education has been enlightening. I have developed my research skills and consider that I am now a more effective supervisor for my own undergraduate and postgraduate dissertation students. There were times when I was tempted to give up, but I persisted as I hoped that my research would have a positive impact on YACs. One of the things that continued to motivate me was my own involvement with Study Higher, which is an organisation that runs outreach programmes for young people at school, including young carers. As I helped deliver Study Higher sessions to year 9 students who are young carers, I started to envisage the impact that this project might have on these young people when they eventually transitioned into HE.

Finally, in the context of this research project it was also interesting to observe the degree to which the participants took advantage of social opportunities and how this impacted their mental health and hence their propensity to study. I was grateful to the participants for giving up their valuable time, and received positive feedback from some of them regarding the interviews. They had viewed these as supportive and useful. As it appeared that I had become a support network of sorts for them, I was mindful of how I exited the

study. During the final interview, I asked them what their future plans were and how they were feeling and they were all in a positive place. I ensured they were all aware of the other support available to them, should they require it, and said I would be in touch with the final version of my research project. They were all accepting of this and we parted on good terms. I am hopeful that this thesis has given a voice to the young adult carers that participated in it and that by sharing the findings and working with various agencies I will be able to influence practice and policy.

References

Advance HE (2021a) Framework for Student Access, Retention, Attainment and Progression in Higher Education <https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/guidance/teaching-and-learning/student-retention-and-success#framework> Accessed 26th April 2021.

Advance HE (2021b) Student retention and success in Higher Education. <https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/guidance/teaching-and-learning/student-retention-and-success> Accessed 26th April 2021.

Aldridge, J. (2006) The experiences of children living with and caring for parents with mental illness. *Child Abuse Review*, 15, 79-88. <https://doi.org/10.1002/car.904>

Aldridge, J. and Becker, S. (1993) Children as carers. *Archives of Disease in Childhood*, 69(4), 459–62.

Aldridge, J. and Becker S. (1999) Children as carers: the impact of parental illness and disability on children's caring roles. *Journal of Family Therapy*, 2, 303–320.

Aldridge, J. and Becker S. (2003) *Children Caring for Parents with Mental Illness: Perspectives of Young Carers, Parents and Professionals*. The Policy Press: Bristol.

Andrewartha, L. and Harvey, A. (2021). *Supporting carers to succeed in Australian higher education. Report for the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education*, Curtin University. Melbourne: Centre for Higher Education Equity and Diversity Research, La Trobe University.

Austen, L., Hodgson, R., Heaton, C., Pickering, N., Dickinson, J., Mitchell, R. and

O'Connor, S. (2021) *Access, retention, attainment and progression: an integrative review*. London: Advance HE. Available at <https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/access-retention-attainment-and-progression-review-literature-2016-2021> Accessed 14th March 2022.

Bamidele, O. O., McGarvey, H.E., Lagan, B.M., Chinegwundoh, F., Ali, N. and McCaughan, E. (2019) Hard to reach, but not out of reach: barriers and facilitators to recruiting black African and black Caribbean men with prostate cancer and their partners into qualitative research. *European Journal of Cancer Care*, 28(2).
<https://doi.org/10.1111/ecc.12977>

Barrera, M., I.N. Sandler, and T.B. Ramsay. (1981) Preliminary development of a scale of social support: Studies on college students. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 9, 435–47.

Becker, F. and Becker S. (2008) *Young Adult Carers in the UK: Experiences, Needs and Services for Carers Aged 16–24*. The Princess Royal Trust for Carers: London.

Becker, S. and Sempik, J. (2019) Young adult carers: The impact of caring on health and education. *Children and Society*, 33, 377-389.

BERA (2023) British Educational Research Association. *Ethical guidelines for educational research 4e* Available at <https://www.bera.ac.uk/publication/ethical-guidelines-for-educational-research-2018-online#participants> Accessed 25th July 2023.

Berger, J.B. and Braxton, J.M. (1998) Revising Tinto's Interactionalist theory of student departure through theory elaboration: Examining the role of organisational attributes in the

persistence process. *Research in Higher Education*, 39(2), 103-19.

Birch, M. and Miller, T. (2000) Inviting intimacy: the interview as a therapeutic opportunity. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 3(3), 189-202.

Boumans, N.P.G., and Dorant, E. (2018) A Cross-Sectional Study on Experiences of Young Adult Carers Compared to Young Adult Noncarers: Parentification, Coping and Resilience. *Scandinavian Journal of Caring Sciences*. 32, 1409–1417.

Bourdieu, P. (1986) The forms of capital, 241-258. In J. Richardson (Ed.). *Handbook of theory and research for the sociology of education*. New York: Greenwood.

Bourdieu, P. (1989) Social space and symbolic power. *Sociological Theory*, 7(1), 14-25
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/202060> Accessed 20th June 2020.

Bourdieu, P. (2020) [1982] 5 October Lecture, 1-22. In *Habitus and Field. General Sociology, volume 2 Lectures at the College de France 1982-83 (2020)* Cambridge: Polity Press.

Braun, V., and Clarke, V. (2006) Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp0630a>

Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2022) *Thematic Analysis: A Practical Guide*. London: Sage Publications.

Braxton, J.M. and Hirschy, A.S. (2004) Reconceptualizing antecedents of social integration in student departure, 89-102 In M. Yorke & B. Longden (Eds.), *Retention and student success in higher education*. Bodmin, Great Britain: MPG Books.

Braxton, J.M., Milem, J. and Sullivan, A.S. (2000) The influence of active learning on the college student departure: Toward a revision of Tinto's theory. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 71, 569-590.

Brissette, I., Scheier, M.F., and Carver, C.S. (2002) The role of optimism in social network development, coping, and psychological adjustment during a life transition. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 82, 102–11.

Buote, V.M., Pancer, S.M., Pratt, M.W., Adams, G., Birnie-Lefcovitch, S., Polivy, J. and Wintre, M.G. (2007) The importance of friends: Friendship and adjustment among first-year university students. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 22, 665–89.

Burr, V. (1998) Overview, realism, relativism, social constructionism and discourse, 21-32 in Patrick, I (ed.) *Social Constructionism, Discourse and Realism*, London: Sage Publications.

Butina, M. (2015) A narrative approach to qualitative inquiry. *Clinical Laboratory Science*, 28(3), 190-196 Available at <http://hwmaint.clsjournal.ascls.org/> accessed 6th October 2020.

Carers Trust (2015) *Supporting Students with Caring Responsibilities: Ideas and Practice for Universities to Help Student Carers Access and Succeed in Higher Education*. London: Carers Trust.

Carers Trust (2022) <https://carers.org/about-caring/about-young-adult-carers> Accessed 2nd September 2022.

Carers Western Australia (2022) Who are carers? Available at <https://www.carerswa.asn.au/resources/who-are-carers/> Accessed 23rd June 2022.

Cassidy, T. (2004) Mapping variables related to social identity and perceived health in an undergraduate student population. *Social Psychology of Education*, 7, 339–52.

Chase, S.E (2005) Narrative Inquiry: Multiple lenses, approaches, voices. 651-679 in *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research* 3e. Denzin, N.K and Lincoln, Y.S. (eds). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Chase, S.E. (2013) Narrative Inquiry: Still a field in the making. 55-83 in *Collecting and Interpreting Qualitative Materials* 4e. Denzin, N.K and Lincoln, Y.S. (eds). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Cheng, W., Ickes, W., and Verhofstadt, L. (2012). How is family support related to students' GPA scores? A longitudinal study. *Higher Education*, 64(2), 399–420.

Cherry, M.G., Taylor, P.J., Brown, S.L., Rigby, J.W. and Sellwood, W. (2017) Guilt, shame and expressed emotion in carers of people with long-term mental health difficulties: A systematic review. *Psychiatry Research*, 249, 139-151.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.psychres.2016.12.056>

Chevrier, B., Lamore, K., Untas, A., and Dorard, G. (2022) Young adult carers' identification, characteristics and support: A systematic review. *Frontiers of Psychology* 13:990257. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.990257>

Chevrier, B., Untas, A., and Dorard, G. (2022) Are we all the same when faced with an ill relative? A person-oriented approach to caring activities and mental health in emerging

adult students. *International Journal of Environmental Research in Public Health* 19, 8104.

<https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph19138104>

Clandinin, D.J. (2007) *Handbook of Narrative Inquiry: mapping a Methodology*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Clandinin, D.J. and Connelly, F.M. (2000) *Narrative Inquiry. Experience and Story in Qualitative Research*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

CMA (2023) The Competition and Markets Authority. Available at

<https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/competition-and-markets-authority>

Accessed 6th June 2023.

Cohen, J. (1960). A coefficient of agreement for nominal scales. *Educational and Psychological Measurement*, 20(1), 37–46. <https://doi.org/10.1177/001316446002000104>

Cohen, L., Manion, L. and Morrison, K. (2018) *Research Methods in Education*. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge.

Cohen, P., Struening, E. L., Muhlin, G. L., Genevie, L. E., Kaplan, S. R., and Peck, H. B. (1982). Community stressors, mediating conditions, and wellbeing in urban neighborhoods. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 10, 377-391.

Cohen, S., Sherrod, D., and Clark, M. S. (1986). Social skills and the stress protective function of social support. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 50, 963–973.

Cohen, S., and Wills, T. A. (1985). Stress, social support and the buffering hypothesis. *Psychological Bulletin*, 98, 310–357.

Coleman, J.S. (1988) Social capital in the creation of human capital. *American Journal of Sociology*, Supplement: *Organizations and Institutions: Sociological and Economic Approaches to the Analysis of Social Structure* 94, S95-S120.

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/2780243> Accessed 21st July 2022

Coleman, J. S., and T. B. Hoffer (1987) *Public and Private Schools: The Impact of Communities*. New York: Basic.

Connelly and Clandinin (1990) Stories of experience and narrative inquiry. *Educational Researcher* 19(5), 2-14.

Connelly and Clandinin (2006) Narrative Inquiry 508-519 in *Handbook of Complementary Methods in Education Research*, Green, J.L., Camilli, G., Elmore, P.B., Skukauskaite, A. and Grace, E. (eds). Taylor & Francis Group: ProQuest Ebook Central, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/brookes/detail.action?docID=446575>.

Cooke, S. (2012) *Perspectives on the learning journeys of students in English higher education* <https://ethos.bl.uk/OrderDetails.do?uin=uk.bl.ethos.549110>

Crosling, G., Heagney, M. and Thomas, L. (2009) Improving student retention in higher education: Improving teaching and learning. *Australian Universities' Review*, 51(2), 9-18.

Crotty, M. (1998) *The Foundations of Social Research: Meaning and Perspective in the Research Process*. London: Sage Publications.

Cuseo, J. B. (Ed.). (1991) *The freshman orientation seminar: A research-based rationale for its value, delivery, and content*. Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina

<https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED334883> Accessed 27th January 2021.

Cutrona, C. E., Cole, V., Colangelo, N., Assouline, S. G., and Russell, D. W. (1994) Perceived parental social support and academic achievement: An attachment theory perspective. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 66(2), 369–378.

Dagley, M., Georgiopoulos, M., Reece, A., & Young, C. (2015) Increasing retention and graduation rates through a STEM learning community. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice*, 18(2), 167-182. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1521025115584746>

Day, C. (2015) Young adult carers: A literature review informing the re-conceptualisation of young adult caregiving in Australia. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 18, 855–866.

Day, C. (2017) *The YACU project: Exploring the educational experiences and student support needs of Young Adult Carers in Australian universities*. Unpublished Doctoral Thesis. Griffith University, Brisbane, Australia.

Day, C. (2019) An empirical case study of young adult carers' engagement and success in higher education. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2019.1624843>

Dearden, C. and Becker, S. (1995) *Young Carers: The Facts*. Sutton: Reed Business Publishing.

Dearden, C. and Becker, S. (1998) *Young Carers in the United Kingdom: A Profile*. Carers National Association: London.

Dearden, C. and Becker, S. (2004) *Young Carers in the UK: The 2004 Report*. Carers UK, London, UK.

DeBerard, M. S., Spielmans, G. I., & Julka, D. C. (2004). Predictors of academic achievement and retention among college freshman: a longitudinal study. *College Student Journal*, 38, 66–80.

Dellmann-Jenkins, M., Blankemeyer, M., and Pinkard, O. (2000) Young adult children and grandchildren in primary caregiver roles to older relatives and their service needs. *Family Relations*, 49, 177–186. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-3729.2000.00177.x>

Denscombe, M. (2014) *The Good Research Guide* 4e. Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Denzin, N.K. (1989) *The Research Act: A Theoretical Introduction to Sociological Methods* 3e. New Jersey: Prentice Hall.

Dickinson, J., Griffiths, T-L., and Bredice, A. (2021) 'It's just another thing to think about': encouraging students' engagement in extracurricular activities. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 45(6), 744-757. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2020.1813263>

Eggens, L., Van Der Werf, M. P. C., and Bosker, R. J. (2008) The influence of personal networks and social support on study attainment of students in university education. *Higher Education*, 55(5), 553–573.

ESU (2020) COVID-19 Position Paper: A multidimensional crisis that affects us all. <https://www.esu-online.org/?policy=covid-19-position-paper-a-multidimensional-crisis-that-affects-us-all> Accessed 2nd November 2021.

Feldman, K. A., & Newcomb, T. M. (1969). *The Impact of College on Students*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Fischer, M. (2010). A longitudinal examination of the role of stereotype threat and racial climate on college outcomes for minorities at elite institutions. *Social Psychology of Education*, 13, 19-40. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11218-009-9105-3>

Fisher, S., and Hood, B. (1987) The stress of the transition to university: A longitudinal study of psychological disturbance, absent-mindedness and vulnerability to homesickness. *British Journal of Psychology*, 78(4), 425–441.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.2044-8295.1987.tb02260.x>

Friedlander, L.J., G.J. Reid, N. Shupak, and R. Cribbie. (2007) Social support, self-esteem, and stress as predictors of adjustment to university among first-year undergraduates. *Journal of College Student Development*, 48, 259–74.

Fruhauf, C. A., Jarrott, S. E., and Allen, K. R. (2006) Grandchildren's perceptions of caring for grandparents. *Journal of Family Issues*, 27, 887–911.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X05286019>

Gallagher, S., Daynes-Kearney, R., Bowman-Grangel, A., Dunne, N., and McMahon, J. (2022) Life satisfaction, social participation and symptoms of depression in Young Adult Carers: Evidence from 21 European countries. *International Journal of Adolescence and Youth*, 27(1), 60–71 <https://doi.org/10.1080/02673843.2021.2025115>

Gergen, K.J. (1994) *Realities and relationship: Soundings in social constructionism*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Gergen, K.J. (2002) *Narrative, moral identity and historical consciousness: A social constructionist account*. Available at https://www.swarthmore.edu/sites/default/files/assets/documents/kenneth-gergen/Narrative_Moral_Identity_and_Historical_Consciousness.pdf accessed 28th December 2021.

Giddens, A. (1979) *Central Problems in Social Theory: Action, Structure and Contradiction in Social Analysis*. London: Macmillan.

Giddens, A. (1984) *The Constitution of Society*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Gilardi, S. and Guglielmetti, C. (2011) University life of non-traditional students: Engagement styles and impact on attrition. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 82(1), 33-52.

Giroux, H.A (2014) *Neoliberalism's War on Higher Education*. Chicago: Haymarket Books.

Goncalves, S. A., and Trunk, D. (2014) Obstacles to Success for the Non-traditional Student in Higher Education. *Psi Chi Journal of Psychological Research*, 19(4), 22-34.

Gottlieb, B.K and Bergen, A.E. (2010) Social support concepts and measures. *Journal of Psychosomatic Research*, 69, 511-520.

Gov.UK (2022) Carer's Allowance: Eligibility <https://www.gov.uk/carers-allowance/eligibility> Accessed 13th July 2022.

Greene, J., Cohen, D., Siskowski, C. and Toyinbo, P. (2016) The relationship between family caregiving and the mental health of emerging young adult caregivers. *Journal of*

Behavioral Health Services & Research, 44(4), 551–563. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11414-016-9526-7>

Guiffrida, D. A., and Douthit, K. Z. (2010) The Black student experience at predominantly white colleges: Implications for school and college counsellors. *Journal of Counselling and Development*, 88(3), 311–318.

Hall, M.M, Worsham, R.E. and Reavis, G. (2021) The effects of offering proactive student-success coaching on community college students' academic performance and persistence. *Community College Review*, 49(2), 202-237. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0091552120982030>

Hartup, W. W. and Stevens, N. (1997) Friendships and adaptation in the life course, *Psychological Bulletin*, 121(3), 355–370. <http://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.121.3.355>

Haugland, B.S.M., Hysing, M. and Sivertsen, B. (2019) The burden of care: A national survey on the prevalence, demographic characteristics and health problems among young adult carers attending higher education in Norway. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 10, 2859–2859. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.02859>

Haugland, B.S.M., Hysing, M. and Sivertsen, B. (2022) Study progress, recreational activities, and loneliness in young adult carers: A national student survey. *BMC Psychology*, 10(1). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40359-022-00760-5>

Havnes, A. (2008) Peer mediated learning beyond the curriculum. *Studies in Higher Education*, 33: 193–204.

Heaney, C. A. and Israel, B. A. (2008) Social networks and social support: 189-210, in

Glanz, K., Rimer, B.K and Viswanath. K (eds) *Health Behavior and Health Education: Theory, Research and Practice* 4e. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass

Heidegger, M. (1962) *Being and Time*. London: Basil Blackwell. Translated from the German *Sein and Zeit* 7e by permission of Max Niemeyer Verlag, Tübingen.

Hoffer, T. B. (1986) *Educational Outcomes in Public and Private High Schools*. Ph.D. dissertation. University of Chicago, Department of Sociology.

Holliday, A. (2016) *Doing and Writing Qualitative Research* 3e. London: Sage Publications.

Holmes, T. H. and Rahe, R.H. (1967) The social readjustment rating scale. *Journal of Psychosomatic Research*, 11, 213-18.

Howlett, M. (2022). Looking at the 'field' through a Zoom lens: Methodological reflections on conducting online research during a global pandemic. *Qualitative Research*, 22(3), 387–402. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794120985691>

Hyden, M. (2008) Narrating sensitive topics. 121-136 in Andrews, M., Squire, C. and Tamboukou, M. (eds) *Doing Narrative Research*. London: Sage Publications.

Johnson-Ahorlu, R.N. (2013) Our biggest challenge is stereotypes: Understanding stereotypes, threat and the academic experiences of African American undergraduates. *The Journal of Negro Education*, 82(4) 382-392.

Joseph, S., Becker, S., Becker, F., and Regel, S. (2009) Assessment of caring and its effects in young people: development of the Multidimensional Assessment of Caring

Activities Checklist (MACA-YC18) and the Positive and Negative Outcomes of Caring Questionnaire (PANOC-YC20) for young carers. *Child: Care, Health and Development*, 35, 510–520. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2214.2009.00959.x>

Joseph, S., Kendall, C., Toher, D., Sempik, J., Holland J. and Becker. S. (2019) Young carers in England: Findings from the 2018 BBC survey on the prevalence and nature of caring among young people. *Child: Care, Health and Development*, 45(4), 606-612. <https://doi-org.oxfordbrookes.idm.oclc.org/10.1111/cch.12674>

Joseph, S. Sempik, J., Leu, A. and Becker, S. (2019) Young carers research, practice and policy: An overview and critical perspective on possible future directions. *Adolescent Research Review*, 5, 77–89 <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40894-019-00119-9>

Kaiser, S., and Schulze, G.C. (2015) Between inclusion and participation: Young carers who are absent from school. *Journal of Cognitive Education and Psychology*, 14(3), 314–328.

Kasworm, C.E. and Blowers, S.S. (1994) Adult undergraduate students: Patterns of learning involvement. Knoxville, Tennessee University: *College of Education Research Report*. ERIC Number: ED376321

Kasworm, C.E. (2005) Adult student identity in an intergenerational community college classroom. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 56(1), 3-20.

Kavanaugh, M. S., and Stamatopoulos, V. (2021) Young carers, the overlooked caregiving population: Introduction to a special issue. *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal*, 38(5), 487–489. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10560-021-00797-2>

Kettell, L. (2018) Young adult carers in higher education: the motivations, barriers and challenges involved – a UK study. *Journal of Further and Higher Education* 44(1), 100-112. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2018.1515427>

Khatamian Far, P. (2018) Challenges of recruitment and retention of university students as research participants: Lessons learned from a pilot study. *Journal of the Australian Library and Information Association*, 67(3), 278–292.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/24750158.2018.1500436>

Kirton, J. A, Richardson, K., Jack, B.A., and Jinks, A.M. (2012) A study identifying the difficulties healthcare students have in their role as a healthcare student when they are also an informal carer. *Nurse Education Today*, 32(6), 641–646.
<https://doi:10.1016/j.nedt.2012.01.010>

Knopf, L., Wazinski, K., Wanka, A. & Hess, M. (2022) Caregiving students: a systematic literature review of an under-researched group, *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2021.2008332>

Krippendorff, K. (2013) *Content Analysis: An introduction to its methodology* 3e. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications.

Kuh, G.D. (2002) Organisational culture and student persistence: Prospects and puzzles. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory and Practice*, 3(1), 23-39.
<https://doi.org/10.2190/U1RN-C0UU-WXRV-0E3M>

Kuh, G.D. and Love, P.G. (2000) A cultural perspective on student departure in *Reworking the student departure puzzle: New theory and research on college student retention*

Braxton J.M. (ed), 196-212. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press.

Landi, G., Pakenham, K. I., Grandi, S., and Tossani, E. (2022) Young adult carers during the pandemic: The effects of parental illness and other ill family members on Covid-19-related and general mental health outcomes. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 19(6). <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph19063391>

Larkin, M. and Kubiak, C. (2021) Carers and higher education: Where next? *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning*, 23(2), 130-151.
<https://doi.org/10.5456/WPLL.23.2.130>

Leaney, S. and Mwale, S. (2021) Campus closures and the devaluing of emplaced Higher Education: widening participation in neoliberal times. *Higher Education: the International Journal of Higher Education Research*, 977-992. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-021-00696-6>

Lee, J., Solomon, M., Stead, T., Kwon, B., and Ganti, L. (2021) Impact of Covid-19 on the mental health of US college students. *BMC psychology*, 9(1), 95–95.
<https://doi.org/10.1186/s40359-021-00598-3>

Leu, A., and Becker, S. (2017) A cross-national and comparative classification of in-country awareness and policy responses to "young carers". *Journal of Youth Studies*, 20, 750–762.

Liu, H., Liu, W., Yoganathan, V., and Osburg, V-S. (2021) COVID-19 information overload and Generation Z's social media discontinuance intention during the pandemic lockdown *Technological Forecasting and Social Change* 166 120600
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.techfore.2021.120600>

Mackinnon, S. P. (2012) Perceived social support and academic achievement: Cross lagged panel and bivariate growth curve analyses. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 41(4), 474–485.

Mannheim, K. (1936) *Ideology and Utopia*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Martin, Y., Gilbert, P., McEwan, K. and Irons, C. (2007) The relation of entrapment, shame and guilt to depression in carers of people with dementia. *Aging and Mental Health* 10(2), 101-106. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13607860500311953>

Marx, K. (2000) *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy (Vol 1)*. London: The Electric Book Company. Available from: ProQuest Ebook Central. Accessed 22 July 2021.

McCaig, C. (2018) *The Marketisation of English Higher Education : A Policy Analysis of a Risk-Based System*. Bingley: Emerald Publishing Limited. Available from: ProQuest Ebook Central. Accessed 22nd May 2023.

McDermott, E., Roen, K. and Piela, A. (2013) Hard-to-reach youth online: Methodological advances in self-harm research. *Sexuality Research and Social Policy*, 10(2), 125–134. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13178-012-0108-z>

McGettigan, A. (2013) *The Great University Gamble: Money, Markets and the Future of Higher Education*. London: Pluto Press.

McKinsey (2018) *Generation Z and its implications for companies*. Available at <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/consumer-packaged-goods/our-insights/true-generation-z-and-its-implications-for-companies> Accessed 16th October 2022.

McLaughlin, J.K., Greenfield, J.C., Hasche, L. and de Fries, C. (2019) Young adult caregiver strain and benefits. *Social Work Research*, 43(4), 269-278.

<https://doi.org/10.1093/swr/svz019>

Mishra, S. (2020) Social networks, social capital, social support and academic success in higher education: A systematic review with a special focus on “underrepresented” students. *Educational Research Review*, 29. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.edurev.2019.100307>

Molock, S.D., and Parchem, B. (2021) The impact of Covid-19 on college students from communities of colour. *Journal of American College Health*.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/07448481.2020.1865380>

Mollon, P. (1998) False memories: Finding a balance. *Advances in Psychiatric Treatment*, 4(6), 335–342. <https://doi.org/10.1192/apt.4.6.335>

Moore, T., McArthur, M., and Morrow, R. 2009. Attendance, Achievement and Participation: Young Carers’ Experiences of School in Australia. *Australian Journal of Education* 53 (1), 5–18. <https://doi.org/10.1177/000494410905300102>

Museus, S. D. (2011). Generating ethnic minority student success (GEMS): A qualitative analysis of high-performing institutions. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*, 4(3), 147–162.

Nagl-Cupal, M., Metzging, S., and Mayer, H. (2015) Experience of being a former young carer: Effects in the transition into adulthood and in the present life situation. *Revista Eletrônica de Enfermagem. Electronic Nursing Journal*, 17(4), 265.

<https://doi.org/10.5216/ree.v17i4.34350>

Naidoo, N., Roy, R., Rabbanee, F.K., and Wu, T. (2022) Drivers of tuition fee setting practices for higher education institutions involved in international student recruitment, *Journal of Marketing for Higher Education*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08841241.2022.2076274>

NECC (2020) Hannah's Essay: An Inside Perspective on the Toll of Covid-19 <https://www.necc.org/hannahs-essay-an-inside-perspective-on-the-toll-of-covid-19/>
Accessed 2nd November 2021.

NERUPI (2023) About NERUPI Available at <https://www.nerupi.co.uk/about/overview>
Accessed on 1st June 2023.

Nuere, S., and de Miguel, L. (2021) The digital/technological connection with Covid-19: An unprecedented challenge in university teaching. *Technology, Knowledge and Learning* 26, 931-943. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10758-020-09454-6>

OECD (2021) *Education at a Glance 2021: OECD Indicators* Available at https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/education/education-at-a-glance-2021_b35a14e5-en
Accessed on 31st May 2023

Office for Students (2018a) *HE Finance and Funding*.
<https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/1328/bd-2018-jan-111-he-funding-briefing.pdf>
Accessed on 1st June 2023.

Office for Students (2018b) Access and participation plans. Available at <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/promoting-equal-opportunities/access-and-participation-plans/> Accessed on 4th April 2022.

Office for Students (2021) The Office for Students: How we are run.

<https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/about/how-we-are-run/> Accessed 9th November 2021.

Office for Students (2022a) Our approach to access and participation. Available at <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/promoting-equal-opportunities/our-approach-to-access-and-participation/> Accessed on 4th April 2022.

Office for Students (2022b) Access and Participation Plans. Available at <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/promoting-equal-opportunities/access-and-participation-plans/> Accessed on 23rd June 2022.

Office for Students (2022c) Access and participation data dashboard. Available at <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/access-and-participation-data-dashboard/> Accessed on 30th March 2022.

Office for Students (2023) Fee Limits - Office for Students. Available at <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/promoting-equal-opportunities/access-and-participation-plans/fee-limits/> Accessed 22nd May 2023.

Papert, S. and Harel, I. (1991) *Constructionism*. New York: Ablex Publishing Corporation.

Pernecky, T. (2016) *Epistemology and Metaphysics for Qualitative Research* London: Sage.

Piaget, J. (1959) *The Construction of Reality in the Child*. New York: Basic Books Inc.

Pocock, T., Smith, M., and Wiles, J. (2021) Recommendations for virtual qualitative health research during a pandemic. *Qualitative Health Research*. 31(13), 2403-2413.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/10497323211036891>

Polkinghorne, D. E. (1995) Narrative configuration in qualitative analysis, 5-24 in Hatch, J. A. and Wisniewski, R. (eds) *Life history and narrative*. London: Falmer Press (Qualitative studies series, 1). <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203486344>

Polkinghorne, D. E. (2007) Validity Issues in narrative research, *Qualitative Inquiry*, 13(4), 471–486.

Putman, R. D. (2000) *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

Putnam, R.D. (ed.) (2002) *Democracies in Flux: The Evolution of Social Capital in Contemporary Society*. Oxford University Press USA - OSO, Cary. Available from: ProQuest Ebook Central. [20 July 2021].

Rapanta, C., Botturi, L., Goodyear, P., Guardia, L. and Koole, M. (2020) Online university teaching during and after the Covid-19 crisis: refocusing teaching presence and learning activity. *Postdigital Science and Education*, 2, 923-945. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42438-020-00155-y>

Rendon, L. I., Jalomo, R. E. and Nora, A. (2000). Theoretical considerations in the study of minority student retention in higher education. 127-156 In Braxton, J.M. (Ed.), *Reworking the Student Departure Puzzle*. Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press.

Renzetti, M. and Lee, R. (eds) (1993) *Researching Sensitive Topics*. Newbury Park: Sage.

Ricoeur, P. (1980) Narrative time. *Critical Inquiry*, 7(1), 169-190.

Robbins, S. B., Lauver, K., Le, H., Davis, D., Langley, R., & Carlstrom, A. (2004). Do psychosocial and study skill factors predict college outcomes? A meta-analysis. *Psychological Bulletin*, 130, 261–288.

Rubinstein, D. (1986) The concept of structure in sociology in M. Wardell and S. Turner (eds) *Sociological Theory in Transition*. London: Allen & Unwin.

Rudes, J. and Guterman, J. T. (2007) The value of social constructionism for the counseling profession: A reply to Hansen. *Journal of Counseling & Development*, 85(4), 387–392.

Runacres, J., Herron, D., Buckless, K. and Worrall, S. (2021): Student carer experiences of higher education and support: a scoping review. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2021.1983880>

Scanlon, L., Rowling, L. and Weber, Z. (2007) You don't have like an identity ... you are just lost in a crowd': Forming a student identity in the first-year transition to university. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 10(2), 223-241. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13676260600983684>

Searle, J.R. (1971) *The Philosophy of Language*. London: Oxford University Press (Oxford readings in philosophy).

Searle, J.R. (2010) *Making the Social World: The Structure of Human Civilisation*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Seidman, I. (2013) *Interviewing as qualitative research: a guide for researchers in*

education and the social sciences 4e. New York: Teachers College Press.

Sempik, J. and Becker, S. (2013) *Young Adult Carers at School: Experiences and Perceptions of Caring and Education*. London: The Carers Trust.

Sempik, J. and Becker, S. (2014) *Young Adult Carers at College and University*. London: The Carers Trust.

Shabini Varaki, B. (2007) Narrative inquiry in educational research. *Forum Qualitative Social Research*, 8(1), art 4. Available at <http://www.qualitative-research.net/fqs-texte/1-07/07-1-4-e.htm>

Smyth, C., Cass, B., and Hill, T. (2011) Children and Young People as Active Agents in Care-Giving: Agency and Constraint. *Children and Youth Services Review* 33: 509–514. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2010.05.009>

Son, J. (2020) *Social Capital* Cambridge: Polity Press.

Spector-Mersel, G. (2010) Narrative research: time for a paradigm. *Narrative Inquiry*, 20(1), 204-224. <https://doi.org/10.1075/ni.20.1.10spe>

Squire, C. (2008) Experience-centred and culturally oriented approaches to narrative 41-63 in Andrews, M., Squire, C. and Tamboukou, M. (eds) *Doing Narrative Research*. London: Sage Publications.

Study Higher (2023) What is Study Higher? Available at <https://www.studyhigher.ac.uk/about-us/what-is-study-higher/> Accessed on 1st June 2023.

Summers, J.J., and Svinicki, M.D. (2007) Investigating classroom community in higher education. *Learning and Individual Differences* 17: 55–67.

Tao, S., Dong, Q., Pratt, M., Hunsberger, B., and Pancer, S.M. (2000) Social support: Relations to coping and adjustment during the transition to university in the People's Republic of China. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 15, 123–44.

Thoits, P.A. (1982) Conceptual, methodological, and theoretical problems in studying social support as a buffer against life stress. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, 23, 145-159.

Thoits, P.A. (1995) Stress, coping and social support processes: Where are we? What next? *Journal of Health and Social Behaviour Special*, 53-79.

<https://doi.org/10.2307/2626957>

Thomas, G. (2013) *How to do your Research Project*. London: Sage Publications.

Thomas, S.L. (2000) Ties that bind. A social network approach to understanding student integration and persistence. *Journal of Higher Education*, 71, 591–615.

Tinto, V. (1975) Dropout from Higher Education: A theoretical synthesis of recent research. *Review of Educational Research*, 45(1), 89-125.

Tinto, V. (1993). *Leaving college: Rethinking the causes and cures of student attrition* 2e. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Tinto, V. (2006) Research and practice of student retention: What next? *The Journal of*

College and Student Retention, 8(1), 1-19.

Tinto, V. (2017) Through the eyes of students. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory and Practice*, 19(3), 254-269.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/1521025115621917>

Usher, R. and Edwards, R. (1994) *Postmodernism and Education*. London: Routledge.

Villar, E. and Albertin, P. (2010) 'It is who knows you'. The positions of university students regarding intentional investment in social capital. *Studies in Higher Education*, 35(2), 137–154.

Vygotskiĭ L. S. (1978) *Mind in society: the development of higher psychological processes*. Cole, M., John-Steiner, V., Scribner, S., and Souberman, E. (eds) Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Wayman, S., Raws, P., and Leadbitter, H. (2016). *There's nobody is there—no one who can actually help? The challenges of estimating the number of young carers and knowing how to meet their needs*. London: Children's Society.

Wellington, J. (2015) *Educational Research: Contemporary Issues and Practical Approaches 2e*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.

Wells, R. (2008) Social and cultural capital, race and ethnicity, and college student retention. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory and Practice*, 10: 103–28.

Wheeldon, J. and Faubert, S. (2009) Framing experience: Concept maps, mind maps, and data collection in qualitative research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*,

8(3) 68-83.

Wheeldon, J. (2011) Is a picture worth a thousand words? Using mind maps to facilitate participant recall in qualitative research. *The Qualitative Report*, 16(2), 509-522.

<http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR16-2/wheeldon.pdf>

Wilkins, A. and Burke, P.J. (2015) Widening participation in higher education: the role of professional and social class identities and commitments, *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 36:3, 434-452, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2013.829742>

Xue, B., Lacey, R.E., Di Gessa, G., and McMunn, A. (2022) Does providing informal care in young adulthood impact educational attainment and employment? Evidence from the *UK Household Longitudinal Study* [WWW document]. <https://doi.org/10.31235/osf.io/vx5rd>

Yorke, M. and Longden, B. (2004) *Retention and student success in higher education*. Maidenhead: Oxford University Press.

Yosso, T.J. (2005) Whose culture has capital? A critical race theory discussion of community cultural wealth. *Race, Ethnicity and Education*, 8(1), 69-91.

Appendices

Appendix A: Summary of review

Source: Corpus of documentary evidence from 50 higher education institutions (January - April 2022) University names anonymised as U#

University (anonymised)	Bespoke programme	Named contact	Bursary	SU information	Other
U1		Generic wellbeing address			
U2		Yes			
U3	U3 Cares	Yes	£3500 pa		
U4		Generic transitions address	£1000 pa		
U5				A guide for student carers; set up a Family Association. Online discussion board for YACs.	Broken links
U6	U6 Cares	Yes	£500 pa		
U7					Video of YAC
U8		Generic ISP until registered			Broken links
U9					
U10	Carers Support Plan	Yes			Facebook for

					YACs
U11					New project to support YACs November 2021
U12		LSE Cares email			
U13	Sarah Hawkins Young Carers Awards	Yes	£2000 pa		Outreach to young carers
U14		Yes			Link to Bradford YAC Project
U15					All about outreach
U16			£500 (includes a book voucher)		Humber Grant
U17			£600		YAC pack
U18		No, just to contact transitions			
U19					Outreach to young carers, work as an SA when YAC joins
U20			Up to £4500		Specific form to register as a YAC
U21					Parking for carers
U22		Generic wellbeing address			
U23		Yes		SU officer for SCR	Over 3000 YACs
U24		Yes (DMS)			

U25					SPACE - for staff not students
U26		Generic student carers email			Outreach to young carers
U27		Named once you enrol.			Peer support schemes
U28	Carers' Passport				
U29	Carers Champions Scheme		£1000 pa	A student started the Carers Champions Scheme	Training sessions for staff members in how to recognise a YAC
U30			£1000 pa		
U31					Outreach to young carers
U32					Parking for carers
U33					
U34					300 YACs here, specific document outlining support for YACs
U35	U35 Cares	Yes	£1500 pa + £500 on graduation		Waiver for deposit on accommodation for YACs
U36		Yes			Specific form to register as a YAC
U37		Yes			

U38					Prof Saul Becker, Ambassador for Carer's Trust
U39	Carers Support Plan		Yes but no figure		Specific form to register as a YAC, carers parking too. Have won the Lincolnshire Carers Quality Award for support for YACs
U40					Nothing specific but Lynn Kettell who researches YACs is here
U41					Reasonable Adjustment Plans by proxy for YACs
U42	Carers Support Plan	Yes	Yes but no figure		
U43	Carers Support Plan				Outreach for young carers
U44				SU officer for SCR	
U45					Outreach for young carers
U46	Support in place, but nothing named		£500 pa		THES Award for supporting YACs, part of Young Carers Alliance

U47	Support in place, but nothing named		£500 pa		
U48		Named school support officers			
U49		Yes	£500 pa		
U50			£2,000		

Appendix B: Interview protocols 1, 2 and 3

Semi-structured interview introduction: common to all interview protocols:

Aim and Purpose of Interview:

The aim of this interview will be to elicit young adult carers' (YAC) perception of the impact of caring on their education to date and to discuss their existing social support network (i.e. people in that network who are important and supportive to them in relation to facilitating their educational journey). The role the University and Students' Union plays in providing supportive events will also be discussed. This interview will be captured through an audio recording (not videoed) that will then be transcribed, anonymised and analysed. The findings will provide insights into the people and events that are most supportive of a YAC's educational journey and potentially illuminate how this impacts on retention and progression.

Interview Practicalities and Structure:

It is intended that the interview will last about 30 minutes.

The researcher will review the participant information sheet (Appendix F) with the interviewee (even though they will have seen this sheet beforehand). The student (interviewee) will be reminded that the interview is voluntary and that they have the right to decline answering any interview questions without providing a reason. They will also be reminded that they may stop the interview at any point, at which point the recording equipment will be switched off and if the student no longer wishes to continue they will be asked if they wish the data to be discarded. If the consent form (Appendix E) has not been signed and emailed to the researcher prior to the interview, the researcher will then invite the interviewee to sign the consent form, which makes clear that their identity will be anonymous. The interviewee will be asked if they have any questions before the interview takes place.

The interview will be semi-structured. The researcher will invite the participant to share the visual representation diagram, which they would have been invited to email to the researcher prior to the day, and questions will be based on the topic areas below.

The first interview protocol

Question area	Probes
Introductions Checking in that participant information sheet and consent form have been read and signed. Invite the participants to ask any questions. Let's start with you telling me a bit about you. What inspired you to come to university?	Journey into HE. Commuting or living on campus? What subject area and why? What are you looking forward to in the next academic year?
Impact of caring on education?	With a focus on your education what has the impact of caring had on your study to date? How have you managed that?
FOR A FIRST YEAR STUDENT	
Ask for completed visual representation diagram (or share it if it has been emailed). Ask the student to comment on it.	What's important to you about this diagram? Who has had a positive impact on your education to date? May I ask why that is? If you attended any, of what value to you were the University/Student Union? Events? Role of academic adviser? How do you think this diagram might change over the next few months?
FOR A SECOND YEAR STUDENT	
Ask for completed visual representation diagram (or share it if it has been emailed). Ask the student to comment on it.	What's important to you about this diagram? Who is supportive to you in this diagram? May I ask why that is? Would this diagram have changed if you had drawn it in your first year? Why might that be? What might have happened without these supportive social networks? Has the support, externally and offered by the university, helped you academically? And why? How important have these people, or external agencies (e.g. the SU) and events been in encouraging you to stay at university? How do you think this diagram might change over the next few months?
FOR A FINAL YEAR STUDENT	
Ask for completed visual representation diagram (or share it if it has been emailed). Ask the student to comment on it.	What's important to you about this diagram? Who is supportive to you in this diagram? May I ask why that is?

	Would this diagram have changed if you had drawn it in your first and second years? Why might that be? Has support, externally and from the university, helped you academically? And why? What might have happened without these social networks? How have these people, or external agencies (e.g. the SU) and events encouraged you to stay at university? How do you think this diagram might change over the next few months? Will you maintain any of these supportive relationships formed since being a student (e.g. with the SU or peers) when you graduate? And why?
FOR ALL STUDENTS	Summarise, clarify and thank them. Reminder of reflective journals and next interview at the end of semester one after assignment deadlines have passed. Explain that a copy of the transcript will be shared with them and that they have the opportunity to change or remove anything they are unhappy with within 7 days. Ask them how they thought the interview went and remind them about the internal and external support available to them if they need it and that all information from the interview will be treated in the utmost confidence (e.g. any names mentioned will be anonymised).

The second interview protocol

Question area	Probes
Recap and check in with student that they are happy to proceed with the interview. Invite the participants to ask any questions.	What has happened that is good in relation to their studies? What events or individuals have supported you in terms of integrating into the University as a whole, modules, social activities? Do they feel part of the University community? And why? Ask about the impact of caring on their university studies and social life?
FOR ALL STUDENTS	
Ask for completed visual representation diagram (or share it if it has been emailed). Ask the student to comment on it.	How has the diagram changed/developed from the beginning of semester? Who has been added or removed? Can you tell me why that is? What about University events? How useful are they in terms of helping you integrate into university life? Is your network now more supportive of your education than before? How important have these people and events been in encouraging you to stay at university? Who else is important to you? May I ask why that is? What might have happened without these supportive social networks? How do you think this diagram might change over the next few months?
FOR ALL STUDENTS	Summarise, clarify and thank them. Reminder of reflective journals and next interview at the end of semester two after key assignment hand in dates. Explain that a copy of the transcript will be shared with them and that they have the opportunity to change or remove anything they are unhappy with within 7 days. Ask them how they thought the interview went and remind them about the internal and

	external support available to them if they need it and that all information from the interview will be treated in the utmost confidence (e.g. any names mentioned will be anonymised).
--	--

The final interview protocol

Question area	Probes
Re-introductions and check they have sought help if needed. Recap on academic year, how has it been? Invite the participants to ask any questions.	What has happened that is good? What events or individuals have supported you in terms of integrating into the University as a whole, modules, social activities? Ask about the impact of caring on their university studies and social life?
FOR FIRST AND SECOND YEAR STUDENTS	
Ask for completed visual representation diagram (or share it if it has been emailed). Ask the student to comment on it.	How has your diagram changed over the last semester? Who is important to you now? How will your social network and support system impact your academic progression? How important have these people and events been in encouraging you to stay at university? What might have happened without these social networks? Will you maintain any of these relationships over the summer in preparation for next academic year? What role did University events play in terms of offering you opportunities to integrate into the University? Something about how they see their social relationships developing in the future?
FOR A FINAL YEAR STUDENT	
Ask for completed visual representation diagram (or share it if it has been emailed). Ask the student to comment on it.	How has the diagram changed considering you are in your final year? How has the support helped you succeed academically? What might have happened without these social networks? What about your next steps regarding employment or further study – how do you think your supportive social network and support system have impacted on these decisions?

	How important, and why, have these people and events been in encouraging you to stay at university? Will you maintain any of these relationships when you graduate? And why?
FOR ALL STUDENTS	Summarise, clarify and thank them. Ensure all reflective journal entries are complete. Explain that a copy of the transcript will be shared with them and that they have the opportunity to change or remove anything they are unhappy with within 7 days. Ask them how they thought the interview went and remind them about the internal and external support available to them if they need it and that all information from the interview will be treated in the utmost confidence (e.g. any names mentioned will be anonymised). Give them a book voucher as a thank you.

Appendix C: Reflective journal template

Reflective Journal

For each entry write as little or as much as you like. The important thing to remember is that these are your own thoughts and feelings. Some question areas have been inserted into each month's entry to guide your reflection.

Please also remember that these journals will be anonymous and that confidentiality will be observed at all times and that any entries you make will not impact your grades or progress at University.

Your entries will be shared with me, Lynn McBain via this GoogleDoc on the University secure Google Drive, so there is no need to email it to me. I will read your journal regularly at the end of each month. Thank you very much for your participation, it's appreciated.

October 2021

How do you feel you have settled into the new academic year?

How has your social group supported you to achieve in your studies/education over the past year?

What social activities or events have you managed to attend in the past month?

How useful were any social activities or events organised by the University in terms of facilitating social support?

What support did you receive to attend any social events organised by the University?

How are you feeling this month? Please circle ONE.			
--	---	---	---

November 2021

What social activities or events have you managed to attend in the past month?

How useful were any social activities or events organised by the University in terms of facilitating social support?

What support did you receive to attend any social events organised by the University?

How are you feeling this month? Please circle ONE.			
--	---	---	---

December 2021

How has your first semester gone with respect to your studies?

Can you describe a supportive event that happened since we last talked that helped you with your studies?

How could the University have supported you further?

What or who was most supportive of your educational journey this semester? And why?

How are you feeling this month? Please circle ONE.			
--	---	---	---

January 2022

How do you feel about the new semester?

Have you maintained contact with any new social contacts over the Christmas break and if so, how did you do this?

How are you feeling this month? Please circle ONE.			
--	---	---	---

February 2022

How do you feel about your academic studies this semester?

Having received your results for semester one, do you think anyone was particularly supportive in helping you achieve your grades? If so who were these people and how did they help you?

How are you feeling this month? Please circle ONE.			
--	---	---	---

March 2022

Now you are half way through semester two, how have your social circles changed or developed since semester one?

Are there any individuals who were particularly supportive of your studies? If so who were these people and how did they help you?

How are you feeling this month? Please circle ONE.			
--	---	---	---

April 2022

The Easter break is upon us; semester two is almost over, how many of the people you are in social contact with will you keep in touch with after this academic year?

What social activities have you valued most this year and why?

Which of those were organised by the University?

Are the things that prevent you attending social events organised through the University earlier in the academic year still the same or different? If they are different, how have they changed?

How are you feeling this month? Please circle ONE.			
--	---	---	---

May 2022

How do you feel this academic year has gone? What was good about it?

Can you provide an example of how people have supported you in terms of your academic progress?

How important are the people you have social contact with in supporting your decision to keep going with your studies?

How are you feeling this month? Please circle ONE.			
--	---	---	---

Appendix D: Visual network diagram template

Visual Network Diagram Instructions

Investigating social networks and social support

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research about how you, as a student carer are positively supported to integrate socially into Higher Education. As part of the research I will be inviting you to participate in a short 30 minute semi-structured interview at three points during the next academic year. Before these interviews I would like you to fill in the visual representation diagram on the next page and bring it with you so we can use it as part of the discussion. You may either print this out and hand write it, then take a photograph of it or scan it in, whichever is easier, and email it back to me, prior to the interview, or bring it with you on the day of the interview or alternatively fill it out online and email it back to me directly. What I am interested in is the content of the diagram and what is positively supporting you in your educational journey.

What I would like you to do is use the template on the next page and think about you at the centre. Please fill in the following on the diagram:

- People who you see on a regular basis and provide the support needed to continue in your educational journey, this can be daily or weekly (please use anonymised names or descriptions, rather than actual names so confidentiality is preserved)
- People who are supportive of you as a student, inside and outside of university (please use anonymised names or descriptions, rather than actual names so confidentiality is preserved)
- Places you go to meet people either online or in person
- University events you have attended either online or in person

Please add as many or as few to each category as you like. If you need to add any notes to explain anything that will be really helpful. There will be an opportunity for you to comment on your diagram during the interview.

When you feel comfortable with your diagram, please email it to me at 18030245@brookes.ac.uk before the interview – or alternatively you may print it out and bring it with you on the day if we are meeting face to face. If we are unable to meet face to face the interview will take place online using a secure Zoom platform. The interview has been arranged on ADD DATE at ADD TIME. The Zoom meeting link will be emailed to you 24 hours beforehand.

Many thanks for giving up your time to participate in this research. I look forward to seeing you in the next few weeks.

Lynn McBain (EdD research student)

Please fill in the diagram with as much detail as you can think of. You can either print this off and write in the boxes or fill in the boxes by clicking on each box and typing in the box. Thank you.

People who I see socially on a regular basis – this can be daily or weekly (please don't use actual names, call them friend X or cousin Y for example)

People who are supportive of me as a student (please don't use actual names, call them friend X or cousin Y for example)

Me

Places I go to meet people – these can be online or in person, and may include religious buildings, please specify (name) those which are online and which are in person.

University run events that I have attended - these can be online or in person, please specify which are online and which are in person.

Appendix E: Consent form



CONSENT FORM

Full title of Project: An investigation into how social integration into post-1992 Higher Education Institutes (HEI) impacts student retention and progression for Young Adult Carers.

Research team: Roger Dalrymple, Director of Studies Email rdalrymple@brookes.ac.uk ; Sarah Frodsham, Supervisor Email sfrodsham@brookes.ac.uk ; Lynn McBain, Doctoral student Email 18030245@brookes.ac.uk

	Please initial box	
I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions.		
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving reason.	☐	
3. I understand that the interview will be audio-recorded	☐	
4. I understand that the interview may be video recorded in the event of the interview taking place online.	☐	
5. I understand that I will be asked to fill in a visual network diagram prior to each interview taking place.	☐	
6. I understand that I will be asked to write a reflective journal entry at the end of each month from October to May (8 entries in total) and that I will be asked to email these to the researcher at the end of every month.	☐	
	Please initial box	
	Yes	No
7. I agree to take part in the above study.	☐	☐
8. I agree to the use of anonymised quotes in publications	☐	☐

--	--	--

Name of Participant

Date

Signature

Appendix F: Participant information sheet



Study title

An investigation into how social integration into a post-1992 Higher Education Institute (HEI) impacts student retention and progression for Young Adult Carers.

Invitation

You are being invited to take part in a research study. Before you decide whether or not to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully.

What is the purpose of the study?

The focus of this study is supportive social integration into Higher Education for undergraduate students aged 18-25 with caring responsibilities or young adult carers. YACs are and continue to be an under-researched group. Recent studies have indicated that students require three types of support to be successful; these are academic, financial and social support. The focus of this study is on socially supportive groups and their impact on a student's programme of study from year to year.

The study will run for an academic year and the overall design is to gain an in-depth perspective of YACs' social networks. This will also include the support they receive and the role of the Students' Union in facilitating any social or support activities.

Why have I been invited to participate?

You have been invited to participate as you have self-identified as a Young Adult Carer and you are on an undergraduate programme of study. This self-identification was achieved in one of three ways:

- You have seen an email from your Student Transitions team and responded via the contact details on the email
- You may have seen an announcement in student communications from The Students' Union and responded via the contact details on the announcement
- You have seen a poster describing the research project and responded via the contact details on the poster
- You have may have seen a social media post from your local Carers' Network.

If you decide to take part, you will be potentially one of ten YACs in this study; if you are not selected to take part in this study you will be offered a summary of the findings. At no point will your data be discussed with other participants.

Do I have to take part?

It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part in this research study. If you do decide to take part, a week prior to the interviews, you will be given this information sheet along with a privacy notice that will explain how your data will be collected and used, as well as a consent form which you will be invited to sign and return, via email, after you have had at least 48 hours to consider your participation. This should be prior to the interview commencing. If you decide to take part, you are still free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason; however your data can only be withdrawn or discarded up until the point of analysis.

Choosing to either take part or not take part in the study will have no impact on your marks, assessments or future studies.

What will happen to me if I take part?

You will be invited to participate in three 30 minute interviews with the researcher. These will be in semester one, after semester one has ended and at the end of semester two. The interviews will be audio recorded with your permission and take place online using a Zoom call. The time and date of the interview will be arranged at your convenience. Prior to each interview Lynn McBain will email you a one page diagram to fill in. This will take you about 10 minutes to complete and will be used as a visual representation of the individuals and organisations who are supportive of you. At no point will you be asked to identify the individuals on the diagram by name, but you may use anonymous labels such as Friend A, Cousin B and so on. You will have an opportunity to discuss this diagram during the interview. Lynn will also email you a list of the topic areas that will be discussed at the interview. At no point will any questions regarding your specific caring responsibilities be discussed, only the impact it has on your education. After the interview has been transcribed by the researcher, the anonymised transcription will be shared with you to confirm accuracy of the conversation. You will have 7 days to confirm the transcription.

In addition to the 3 interviews you will be invited to complete a short reflective journal once a month (this equates to 8 entries across an academic year). This should take you no longer than 10 minutes to complete each month; the question areas for you to consider will be available to you as a GoogleDoc. Lynn will email you once a month to gently prompt you to complete your entry for that month.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

The only disadvantage of taking part is the small amount of time involved, but the researcher will work with you to ensure the interviews take place at a time and date within the research window that is convenient to you.

If at any point during the interview you feel distressed and do not wish to continue with the interview the audio recording equipment will be turned off and the interview terminated. You will be offered the opportunity to take a short break and return to the interview or you may choose to leave. You will be asked if you wish your data to be deleted and not used as part of the study. If you feel distressed after the interview you may decide to leave the study completely. In both instances you will be directed to details of organisations that can support you:

Sources of support include Shout: text 85258 (a text service for students who are worried, anxious or stressed); or the Samaritans Tel: 116123 (Freephone) or email: jo@samaritans.org

; or you may wish to contact your local Carers' network for support or your University Wellbeing services.

If you decide to leave the study you may do so without giving a reason to the researcher.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

The outcome of this study is intended to raise awareness of Young Adult Carers across the Higher Education Institutions more widely. The possible benefit to you is that you may benefit from the interview and become more aware of the supportive help on offer to you.

Will what I say in this study be kept confidential?

All information collected about you will be kept strictly confidential (subject to legal limitations); however, complete anonymity may not be entirely possible with such a small sample size. Any identifying elements such as the use of personal names during interviews will be removed during transcription and replaced with [XXX]. Any identifying labels used in the visual network diagrams will also be removed and replaced with codes.

Research data will be kept securely at all times, especially when collected in the field before being transferred back to Oxford Brookes University. Laptops and other devices are password

protected and data files will be encrypted. Data will be stored in Google Drive, for which the University has a security agreement.

Data generated by the study will be retained in accordance with the University's policy on Academic Integrity. The data generated in the course of the research will be kept securely in electronic form for a period of ten years in accordance with University policy.

What should I do if I want to take part?

If you would like to take part in this study, please email Lynn McBain on 18030245@brookes.ac.uk to express your interest and for an opportunity to ask further questions. The deadline for opting into the study is 30th November 2021.

What will happen to the results of the research study?

The results will be used in the researcher's thesis for the Doctorate in Education. A summary of the findings of the study is available to you as a participant. The results may also be published as an output or used as a conference paper.

Who is organising and funding the research?

I am conducting the research as a doctoral student at Oxford Brookes University and am self-funded.

Who has reviewed the study?

The research has been approved by the University Research Ethics Committee, Oxford Brookes University.

Contact for Further Information

If you would like any further information please contact the student researcher, Lynn McBain on 18030245@brookes.ac.uk or the Director of Studies, Roger Dalrymple on rdalrymple@brookes.ac.uk or the Supervisor, Sarah Frodsham on sfrodsham@brookes.ac.uk. If you have any concerns about the way in which the study has been conducted, you should contact the Chair of the University Research Ethics Committee on ethics@brookes.ac.uk.

Thank you for taking time to read the information sheet.

Appendix G: Initial coding approach



Appendix H: Summary of visual network data

	Participant Pseudonym and Year of Study												
	Chloe Year 3 (final)	Yusra Year 3 (final)			Rae Year 3 (final)			Kaya Year 2			Ally Year 2 (a year behind peers)		
Interview no.	1	1	2	3	1	2	3	1	2	3	1	2	3
People I see socially on a regular basis	Family; Friends 1, 2 and 3. Friend 4 online only. Work colleagues. Partner	Friend X (I go to the gym with this friend too)	Friend X, university friends	Friend X, university friends	Friend A, Friend B every other day; group X that I live with	Friend A, Friend B every other day, Friend C, and group X that I live with	Friend A, Friend B every other day, Friend C, Friend D and group Y who I rehearse with and saw daily for 2 months	Boyfriend, Friend K, Friend A (flatmate), Friend P, Teacher W who teaches Japanese online	Boyfriend, Friend K, Friend A, Friend P, Teacher W	Friend A; boyfriend; teacher W	5 friends, dance crew	Dance crew	Dance crew and VR family

People who are supportive of me as a student	Parents, grandparents, cousins, aunts, uncles, neighbours, friends, partner, partner's family, colleagues, lecturers and fellow students	Mother, father, siblings, friends X and Y and university friends	Mother, father, siblings, friends X and Y, university friends and other friends outside university	Friend A, Friend B every other day; group X that I live with; mum, brothers x 2, friends on course and friends from home	Friend A, Friend B every other day; group X that I live with; mum, brothers x 2, friends on course and friends from home, college counsellor, welfare dean, GP, dissertation supervisor	Friend A, Friend B every other day; group X that I live with; mum, brothers x 2, friends on course (support has increased) and friends from home, various teachers, GP, core creative team for play I wrote	Best friend, boyfriend, Mother, aunty, friends K, P (less contact, no reason) and A (increased support)	Best friend, boyfriend, Mother, aunty, brother, friends K, P and A	Best friend, boyfriend, Mother, aunty, brother, friends R and A and flatmate A.	Mum, brothers x 2	Mum, brothers x 2	Mum, brothers x 2, best friends x 2
---	--	--	--	--	---	---	---	--	---	-------------------	-------------------	-------------------------------------

						Online classes and meetings e.g. volunteering and online calls with people back home (people rather than place). Cafes, college bar, theatre rehearsal space, library, restaurant s, park for walks less so.	Online classes and meetings e.g. volunteering and online calls with people back home (people rather than place). Cafes, college bar, theatre rehearsal space (more now), restaurant s, park for walks less so.							
Place I go to meet people	Online via Zoom and FaceTime. Pubs, bars, coffee shops, other people's houses, restaurants, gym.	Online via FaceTime (Friend Y). Other people's houses, gym, restaurant s	Online via FaceTime (Friend Y). Other people's houses, gym (I now go on my own), restaurant s	Online via FaceTime (Friend Y). Other people's houses, gym (I now go on my own), restaurant s	Online classes and meetings e.g. volunteering and online calls with people back home. Cafes, college bar, theatre rehearsal space, library, restaurant s, park for walks.	Online classes and meetings e.g. volunteering and online calls with people back home (people rather than place). Cafes, college bar, theatre rehearsal space, library, restaurant s, park for walks less so.	Online classes and meetings e.g. volunteering and online calls with people back home (people rather than place). Cafes, college bar, theatre rehearsal space (more now), restaurant s, park for walks less so.	Online via Zoom - Japanese lessons; pub, library, clubs (but not very often)	Online via Zoom - Japanese lessons; friends in different countries on social media; Microsoft teams study sessions with Friend K; pub; library; skate park with boyfriend	Pub; library; online Japanese class.	London for dance events weekly; online to talk to 2 friends in Korea	London for dance events weekly; online to talk to 2 friends in Korea and 1 friend in Australia	London for dance events; online VR chat	

University run events I have attended	1-2-1 support session, careers/volunt eering fairs, lectures, course rep meetings.	One Arab society event and one Islamic charity week event.	None	None	Student theatre performan ces, college parties, college dinners, college parties, college dinners, college quiz nights, peer support online, Gospel choir rehearsals, SU to meet people	Student theatre performan ces, college parties, college dinners, college parties, college dinners, college quiz nights, Gospel choir rehearsals, SU to meet people	Dodgeball, dungeons and dragons, Freshers events	Dungeons and dragons (outside of uni)	None	Kpop Dance society; committee for Korean Hallyu	Kpop Dance society occasional ly	None
--	--	---	------	------	--	--	---	---	------	--	--	------