

**Taking time out of a study programme:**

**An investigation of student interruptions of study using  
Archer's theory of structure and agency**

**Bridie Teresa Woods**

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## **Declaration**

I, Bridie Teresa Woods, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

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**Signature**

## **Abstract**

This thesis is concerned with staff and student experiences of the interruption process, when students take time out of their study programme because of personal reasons, and draws on my experience as a welfare officer supporting students through the process. Research studies on student retention express concerns regarding the number of students who do not return following an interruption of study, but studies on the interruption process itself are extremely scarce.

The theoretical framework chosen was Margaret Archer's theory of Structure and Agency, a critical realist approach to exploring how individuals use their reflexive processes and agency when engaging with structures. The qualitative study was based on semi structured interviews held with eight members of staff and six students. The analysis showed that although in principle the interruption of study is a structural enablement, it can nevertheless be a challenging experience. Some students were unaware of support services, and both staff and students faced challenges of communication when interacting with an uncoordinated system of support structures. The findings also showed how students' mental and emotional health concerns impacted upon their ability to focus and manage the interruption process.

The study shows areas of good practice and also areas that would benefit from improvement, including a better coordination of support services and improved levels of support and information for students when undertaking an interruption of study. Areas of support should cover all stages of the interruption, including when students return to their study programme.

Notwithstanding its limitations, this study makes an important contribution to the literature on student retention, providing an understanding of the challenges facing staff and students when managing the interruption process. Further areas for research may include the experiences of international students, and of administrators when managing the interruption process.

## Impact Statement

My research is concerned with how staff and students in higher education manage the interruption process. There is very little research in this area, and I hope my study will raise awareness of the potential challenges when managing an interruption of study. Although some students may have no concerns, as a welfare officer I saw many students who experienced a number of challenges throughout the interruption process. Research studies express concern that many students do not return following an interruption but there is no research regarding the reasons why this is the case.

This study, using Archer's theory of structure and agency, showed the difficulties experienced by staff and students throughout the interruption process, including students' lack of awareness of, and problems when seeking, information and support. The findings show how limited support can add stress to an already stressful situation for students, and how this can impact upon their ability to manage an interruption of study. The findings thus show the importance of a coordinated support system for students to ensure effective management of the interruption process.

The study also shows the reasons why some students may have problems regarding disclosure of their personal concerns, including fear of failure, a sense of being overwhelmed, confusion, stress and the effects of anxiety or depression. Archer's theory acknowledges the emotional effects of personal concerns and how they may conflict with the more rational approaches of organisational structures. The findings show the importance for individuals to receive the support that enables them to process their emotional concerns and consider practical solutions to their problems. The study thus demonstrates the importance of the staff student relationship and that students need to feel able to speak about their personal concerns when necessary.

As there is so little research concerning students' interruption of studies, I hope this study will make an important contribution to the literature and raise awareness of the concerns that may arise when students need to take time out of their studies. I also hope that the findings of this study will shed some light on why many students do not return to their studies and generate further research in this area of the student experience. The

concerns of this study may also apply to areas external to the field of education. Archer's theory of structure and agency helps to identify the challenges that individuals may face when experiencing personal problems and trying to engage with structures that are not well coordinated or designed to manage individual concerns.

Notwithstanding its limitations, I hope this research will raise awareness, within student support structures and higher education management, of the challenges that staff and students may face when managing an interruption of study. I also hope to disseminate this research through publication in journals concerned with the student experience and that the findings will be a useful reference for staff when writing guidance for students who are managing an interruption of study.

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I dedicate this thesis to my parents  
Bernard Woods (1924 - 2015) and Teresa Woods (1928 - 1983)  
my daughter Sarah and grandson Reece.

In memory of  
Margaret Scotford Archer  
1943-2023

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## Abbreviations

BERA	British Educational Research Association
COCs	Change of Circumstances
DBIS	Department for Business, Innovation and Skills
NUS	National Union of Students
DWP	Department for Work and Pensions
HE	Higher Education
HEFCE	Higher Education Funding Council England
HEP	Higher Education Provider
HEPI	Higher Education Policy Institute
HESA	Higher Education Statistics Agency
IFS	Institute Focus Study (Stage Two of the EdD Programme)
ITP	Initial Teacher Preparation
MOE2	Methods of Enquiry 2 (Stage One of the EdD Programme)
OFFA	Office for Fair Access
OfS	Office for Students
SFE	Student Finance England
SLC	Student Loans Company
WP	Widening Participation

## **Reflective Statement**

### **My professional role as Student Welfare Officer**

The EdD programme has been very important for me for professional, academic, and personal reasons. The programme commenced with the first assignment, Foundations of Professionalism in which I considered my role as a professional. I felt challenged by this assignment as I had not previously considered myself as a professional but realised that the term 'professional' is socially constructed, and no longer adheres to previous notions of hierarchy. The term 'professional' is now much more inclusive, diverse, and non-elitist and does not preclude my role as a Student Welfare Officer. I felt this realisation was reaffirming in the context of my work when supporting students.

### **My research topic: student interruptions of study**

I began my research journey with an initial intention to consider the interface between the two identities of students, the academic and the personal, and how these interrelate in the event of a personal crisis. This can be related to my professional role regarding the non-academic concerns of students, particularly when those concerns impact upon students' ability to focus on their studies. Sometimes it is necessary for students to take time out of their studies until their personal concerns, such as health matters or caring responsibilities have been resolved and they are then able to resume their studies. I supported a number of students through the process and for many students this can be a challenging time with regard to the number of issues they need to attend to and departments they need to engage with, when already feeling anxious and stressed. When looking at the literature I was surprised to discover that research on this aspect of the student experience was very scarce. It therefore seemed both appropriate and important for me to focus on this topic for my research.

### **MOE1 and MOE2: Grounded Theory**

I began with the MOE1 study where I considered researching students who interrupt, with a focus on "non-traditional students". I struggled with the assignment with regard to my understanding of methodological concepts. However, I was able to reflect and learn from my limitations and progress to the MOE2 assignment entitled 'When the going gets tough'. This was a small pilot study where I looked at the experiences of two students who interrupted their studies, applying Grounded Theory in accordance with Charmaz (2006).

The students in this study revealed how challenging, emotional, and isolating an interruption of study can be. They also reported feeling there was very little support available to them throughout the interruption process and that the guidance and regulations were confusing since, although appearing to be straightforward, they felt they did not relate to their actual circumstances. On completion of the assignment, although still struggling with methodological concepts, I was realising the value of the research I was conducting with regard to the deeper understanding I was gaining, as a welfare officer, of the student experience when undertaking an interruption of study.

### **IFS: Critical Discourse Analysis**

For my IFS I decided to conduct a critical discourse analysis on the guidance and documents related to the interruption of studies process. This arose from the findings of the MOE2. I felt it was important to look further into the guidance, as well as the forms and other documents associated with the interruption process, to gain a better understanding of the challenges facing students. I adopted Fairclough's approach to Critical Discourse Analysis (2001, 2010) because I felt his concern with power relations were relevant to the potential vulnerability of students when experiencing personal crises and undertaking an interruption of study. The findings from the study showed that the guidance and documents associated with the interruption of study are indeed not straightforward when related to the actual experiences of students. The students have to navigate a complex system of structures, read a number of documents and complete forms which use unfamiliar language and instructions that can be difficult to understand. The guidance and documents for the interruption process can thus be challenging when students are struggling with a range of different concerns and already experiencing stress and anxiety.

### **EdD Thesis: Margaret Archer's Theory of Structure and Agency**

For my EdD thesis, I initially intended to conduct a further investigation of the student experience of the interruption process using complexity theory and its concern with systems, social structures, and their dynamic interactions. However, through the critical realist reading group I discovered Margaret Archer's critical realist approach to structure and agency (Archer, 2003, 2007; Archer, 2000). Archer's theory, with her focus on the human aspects of the interactions between agency and structures seemed more relevant for my research. I also felt her multidimensional approach to how emotions can influence

individual reflexive powers, and how reflexivity drives agency when managing structures, was relevant to the challenges students often face when interrupting their studies.

I also wished to consider the interruption process from different perspectives and therefore interviewed eight members of support and academic staff in addition to six students from different study programmes. This provided a range of different viewpoints, arising from differences in the experiences of staff and individual students as well as similarities regarding their experiences of the interruption process. The findings from my thesis, using Archer's theory, has shown how both staff and students are challenged when engaging in organisational structures during personal crises and how students' emotions combined with mental health concerns and stress can impact upon their ability to manage the interruption process. The research also shows, through Archer's concept of the three orders of reality, the importance of acknowledging the interrelation of the different aspects of student identity, both personal and academic, not only for the benefit of students who are experiencing a crisis but also for the optimal development of individual agency for all students and individuals.

### **The development of my research skills**

On reflection I can see how my journey regarding the staff and students experience of the interruption process has progressed in terms of my development as a research student, acquiring a greater understanding and experience in research methodology. I feel my use of grounded theory and critical discourse analysis combined with the knowledge I gained from the critical realist reading group have provided me with a wider range of experience and understanding of research methodology. I found critical realism to be a very useful philosophical approach to research methodology because it gave me a greater understanding of concepts such as ontology and epistemology, the different perceptions of what actually exists and how we experience what exists. According to Bhaskar, ontology and epistemology are often conflated, resulting in what he describes as epistemic fallacies (Bhaskar, 2008; Collier, 1994). For example, the interruption of study is often presented in the literature as a problem, with a focus upon its challenges and association with students leaving their study programmes, rather than a focus on the need for a better coordination of organisational structures and understanding of how structures can impact on staff and students' ability to manage the interruption process.

I have also gained valuable experience from presenting my research to the critical realist reading group and at the IOE summer conference in 2018. The questions and feedback received from other researchers was helpful in providing different viewpoints and approaches. For example, it became evident that my research concerning the challenges that staff and students face when managing an interruption of study may also be related to the challenges that individuals may face in times of crisis when engaging with other organisational structures, such as health care and public services or places of employment.

## **The Merger**

### ***Challenges to my role as Welfare Officer***

In my professional practice the challenges arising from the merger with a larger university, began in 2014. There was a change of location for my place of employment which meant I was less accessible to students. There was also a significant reduction in the range of my responsibilities from a holistic approach to supporting students to a narrower focus on student funding. The impact of the merger upon my sense of professional identity resulted in me taking voluntary redundancy in 2016. I then took on a short-term post at another specialist institution where there were both similar and different concerns for students who were interrupting their study programmes.

### ***Challenges to my role as researcher***

The merger also presented challenges for me with regard to the continuation of my research as a former employer in the institute where I was studying. However, I felt it was important to complete my thesis in the hope that it would be of benefit to both staff and students and make an important contribution to the literature where, as noted above, research on the subject of interruptions of study is so scarce. The merger also impacted upon my actual research since it occurred shortly before the collection of my data. Two members of staff reported the effects of the merger upon their ability to support students and the majority of student participants referred to ways in which the merger impacted upon their experiences when interrupting their study programme. Although some of the concerns expressed in the thesis can be related to the merger, I was also aware, from my experience in supporting students, my previous research, and the concerns expressed in the literature regarding student support structures, that many concerns had existed prior to the merger.

## **Personal challenges**

My research journey has taken much longer than anticipated. In addition to the above professional and research concerns, I also experienced some personal challenges including the loss of my father in 2015, and seeing my grandson, now aged 21 and autistic, experience serious mental health problems resulting in two hospital admissions. At times I feel I have walked in the shoes of my participants when considering the challenges of seeking support for my grandson and my interactions with organisational structures concerned with autism and mental health issues. I also experienced health problems with a diagnosis of thyroid cancer, requiring surgery and a course of treatment that took place over a two-year period during the pandemic.

Thus, as a welfare officer and a researcher, and from my own personal experience, I feel I have gained a considerable amount of understanding with regard to the challenges that students may face when undertaking a study programme. My research has also provided me with a greater understanding of my professional role and the experiences of staff and students in the wider context of higher education research. I view the interruption of study as a very important process whereby students who, through unforeseen events not of their making, need to take time out of their studies to focus on their more personal concerns. I therefore feel very strongly that both staff and students need to be supported when students are undertaking an interruption of study.



## **Chapter One: Introduction**

### **The rationale for this study**

My thesis is concerned with interruptions of study, when students, for a range of personal reasons, need to take time out of their study programme. It is a continuation of the theme of the research I conducted for my Methods of Enquiry (MOE 2) and my Institution Focused Study (IFS). The reason for my focus on this area of the student experience arises from my professional role as a Student Welfare Officer over a period of sixteen years, and the support I provided to students who needed to take time out of their study programme. There is very little research on student interruptions of study, and I would argue there is a need to look more closely at the experiences of both students and staff when they are engaged in what can sometimes be a challenging process. The effective management of an interruption of study can mean that a student who is at risk of academic failure owing to personal concerns is able to take time out of their study programme and return to complete their studies when their personal issues have been addressed.

As discussed below and in Chapter Two, there is a concern for the number of non-traditional students who do not complete their studies. The majority of students I supported could be described as “non-traditional”, mature students, aged over 21 years, who were following postgraduate, professional training programmes, including the Foundation Degree for teaching assistants, the PGCE programme for trainee teachers and the EdD, a professional doctorate for students already employed in professional roles. The term non-traditional is contested but includes, for the purposes of my study, students who may be the first in their families to enter higher education, students with caring and/or professional responsibilities, and students from ethnic minorities and “lower socio-economic strata” (Field & Morgan-Klein, 2012, p.182). It is often non-traditional students who need to interrupt their studies because of additional responsibilities. Whilst mindful that many students may have positive experiences when interrupting their studies, my research arises from supporting students who experienced difficulties and requested my support and guidance. The interruption process can be complex and stressful, especially for non-traditional students who, as stated, often have additional responsibilities with limited resources. I would argue from my role as a welfare officer, the effective management of an interruption of study is important in order to facilitate as far as possible a student’s potential to complete their study programme. It is my wish that this research will provide a greater understanding of the interruption process from a welfare viewpoint and contribute

towards mitigating some of the concerns that students and staff may experience during the interruption process.

### **My professional role and previous research**

As a Student Welfare Officer in a higher education institution my role was to support students experiencing personal difficulties during their study programmes. It was also my responsibility to ensure, as far as possible, that students did not leave their course because of a lack of the reasonable support that would enable them to continue their studies. As the Office for Students (OfS) states in its regulatory framework, higher education providers (HEPs) “must support all students, from admission through to completion, with the support that they need to succeed in and benefit from higher education” (OfS, 2018, p.138). My main concern was the welfare of students and to assist them in making informed and appropriate choices when facing difficulties during their studies. This could mean helping them to continue their studies or interrupt their study programme or to make a fully informed decision to withdraw from their studies completely. It was also my role to support students, where appropriate, through their experience of an interruption.

With regard to my initial research study on the EdD programme, my MOE 2 (Methods of Enquiry 2) was an in-depth study, using grounded theory, which focused on the experiences of two students who had interrupted their study programmes. The students reported a range of emotional and psychological effects arising from their experiences of an interruption which related to the personal reasons for the interruption and to their experiences of the interruption process itself. The students reported a perceived lack of support and information throughout all stages of the interruption process. One student highlighted a disconnect between the guidance for students considering an interruption and the actual student experience of an interruption, describing the guidance as ‘fairly straightforward’ but ‘too fixed sometimes ... life isn’t like that’ (Woods, 2013). The MOE2 study also highlighted the stages of an interruption of study which could be perceived to comprise three main stages, the period prior to the interruption, the period during the interruption, and the period when the student returns to study.

Whilst mindful of its limitations, regarding the small size of the study concerning the experiences of two students, I built upon the MOE 2 study’s findings for my IFS, the second stage of my EdD study programme, by exploring the students’ concerns about the

interruption procedures. A critical discourse analysis of the guidance for students who interrupt their studies, and other related documents, suggested that a use of unfamiliar language, the application of linear administrative procedures and regulations to the non-linear, real-life concerns of students who need to interrupt a study programme can be a problem. The IFS study suggested that a number of the challenges raised by an interruption of study can be attributed to the non-linear connections between a student's circumstances and organisational procedures, and the lack of helpful guidance to assist staff and students through the process. In addition, the study highlighted the number of organisations and departments engaged in the interruption process and the disconnections that exist between them.

### **An interruption of study: its meaning and some of the challenges**

With reference to the students I have supported, an interruption of study normally arises when, for personal reasons, a student needs to take a break from a study programme, with the intention of returning to study, normally within one to two years. Personal reasons may include family illness or bereavement, a pregnancy, a personal crisis, or health concerns. During the period of an interruption a student is registered as interrupted and is no longer enrolled for attendance purposes. This means the student will not be required to attend the course or complete assignments, nor will they have access to academic support. Access to online electronic learning resources and the library will be limited. Students may have some access to pastoral support and retain email access to administrative departments. No fees are payable during an interruption period, but this may mean a student will not receive funding for living costs.

There is a complex range of regulations that may be applicable to an interruption of study. Some are related to HEP (Higher Education Provider) processes and some to Higher Education (HE) external organisations, such as scholarship providers and those concerned with statutory funding. There are also regulations related to non-HE external organisations such as the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP). HEPs are also required to provide statistical information to the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) concerning those students who interrupt their studies and, since 2018, HEPs are accountable to the OfS for the experiences of students during their studies.

Regulations concerning the duration of an interruption period may vary according to HEPs, the student profile and the structure of a study programme. For example, a student

following a taught undergraduate or postgraduate course would normally need to resume studies at a point in the course corresponding with the date of the interruption, typically one academic year later. For instance, a student who interrupts at the end of the Autumn term would return to study at the start of the Spring term of the next academic year, although students who interrupt mid-term will need to repeat the Autumn term. Arrangements for students on research degrees with no teaching structure can be more flexible. The maximum length of an interruption is normally one to two years although longer periods of interruption may be granted in exceptional circumstances. However, longer periods of interrupted study can be problematic owing to changes in the requirements and contents of a study programme. Although this may not be possible, students are usually asked to provide advanced notice of an interruption, generally at least one month, and a date for their return to study.

While the personal concerns that the students experience can in themselves be challenging, it is evident from my experience that students also face a number of additional challenges related to their experience of an interruption that are not explored in the literature. They are concerned with the task of completing a study programme that has often required a good deal of personal and financial investment. Moreover, students need to interact with a number of different HEP departments and external organisations and may struggle with understanding the different sets of academic and funding regulations attached to the interruption of a study. There are also financial concerns because students may no longer receive student financial support during a period of interrupted study. An interruption of study can be difficult because students temporarily lose contact with their study programme and will normally be required to join a new, but already established, cohort of students when returning to study. There may also be some anxiety and stress arising from the uncertainty surrounding their personal concerns, the duration of the interruption, the anticipated date of their return to study, and anxieties concerning exam resits or reengagement with the cognitive demands of academic study.

Staff in HEPs also face challenges regarding the additional support and administration services required for students who are interrupting their studies. An interruption varies according to each student's personal circumstances and their study programme. A complex coordination of administrative procedures and support is often required, which can be problematic when applying linear processes to the non-linear experiences of a

student who is interrupting. In addition, there is often uncertainty, prior to an interruption, about whether an interruption is advisable, and this may entail a period of extended deadline applications and assignment deferrals. It may also be difficult to coordinate the timing of the interruption with the schedule of the study programme when a student needs to interrupt mid-term or during a module. Furthermore, it may not be possible to predict the duration of an interruption and when a student might return to the study programme.

### **The stages of an interruption**

Below I provide a summary of each stage of the process of an interruption in accordance my experience, in one institution, when supporting students who interrupt their studies. Although a student interruption may not always follow a set pattern, there are certain stages that can be identified in the process. I would maintain the application of a structure to the interruption process can assist in identifying the main concerns of the process at each stage of an interruption, and highlights the challenges faced by both staff and students throughout the interruption process.

#### ***Stage One: Prior to the interruption***

The period prior to an interruption often entails a series of requests for extensions or deferrals of coursework before the need for an interruption of studies is realised. At this stage students are often experiencing high levels of stress because of their personal circumstances and a fear of failing their course. The procedure of applying for an interruption requires communication with tutors and administrators to discuss the conditions of an interruption, the completion of forms and administration processes before an interruption can be confirmed. There will be required interactions, for staff and students, with a number of internal HEP departments, including student support services, and external organisations such as Student Finance England (SFE), the Student Loans Company (SLC) and other funding providers. Students may need to contact other agencies such as their accommodation provider, the DWP and their local council tax office regarding any benefit entitlements and council tax exemptions.

Students are often concerned with the financial implications when interrupting their study programme, and funding entitlement during a period of interruption is complex and depends upon individual circumstances. Students who interrupt mid-term may need to pay twice for tuition fees for the full term because of repeat attendance on the course. Students

may also be liable to repay any overpayment of a maintenance loan for non-attendance. This is usually subtracted from their funding entitlement when returning to study.

### ***Stage Two: During the interruption***

The period during an interruption can also be problematic. Although students can focus upon their personal concerns without the demands of their study programme, they may feel isolated and uncertain about their identity as students. HEPs maintain that students lose their student status during an interruption because they are not in attendance, but the DWP states that students remain students unless they have withdrawn from their study programme (DWP, 2012). This ambiguity of status for interrupted students can raise financial implications. Students who have interrupted are no longer entitled to student funding unless they can provide evidence of compelling personal reasons or financial hardship, and most interrupted students, except for those who are disabled or single parents, are regarded as ineligible for welfare benefits. Finding full-time employment to cover living costs during this period can be difficult, usually because of personal circumstances and the uncertain duration of their availability for work. Staff may also experience additional challenges because of the individual nature of student interruptions, where students interrupt at different times for varied durations. It can also be difficult to maintain contact with interrupted students when they are no longer in attendance and do not have access to their learning resources.

### ***Stage Three: Return to study***

Students may also have concerns when they return to their study programme. It can be difficult to ascertain the best time to return and the transition from non-student to returning student may present further financial implications. For example, if a student interrupted mid-term, they will most probably need to return at the start of the term or even the academic year. This could mean they have additional tuition fees to pay and will need additional loans for living costs which will result in higher amounts of student debt. Returning students will again be required to interact with external organisations and HEP departments. Application forms for student funding for living costs and the payment of tuition fees will need to be completed in advance to ensure where possible that funding is available at the point of return. However, there are often administrative delays in the reinstatement of their student funding for living costs. Students who have interrupted for health reasons may be required to attend a Welfare Review (formerly known as a Return to Study Meeting) before they are readmitted to their study programme. HEP staff will also need to coordinate an interrupted student's return to study and ensure that a place on the

study programme is confirmed, learning resources are updated, and appropriate support mechanisms are in place where applicable. Students may be joining a different cohort that has already been established and it may take time for them to “fit in” with the other students. There may also be new members of staff who are unaware of their circumstances and some students may feel conscious of their status as interrupted students returning to study. One student in my MOE2 study stated, “it is not as if I am returning from a holiday” (Woods, 2013).

### **Locating the interruption process in a wider context**

There is a wide range of research on the student experience itself, and on students who withdraw from their study programmes, but a scarcity of literature concerned with the experience of students who interrupt their studies. The research that does exist is situated in the context of student retention, where the main concerns relate to the number of non-traditional or “disadvantaged” students who fail to complete their study programmes. To indicate why it was important to focus on interruptions, the following HESA statistics (see Table 1, below) show the number of students affected. To give an example, in 2018-19, 82.2% of mature undergraduate students, in England, who took a year out after their first year were no longer in Higher Education.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> HESA statistics are not available for subsequent years due to the Covid pandemic and a review of statistical information regarding student continuation and retention in higher education see <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/performance-indicators/non-continuation>

**Table 1 Resumption of study after a year out: mature students in England**

Year	No. who take a year out	No. who resume at the same HEP	% who resume at the same HEP	No. who transfer to another UK HEP	% who transfer to another UK HEP	No. no longer in HE	% no longer in HE	Entrants in Academic Year	% not in HE for 2 years
2014-15	8,850	955	10.8%	530	6.0%	7,365	83.3%	71,905	10.2%
2015-16	9,770	930	9.5%	640	6.6%	8,195	83.9%	75,675	10.8%
2016-17	10,460	895	8.6%	725	7.0%	8,835	84.5%	77,965	11.3%
2017-18	10,525	950	9.0%	770	7.3%	8,800	83.6%	76,825	11.5%
2018-19	11,270	1,000	8.9%	1,010	9.0%	9,260	82.2%	82,005	11.3%

<https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/performance-indicators/non-continuation/table-t4>  
<https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/performance-indicators/non-continuation/table-t4>

An OfS briefing expresses a concern for the non-continuation rates of mature students who are “more likely to be from disadvantaged backgrounds” (OfS, 2020, p. 4). The same briefing refers to the reasons why mature students struggle to complete their studies, “Significant reasons for this cited by students include the difficulties of balancing study with other commitments and financial problems” (OfS, 2020, p. 4). A report produced by the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) states that HEPs will be expected to accommodate students who have caring responsibilities and ensure as far as possible that these do not prevent students from completing their study programmes (OFFA, 2018). However, there are no references to the intervention of an interruption of study, that could facilitate the completion of a study programme for some students when facing temporary concerns such as ill health or caring responsibilities.

In the literature on student retention, many studies are concerned with the reasons why students leave HE early, but there are no studies that address the fact that, according to HESA, many students take a break, suggesting some intention to return to study, before leaving university. The reasons why students take time out and then do not return to their studies are not explored. The lack of research in this aspect of the student experience may be attributed to the difficulties in reaching students who have left university and no compelling reason to consider the views of students who do return to their study programmes. Nonetheless, I would argue, a consideration of the experiences of students who take time out of their studies may offer some explanation as to why some students do not return to their study programmes after taking time out. A number of students I have



supported when taking an interruption of study have not returned to their study programmes and I would maintain it is possible their experience of the interruption process may have had some influence on their decision to leave university. As I will discuss in Chapter Two, research studies suggest that HEP support plays a significant role in helping students to complete their studies. As stated earlier, the two students in my MOE2 study cited a lack of support and a sense of isolation as negative factors in their experiences of the interruption process.

### **The merger of two institutions**

The merger of the institution and place of my employment with a larger institution located nearby took place in 2014 before the collection of data. This study will consider the impact of the merger in the context of both staff and student experiences of the interruption process.

### **The aim of my research and outline of the thesis**

Following on from the findings of my MOE2 and IFS studies, and from my own experience as a welfare officer, I wish to further consider the experiences of staff and students' when managing the interruption process. I have chosen Archer's theory of Structure and Agency as my theoretical framework because her theory is concerned with how individuals exercise their agency when engaging with organisational structures. I will consider to what extent Archer's theory can facilitate a better understanding of staff and students experiences of the interruption process.

In the following Chapter Two, Review of the Literature, I consider the few references in the literature to the student interruption process and the literature concerning the student experience, student support and student retention that can be related to the interruption process. In Chapter Three, Theoretical Framework, I will discuss my application of Archer's theory to the experiences of staff and students when managing the interruption process. In addition, I will consider how Archer's theory has been applied in studies concerning the teaching and learning experiences of staff and students in higher education and provide a brief account of criticisms of her theory. I will then outline the aim of my research and present my research questions. In Chapter 4, Methodology I present my approach and the methods used when conducting my research. In Chapter 5 Findings and Discussion, I will consider the findings in relation to Archer's theory of Structure and

Agency, the aim of my research and my research questions, and to the concerns explored in the literature regarding student retention as they relate to interruption of study process. I will also consider suggestions for improvements to the interruption process that have arisen from the study. In Chapter 6 I will discuss the limitations of the study with regard to the merger, the size of the study, positionality, and generalisability. Finally, in Chapter 7, Conclusion, I will consider the implications of my research for my professional practice, dissemination of the findings, and suggestions for further research.

## **Chapter Two: Review of the Literature**

As stated in the preceding chapter, there are very few references to the interruption process in the literature concerned with supporting students in UK higher education. The references that do exist can be found in studies regarding student retention and the number of students leaving university before completing their studies. The main focus is non-traditional first year undergraduates, age 18-25, but there are also concerns for the retention of mature students aged over 21 years, PGCE and postgraduate students. As the literature on student interruptions is limited, I also conducted a survey of the literature concerning student support and retention, in the context of my concerns regarding the interruption process as a support mechanism to enable students complete their study programmes. I will report my critical evaluation of that literature in this chapter. I will first consider the few references to the interruption process that exist in the literature. I then discuss the literature that is related to student support and retention including an outline of student support structures and related concerns regarding student concerns, mental health and the coordination and complexity of student support structures in addition to matters related to the student staff relationship, student disclosure and students' emotional concerns. I will also briefly consider some of the literature that can be related to the merger and its impact.

### **References in the literature to the interruption of study**

Many studies express concerns for the challenges faced by students described as non-traditional, whose numbers have increased as a result of the UK government's continuing Widening Participation Strategy with its aim to improve access for non-traditional students into higher education (Connell-Smith & Hubble, 2018). A large body of research considers how to support this group of students, enhance their student experience, and improve completion rates. Many articles endorse the improvement of student support structures, but very few refer to the effectiveness of an interruption of study as a support mechanism for students who are struggling and may otherwise abandon their study programme. Although, as Kilmister (2015) states in his small study of three students who interrupted, institutions are accountable for their management of student interruptions, there is a dearth of literature about the potential benefits of the interruption process, and best practice regarding its management for staff and students in HEPs.

I would argue that references in the literature to the interruption process raise some concerns regarding its perception, for students, staff, and researchers. The diverse terminology, its frequent association with student attrition, and the challenges associated with its undertaking suggest a process perceived to be a problem rather than a potential solution for students who are struggling on their study programme. Kilmister (2015), refers to the association of an interruption of study with withdrawal, and students who do not return after an interruption, stating, “if interruption is not always viewed institutionally as withdrawal, this might enable universities to communicate with and encourage students to return to study” (p. 65). However, there are very few references in the literature to the reasons why students do not return to study after taking time out. The few references to an interruption of study that do exist in the literature will now be discussed.

Firstly, a diverse use of terminology regarding the interruption process denotes some inconsistency within the discourse of HE structures. For example, the process is referred to as “suspending” (DBIS, 2014; NUS, 2012); “study breaks” (Bradley, 2017); “taking a year off” and “leave of absence” (Dent, Nightingale, Mather, & Strike, 2017); “intercalated” (Byrom & Lightfoot, 2013) and “deferred” or “temporary withdrawal” (Merrill, 2012), “temporarily suspend ... (intercalate)” (Roberts, 2012). This may explain why students are often unsure about their options. In one study a student expresses some confusion when using the terms associated with an interruption of study:

...because one of my friends, he actually dropped out ... because he got diagnosed with depression and he's, like, taking a year off but I don't know if that's, kind of, a case where you would use student mobility or you would actually have a leave of absence. (Dent et al., 2017, p. 58)

Furthermore, many references associate interruptions with students leaving university. For example,

- “mature students contemplating suspending or leaving” (DBIS, 2014, p. 52);
- “dropping out of university or taking an extended leave of absence” (Dent et al., 2017, p. 57) ;
- “firstly ‘a break from study’; secondly, wanting to leave” (McCary, Pankhurst, Valentine, & Berry, 2011, p. 39); and

- “leaving their course (32.5 per cent) or suspending (47.3 per cent) their studies” (NUS, 2012, p. 32).

One explanation for this association is the impact of both interruptions and withdrawals on HEP performance indicators. Jones (2008), in his synthesis of research on student retention refers to interpretations of the data regarding the impact of interruptions of study upon student retention, stating,

The focus on retention - a narrow view of student success - is reinforced by the data collection mechanisms and funding regimes. These do not recognize interrupted or partial patterns of participation as valid, but rather perceive them in terms of either individual or institutional failure (Jones, 2008, p. 2).

Accordingly, studies express the same concerns for students who interrupt and students who are leaving HE. As stated in the National Union of Students (NUS) report, an online survey concerning the experiences of over 4,000 mature students, “There are many reasons why students of all ages suspend their studies or drop out of university, but this is a serious problem” (NUS, 2012, p. 11). Another explanation could be the similarity of some issues experienced by students who consider leaving and those who consider taking a break, and the challenges this presents for HEP support structures. The NUS report states, “the situation of prospective leavers is broadly similar to those who have considered suspending” (2012, p. 33).

Thus, I would argue, an interruption of study is often presented as a problem, rather than a solution to a problem and, as in the NUS report, not considered as a separate and different concern to that of students who leave their study programme. An interruption may extend the time taken to complete a study programme, but it can be an important mechanism for enabling students to complete their study programme, reducing the number of student withdrawals and improving completion rates.

There are also some brief references to the challenges of an interruption of study. Bradley (2017) states financial concerns, especially for low-income students, can mean there are even more challenges when returning to study. Mannay and Morgan (2013) refer to a

student whose “position in higher education became more precarious when her maternity leave meant that she had to join the next year’s cohort” (p. 68) and Merrill (2012) states “returning to study after taking a temporary break can be a struggle” (p. 174). Roberts (2012) states that only 3 out of 5 teacher trainer students returned to their teacher training programme at the expected time following an interruption. However, these studies do not explore the challenges faced by students, the reasons for the challenges or how these challenges could be mitigated.

Notwithstanding the above challenges, some studies acknowledge the benefits of an interruption of study. Jones (2008) argues for “longer periods of absence” (p. 22) and Xuereb (2014) states: “Specifically, personal difficulties and financial stress may require time away from studies” (p.153). Roberts (2012), referring to teacher trainers, sees the option of “intercalation” as instrumental in helping students to remain rather than leave their study programme,

Recognising that for some trainees timing is a factor, and that for a variety of reasons the course is not right for them at that point in time; intercalation, can then, be an important tool in reducing withdrawal and promoting trainee persistence. (2012, p. 968)

However, Quinn (2013) maintains the option to interrupt is less available to students in the UK than in some EU countries and argues that in Sweden, for example, where students can leave a course to take up temporary employment, attrition is comparatively low. Similarly, Bradley (2017), citing Australia and Europe, argues for more options for students, including “study breaks” (p. 42). However, again, references to an interruption of study are very brief with no exploration of the benefits or the circumstances where a student may interrupt a study programme.

Research suggests many students who leave university wish to return at a future date (Hobson et al., 2006 ; Quinn, 2013; Yorke & Longden, 2008). As Yorke and Longden (2008) state in their study concerning over 400 students from 25 different institutions who left university, “nearly three-quarters of the respondents either had already re-engaged, or intended to re-engage with, higher education” (2008, p. 2). A report concerning the

experiences of student teachers states that a number of students would consider returning to the same course (Hobson et al., 2006). However, what is not reported are the challenges facing students when returning to a different study programme after a long break, especially with regard to the funding regulations for previous study which can reduce future student funding entitlement. Since it is reported that some students leave because of lack of support and information (NUS, 2012), arguably a number of students, with information and support, may have chosen to interrupt rather than leave their study programme.

### **Studies related to student support and retention**

Many studies concerned with student retention consider the reasons why students struggle and possible mitigations. Measures of support are largely related to the academic and financial disadvantages associated with non-traditional students. The challenges arising from unforeseen circumstances, such as ill health or a bereavement, which are often the reasons why students interrupt their studies, are not explored. Whilst it is important to consider knowable and preventable student concerns, unforeseeable events may temporarily impact upon academic progress and need to be addressed. Studies concerning the reasons why students struggle do not consider how an interruption of study may allow a student to take time out until, where possible, the crisis is resolved.

The reasons why students struggle are generally categorised in the literature as academic, social, or personal (Bradley, 2017; Jones, 2008; National Audit Office, 2007; Quinn, 2013; Webb & Cotton, 2018; Yorke & Longden, 2008). It is acknowledged that these categories are usually interrelated when students are struggling (Hobson et al., 2006; Jones, 2008; NUS, 2012). As Jones (2008) states, students seldom leave university for one reason only and “In most cases, the picture is complex and students leave as a result of a combination of inter-related factors” (2008, p. 9). Mannay and Morgan (2013) state there is a tendency to overgeneralise the personal aspects of student concerns and overlook the complex ways in which personal issues interrelate and impact upon academic performance:

Although the simplified categories of barriers offered by retention research synthesis may be useful, groupings such as ‘lack of social integration’ or ‘personal circumstances’ (Jones, 2008) are often too generic to communicate

the everyday practicalities and psychological conflicts that make the possibility of higher education untenable. (Mannay & Morgan, 2013, p. 60)

Although it is acknowledged that student issues are often interrelated there are few references to the different support structures that students may need to navigate. The concerns for students when interrupting are often complex, and they need a coordinated process of support until their return to study. In addition to HEP support services, they will also need to engage with external organisations such as funding, health, and childcare providers to make arrangements for their change of circumstances. This can be challenging when experiencing a personal crisis and could explain why some students opt to leave rather than interrupt and why many students do not return after interrupting.

### ***Mental health***

There is a large body of research on mental health in Higher Education which cannot be considered in any depth in this thesis. However, mental health concerns are frequently related to, and hidden, in personal reasons in the research concerning student retention (Jones, 2008). Students often experience high levels of stress when personal concerns impact upon their academic performance and a number of studies cite stress as a factor for students who are struggling (Bradley, 2017; Brown, 2018; Cotton, Nash, & Kneale, 2017; Merrill, 2015; Waight & Giordano, 2018). Bradley (2017) states in a longitudinal qualitative study that, "Stress has emerged as a major theme in our study. Stress is related to loneliness, to relationship breakups, accommodation difficulties, but above all to worries about performance in academic assessments" (p. 38).

Stress concerning personal issues and academic performance are often interrelated. Students' feelings of stress during crises can impact upon their mental health and their academic progress. High levels of stress are experienced by students when struggling to manage caring responsibilities or serious health conditions and meet the academic requirements of a study programme. An interruption of study can often provide students with a much-needed break during a crisis and help to reduce stress levels. However, there is often additional stress for students when struggling to find the information and support they need.



Some challenges are shared by all students, and some are specific to different students and study programmes. For example, caring responsibilities may be a concern for mature, and mainly female, students (NUS, 2012; OFFA, 2018), school placements may present challenges for some PGCE students (Hobson, Malderez, et al., 2009; Roberts, 2012) and research students may struggle to balance their research with personal and professional roles (Jazvac-Martek, Chen, & McAlpine, 2011; McAlpine, Gonsalves, & Jazvac-Martek, 2012; Wellington & Sikes, 2006). Many of these concerns are cited as reasons for students leaving their studies and some, I would argue, may be resolved through an interruption of study. However, the main concern in the literature is why students leave and studies do not explore how an interruption of study may enable students to take a break and resume at a later date.

### ***HEP support structures***

Student support structures are held to play an important role in providing information, guidance, and assistance to students when they are experiencing problems. Tinto (2007) includes academic and personal support for students as key conditions for student retention (cited in Quinn 2013, p. 85). Morgan (2012) argues that “Student support services enhance the student experience, and they play an important part in student retention” (p. 83). However, as will be discussed below, some studies acknowledge there are challenges when evaluating the effectiveness of student support services. Many references to HEP support services are related to concerns for student retention (Bradley, 2017; Higher Education Policy Institute [HEPI], 2017; Merrill, 2015; Morgan, 2012; Quinn, 2013; Thomas, 2012) but studies do not consider the potential role of an interruption of study as a support mechanism. Notwithstanding, the literature discussed below is relevant for those students who may need support when interrupting their studies.

Student support services tend to be generalised into the categories of academic or non-academic support. Waight and Giordano (2018) describe non-academic support as “the varied and holistic forms of support that consider the physical, social, cultural and emotional needs of students” (p. 391). Morgan (2012) provides a long list of support services including personal tutors, course administrators, funding advice, disability and wellbeing support, reflecting the wide range of concerns that students may experience during a study programme. Although provision varies according to HEPs, many support services exist in a central location, often referred to as a “one stop shop” (Morey et al.,

2012; Thomas, 2012). These services normally include those listed by Morgan (2012) with links to other services such as counselling, careers and student union services. Student support is also usually available within faculties and departments, where it is offered by academic and professional staff (Morgan, 2012).

Personal tutors, who are normally members of the academic staff, provide academic and pastoral support and often assist students who consider an interruption of study. They can guide students through the academic regulations and refer students to other HEP support services. There are many references in the literature to personal tutors, highlighting the importance of their role in supporting students (Bradley, 2017; Gabi & Sharpe, 2019; Grey & Osborne, 2020; McCary et al., 2011; Morgan, 2012; NUS, 2012; Stephen, O'Connell, & Hall, 2008; Thomas, 2012; Wakelin, 2021; Webb & Cotton, 2018). Thomas (2012) refers to the importance of the relationship between students and their personal tutors who keep a close eye on students' progression.

Personal tutors are perceived to play an important role in student retention (Bradley, 2017; Hobson et al., 2006; Thomas, 2012). Bradley (2017) states they may "pick up both personal and academic problems at an early stage and provide advice and support" (p.31). Hobson et al. (2006) report a PGCE student stating, "you have got somebody you are seeing every week, somebody you know who you can talk to" (p. 272). Gabi and Sharpe (2019) conducted a survey of 68 students and three focus group interviews with 24 students at a rural campus. The study maintains the importance of the relationship between the personal tutor and student, since despite students' initial reluctance to approach their personal tutor, they find them "to be understanding and approachable and an immense help both on a personal and academic level" once a relationship is established (Gabi & Sharpe, 2019, p. 13). However, Stephen, O'Connell, and Hall (2008) in a small qualitative study comprising 24 tutors and 37 students, refer to the impact of increased student numbers on the role of the personal tutor and Wakelin (2021) in a small case study including 6 tutors and 25 students expresses a need for more clarity regarding the role of the personal tutor and a greater awareness of available support services.

## ***Structural Concerns***

Since students often have both academic and non-academic concerns, it is considered important to coordinate academic and non-academic support. As Morgan (2012) states, “there is an increasing realisation that effective non-academic student support should...be integrated with some elements of academic support” (p. 82). A number of studies consider the coordination of student support services (Brown, 2011; DBIS, 2014; Gibbs & Kharouf, 2022; Graham & Regan, 2016; Morgan, 2012; Morey et al., 2012; Quinn, 2013; Roberts, 2018; Thomas, 2012; Thomas, Hill, O’ Mahony, & Yorke, 2017) . Thomas et al. (2017), for example, state that “a whole-institution approach to improving student retention and success” (p. 133) is more effective than different HEP departments working to support students independently. Roberts (2018) advises better integration of working relationships between staff in different departments and between staff and students in order to improve student retention. Brown (2011) states staff working in coordination avoids students being sent “from one person to another” (p. 200), thus ensuring students are directed to the appropriate services. However, there are no studies that focus specifically on the different roles held by HEP staff engaged in the provision of student support in student services.

There is also a need for better coordination with external support services. For example, the Royal College of Psychiatrists (2021) advises close collaboration between HEP support services, the counselling services and external NHS health care providers. A coordination of internal and external support is important for students when interrupting their study programmes to ensure effective management throughout the different stages of the interruption process. However the challenges of coordinating complex systems such as the NHS, mental health services and HEP support structures are not clearly addressed.

Notwithstanding the need for a coordination of support services, there are concerns regarding the tensions between staff and different departments, and the complexity of support structures, that may negatively impact on students when seeking support from different services. Some studies report tensions between academic and HEP staff (Gibbs & Kharouf, 2022; Graham & Regan, 2016; Roberts, 2018). Graham and Regan (2016) maintain, “professional staff barely get a mention when proposals for collaboration are discussed in the literature” (2016, p. 606). Professional staff are reported to feel a sense of inferiority, despite their range of skills and contributions to supporting students (Gibbs &

Kharouf, 2022 ; Graham & Regan, 2016). Gibbs & Kharouf (2022) , who interviewed 23 academic and 27 professional staff from different departments in three UK universities, reported the benefits of staff morale for staff who had positive working relationships with staff in other departments. However, the study also reported tensions between academic and professional staff and within different groups of professional staff because of diversity in the roles and functions of HEP staff. Although the diverse roles of professional staff are acknowledged there are few details of the many different roles held.

References are also made to the complexity of HEP structures (Brown, 2011; Field & Morgan-Klein, 2012; Gibbs & Kharouf, 2022; Roberts, 2018; Thomas et al., 2017). Roberts (2018) acknowledges the complexity of HEI systems “bound by tradition, hierarchical structures, rules, processes and relationships” (p. 151). Gibbs & Kharouf (2022) refer to HEP staff working within “a complex web of ongoing service relationships” (p. 40). Regan, Dollard, and Banks (2014) note both staff and students find HEP processes “complex and not user-friendly” (p. 534) and Dent, Nightingale, Mather, and Strike (2017), in their study concerning the experiences of students seeking advice regarding credit transfers, cite one student who stated, “there are so many procedures. It’s, like, really stressful and you want to look for some help but then they just give you so much reading, [which makes] the process even harder” (2017, p. 67).

Students often require the assistance of support staff when navigating the complex processes of HEP structures. The important role played by professional staff in helping academic staff and students navigate institutional policies and procedures is acknowledged (Graham & Regan 2016; Regan, Dollard, & Banks 2014; Roberts, 2018). Graham and Regan (2016), in their comparative study based on interviews held with 28 professional staff comprising 14 from each of two universities, one in the UK and one in Australia, found that many academic staff rely on the professional staff who possess the administrative skills to manage policies and procedures. However, Gibbs & Kharouf (2022) report that professional staff are often associated negatively with complex bureaucratic processes, adding this could be mitigated through improved communication and “an understanding of the customer’s [student’s] needs” (2022, p. 47).

With regard to the staff and student relationship, although the relationship is viewed as important, research is held to be scarce. Graham and Regan (2016) state: “Even with an

increasing emphasis on student satisfaction, student retention and success, and more recently student resilience, the contribution of professional staff to these issues has been largely overlooked” (2016, p. 596). Students frequently engage with structures through members of staff. The relationship between staff and students is therefore important, particularly when a student is feeling vulnerable. Thomas (2012) maintains the importance of a “meaningful interaction between staff and students” (p. 14) and Gabi and Sharpe (2019) state academic tutors should “develop a positive, relational approach towards their tutees” (p. 14). Waight and Giordano (2018), in a study in one research intensive UK university, concerning the mental health of doctoral students, maintain the relationship between students and their supervisors often appears to be unclear. One student states “Are they...supposed to offer you support? Are they meant to send you to someone else? What is their role in managing your stress?” (2018, p. 400). According to McAlpine, Paulson, Gonsalves & Jazvac-Martek (2012), research students are reluctant to disclose personal issues to their supervisors. However, studies tend to present a one dimensional approach with a focus either on staff or on students. Notwithstanding, it is acknowledged that limited resources, training needs and increased demands for academic staff to conduct research activities are challenges for the relationship between students and supervisors (Grey & Osborne, 2020; Tett, Cree, Mullins, & Christie, 2017; Webb, Wyness, & Cotton, 2017).

There are also concerns for the capacity of HEPs to support an increasing number of students with diverse needs (Grey & Osborne, 2020; Morgan, 2012; Roberts, 2018). Roberts (2018), considering the role of professional staff in the context of the student lifecycle, cites the difficulties experienced by professional staff when struggling to meet the demands of an increasing diversity of support required from students in a climate of decreased funding resources. Graham and Regan (2016), in their study concerning the contribution of professional staff to student outcomes, cite one member of staff’s concern for the number of students needing support; “when the policy loses that sense of the student being a person, the student becomes a number...You can’t deal with 30,000 students without ending up with the numbers thing” (2016, p. 602).

A number of studies consider students who cite a lack of support as a reason for leaving university. Merrill (2015) explored why some students leave and some remain, maintaining that some students may have remained on their course if they had received “appropriate

practical support” (2015, p. 1863). Similar concerns are expressed regarding the experiences of research students (McAlpine et al., 2012; Waight & Giordano, 2018). McAlpine, Paulson, Gonsalves, and Jazvac-Martek (2012), in their study concerning the mental health of doctoral students, express concerns regarding a lack of consistency in the provision of information and support for students. Similarly Hobson, Giannakaki, and Chambers (2009) cite a lack of support as the reason why PGCE students leave their course: “19% of respondents who withdrew from their courses indicated that they may have been able to complete their ITP<sup>2</sup> if they had enjoyed more support from their ITP provider” (2009, p. 331). According to Waight and Giordano (2018) research students are often unaware of support services, assume they exist only for undergraduate students, or that they would have to pay for the service.

Although there is a general agreement regarding the importance of student support provision, some studies maintain there are problems when evaluating the actual effectiveness of student support (Morgan, 2012; Webb et al., 2017). Morgan (2012) states, “it is difficult to quantify the effectiveness of the non-academic support provided by units such as student services because they are not solely responsible for the student experience or retention” (2012, p. 78). Similar concerns are raised about the effectiveness of personal tutoring (Bartram, 2009; Thomas, 2012; Webb & Cotton, 2018). Field & Morgan-Klein (2012) argue there is a problem regarding a lack of evidence concerning the staff student relationship since students often do not report their positive or negative experiences with staff. Notwithstanding, Merrill (2015) maintains the reason some students remain on their study programme is because of the help they received from their tutor.

### ***External Organizations***

Students also need to engage with external organisations such as funding providers. However, references in the literature to external organisations such as student funding bodies are scarce. Although funding providers facilitate a student’s engagement in a study programme, their structural processes can be challenging for students when interrupting their studies. Students often need support when navigating external organisations such as funding providers whose regulations and procedures, like those of HEPs, can be complex and confusing. Roberts (2018), citing Thomas (2002), refers to the importance of student

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<sup>2</sup> ITP: Initial Teacher Preparation

funding arrangements for the retention of students but does not consider the challenges that students may face when trying to understand the regulations or manage the funding concerns related to an interruption of study. Some students have additional structures to engage with when interrupting, including the DWP, housing and employment providers.

Many students may have the support of friends and family when experiencing difficulties and studies report the supporting roles of friends and family for students (Gabi & Sharpe, 2019; McCary et al., 2011; Thomas, 2012; Xuereb, 2014). As McCary et al. (ibid) state, the results of their online survey of 6,000 students “suggest that support from family and friends may play a much greater role than anticipated in areas such as retention and the overall student experience” (2011, p. 46). However, Waight and Giordano (2018) argue family support and other external resources are not available for all students and a reliance upon these services may result in HEPs neglecting their own provision of support services. For many students, family responsibilities preclude family support (Brown & Watson, 2010; Mountford-Zimdars et al., 2017; NUS, 2012). As Field and Morgan–Klein (2012) state, families may be both a source of support and a constraint where there are caring responsibilities. Family responsibilities are frequently reported as reasons why students leave their course (Field & Morgan-Klein, 2012; Willcoxson et al., 2011).

As stated in Chapter One, it is acknowledged that many non-traditional students do not have the resources perceived to be available to more traditional students. Some studies consider the impact of limited resources on the lives and experiences of students who are constrained by what are perceived as “disadvantaged backgrounds” (Mannay & Morgan, 2013, p. 58). Mannay and Morgan (ibid) argue there is a failure to acknowledge the challenges non-traditional students may continue to face because of their disadvantaged backgrounds. A lack of HEP support, as cited above, may result in students leaving their studies when experiencing problems (Mountford-Zimdars et al., 2017; Thomas, 2012). Xuereb (2014), in a study comprising 42 traditional and 29 non-traditional students, suggests non-traditional students are more likely to require HEP support while traditional students tend to receive support from friends and family. The study also reports that non-traditional students are more likely to cite competing priorities in contrast to the academic issues cited by traditional students. However, there are no references to an interruption of study as an option for students when struggling with limited resources and competing priorities.

Although many studies acknowledge the important role of student support services, concerns are expressed regarding the impact of support services upon the development of students as independent learners. While Morgan (2012) recommends a proactive and embedded approach to supporting students, Bartram maintains that some approaches to student support can impede the process of independent learning. He argues therapeutic approaches to supporting students assume vulnerability and, “some students themselves might also come to accept this rather impoverished view; a view clearly antithetical to supporting the development of the independent and self-directing learner that higher education arguably aims to promote” (2009, p. 312). However, one study cites a student who feels “the focus on independent learning” is restricting access to support from personal tutors (Stephen et al., 2008, p. 453)

Contrary to the above concerns regarding the provision of too much support, some studies report the reluctance of students to seek assistance (Cotton et al., 2017; Jazvac-Martek et al., 2011; Thomas, 2012). Thomas (2012) maintains students in most need are often least likely to seek help. Cotton, Nash, & Kneale (2017), when considering the resilience of 20 national scholarship students and 8 care leavers, found that students often felt they were over demanding when needing support and required encouragement to ask for the help that was available to them. Arguably, the development of an independent learner may require awareness of available support. Jazvac-Martek et al. (2011) maintain that research students’ reluctance to expose their vulnerability suggests a restriction of agency. McAlpine et al. (2012) state a lack of student support can impede a student's potential to “negotiate support within the academic arena” (p. 518).

Studies report that many students who remain on their study programmes do so because they receive support from HEP services or friends and family (Bradley, 2017; Gabi & Sharpe, 2019; Merrill, 2015; NUS, 2012; Sanders et al., 2016; Xuereb, 2014). Merrill (2015) for example, cites one student who states that without the help of her programme director she would have left. A number of studies also consider how students reflect upon their circumstances, and the role that resilience and determination can play in student decisions to leave or remain in higher education. Resilience is defined as “the ability to recover rapidly from difficult situations as well as the capacity to endure ongoing hardship in every conceivable way” (Walker et al., 2006, cited in Cotton, Nash, & Kneale, 2017, p.65). Studies suggest a combination of resilience and determination and HEP support



structures influences student reflections concerning decisions to continue or abandon a study programme. Gabi and Sharpe (2019) maintain, “Successful student persistence tends to be a result of an intricate interaction between the student’s personal factors and their environment – and the institution is a key component of that environment” (2019, p. 1). Cotton et al. (2017) agree, stating in their study of twenty students that student resilience cannot be developed without a supportive environment. Kilmister (2015) when considering the experiences of three students who interrupted their studies, notwithstanding the small size of the study, maintains, in addition to the students’ reflexive powers as learners and their determination to continue, it was “the crucial influence of others in supporting their motivation and resilience that kept them going” (2015, p. 65) .

There are a number of references to the emotional concerns of students in the literature on student retention. Thomas, Hill et al. (2017) state that student friendships are important in providing “emotional support” (p. 19). The NUS report (2012) acknowledges the emotional challenges faced by mature students and Mannay and Morgan (2013) consider the emotional issues experienced by three working class mothers when entering higher education. Bradley (2017) refers to students’ emotional investment when undertaking a programme of study, stating that HEPs need to be more attentive to “what some students may be suffering” (2017, p. 41). There is a recognition that students can experience emotional issues for both academic and personal reasons, as Bartram (2015) states, “it must of course be recognised that studying at university often is an emotionally taxing experience, and that many students go through genuinely difficult periods during their time of study, both on and off campus” (2015, p. 81). Kindness is perceived to be an important social asset because it acknowledges other endeavours as well as our own (Clegg & Rowland, 2010). The importance of kindness can be applied to the support of students who are emotionally challenged by personal concerns.

The diverse perceptions of the emotions in the sphere of higher education are acknowledged (Bartram, 2015; Beard et al., 2007). Gilmore and Anderson (2016), in their qualitative study concerning the experiences of 65 students and their tutors, found that teaching and learning requires an acknowledgement of “both the affective and the cognitive” (2016, p. 687). However, it is held that an increased emphasis on the pastoral role of academic staff can generate high levels of anxiety for both staff and students when combined with concerns for student satisfaction and achievement (Bartram, 2018).

Accordingly, some studies consider the negative impacts arising from a growing interest in emotional concerns. Ecclestone (2017) views the increased focus on students' emotional wellbeing as 'Vulnerability Creep', whereby students are pathologised in an ever-increasing demand for therapeutic interventions. Bartram (2015, 2018) considers academic concerns for students' tendency to engage in "emotional bargaining" when negotiating concessions for extenuating circumstances. Conversely, as discussed in Chapter Three, Archer maintains the importance of reconciling the rational and affective aspects of being human. An interruption of study can be an emotional event and a combined approach of emotional and rational support is often required for students who are experiencing both the emotional and practical effects of a personal crisis.

A number of studies are concerned with the need for improvements to HEP support structures. Despite the aim of widening participation to facilitate some social change regarding the entrance of more non-traditional students into higher education, concerns prevail regarding the numbers of non-traditional students who do not complete their studies. As stated in Chapter One, many non-traditional mature students have additional responsibilities and limited resources that may challenge their ability to complete their studies (OfS, 2020, p. 4). Accordingly, studies argue the need for more changes in HEP support services to improve student experience and retention, and the need to raise awareness of the support available to students. (Cotton et al., 2017; DBIS, 2014; Kilmister, 2015; NUS, 2012; Quinn, 2013; Thomas, Hill, O'Mahoney, Yorke, et al., 2017). As a government report states, "Institutions need to ensure that support systems, including targeted support, are well advertised so that students know how and where to access support should they need it" (DBIS, 2014, p. 59). Quinn (2013) states students who consider leaving their study programmes should be provided with information about the option to interrupt and return to their studies at a later date. However, with the exception of Quinn (ibid) and Kilmister (2015), there are few references to the option of an interruption of study as a support mechanism for students who are struggling.

A number of studies also consider improvements for members of staff working within HEPs. While some studies advocate a more holistic approach when supporting students (Brown, 2011; Gabi & Sharpe, 2019) it is acknowledged that staff also need to be supported when assisting students (Giannakis & Bullivant, 2016). In a recent Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) report, Cornell (2020), concerned with the challenges

faced by PhD students, cites Morrish (2020) who maintains increased workloads and high levels of stress are reasons for poor mental health among both academic and professional services staff in HEPs. Berry, Niven, and Hazell (2021) argue for more training for supervisors “that improves the degree of agency, and especially communion, in the relationships they form with postgraduate researchers” (2021, p. 9). It is maintained this would enhance supervisors’ ability to support students and reduce the sense of loneliness and isolation that can be experienced by both supervisors and students.

Tight (2019), in his review of the literature concerning student retention and engagement in higher education, states that student engagement can also include students’ involvement with policy making and seeking “to change the balance of power within the university” (2019, p. 9). Buckley (2018), criticising “the nebulous concept” (p. 719) of student engagement, argues “In recent years, the prominence of students’ participation in decision-making has increased dramatically and is now a fundamental part of how higher education is understood” (2018, p. 719). While the main focus is on the learning environment, I would add that this should include student engagement in decisions concerning the provision of student support, including the option to interrupt a study programme, in ways that would be of benefit to the learning environment and to staff and students.

### **The merger and its impact**

With regard to the impact of the merger on the experiences of staff and students in this study, it is not possible to consider the large body of research concerning the mergers of higher education providers. Some studies can be considered in relation to the general impact of the merger that took place shortly before this study. A literature review of 21 studies from different countries, including the UK, conducted by Wollscheid and Røsdal (2021), considers different types of mergers including the merger of small and large universities with different structures and identities. The increased structural complexities that can arise from such mergers may be applicable to the merger that took place prior to this research. Evans (2017) when looking at the merger of a small and larger institution in France considered how mergers impact upon staff roles and identity. Cartwright, Tytherleigh, and Robertson, (2007) advocate the importance of consultation to mitigate the stressful effects of a merger upon staff members. The study of Papadimitriou and Johnes (2019) who consider whether mergers promote greater levels of efficiency, is

inconclusive. There are no studies that focus upon the impact of mergers upon the student population or student support structures in higher education. .

## **Summary**

In this chapter I have discussed the literature relating to the interruption process, and matters concerning the student experience and student retention. I have considered studies regarding the reasons why students may struggle, student support services, student resilience regarding decisions to leave or remain in higher education, the emotional aspects of the student experience, and studies concerned with the need for improvements and developments in higher education. Finally, I briefly considered some concerns regarding the potential impact of the merger. In the following chapter, Theoretical Framework I will present my reasons for using Archer's theory of Structure and Agency. I will also outline some of the ways her theory has been applied to the experiences of staff and students in higher education and to their concerns regarding the interruption of study. I will also consider some views expressed regarding the limitations of her theory.

## **Chapter Three: Theoretical Framework.**

The purpose of this chapter is to outline the reasons why I have chosen to use Archer's theory and how her theory can be related to the experiences of staff and students during the interruption of a study programme. I consider her use of analytical dualism, drawn from her critical realist approach to structure and agency. I then discuss how Archer's theory can be applied to the student experience of an interruption of study. I will also consider how Archer's theory of structure and agency is concerned with the process of morphogenesis, or social transformation, signifying changes in the development of social structures over time. I consider how this process can be related to the aims of Widening Participation Strategy, by identifying potential improvements in the interruption process for the benefit of both staff and students. In conclusion, I will consider the literature that applies Archer's theory to the learning and teaching experiences of staff and students in higher education and some studies that consider the limitations of Archer's theory.

As noted in the review of literature, there are very few studies concerning students who need to take time out of their study programme. Much of the literature on student retention is concerned with the number of non-traditional students who "drop out" of university education. Bourdieu's theory of habitus (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990) has been widely used to explain the challenges faced by non-traditional students when trying to belong in what is perceived to be the traditional, predominantly white, middle-class domain of higher education. It is suggested that many students do not complete their courses for this reason. A more recent focus has been on student engagement strategies, with the premise that students who engage in the university's academic and social activities are more likely to develop a stronger sense of belonging and, therefore, more likely to complete their study programmes (Thomas, 2012). As discussed in Chapter Two, theories using models of resilience and persistence are also utilised in the research on student retention and completion (Cotton, Nash, & Kneale, 2017, Gabi and Sharpe (2019).

### **Why Archer's theory of structure and agency?**

The aim of my research is to look at the experiences of staff and students when managing an interruption of study. I have chosen to use Archer's theory of structure and agency because although theories related to belonging and engagement may have some relevance to the difficulties experienced by non-traditional students, they do not fully

address the concerns of students who, for personal reasons, need to take time out of their study programme. Bourdieu's theory of habitus and belonging (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990) and its concerns for knowing how to play the field, may be applicable to student interactions with unfamiliar organisational structures, but his theory does not adequately account for the more personal concerns that require students to interrupt their studies. Archer's theory resonates with my experiences of supporting students through the interruption process and seeing the challenges they face when interacting with a range of different organisational structures. Moreover, as (Porpora, 2013) argues, Bourdieu's individual internalisation of social structures constitutes a conflation of agency with structure, which would compromise one of my aims, to consider how staff and students exercise their agency when managing organisational structures. Accordingly, I consider Archer's theory of structure and agency to be more appropriate for my research purposes because her critical realist approach challenges Bourdieu's conflation of agency with structure which she states prevents one "from disengaging the properties and powers of the practitioner from the properties and powers of the environment in which practices are conducted – and yet again this prevents analysis of their interplay" (Archer, 2000, p. 6).

### **Analytical Dualism**

Archer's approach thus utilises an analytical dualism which separates agents from the structures they interact with, upholding their "independent properties of subject and object" (Archer, 2000, p. 172), whereby agency and structure are attributed distinct and irreducible ontologies. As Porpora (2013) states, "Archer's analytical dualism affirms the continuing need to maintain an analytical distinction between structure and agency. Although they always interrelate causally, structure and agency remain ontologically separate" (2013, p. 26). This ontological distinction arises from the view that individuals involuntarily enter a world of pre-existing social structures. Archer's theory, by facilitating an analysis of how individuals interact with pre-existing social structures allows me to explore how students and staff manage their interactions with those structures that are associated with the student experience of an interruption of study. As Lockett (2008) maintains, analytical dualism helps us to "untangle the knots of multiple causes of social situations" (p. 301) and thus identify the structural challenges faced by individuals in their personal endeavours. Thus, it may be possible to consider the ways in which staff and students exercise their agency and the potential, where applicable, for changing structural mechanisms. Clegg (2005) states, it is through an investigation of the ways in which individuals interact with

the structures they encounter in their academic endeavours that we gain an understanding of the potential for change “and the possibilities for new forms of action” (2005, p. 152) by identifying those interactions and structural mechanisms that may impede the process of social morphogenesis.

**Archer’s critical realist approach to structure and agency**

Archer’s theory utilises Bhaskar’s critical realist approach to research methodology which advances a stratified ontology consisting of three interrelated planes of being, the empirical, the actual and the real, allowing for both transitive and intransitive levels of human experience and activity (Alderson, 2013; Bhaskar, 2017; Collier, 1994). The transitive level corresponds with the empirical and actual layers of reality and the intransitive level relates to Bhaskar’s account of the ‘real’. At the empirical level are our experiences, impressions, perceptions, and evaluations of social activities. At the actual level are ‘concrete’ events, the persons, relationships, and structures relating to the events. At the real level are those aspects of reality that are unseen and independent from our experiences and impressions. Arising from the real level, we may witness or uncover the causal mechanisms that underlie, or give rise to, the occurrences that are found at the empirical and actual levels of our experiences (Alderson, 2013; Collier, 1994; Shipway, 2011). For example, when we see an apple falling from a tree, we see the event, but we do not see the underlying causal mechanism – gravity, which, from a critical realist approach, exists in the unseen or independent reality of our experiences. In Table 2, below (adapted from Bhaskar, 2008, p.13) I illustrate the three layers of a realist stratified ontology, using the effects of gravity as an example:

**Table 2 Critical Realist Stratified Ontology**

The Empirical	Our perceptions, experiences	We see the apple falling from a tree
The Actual	Structures & Events	The apple falls to the ground
The Real	Underlying Causal Mechanisms	Gravity is the mechanism that causes the apple to fall. We witness the event, but we do not see the cause - gravity

The transitive dimension of reality is directly accessible to social agents through experience and observation. The intransitive dimension exists independently from human observations and perceptions. It is from the intransitive dimension that causal mechanisms

arise to generate activity within the transitive spheres of human experience. For example, experiences of poverty such as hunger or health concerns, will exist at the empirical level of reality. Insecure employment, low wages, and high housing costs exist at the actual level. From a critical realist perspective, independent, underlying causal mechanisms exist in the real, intransitive level, where economic and social mechanisms, such as capitalism and the social class system, constrain the potential for social mobility. These causal mechanisms, like gravity, remain unseen, but their effects are apparent at the actual and empirical levels. Bhaskar (2008) refers to problems arising from the “epistemic fallacy” (p. 36), a tendency to conflate ontology with epistemology or being with knowing. Accordingly, the manifestations of poverty, are often attributed to the poor, rather than to the underlying causal mechanisms of capitalism and social class.

This critical realist stratified ontology could be applied to a student’s experience of interrupting a study programme as follows:

**Table 3 Stratified ontology of the student interruption**

The empirical level	Personal experiences of an interruption of study	Stress, anxiety, depression, grief, fear of failure
The actual level	A personal crisis, interactions with organisational structures The causal effects arising from structural processes	Ill health or bereavement Sporadic or non-attendance Non completion of assignments Funding issues
The real	The underlying causal mechanisms	Organisational systems and processes, social systems

Thus, at the empirical level, when a student experiences a personal crisis s/he may undergo some degree of stress and anxiety. Some of these experiences may relate to the crisis and concerns about completing a study programme. From my experience in student welfare, further stress and anxiety can be generated by the underlying causal mechanisms of structural processes. For instance, at the actual level, students taking time out of a study programme may not be entitled to financial support during this period and may consider applying for welfare benefits. However, at the real level, the welfare benefit regulations concerning student status during an interruption of study do not correlate with



those of Higher Education. The DWP maintains students remain students during the interruption, while under HE regulations students lose their student status when interrupting their studies. This means at the actual level some students are illegible for both student funding and welfare benefits, and it can be difficult to find employment for reasons including health issues, and availability of opportunities for work. Thus, the interruption process tends to be viewed as a problem because the causal effects at the empirical and actual levels are conflated with the real effects of the underlying causal mechanisms of organisational structures.

While this study is concerned with those students who interrupt for personal reasons and experience challenges, it should be noted that some students may interrupt for other reasons that may not be so challenging. For example, a student may wish to take a year's sabbatical or internship. At the empirical level the student's experience would be of a different range of experiences and may include optimism and excitement at the prospect of a new opportunity. At the same time there may be a degree of uncertainty before the interruption is agreed and confirmed. At the actual level the student may need to arrange meetings within organisational structures to arrange the practical aspects of the interruption such as financial or accommodation concerns. In the real realm exists the structural mechanisms of the interruption process that would enable the student to take an interruption of study.

**Archer's stratification of structure and agency**

Archer stratifies the relationship between individuals, their agency, and social structures as outlined in Table 4 below:

**Table 4 Archer's stratification of structure and agency**

The Empirical Realm	Social agents	Individuals and their experiences
The Actual Realm	Causal effects	social structures, events, and agential interactions
The Real (Unseen) Realm	Underlying causal mechanisms	The private mental domain of reflexive deliberations

According to Archer (2003), "the inner world is real and has real causal powers" (p. 69). Individual agency arises from the "real realm", through "the private mental domain" of

reflexive deliberations which, although unseen, is a causal mechanism acting as a mediator to connect individual agency with social structures and the projects that are undertaken. A project is defined as ‘specific agential enterprise’ (Archer, 2003, p. 6) that has a causal relationship with associated structural constraints and enablements. For example, a student engages in a project when applying to university and activates the structural constraints and enablements relating to entrance requirements and funding regulations. Archer (2003) states: “Our inner dialogue is the modality through which our personal autonomy is explored, is directed to particular ends, affirms specific ideals, and is then realised in terms of our commitments” (p. 69). As outlined in Table 5 below, Archer’s stratification can be applied to students’ experience when engaging in the project of an interruption process:

**Table 5 Archer's stratification applied to the interruption process**

The Empirical Realm	Social agents	Students	Experiences, perceptions, impressions
The Actual Realm	Events and Causal effects	HEP and External Organisations	Agential interactions constraints and enablements
The Real (Unseen) Realm	The private mental domain	Projects Strategies	Reflexivity, internal conversations Feelings, emotions, thoughts, beliefs

**The Empirical Realm**

This realm addresses how reality is experienced empirically by individuals through their perceptions and impressions, and accounts for how students, as social agents, may experience an interruption of study. Individuals may, through their reflexivity (see ‘Reflexivity’ below), use their agency to transform their experiences at the empirical level.

**The Actual Realm**

This realm is where actual structures prevail, in addition to associated events and student interactions and accounts for the constraints and enablements students experience in the process of their interactions with organisational structures when interrupting a study programme.

## **The Real (Unseen) Realm**

This is where students exercise their agency through reflexivity and internal conversations and includes how students' thoughts, beliefs, and emotions may influence their agency.

## **Archer's Constellations of Concerns**

According to Archer, when individuals exercise their agency they need to consider their circumstances. Archer's account for individuals' constellations of concerns, or their individual personal interests, are ascribed to three orders of reality (Archer, 2000). She maintains: "The realisation of every human property and power depends upon our relations with the natural, practical and social orders, without which these tendential developments will be suspended" (Archer, 2000, p. 189).

The following Table 6 outlines Archer's three orders of reality (Archer, 2000) as they relate to a student's constellations of concerns when undertaking an interruption of study:

**Table 6 Archer's three orders of reality**

Order of Reality	Concerns	Students
Natural Order	Physical well-being	Physical and mental health, environmental factors
Practical Order	Performative achievement and practical concerns	Completion of course, career prospects, funding, accommodation, travel etc
Discursive or Social Order	Self-worth	Family, friends, identity student community, social groups

## **The Natural Order**

Students may need to consider their physical or mental health if these are the reasons for their interruption of study. Their circumstances may generate mental health concerns such as stress or anxiety. When an interruption is confirmed, students may also need to consider environmental changes regarding the university and their living arrangements.

## **The Practical Order**

This order can be related to a student's wish to complete a study programme, their career concerns, and how they will manage practically to achieve this. Students may need to

consider their financial situation during the interruption period and are often concerned with the impact an interruption may have upon the completion of their course and their future career prospects.

### **The Discursive Order**

This order is concerned with a student's social situation and can be related to students' family, friends and social groups and their place in the community. A student may be interrupting because of caring responsibilities, and many students are concerned about losing contact with their current student cohort. Students may also have concerns about their social identity because they are not considered to be students during an interruption period. When returning to study there may be further concerns such as joining a new cohort of students.

Archer (2000) recognises an interrelation between the three orders of reality (p. 179), "in which none has any automatic precedence" (p. 190) and she maintains a balance between the three orders is important for personal wellbeing and fulfilment. Archer acknowledges that maintaining a balance when managing individual personal concerns can be challenging:

agents have to diagnose their situations, they have to identify their own interests and they must design projects they deem appropriate to attaining their ends. At all three points they are fallible: they can mis-diagnose their situations, mis-identify their interests, and mis-judge appropriate courses of action. (Archer, 2003, p. 9)

Accordingly, students need to manage their concerns throughout their study programme and since it is not possible to fully account for future events, they may struggle to maintain this balance. As Archer (2003) recognises, individuals are neither "omniscient, infallible, indubitable nor incorrigible" (p. 52) and are thus not able to account for all eventualities and may need to review their circumstances at certain stages of their study programme. For example, students with children may experience the impact of change when their child is taken ill or progresses from nursery to primary education and students who are dependent upon parental support may need to adjust to changes in family circumstances.

A consideration of students' constellations of concerns may raise awareness of the range of potential issues associated with an interruption of studies and how these are addressed through the interruption process. When an unforeseen event occurs during a study programme a student's management of individual concerns may constitute several stages. When it becomes evident that an interruption may be necessary students often need to consider the impact of an interruption upon their individual concerns. At the beginning of a crisis such as a family illness the decision to take time out may not be easy because of the uncertain gravity or duration of a situation. The need to complete assignments may then generate further stress because this encroaches upon personal concerns.

### **Enablements and constraints**

Archer (2003) describes enablements and constraints as those factors that have a direct relationship to the project undertaken by an individual. Structural constraints and enablements become active when individuals consider a course of action, such as applying to university or interrupting a study programme. Archer (2003) states, 'no projects mean no constraints and enablements' (p. 8) and maintains we exercise our agency and decide how to manage the structures we navigate through our reflexive deliberations, or internal conversations, in accordance with our most important concerns. She also acknowledges that we may misconstrue the social factors we are considering (Archer, 2003), and underestimate or fail to anticipate certain structural mechanisms. I would add that individuals may also lack information or receive misinformation regarding a particular mechanism. For example, students who are considering an interruption of study are not always aware of, or may be misinformed about, the structural mechanisms that relate to the higher education funding regulations or to the pastoral support available to them.

As discussed in Chapter Two, there is a range of HEP support mechanisms available to students when they need to interrupt their studies. These include personal tutors, academic administrators, and support departments dedicated to student pastoral concerns including mental health, disabilities, and funding issues. It is therefore important to consider how students access these facilities and navigate the different HEP resources available to them. In addition, students often need to engage with external organisations to address concerns such as student funding and health concerns. Student support needs will vary according to individual student circumstances. For example, the support needs of a single male PGCE student with no children will be different from those of a foundation

degree student who is a single parent. Within the context of Archer’s theory, the roles played by these support mechanisms and organisational structures in the interruption process can constitute constraints or enablements. Table 7 below outlines a range of structures that students may need to navigate when undergoing an interruption of study:

**Table 7 Organisational structures related to the interruption process**

<b>External Structures</b>	<b>HEP Structures</b>	<b>Social Structures</b>
Student Finance	Academic Department	Family
Accommodation	Registry	Friends
Welfare Benefits	Finance Office	Student community
Workplace	Fees and Funding	Social Groups
Health Providers	Student Support Services	
	Teaching Placement (PGCE/FD courses)	

The range of structural mechanisms, with their potential enablements and constraints, as they relate to students who take time out of a study programme, highlights the potential challenges faced by both students and staff. As Archer states, it is only through an investigation of how individuals exercise their agency when negotiating the enablements and constraints of social structures that an understanding of the possibilities and challenges that are entailed in the processes of social morphogenesis can be identified and addressed. Accordingly, I would add that an examination of those structural mechanisms which are activated when a student needs to take time out of a study programme, also play a key role in identifying potential areas for transformation.

**Reflexivity**

Archer’s theory regarding the role of reflexivity is related to how individuals exercise their agency and further highlights the challenges faced by students who are undergoing an interruption of study. Archer (2003) defines reflexivity as “a second order activity in which the subject deliberates upon how some item, such as a belief, desire, idea, or state of affairs pertains or relates to itself” (p. 26).

It is a self-conscious process whereby individuals deliberate upon what they should say or do when engaging in social interactions and activities. Archer (2003) states that we use our reflexivity to consider our priorities with regard to our constellations of concerns, and to negotiate the structural constraints and enablements we encounter. She also refers to the way in which we anticipate the structural constraints and enablements that we may encounter when undertaking a project. We thus use our reflexivity to ascertain the advantages and disadvantages of certain courses of action and how we may manage the constraints, and exploit the enablements, that we encounter in the process. Individuals therefore 'have degrees of freedom in determining their own courses of action' (2003, p. 6). This capacity of freedom in decision making can be related to students when they decide to apply for a programme of study. The student's decision regarding their application will be made in accordance with their reflexive processes concerning their constellations of concerns and how they relate to the structural enablements and constraints relevant to making an application to university. For example, the student will consider whether the course meets the student's academic and personal interests and career aspirations, whether the student has the required qualifications, and will the student be able to finance the study programme? Thus, the process for applying to follow degree programme may be straightforward and, ordinarily, does not present a serious challenge for students.

The 'degrees of freedom' applicable to students undergoing a personal crisis may be of a different order. Archer accounts for the challenges presented by changes of circumstances and this can be related to situations where students who are engaged in a study programme need to take time out. In the same way that a broken leg may suddenly challenge a journey to work (Archer, 2007, p. 9) an unforeseen event may present challenges for students with regard to their constellation of concerns when on a course of study. The process of reflexive deliberation in the event of changed circumstances may be a complex one requiring an ongoing revision of personal concerns and the negotiation of structural mechanisms that can be challenging to varying degrees, depending on individual circumstances. For example, a student experiencing ill health may need to consider the potential benefits of an interruption of study that would enable recovery without the stress of academic deadlines. Unfortunately, the situation may not be clear cut since it is not always possible to ascertain the gravity of a health concern and the decision-making process may be further challenged by mechanisms such as course structure, funding

regulations and healthcare provision. The timing of ill health may generate additional tuition fees for students who need to repeat a significant proportion of the study programme. Moreover, priorities will be subject to review. For example, a health concern may need to be prioritised over academic aspirations, but, following recovery, the priority of academic endeavours will be reinstated.

### **Modes of Reflexivity**

Archer (2007) identifies four modes of reflexivity and maintains there is a relationship between the different modes of reflexive deliberation and the potential for social mobility, asserting the significance of "active agential interventions" (2007, p. 97) when addressing the impact of social circumstances. Archer acknowledges the forms of reflexivity normally overlap in individuals, but maintains one type of reflexivity often predominates. A brief description of each type of reflexive deliberation is outlined below.

#### *Communicative Reflexives*

This mode of reflexivity requires confirmation from those who are significantly connected with the individual, such as friends, partners and family members before a project is undertaken. Individuals who predominate in this type of reflexivity are said to demonstrate a sense of trust in the opinions of others and would be more likely to ask for help, but less likely to be socially mobile because of their attachment to 'similar' and 'familiar' (Archer, 2007).

#### *Autonomous Reflexives*

This mode describes individuals who are more self-contained and, with a confidence in their own views, may only seek the advice of experts. This group of reflexives are perceived to be self-motivated, with a strong commitment to the projects they undertake. They are also seen to be more likely to take risks, to be less context dependent, and to be potentially more socially mobile as a result.

#### *Meta-Reflexives*

Individuals in this category are seen to engage in self-critical reflexivity, and to be more socially aware. Because of their idealistic tendencies they may face challenges in finding an appropriate "modus vivendi" and be more volatile regarding their sense of social mobility.



### *Fractured Reflexives*

Individuals who experience this mode of reflexivity are said to be challenged by their deliberations which can generate increased levels of self-doubt, anxiety, and confusion. Archer describes members of this group as passive agents (Archer, 2007) who are unable to make decisions.

### **Emotions**

Archer (2000) perceives human emotions to be important because they “are among the main constituents of our inner lives. They are the fuel of our internal conversation and this is why they matter... emotions matter because if we did not have them nothing else would matter” (p. 194). She also notes that we become aware of our emotions through significant events such as, for the purpose of this research, the interruption of a study programme. Archer (2000) relates different emotions to the different orders of reality, as outlined in Table 8 below:

**Table 8 The emotions in relation to the three orders of reality**

<b>Order of Reality</b>	<b>Concerns</b>	<b>Emotions</b>
Natural Order	Physical Wellbeing	Fear, anger, sadness, joy, hope, and relief
The Practical Order	Performative achievement and practical concerns	Frustration, boredom, depression, satisfaction, joy, and exhilaration
Discursive	Self- worth	Shame, remorse, pride, envy, jealousy, and guilt

Archer acknowledges that emotional conflicts can arise between the three orders such as when an individual’s sense of fear (in the natural order) conflicts with a wish to avoid shame (in the discursive order). Regarding an interruption of study, a student may experience a sense of frustration (in the practical order of reality) when unable to complete an assignment which could conflict with a sense of guilt (in the discursive order) owing to the demands of a caring responsibility.

## **First and Second Order Emotions**

Archer also categorises our emotions into two orders, the first order denoting the initial emotional response to a situation (such as a student's stress and fear of failure when unable to complete an assignment). The second order of emotional experience may relate to a sense of relief when the student decides to take time out of a study programme. This process of the emotions from first to second order is seen to take place through the reflexive and agentic powers of individuals. As Archer (2000) states, "we are dealing with a reflexive being who not only has (first-order) concerns but who also has the (second-order) capacity to evaluate her concerns and to arrive at her ultimate concerns" (2000, p. 209). The students' ultimate concerns, while on a study programme, are most likely the completion of their studies and a realisation of their career aspirations. However, with the occurrence of a significant event, or crisis, such as a bereavement or ill health, students need to consider other personal concerns such as family and caring responsibilities which may impact upon their ultimate concern to complete their studies. Thus, students will need to engage their reflexive powers to process their emotional responses and consider how they evaluate, and reconcile where possible, their personal and academic concerns. As Archer states, "The conversation also involves evaluating them, promoting some and subordinating others, such that the ultimate concerns which we affirm are also those with which we feel we can live" (Archer, 2000, p. 228). She adds that this process of reflexivity and emotional experience is continual and subject to review in accordance with changing life experience and events. For example, when the students experience a personal crisis, they need to revise their ultimate concerns and prioritise their caring responsibilities. The interruption of study can mitigate emotional distress and as stated above, generate a sense of relief for the student. When the personal crisis is over the student can review their concerns and return to study to realise their ultimate concern.

Archer's consideration of how emotions are experienced and processed by individuals provides an additional dimension to my investigation that, again, highlights the complexity of the issues related to a student interruption. This is a factor that will be considered when analysing the data where I will be alert to student references to the effects of their emotions upon their reflexive processes during an interruption of study.

## **Mental Health**

Archer, however, does not account for mental health concerns or how individuals manage their reflexive deliberations during times of stress and anxiety and how these factors may

impact upon an individual's reflexive powers. This is a factor that, from my experience in supporting students in times of stress, needs to be considered. As discussed in Chapter Two, mental health concerns relating to stress are often cited as reasons for students struggling on their study programme but are hidden in the category of personal reasons regarding student issues. Those are times when the role of support staff may be crucial in assisting students to manage their reflexive deliberations and their increased levels of stress and anxiety. As Mezey (2021) states, it is important that students who are experiencing mental health concerns receive support and guidance regarding the option to interrupt a study programme and access to relevant services both within and external to the university. I will consider the mental health concerns of students when interrupting their studies in this research.

### **Morphogenesis or Social Transformation**

Archer's theory of structure and agency is concerned with the process of morphogenesis, or social transformation, signifying changes in the development of social structures over time (Archer, 1995, 2013). It is defined as "a process, referring to the complex interchanges that produce change in a system's given form, structure or state (morphostasis being the reverse)" (Archer, 2010, p. 228). The UK government's continuing Widening Participation (WP) strategy, designed to improve social mobility by enhancing access for non-traditional students into higher education (Connell-Smith & Hubble, 2018) can exemplify a process of social morphogenesis. Lockett (2008) perceives social change, or morphogenesis, as comprising "three levels of emergence in the stratified social subject" (2008, p. 300). The "I" is the subjective individual, the "Me" is the objective aspects of an individual who has no subjective agency regarding social position at birth, and the "You" is the social individual who can be realised through engagement with social structures. Hence, individuals, whose original social positions are not of their choice, consider the opportunities available to them in the face of social constraints and enablements. These individuals may then proceed to exercise their agency by implementing those structural enablements, or opportunities, in order to transform their social selves and, potentially, achieve social mobility. Thus, non-traditional students can be perceived to be exercising their agency through the WP strategy, a structural enablement that facilitates an opportunity for social change by enrolling on higher education study programmes. An increase in the number of non-traditional students entering higher education can thus be viewed as a morphogenetic process that enhances

individual potential for social mobility and ultimately creates a more egalitarian society wherein, as Lockett states, “one can achieve an alignment between ‘personal identity’ and ‘social identity’ and fully realise one’s causal powers as a human being” (2008, p. 300). However, current government concerns for the failure of many non-traditional students to complete their study programmes (Connell-Smith & Hubble, 2018; HEFCE, 2017; HEPI, 2017) raises questions regarding the morphogenetic effectiveness of the WP strategy and the structural enablements put in place in HEPs to facilitate it.

The interruption process, which allows students to take time out of a study programme when they experience personal difficulties, can be viewed as a structural enablement that is instrumental in the morphogenetic process of social mobility. However, the challenges that face students who interrupt, and the number of students who fail to return to their study programme following an interruption of studies, as discussed in Chapter One, may raise questions regarding the effectiveness of the interruption process in the context of Widening Participation. Nonetheless, the interruption process can be viewed as having the potential to facilitate a greater alignment between personal and social identity because it allows a consideration of students’ personal concerns during a study programme. Many of the students that have needed my support through an interruption of study can be described as non-traditional students who do not have access to the resources associated with traditional students (Reay, 2012). Many non-traditional students are more likely to have caring responsibilities and financial constraints which can generate high stress levels when needing to interrupt a study programme. In my experience, these students also suffer additional challenges and levels of stress when trying to navigate the complex structural processes associated with taking time out of a study programme.

## **The application of Archer’s theory in HE studies**

### ***Student Identity and their constellations of concerns***

Lockett and Lockett apply Archer’s theory concerning individual “constellation of needs” (2009, p. 477) to the complexity of students’ identities and how students prioritise their concerns through the process of reflexivity. In accordance with Archer, they argue that it is important to consider all concerns for student identity within the three orders of reality, the natural, practical, and discursive. A conflict of personal and academic concerns may give rise to a conflict in student identity. An interruption of study can thus play an important role

in helping students to address both academic and personal concerns and thereby maintain their sense of student identity.

### ***The development of student reflexivity and agency***

A number of studies apply Archer's theory to teaching and learning in higher education and consider the importance of students' interactions with their tutors and peers for the development of individual reflexive processes and agency. Kahn, Qualter, and Young (2012) maintain Archer's concerns regarding how individuals use their agency can "help to explain the interplay between personal and socio-cultural factors within student learning" (2012, p. 860). The constraints in employment - based programmes, for example, may inhibit the capacity for students to discuss and reflect upon their individual views and thereby restrict their exercise of agency. Similar concerns can be applied to the challenges students may have when needing to discuss their personal issues with academic and support staff. Kahn et al. (2012) maintain student interactions with a range of agents in addition to peers and tutors are intrinsic to the process of individual agency and educational development. I would include support staff and administrators to the list of agents who may play a significant role when students need to discuss personal concerns.

Similarly, Lockett and Lockett (2009), when applying Archer's theory in their study concerning the benefits of mentorship schemes in higher education, argue the advantages for students when externalising their internal conversations "with trusted and significant others in order to gain confidence, reflect critically and refine their plans for action" (2009, p. 475). The externalisation of the internal conversation is seen to be an important stage in the process of development "from primary to corporate agents ... from students to professionals" (2009, p. 477) and, in accordance with Archer's theory, to the morphogenetic process of both individual and social agency. Kahn (2017) argues that the potential for students to "flourish" rests upon the development of their reflexive powers and agency, whereby students are able to engage in a communal reflexivity that promotes a mutually supportive environment, stating "the overall purpose of higher education should be the morphogenesis of the agency of students, considered on an individual and on a collective basis" (Kahn, 2017, p. 368). I would maintain it is also important for students wellbeing to feel able to externalise their internal conversations concerning personal concerns when they impact upon their academic progress and also important for the development of a supportive educational environment.

### ***The role of the emotions***

Regarding the emotional aspects of supporting students discussed in Chapter Two, Archer's concern with the role of the emotions are applied to the experiences of teaching and learning in higher education. Beard et al. (2007) in their study applying Archer's theory of emotions to the emotional journeys of 90 students, argue the emotions are integral to the process of teaching and learning for both academic staff and their students. It is therefore likely that students' ability to learn will be challenged when struggling with their emotions because of personal issues. Beard et al. (2007) cite Archer, in seeking "to reclaim the notion of common humanity" (2000, p. 18) and refute a purely rational perception of what it is to be human which can be applied to what is to be a student. An over emphasis on the rational aspect of "being human" may be applied to the administrative and bureaucratic practices of higher education that, from my experience, can be challenging for students when interrupting their studies. Clegg and Rowland (2010), asserting the importance of kindness, argue there is a tendency in HEP settings to set the emotions in opposition to intellect, and refer to Archer whose concern is "the primacy of practice and the emergent nature of both the intellect and affect". (2010, p. 722).

With regard to the concerns expressed above, I agree with Beard et al. (2007) who refute the relation of the emotions to 'deficit models of the therapeutic' (p.240) and in accordance with Archer, maintain the importance of the emotions in the "exercise of agency and social powers" (p. 240). In my role it is important to consider students' emotional concerns, and, in accordance with Archer (2000), see the emotions as "central to the things we care about and to the act of caring itself" (2000, p. 194). When supporting students through an interruption of study it is necessary to acknowledge students' emotional concerns and their need to process what may be their experience of what Archer (2000) describes as "a welter of contradictory first order" emotions (p. 220) towards a "second-order level" where "pathos and logos work hand in hand" (p. 223).

### **Criticisms of Archer**

#### **Is Archer's theory oversimplistic?**

Luckett (2008) maintains Archer's presentation of agency and the process of reflexivity does not account for the more complex aspects of individual behaviour such as the effects of the 'subconscious', or when individuals may behave inconsistently or irrationally.

Archer's perception of individuals is viewed as over simplistic, and seen to underestimate the impact of social, environmental, and cultural factors upon individual reflexive and agentic processes. Luckett (2008) states, "Thus, in her attempts to preserve human agency, Archer might neglect the subtle or indirect ways in which cultural or structural factors mediate agency and play a role in the internal conversation" (2008, p. 308). In agreement, Archer accounts for the role of the emotions in the reflexive process but she does not account for the effects of mental health. Nonetheless I would argue, her theory, which is concerned with factors that can influence the process of reflexivity, can facilitate a consideration of the more complex aspects of human behaviour.

Conversely, Akram and Hogan, (2015) argue that Archer overestimates the scope of individual agency and contest Archer's distinction between the individual "I" and the socially constructed "me". It is maintained that individuals would only jeopardise the environmental and social conditions essential to their social self in times of crisis. However, Archer (2000) argues that although individuals are social beings and subject to environmental factors, "Personal and social identity must not be elided" (2000, p. 10). Thus, when individuals choose to enter higher education, it can be argued that they are making conscious choices through a process of reflexivity concerning their experience of the world, as related to the objective "me", and in accordance with their individual constellations of concerns, as related to their subjective "I" in their endeavour to attain a more autonomous social "you". As Kahn et al. argue "Engaging in reflexive deliberation itself involves the use of a personal power" (2012, p. 866).

Archer's views concerning different modes of reflexivity are also examined. Caetano (2015) argues that although Archer acknowledges overlaps in modes of reflexivity, she does not consider how individual modes of reflexivity may vary according to their social context. Dyke, Johnston and Fuller (2012) in their case study concerning how individuals decide their career pathways suggest that students engage their powers of reflexivity in different ways according to circumstances. In this study the students' modes of reflexivity may vary in accordance with the students' circumstances and personal experiences of the different stages of the interruption process. Moreover, the students may exercise their reflexive powers in different ways according to their access to support and guidance.

Notwithstanding the above views regarding the limitations of her theory, Archer facilitates a detailed, analytical exploration of the interruption process. Students may be going through the process at a time of emotional and mental stress and the interruption process is in place to facilitate students taking time out and then returning to study when able to do so. Archer's concept regarding individuals' 'constellations of concerns' allows me to consider the personal concerns that students need to manage, and that staff may need to consider, in the event of a crisis or change in circumstances. Archer's theory also allows me to consider how staff and students are enabled or constrained when engaging with student support structures and how staff and students use their 'reflexive deliberations' and exercise their agency when managing an interruption of study. Using Archer's approach to structure and agency may help to "untangle the knots" (Luckett, 2008, p. 301) , assist in gaining an understanding of staff and student experiences of the interruption process and identify areas of good practice and areas that may benefit from improvement. It may then be possible to improve the structural enablement of the interruption process for students thereby helping to increase the morphogenetic potential of widening participation in the promotion of social mobility through higher education. As Clegg (2005) states,

If we want to theorise about change in education, we need a theory that can account for the selves who make choices as academic workers and students, how we engage in constant internal and social debate about the conditions of practice, and how we should act to resist, restructure and preserve aspects of the complex system called higher education. (2005, p. 153)



## **Research Questions**

Accordingly, my research questions are related to Archer's theory and the student and staff experience of an interruption of study as follows:

### **To what extent can Archer's Theory of Structure and Agency facilitate a better understanding of how staff and students manage the interruption process?**

1. What enablements and constraints do staff and students experience during an interruption of study?
2. How do staff and students exercise their agency when managing an interruption of study?
3. How do staff and students use their reflexivity when managing an interruption of study?
4. What improvements to the interruption process might be derived from Archer's theory of structure and agency and what are the implications for my professional practice?

## **Summary**

To summarise this chapter, I have explained how, and the reasons why, I am using Archer's theory: to examine the interruption procedures from the viewpoints of both students and staff, to gain a better understanding of the interruption process, and identify areas for improvement and good practice. I have also provided a brief account of how Archer's theory has been applied to aspects of teaching and learning in higher education and some views concerning the limitations of Archer's theory. I have also outlined the research questions that, in relation to Archer's theory, I will be applying to my study of student interruptions.

In the next chapter, Methodology, I will provide a detailed outline of the methods used when conducting my application of Archer's theory to the staff and student experiences of the interruption process.

## **Chapter Four: Methodology**

This chapter provides an account of the approach and methods I used when carrying out my research which was conducted in my workplace, a higher education institute that had recently undergone a merger with a larger university. The data collection took place after the merger and included participants from both universities. Although the research was originally conceived prior to the merger the effects of the merger were reported in the data and required some consideration in the study. My qualitative approach to the research methodology was not otherwise affected and is described below.

### **Positionality**

The close relation between my research and my work as a Welfare Officer precludes complete impartiality and it is important to “clarify the bias” (Creswell, 2003, p. 196), which could not be avoided in this study. As outlined in Chapter One, my research arose from my role in supporting students and a concern for the challenges faced by some staff and students when managing an interruption of studies. However, I have endeavoured to comply with Denscombe (2010) who, while recognising that it is not possible to achieve complete objectivity, maintains there is a need to “strive towards objectivity as far as possible” (2010, p. 94). Notwithstanding the “purposive” nature of my research sample of participants and my professional relationship with them as a Welfare Officer, my wish was to draw out the perceptions and experiences of the interruption process from the different viewpoints of students, support staff and academic staff.

### **Procedure**

#### ***Ethics***

Ethical approval was sought and granted by the Ethics Advisory Committee. I was mindful of the importance of adhering to ethical guidelines and particularly aware that although my participants were adults, there were potential vulnerabilities relating to experiences of an interruption process that required consideration and sensitivity when conducting this research and interviewing the participants. As a Welfare Officer providing support to students who were experiencing challenging and personal difficulties, I am aware that students often find it difficult to relate their experiences and may also feel very emotional when doing so. As Cohen, Mannion and Morrision (2007) state all participants should be

fully informed about the nature and aims of the research and that interviews should be conducted in a manner that is 'appropriate, non-stressful [and] non-threatening' (2007, p. 182). It is therefore important to consider the positions of all participants, both staff members and students, when they are relating their experiences of managing the interruption process and to ensure that all participants do not feel uncomfortable, anxious, embarrassed, or compromised by their participation in the research. In my ethics application I committed to ensuring that the participants would be informed of the study and its aim to identify areas of good practice and areas that may benefit from improvement for the interruption process. The participants were told in the invitations, as stated below, and at the start of the interview that they were free to alleviate any discomfort they may feel during the interview by expressing how they feel, asking questions, or declining to answer questions, or to withdraw from the study if they wished to do so. Moreover, in accordance with Bera (2011) it was also important to reassure all participants that confidentiality and anonymity would be maintained and that all data recordings and transcripts will be protected and stored securely.

### ***Invitations***

Invitations were sent by email to a range of potential participants, all of whom I had some knowledge through my role as Student Welfare Officer (see Appendices A and B). The invitation briefly outlined the aim of my research study and that I would like to interview individuals, comprising students, and academic and support staff, who had experience of the interruption process. I provided assurance in the invitation that ethical guidelines would be adhered to, in accordance with BERA (British Educational Research Association) (2011), including regard for anonymity and confidentiality. The participants were also told in the invitation that they could, at any stage, decline to answer any questions or withdraw from the study if they wished to do so. A Statement of Consent Form was attached to the email invitations for those staff and students who wished to participate in the study to sign and return (See Appendices A and B).

### ***Participants***

My sample can be described as a 'convenience' sample, whereby the participants who were invited to take part in my study were "the nearest and most convenient persons to act as respondents" Robson (2002, p. 265). Robson (ibid) maintains this is the most unreliable method of sampling because of its propensity for bias but he also states this method can

be used when the researcher wishes to gain some familiarity with the chosen area of research. This may apply to my aim to explore the experiences of staff and students as they relate to the interruption of a study programme. The sample can also be viewed as 'purposive' because the respondents who were invited to partake in the study were selected on the premise that they had experience of the interruption process, as Robson (2002) states, it is a sample that "enables the researcher to satisfy her specific needs in a project" (p. 265). Wellington (2000) agrees but adds a caveat that the researcher needs to be mindful that this form of sampling, within the context of a qualitative study, has its limitations regarding generalisability. I am accordingly aware of the limits of my study in so far that it is an account of the reported experiences of a small number of participants within a specific higher education institution at a specific moment in time. Notwithstanding its limitations, it may also be said that: "Though they may not be generalizable, this is not the primary concern in such sampling; rather the concern is to acquire in-depth information from those who are in a position to give it" (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007).

A total of 14 respondents agreed to take part in the study and completed, signed, and returned the consent form. The participants were as follows:

**Academic Staff: Three Participants**

All three participants were originally employed by the smaller, pre-merger university.

**Table 9 Participants: Academic Staff**

Pseudonym	Department	Course Level	Role
Ursula	Academic	Undergraduate	Programme leader
Margaret	Academic	Postgraduate	Programme leader
Rachel	Academic	Research	Research Supervisor

### Support Staff: Five Participants

Pauline and Mary were originally employed by the smaller university.

Fergal, Clare, and Laura were employees of the larger university.

**Table 10 Participants: Support Staff**

Pseudonym	Department	Course level	Role
Pauline	Academic	Undergraduate	Administrator/Support
Mary	Finance Dept	All courses	Finance Administrator
Fergal	Student Support	All courses	Funding Adviser
Clare	Wellbeing Team	All courses	Wellbeing Adviser
Laura	Wellbeing Team	All courses	Wellbeing Adviser

### Students: Six Participants

All six were originally students at the smaller university. As stated in Chapter One although the term non-traditional is contested, the students in this study can be identified as non-traditional because they are all mature students, aged over 21. In addition, two students, Freda and Kate, had caring responsibilities, and the two EdD students were employed in professional roles. Two students, Kate and Nancy were from ethnic minorities and Ralph was an EU student, resident in the UK. All the students were following what could be described as non-traditional study programmes, that is the courses were not traditional undergraduate or postgraduate study programmes but professional training courses.

**Table 11 Participants: Students**

Pseudonym	Course	Main reasons for interruption of study
Freda	Foundation Degree	Caring responsibilities
Kate	PGCE Primary	Caring responsibilities
Ralph	PGCE Secondary	Course and health concerns
Patrick	PGCE Post Compulsory Part time	Course and health concerns
Christine	EdD Part Time	Course/employment/health concerns
Nancy	EdD Part Time	Course/employment/health concerns

### ***Interview location***

The interview locations were various and in agreement with the participants. I used the same room used when seeing students in my role as Student Welfare Advisor to interview the two wellbeing advisers, who were interviewed separately. I booked separate rooms for the interviews with students. The academic and two support staff selected their office spaces for the interviews. Each member of staff was interviewed on a different day, apart from two members of staff who were interviewed on the same day. One remaining support staff member was interviewed, with her approval and consent, in a public space within the institute. Each participant was asked if they felt comfortable in the space provided. One interview with a student, held in a pre-booked room was interrupted by a fire alarm which meant we had to leave the building. The student wished to continue the interview in a different institute building located nearby where we found a quiet space in a public area. The student insisted he was comfortable with this arrangement.

### ***Interviews***

The interviews were semi-structured and lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes for each participant. Robson (2002) describes a semi-structured interview as having a “shopping list of topics” (p. 278) to ensure the interviewer gains, as far as possible, the information required. Robson (2002), when referring to unstructured interviews, advises using an interview guide that will serve as “a list of things to be sure to ask about when talking to the person being interviewed” (2002, p. 281). My interview approach also complies with the “Interview guide approach”, where “topics and issues are specified in advance” but the interviewer “decides sequence and working of questions in the course of the interview” (Cohen et al., 2007, p. 353). Mindful there may be aspects of the interruption process I had not anticipated I did not want the information provided by the participants to be determined by my questions alone. Although the topic was familiar to all participants with some potential for shared perceptions, my concern was also for their individual experiences, and it did not seem appropriate to structure the interview solely with a predetermined set of questions. I hoped that a more informal, open ended, approach, with the use of a guide, would assist in the prevention of bias, such as any preconceived expectations arising from an emphasis upon predetermined questions (Newton, 2006).

I used two interview guides, one for the academic and support staff and one for the students because of their different perspectives and experiences of the interruption

process (see Appendices C and D). My interview guides contained a brief introduction with short list of questions regarding the interviewee's experiences of the interruption process, providing some allowance for a flexible approach that accords with the interviewee's responses to the questions asked.

Prior to each interview we greeted each other, and I thanked each participant for agreeing to assist me in my research. I explained my study and its aim as outlined in my invitation. I reiterated that the ethical guidelines in accordance with BERA (2011) would be followed, providing assurance that anonymity and confidentiality would be adhered to throughout the study and regarding any future publication or dissemination. I repeated that the students could withdraw from the study at any time and that they could refrain from answering any questions if they wished. I outlined how I planned to conduct the interview, with a focus on their experiences and perceptions of the interruption process. I stated there would be some flexibility, that it would be more a discussion about their experiences of the interruption but that I may ask questions at any stage if I felt it was necessary. I checked if this approach would be agreeable, and all participants responded positively. I also explained my wish to record the interview but only if they felt comfortable and with their consent. All participants agreed to a recording of the interview. I added that the recordings would be kept in a safe place, password protected, where I would be the only person with access and that the interviews would be deleted on completion of my research.

For all interviews, following an introduction, I began with an invitation for the participants to speak about their experience of the interruption process. Using the interview guide as a reference I asked the staff members open questions about their engagement in the interruption process and interactions with students, the kinds of support that students may need, interactions with different departments and any variations in the different stages of the interruption process. The participants then proceeded to report their experiences and I would intervene with further questions where appropriate. With regard to student participants, I asked questions regarding the reason for the interruption, any support they received and their experiences of the different stages of the interruption process. Similarly, members of staff had different roles and perspectives of the interruption process which generated questions regarding their specific areas of expertise. When concluding the interviews, I thanked the participants and asked them if they had any questions.

## **Analysis of the Data**

### **Transcription**

Following the completion of the interviews, and to further my familiarization of the data, I transcribed the verbal data manually, as Braun and Clarke (2006) state “some researchers even argue it should be seen as ‘a key phase of data analysis within the interpretative qualitative methodology.’” (Bird, 2005, p227, cited in Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 87)

### **Approach to the Data Analysis**

My approach to the analysis draws from (Braun & Clarke, 2006), using thematic analysis which “through its theoretical freedom, ... provides a flexible and useful research tool, which can potentially provide a rich and detailed, yet complex, account of data” (2006, p. 78). I applied a “theoretical or deductive or top down way” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 83) using themes relating to Archer’s theory of structure and agency to analyse my data. Burnard, Gill, Stewart, Treasure, and Chadwick (2008) when speaking of the “deductive” approach maintain it can be used where the researcher has some level of awareness regarding the participants’ potential responses, such as when researching participant concerns about a specific topic. My own professional role and experience in supporting students through the interruption process can be viewed as evidence of awareness regarding the potential responses of participants. However, mindful of the dangers regarding bias, I would add my awareness of potential responses relates to my familiarity with the topic rather than any preconceived perceptions of individual experiences related by the participants in this study.

Braun and Clarke (2006) also state it is important to ensure the use of a theoretical framework that complies with the aim of the research and that the decision is explicit. They further state “thematic analysis can be a method that works both to reflect reality and to unpick or unravel the surface of ‘reality’” (2006, p. 81). I would maintain the aim of my research meets this requirement. My aim was to see how the application of Archer’s theory, and its potential to distinguish between structures and agency, may assist my understanding of how the interruption process is experienced and identify, where appropriate, areas of good practice, and potential areas of improvement, for the benefit of both staff and students. The themes I used for the data analysis are mapped out in Table 12 below. In addition to themes drawn directly from Archer’s theory (see Chapter 2,



Theoretical Framework) I used additional themes related to Archer's theory that became evident from the data. The themes, drawn from Archer's theory, to be used in my data analysis:

**Table 12 Data Analysis: Themes drawn from Archer's Theory**

<b>Constellations of Concerns</b> Natural Practical and Discursive Orders	The personal concerns experienced by students when undergoing an interruption of study
Structures	The structures that students and staff need to negotiate during an interruption of study?
Structural Enablements	The mechanisms that assist staff and students when managing an interruption of study
Structural Constraints	The mechanisms that may impede staff and students during an interruption of study
Agency	How do staff and students exercise their agency when managing an interruption of study?
Reflexivity	How do staff and students use their reflexive processes during an interruption study?
Modes of Reflexivity	Communicative, Autonomous, Meta Reflexive, Fractured Reflexives
Emotions	First and Second Orders
<b>Additional themes applied when analysing the data</b>	
Role	The roles of staff when supporting students
Merger	The concerns of staff and students following the merger of the two universities
Unknown	There were several unknown aspects relating to the merger and the interruption of study process
Communication	There were a number of structural concerns regarding communications between departments and with students
Inconsistency	Concerns were expressed regarding a lack of structural consistencies in student support and procedures

## **Arrangement of the Data**

I analysed the data in three separate data sets:

- Academics
- Support Staff
- Students

The reason for this is because I felt that there would be differences of perception and experiences between each group of participants relating to their different perspectives of the interruption process. For example, the perceptions of the academic and support staff are more in the role of supporting students through the interruption process while the students are the recipients of support. Moreover, I was also mindful that each individual would have a different perspective within each group of participants because the academic staff belong to three different study programmes, the support staff provide different aspects of support to students, and the students are on different study programmes. My aim was to conduct the analysis in a manner that would facilitate a consideration of both shared and individual perceptions existing within each group of participants, and across all groups, regarding their experiences of the interruption process.

## **Method of Analysis**

I draw on Braun and Clarke's outline of six phases of analysis (2006, p. 87) as a guide to conducting the analysis and, because I was applying predetermined themes relating to Archer's theory of structure and agency, I felt it necessary to adapt their stages as follows:

### **Phase 1**

#### **Familiarization with the Data**

I familiarised myself with the data by transcribing the interviews, re-reading the data several times, and making notes of my initial observations. For example, I noted there were several references to the recent merger of the two institutions where I conducted the research. There were also unknown aspects relating to the interruption process, and communication concerns across each data set. In addition, I considered the relevance of the roles of the academic and support staff, as agents and regarding their experiences of the interruption process.

## Phase 2

### Generating additional themes and applying data to each theme

Braun & Clarke (2006) consider the question of how a theme is determined, stating that ‘...researcher judgement is necessary to determine what a theme is’. As outlined above, the themes were drawn from Archer’s theory of structure and agency. Accordingly, I looked at how the data related to my predetermined themes and added the themes: Role, Merger, Communication and Unknown, and Inconsistency. I considered these additional themes to be appropriate because of recurrent references to these themes as student concerns throughout the data. I also perceived them to be relevant to the theory of structure and agency when considering the participants’ accounts of their experiences and interactions when managing the interruption process.

The themes were set out in an Excel table as follows:

**Table 13 Themes as set out in Excel**

Role	Merger	Unknown	Inconsistency	Communication	Agency
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Constellations of Concerns			Structures		Structural Mechanisms	
Natural	Practical	Discursive	Academic	Non-Academic	Enablements	Constraints

Reflexivity	Emotions	
Modes of Reflexivity	First Order	Second Order

I then looked at how the data related to the themes and applied extracts of the data to themes as considered appropriate. Mindful that most of the themes are predetermined I was aware of my ‘researcher judgement’ when applying data to a theme and the need to be clear regarding my reasons for doing so. There were instances, for example, where the data suggested the application of several themes, such as when a participant referred to how she was feeling when interacting with HEP departments. The themes of ‘agency’, ‘communication’, ‘structures’, ‘emotions’ and ‘constellations of concerns’ were all perceived to be applicable.

### **Phase 3**

#### **Searching for themes and sub-themes**

I then collated the data extracts allocated to each theme according to each data set. Further analysis was conducted, summarising the main features of the extract, and considering potential sub-themes for each theme. I then looked at the themes and sub-themes for each data set and changed the name of a sub-theme where relevant. For example, I changed the sub-theme 'Students' to 'Supporting Students' because the staff concerns regarding students mainly related to how they provided support for them.

### **Phase 4**

#### **Reviewing themes**

In this phase I looked at the main features of each theme and corresponding sub-themes and created a thematic map for each data set of participants. For this phase I reduced the number of themes to what I considered to be the five main themes: Constellations of Concerns, Constraints, Enablements, Agency and Reflexivity. The reason for this decision relates to my research questions concerning the constraints and enablements experienced by staff and students, and how they exercise their agency and reflexivity when managing the interruption process. I then considered the sub-themes and how they related to the main themes and to the data across all data sets. The sub themes were reviewed to facilitate some consistency when considering the similarities and differences of experience across the three data sets. Thus, the sub theme 'Disclosure' was applied to the main theme 'Constraints' because it related to the challenges faced by staff and students regarding student disclosure of personal issues, and I changed the sub theme Supporting Students' to Student Support to facilitate its application to both staff and students.

### **Phase 5**

#### **Map of themes**

Braun & Clarke (2006) state that this phase entails an "ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, and the overall story the analysis tells generating clear definitions and names for each theme" (2006, p. 87). I arranged three maps according to what I considered to be the main themes for all three data sets as outlined in Table 14 below:

**Table 14 Data Analysis: Phase 5 Map of Themes**

<b>Main Themes</b>	<b>Academic Staff</b>	<b>Support Staff</b>	<b>Students</b>
<b>Constellations of Concerns</b>			
<b>Enablements</b>			
<b>Constraints</b>			
<b>Agency</b>			
<b>Reflexivity</b>			

I then identified the sub themes to be used when reporting the Findings as follows:

**Table 15 Data Analysis: Map of sub themes**

<b>Staff Support</b>	Administrative support for the academic staff.
<b>Student Support</b>	Referring to the roles of the staff in supporting students and to the support received by students
<b>Student Disclosure</b>	Regarding the concerns expressed for the challenges for students when disclosing their personal concerns
<b>Regulations and Procedures</b>	The structural mechanisms relating to the interruption process
<b>External Organisations</b>	External organisations used by students when interrupting their studies
<b>Mental Health Emotional Wellbeing Modes of Reflexivity</b>	I relate this group of sub themes to the exercise of reflexivity

I then mapped the themes and their relevant sub-themes, as shown in Table 16 below:

**Table 16 Map of themes with relevant sub themes**

	<b>Academic Staff</b>	<b>Support Staff</b>	<b>Students</b>
Theme	Sub themes	Sub Themes	Sub Themes
<b>Constellations of Concerns</b>	Student Support	Student Support	Personal Concerns
<b>Enablements</b>	Admin Support Student Support Regulations and Procedures	Student Support	Student Support HEP Support Structures
<b>Constraints</b>	Merger Student Support Regulations and Procedures Student Disclosure	Merger Student Support Regulations and Procedures External Organisations Student Disclosure	Merger Student Support Regulations and Procedures External Organisations Student Disclosure
<b>Agency</b>	Admin Support Personal Tutor System Student Support Regulations and Procedures Student Disclosure	Student Support External Organisations	Student Support External Organisations
<b>Reflexivity</b>	Mental Health Emotional Wellbeing Modes of Reflexivity	Mental Health Emotional Wellbeing Modes of Reflexivity	Mental Health Emotional Wellbeing Modes of Reflexivity

## **Phase 6**

This is the final phase of the analysis where I selected extracts for each sub theme in each of the data sets in preparation for the Findings Chapter. I then created three main sections for the Findings to correspond with my research questions 1, 2, and 3 relating to the staff and students' experiences of the interruption process.

## **Summary**

In this chapter I have provided an outline of the methods used in this research study including the purposive selection of participants, ethical considerations, the use of interviews for the collection of data and my thematic approach to data analysis, using Archer's theory of structure and agency in accordance with Braun & Clarke's (2006) 'top-down' approach. In the following chapter I will report and discuss the findings of my research. I will also consider suggestions for improvements to the interruption process that have arisen from the study.

## Chapter Five: Findings and Discussion

### Introduction

In this chapter I will discuss how my use of Archer's theory of structure and agency facilitated a better understanding of how staff and students manage the interruption process. My study is concerned with those students who interrupt for personal reasons that challenge their ability to focus on their studies. I will consider the findings in relation to Archer's theory and to the literature discussed in Chapter Two. As stated in Chapter One, the aim of my research was to consider staff and students' experiences of the interruption process and to identify, if possible, areas of good practice and areas that may benefit from improvement. My concerns, arising from my role as Welfare Officer, were for the challenges that both staff and students may face during the different stages of the interruption process. A particular concern was the number of departments and organisations that students were required to navigate when undertaking an interruption of study which would add further stress to an already stressful situation. As stated in Chapter One and demonstrated in Chapter Two, there is very little research on the interruption process. I argue for the importance of the interruption process as a structural mechanism that can enable students to take a break and continue their studies following times of personal crisis. Archer's critical realist theory of structure and agency provided me with an analytical and multi-dimensional approach to considering how university staff and students engage with structures and how structures may enhance or hinder individual agency when managing the interruption process.

Although an interruption of study can enable students who experience personal crises or unforeseen events to complete their study programmes, the findings in this study show how challenging the process can be for both staff and students. This may offer one explanation as to why, as stated in Chapter One, statistics show that many students do not return to their study programme following an interruption. As stated in Chapter Two, the few references to the interruption of study that exist tend to present the process in a negative context regarding the challenges students face when interrupting their studies and associations with students leaving their study programme. References are made to financial difficulties (Bradley, 2017) and problems when returning to study (Mannay & Morgan, 2013) in addition to students not returning at the expected time (Roberts, 2012). Two out of the six students in this study withdrew from their studies following the difficulties



they experienced on their return to study and two students who had not yet returned were facing challenges that may result in a withdrawal from their studies.

Notwithstanding the challenges, there are also some references to the benefits of an interruption of study for students who are experiencing personal difficulties (Jones, 2008; Xuereb, 2014). Two students in this study successfully completed their study programme following their interruption of study. The findings in my study show that both staff and students acknowledge the benefits of an interruption, but they express structural concerns, similar to those cited in the literature, that negatively impacted upon their experience of managing the interruption process. They also reported concerns regarding a lack of information and support and difficulties for students when seeking support and guidance. Some of these concerns are referred to in the research on student retention, but not in relation to the experiences of students who interrupt their study programme. This study seeks to address this area of neglect in the literature.

Archer's theory, and her use of analytical dualism (see Chapter Three) which distinguishes individuals and their agency from the structures they engage with, facilitates a consideration of how staff and students interact with organisational structures and how structural constraints can impact upon the exercise of agency during the interruption process. Her theory also allows me to consider the interrelation between students' personal and academic concerns and how students exercise their reflexive powers to manage their concerns when interrupting their studies. Students need to navigate the organisational structures that will enable them to effectively manage their concerns and return to complete their study programme when their personal concerns are resolved.

In this Chapter I will outline how I used Archer's theory when considering the findings of this study, and how the findings can be related to the literature concerning the student experience and student retention. My discussion of the findings will be presented as follows: In Part One I will consider the personal concerns experienced by the students when they interrupted their study programme in relation to Archer's constellations of concerns and Three Orders of Reality. With reference to my research questions: in Part Two I will consider the structural enablements and constraints that staff and students reported experiencing during an interruption of study; in Part Three I will consider how staff and students exercise their agency and use their reflexivity when managing the

interruption process; in Part Four I will consider to what extent Archer's theory can suggest improvements to the process for the benefit of both staff and students. In Part Five I will discuss suggestions for improvement to the interruption of study arising from my application of Archer's theory. I will then provide a summary to the Findings and Discussion Chapter.

## **Part One: Students' constellations of concerns**

In this section the personal concerns experienced by the students when they interrupted their study programme will be considered in relation to Archer's constellations of concerns and Three Orders of Reality and to the literature concerning student identity and their constellation of needs.

Notwithstanding other reasons for an interruption, this study is concerned with students who interrupted their studies because of personal issues including bereavement, caring responsibilities, and health concerns. The application of Archer's theory provided a framework in which to consider students' "constellations of concerns" when undertaking an interruption of study. As stated in the Review of Literature, students may experience a number of concerns that conflict with the requirements of their study programme. An interruption of study may be the structural mechanism that would enable them to take a break and then return to complete their studies. Archer's theory considers the concerns that individuals need to consider when engaging in a project and also accounts for unforeseen events. An interruption of study is a project that students may engage in when they are experiencing an unforeseen event or personal crisis that impacts upon their ability to focus on their study programme.

The students in this study reported a range of concerns that required them to consider an interruption of study, including family bereavement and caring responsibilities, academic issues, professional and career related concerns, in addition to physical and mental health concerns. Freda reported a 'plethora' of issues when caring for her daughter and supporting her mother following the demise of her father. Grieving and experiencing a relationship breakdown she was struggling as a single parent while working full time as a teaching assistant and studying on the Foundation Degree. Kate's positive start to her PGCE course was impacted by her mother's illness and eventual bereavement. Struggling on her course, she was anticipating failure before interrupting her studies. Ralph and Patrick interrupted their PGCE courses following difficulties on school placements. In addition, they both had long term mental health issues. Christine had mental health concerns and experienced changes at work that resulted in voluntary redundancy. Nancy experienced increased responsibilities as a teacher, sustained a neck injury following a car accident, had problems with her laptop, and endured a six-month delay in receiving feedback for her IFS report.

Many of the concerns reported by the students in this study are similar to those explored in the literature regarding why students may struggle on their study programmes. However, studies do not consider students' concerns in relation to an interruption of study or the additional concerns, such as financial issues, that may arise because of an interruption of study. Four of the students in this study experienced concerns regarding funding issues. Ralph, for example, struggled to find employment to support himself during the interruption period.

As Mannay and Morgan (2013) state, there is a tendency in the literature to simplify student concerns into categories such as personal, social, or academic concerns. Jones' (2008) acknowledgement of the complexity and interrelatedness of student issues complies with the view of a member of staff in this study, who spoke of the challenge of identifying the main cause of a student's crisis when so many concerns are interrelated. The complexity and interrelation between personal and academic concerns was evident in the accounts of all the students experiences of their interruption of studies as exemplified above by the 'plethora' of issues which impacted upon Freda's ability to focus on her studies.

### ***The Three Orders of Reality***

The students' concerns, as reported in the findings above, can be related to Archer's theory as follows:

Archer's theory categorises individual concerns into three 'Orders of Reality', the Natural, Practical and Discursive (as discussed in Chapter Three) which bears some relation to the categories found in the literature but also acknowledges the interrelation of individual concerns and facilitates a more holistic approach to supporting students. I outline the students' concerns in relation to Archer's Orders of Reality in the following Table 17:

**Table 17 Students' concerns in relation to Archer's Three Orders of Reality**

Order of Reality	Students' Concerns
<p><b>Natural</b></p> <p>Physical and Mental Health, Environmental Factors</p>	<p>Mental health concerns including depression, anxiety, and stress</p> <p>The emotional effects of their personal concerns and of the interruption itself</p> <p>Returning students also experienced problems relating to changes in their academic environment following the merger of the two universities</p>
<p><b>Practical</b></p> <p>Performative Achievement and Practical Concerns</p>	<p>Completion of studies</p> <p>Future career prospects</p> <p>PGCE school placements</p> <p>Finding employment during an interruption of study</p> <p>Funding and accommodation issues</p>
<p><b>Discursive</b></p> <p>Discursive or Social Order</p>	<p>Caring responsibilities</p> <p>Family bereavement</p> <p>Relationship break up</p> <p>Student identity and returning to new study groups</p>

Archer maintains that individuals need to consider all three orders of concerns when deciding upon a course of action. As stated in Chapter Three, she argues no concern should be prioritised to the detriment of other concerns and the need for a balanced consideration of individual concerns in order to optimise personal wellbeing and fulfilment. The findings of this study show both the interrelatedness and individual nature of the students' concerns. This highlights the importance of providing both individual and coordinated support to enable students to make informed choices with regard to an effective management of their "constellations of concerns" and their study programme. Where appropriate, an interruption of study may be necessary to facilitate the management of both personal and academic concerns.

### ***Student identity and their constellation of needs***

The application of Archer's constellations of concerns highlights the complexity of student identity. Lockett and Lockett (2009) when considering students' needs maintain it is important to acknowledge the full range of students' concerns in relation to students' identity, in order to enable a full engagement of their reflexive processes. In this study the students' accounts show the impact of conflicting academic and personal concerns upon their reflexive processes. As discussed below in Part Four, the students relate how difficult it was for them to focus when experiencing their personal crises and expressed relief when able to disclose their concerns and the interruption of study was granted. They were then able to address their conflicting concerns and engage their reflexive powers to consider how best to manage their interruption of study. As one student stated, she was then able to make plans.

In the following section, Part Two, I will discuss the structural enablements and constraints experienced by the staff and students when managing the interruption process.

## **Part Two: Structural enablements and constraints**

Archer's theory provides a framework in which to consider the structural enablements and constraints that staff and students may encounter when managing an interruption of study. The range of structural enablements and constraints that the staff and students encountered when managing an interruption of study are outlined below. I will briefly consider the general aspects related to the structural constraints and enablements, and I will then report the staff and students' concerns as they relate to the different stages of the interruption process, followed by a consideration of the overall concerns that can be related to all stages of the interruption process.

### ***Enablements***

As stated in Chapter Two, the literature on student support services cites a wide range of support available to students (Morgan, 2012; Thomas, 2012; Waight & Giordano, 2018). The findings in this study show that there are a number of structural enablements to support students and facilitate the interruption process, which itself can be viewed as a structural enablement. The structural enablements comprise the expertise of academic and support staff and their commitment to supporting students. The students in this study received support from various staff members, including their supervisor, tutor, course coordinator, the counselling, disability and wellbeing support services and the funding advisor. However, not all students in this study received the support they needed or were aware of the support available to them.

In Table 18 below the support services available to the students in this study are outlined in relation to Archers Orders of Reality (see also Table 17 in Part One) regarding the students' concerns:

**Table 18 Archer's Orders of Reality in relation to HEP Support Services**

<b>Order of Reality</b>	<b>Concern</b>	<b>Support Services</b>
<b>Natural Order</b> Physical Wellbeing	Mental Health Physical Health Emotional Effects Environmental Effects	Counselling/NHS Disability/Wellbeing Support GP/NHS Pastoral Support HEP Support Services
<b>Practical Order</b> Performative achievement and practical concerns	Study Programme School placement Employment & Careers Funding Accommodation	Academic Support  Careers Guidance Funding Advisor Accommodation Advice
<b>Discursive or Social Order</b> Self-Worth	Family Bereavement Caring Responsibilities Student Identity Study Group	Counselling Student Welfare HEP Support Services Academic Support

### **Family Support**

Although some studies view friends and family as important resources for students, the findings from this study suggest the importance of providing student support and guidance within the university for those students who have no access to family support. As stated in the methodology, the students in this study were mature students, aged over 21 years, attending employment related study programmes. Studies show that it is often mature, non-traditional students who require support because they do not have other resources such as family support (Waight & Giordano, 2018). With the exception of one student who reported discussions with his partner, the students in this study did not report receiving help from family members. Moreover, mature students often have caring responsibilities. Field and Morgan-Klein (2012) report that caring responsibilities are frequently cited as reasons why students leave their study programme. An interruption of study is not



mentioned as an option for students with caring responsibilities. The findings in this study show, through the experiences of two students, that caring responsibilities may not always require withdrawal from a study programme. Their family concerns presented challenges but because they were able to interrupt their studies, both students were eventually able to return to complete their study programme.

In the findings of this study the academic and support staff reported how they provide support to students. The academic staff, as personal tutors, offer both academic and pastoral support to students and expressed their commitment to supporting students throughout their study programmes. Ursula stated she is “able to guide them and keep an eye on people who struggle ... they know I am here if they need me”. Margaret said the personal tutor as “the programme leader, has a very good understanding of the student”. Rachel stated, “Your supervisor’s here at any time”. Ursula and Margaret also expressed the important role provided by their administrative support. Ursula said working with her administrator is “really, really helpful”. Margaret stated her administrator is “very important in making sure that communication has happened with Registry”. Rachel, however, has no administrative support, and states it can be a struggle when dealing with an “amorphous group” of students at different stages of their research degrees. Each member of the student support staff provides a specific area of specialist support for students, including academic, pastoral, disability, wellbeing, and financial support. The staff also refer students to other specialists, for example the Wellbeing Team refers students to the funding advisor.

The students provided accounts of the support they received during the interruption process. They spoke of the benefits of the interruption process and reported a range of enablements in relation to the support they received. Freda and Kate were supported within their academic department and also received funding advice in addition to support from the Wellbeing Team. Christine and Nancy received some support prior to their interruption of studies from their supervisors who referred them to their academic department. Patrick had received support from his Wellbeing Mentor prior to the interruption but he and Ralph reported very limited levels of support during all stages of the interruption process.

## **Constraints**

The staff and students also experienced a number of structural constraints at each stage of the interruption process. Some of the concerns expressed in the findings may be attributable to the recent merger between two HEPs which occurred before the collection of data. The Registry and Student Support Centre was restructured and relocated. Some staff members felt the merger had impacted on them because they no longer knew who to contact when seeking support for students. Changes made to systems, regulations, and procedures also presented challenges for both staff and students. Two members of staff and four students referred directly to the impact of the merger on their experience of the interruption. Some indirect references to issues concerning communication and inconsistencies may be related to the effects of the merger.

## **Concerns related to the three stages of an interruption of study**

As stated in Chapter One my previous study (MOE2) identified three main stages to the Interruption process. Outlined below are the structural enablements and constraints reported by both staff and students as they related to each stage of the interruption. I apply this structure to the interruption process to help to identify and locate examples of good practice and areas for improvement in relation to each stage of the interruption process.

### **Stage One: Before the Interruption**

#### *Academic and Support Staff*

The staff reported a number of challenges facing students at the stage before they interrupt their studies. Ursula said before the interruption students often “feel lost and they don’t see a way out ...they want someone to say ... it’s not the end of the world you can take an interruption of studies, sort yourself out and then come back”. She also spoke of students whose “issues were so bad that they weren’t able to come to the University” before interrupting their studies. Margaret said students need to understand the term ‘interruption’ which “can have different meanings depending on who is using it”. She added students find it difficult to understand the regulations when going through a crisis. Rachel spoke of students with complex issues, including health concerns and childcare issues, when “it would be better for the student not to continue” but students were often reluctant to interrupt and determined to continue their research.

The support staff perceived the interruption of studies to be a positive intervention for some students. Clare stated: “ it’s really positive that there is this opportunity for students to take time out of their study if it is what they need”. However, there were several challenges when supporting students through an interruption. Pauline stated the regulations do not comply with the requirements of the work-based study programme and: “most of the time it baffles them ... some of the terminology that the regulations use ... it’s difficult to place it within their own studies”. Mary spoke of the students’ concerns about their tuition fees liability. Fergal sees students before they interrupt, but only those presenting through the Wellbeing Team or appointment requests. Clare says that some students feel unable to return to their parental home during an interruption: “the anxiety of going back home is completely overwhelming ... where this problem has started at home” and spoke of the challenges presented by some students when interrupting: “there are so many issues, personal, financial, mental health and when you start unpicking you just don’t know which one caused the situation”. The Wellbeing Team may see students several times before an interruption. It is evident from the accounts of Fergal and the Wellbeing Team that not all students access the support services. Fergal is mindful that there may be many students who are unaware of his role and of their funding entitlements when interrupting their studies. Laura states that “not all students are on our radar ... They are already gone by the time we hear that they are interrupting”.

### *Students*

The students reported experiencing a number of enablements and some constraints prior to their interruption of studies. Freda, although very stressed, had initially been reluctant to interrupt and said, regarding the interruption, the department “were very supportive and ... it all seemed to then happen very quickly”. She described her Programme Administrator as “very good at her job, a very calm manner”. Conversely, Kate was initially advised to continue her course and granted extensions. However, she soon “got to the point when I was very stressed”. Her Programme Leader told her she could interrupt and resume where she left off, on her return to study. She said: “the actual nuts and bolts of getting an interruption, that didn’t feel like that was a challenging thing to do”. Ralph, who had suffered anxiety, requested to interrupt his studies when he was withdrawn from his school placement. His interruption was agreed at a meeting with his tutor and course leader. Patrick, who struggled with anxiety and depression, was advised to interrupt because there was no second placement for him. He completed the interruption process alone and was confused about the dates, “the emphasis was kind of more on me to find out the date I

was leaving and the date I am coming back”. Christine was at a pivotal stage of her research and although suffering ill health, found the decision to interrupt challenging. Nancy, who was very stressed, decided to interrupt when a colleague informed her of this option. Christine and Nancy received some guidance regarding the completion of the form from their academic department but experienced difficulties finding the correct form to complete online. Nancy had difficulty explaining the reasons for her interruption on the form: “it was quite difficult to write down one thing on the sheet in the end, because it wasn’t one thing”. She also said her Supervisor was concerned because “she had people beforehand who had interrupted and had not come back”.

## **Stage Two: During the Interruption Period**

### *Academic Staff and Support Staff*

The main concerns for the staff at this stage of the interruption relates to the lack of communication and support for students. Ursula was concerned about students who were not in contact during the interruption: “if they weren’t communicating while they were enrolled here ...why would they after they interrupted?”. She was also concerned that students with mental health issues lose access to HEP support and are “left to their own devices” during the interruption period. She was also unsure whether the email system worked for students during an interruption, sharing with Margaret a concern about keeping track of students. Ursula said she was “so preoccupied with [her] workload that .... They sort of slip through your to do list” and Margaret stated she was “too busy to follow up lots of individuals”, adding: “part of the problem is they get lots of automated emails...which they begin to ignore”. Rachel said, “Just library access, it’s ridiculous not to give them, or even electronic library access” and spoke of managing student interruptions without administrative support: “you don’t have that sense of help that the administrator will come back to you and say oh this person interrupted for a term, what’s happening with them” .

Pauline informs students “if you are interrupted it means you do not have access to resources anymore”, but endeavours to maintain contact with them. Fergal stated funding is of concern for students unable to return to their parental home, “If they can avoid paying rent by going home, then obviously that helps them out financially a great deal...but that is not always the case”. There were also delays in the funding process and some students would not be entitled to funding. Laura spoke of problems gaining access to external

mental health services for students, “they go home and they’re at the bottom of the waiting list ... to make that transitive move is quite a difficult thing”.

### *Students*

The students expressed a sense of relief regarding the ability to interrupt their studies but also reported a range of individual concerns regarding the interruption period. Freda and Kate were relieved to be able to focus on their personal concerns. Freda stated: “working hard and all of that was such a pressure cooker” . Kate spoke of “just feeling relieved when the interruption happened because I thought I could really mess the course” adding, “it was such a relief to be away ... not the university as much, away from my placement”. However, she spoke of financial issues during the interruption period “because you’re not getting student finance”. Nancy interrupted for one term only during which she was able to focus on her health and the demands of her professional role. Freda was pleased to be able to use the library during the interruption period, stating, “if to all intents and purposes you were to be cut off completely, then I would imagine students might be less inclined to return”. Conversely, Kate preferred not to be contacted during the interruption period:

I think it’s a balance because it could have stressed me out. For instance, having somebody getting in touch with me about the course ... which was exactly why I was getting away. I didn’t want somebody getting back in touch with me.

Christine was too unwell to go into the University: “The way I was feeling there was no way I could come in”. Both Ralph and Patrick wished to find employment in schools to improve their teaching skills before resuming their PGCE courses. Neither student was aware of the Careers Service or of their funding entitlements. Ralph stated, “I realise that interruption would not be easy because to find and get a job it will not be easy. Who would accept somebody for just six months [for] a job if they don’t know me?” Ralph was also concerned about his financial situation, “not getting money is very stressful”. He was confused about his eligibility for welfare benefits during the interruption and about the training bursary instalments due on his return to study. Patrick lost access to his mentor of whom he stated: “She helped me organise ... and to motivate me” and felt he was “left to his own devices” during the interruption period.

### **Stage Three: Return to Study**

A number of concerns were raised by both staff and students regarding the students return to their study programme.

#### *Academic Staff and Support Staff*

Ursula said there was no formal support, for students when returning to study: “who’s going to be there for the student when they come for the first time after the interruption?”. Margaret stated, “Well interruptions are challenges, getting them back”. She also referred to the recent merger: “students are returning to a new regime” and joining a new cohort which “can be a bit disconcerting for them in the first place”. Pauline said: “it is hard to come back when you are in a different group” and referred to the academic challenges facing students: “they have just taken a year’s break and then having to come back and think about modules that they did over a year ago and familiarise themselves again with the resources”. She added there is academic support to help returning students and staff “actually go above and beyond ... with a student”. Mary states students are often anxious about their fees “they walk into the office all confused, ... and we have to explain it to them, yes you have paid”. Fergal spoke of the challenges facing students who do not receive statutory funding for extra fees and living costs. The Wellbeing Team manage the Return to Study Meeting<sup>3</sup> which ensures students with mental health concerns are well enough to return and have the support they need. However, students are often anxious about the meeting, seeing it “as this hurdle to go over in order to return to study”. Clare stated returning to study can be “A huge readjustment process” for students when joining new groups and repeating failed assignments and exams. Some students “are really frightened because they don’t want that whole thing to happen again”. Laura stated there was no formal procedure to follow the Return to Study Meeting: “it’s not something we are involved in, it’s something we more encourage the student to contact the department”.

#### *Students*

The relocation of the Registry and Student Support Centre following the merger impacted on students returning to study, not knowing where to go or who to contact for advice and information. Several concerns regarding enrolment can be attributed to the merger, with changes in the location of some departments and offices and changes in IT systems. All

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<sup>3</sup> Now known as The Welfare Review. See Chapter One

students experienced issues with enrolment, administrative processes, access to learning resources and tuition fees liability, on their return to study. Freda spoke of “Beyond Catch 22” interactions with different departments, being sent to different buildings when attempting to enrol onto her course:

I had to pay for my daughter to be looked after by a childminder ... I...spent what felt like three hours wandering around and then “no you can’t do that here you have to do that there” ...ok well I’ll do that there, waiting around and then being told “oh no, that person has gone home now so you have to go there”.

She stated her fees liability “seemed to become a lot more complicated” after the merger, being charged “sums that didn’t even make any sense”, describing her interactions with the Fees Office as a “Kafkaesque nightmare”. She also reported problems gaining access to online learning resources, stating, “four hours of admin ... me emailing back and forth”. Kate stated the merger and her interruption “just seemed like it was all happening at the same time and so that was confusing”.

Nancy felt “communication became more difficult” after the merger. She related problems coordinating a meeting with her supervisor and her re-enrolment with her teaching responsibilities: “So I had to negotiate half a day to come out of school ... to do this”. Having to join several queues for her enrolment, experiencing problems with electronic resources and tuition fees liability, she was unable to see her supervisor. She stated: “coming back was stressful”. Christine was initially unable to find the new Student Centre “I managed to find it in the end” and was also sent “backwards and forwards” between different departments, joining several queues for up to an hour for enrolment. She also had problems gaining access to online resources, stating, “it’s right hand not knowing what left hand is doing basically” and felt unsupported by HEP administrative staff, “You don’t really feel anyone wants you to come back, they really can’t be bothered. You’re now a problem because you haven’t completed and therefore it would probably be easier if you didn’t come back at all”. She was supported by her supervisor of whom she stated: “I think that if I didn’t have a good supervisor ... I would have walked”.

With regard to joining different cohorts, Freda was able to fit in with her new group, stating

“on a personal note I never had problems finding friends”. However, Kate was apprehensive about joining a new group and felt out of step:

I think it was more complicated getting back on the course in terms of being completely out of sync with other students ... it felt like I enrolled at a different time and people weren't sure which bits of paperwork I needed ... so that felt muddled, going back into a different group ... was strange, that was isolating.

Christine stated, when re-joining her cohort, she had changed from being “very proactive and always in front of where people were” to feeling “towards the back of the group now, which I had expected but I hadn't expected the emotional hit of that”.

Ralph and Patrick had not yet returned and were apprehensive about their teaching placements and funding entitlements. Ralph felt determined and motivated to complete his course, but he was worried about his accommodation arrangements which would depend upon the location of his teaching placement. Patrick felt uncertain about returning to complete his study programme and was unsure about the support that would be available to him: “I've been wondering whether it is worth it. You know, since it has been interrupted it has given me more cause to think shall I actually return?”.

### **Concerns related to all stages of the interruption process**

#### *Lack of coordination, communication and consistency*

Both staff and students reported a number of constraints when managing an interruption of study including concerns regarding the coordination of support between staff and departments, communication difficulties between departments and some lack of consistency in support levels for students across departments. Only one student out of the six students in this study, Freda, received substantial support at each stage of the interruption. With regard to communication difficulties, the academic staff spoke of the problems they experienced when trying to communicate with other departments. Ursula said: “I don't know anyone and that's the thing” and the use of generic emails made it difficult to identify named contacts. She also spoke of delayed email responses when



trying to get help for students. Margaret expressed her frustration at “not having clear named people who you can go to” and Rachel reported a lack of communication with departments and not being informed of students’ concerns. She felt this affected her relationship with students stating: “it really helps to have more communication”. Pauline, as programme administrator, also spoke of communication issues with other HEP departments, and not having named contacts when seeking support for students. As with the staff, the students also experienced difficulties regarding communication with different departments. All the students spoke of many emails going back and forth when seeking information and support from HEP departments. Kate spoke of not knowing who to contact, stating: “I wouldn’t say oh this definitely deals with this. I kind of end up muddling through it”.

The staff also reported a lack of consistency across departments. Ursula stated, “Different departments do different things and there’s not a coherent method for the student”, while Margaret said, “there is an issue of consistency across programmes”. Mary, the finance administrator was concerned about the inconsistent use of terminology across HEP departments: “what we need is the proper terminology and everyone understands the terminology ...we are often misinformed”. This can impact on student fees liability. Mary stated the departments are “very compartmentalised and one department could say something that has huge implications for fees” as demonstrated by Freda’s experience regarding her tuition fees on her return to study. This raises challenges because “the trouble is the departments... all deal with their little bits”. The Wellbeing Team spoke of variations in levels of student support “some departments are probably more helpful than others and the same goes for personal tutors”.

Although some of the above concerns regarding the staff not knowing who to contact when seeking support for students may be the result of the recent merger, they nevertheless highlight the importance of a “whole-institution approach” to supporting students (Thomas et al. 2017, p. 133). The experiences reported by the students when returning to their studies echo Brown’s (2011) reference to the problems of students being sent to different staff members and demonstrate how a lack of coordination in support services can increase stress levels for students who are already stressed. The importance of a coordinated system of support also relates to the range of personal concerns, that students may experience when interrupting their study programme. The range of concerns

often experienced prior to an interruption requires students to engage with a number of different departments which in itself can be challenging especially when in need of urgent attention. The staff issues concerning communication difficulties and the students' lack of awareness of support services, indicate there are areas for improvement which could mitigate some of the challenges arising from an interruption of study.

#### *Lack of awareness of support services*

Research studies refer to a lack of information and support as reasons for students leaving their study programmes (Merrill, 2015; NUS, 2012; Quinn, 2013). The findings show that not all students are aware of the support available to them including information concerning funding, disability support, careers guidance and accommodation. Ralph and Patrick were unaware of the careers and funding advice that would have been helpful during their interruption period. Studies also cite a lack of support in the teaching placements (Hobson, Giannakaki, et al., 2009). Kate, Ralph, and Patrick, the PGCE students in this study, also spoke of lack of support in their teaching placements. Although one PGCE student, Ralph, expressed a determination to return to his study programme, a lack of accommodation and financial guidance may seriously impact upon his ability to complete his PGCE. The indecisiveness expressed by another PGCE student, Patrick, regarding his intentions to return to study could be attributed to a lack of information and support regarding how to find teaching work during the summer vacation, and whether he would receive mentoring support on his return to study. He stated, "I think sometimes they assume you know stuff when you go to University". As one academic staff member stated, students are often "left to their own devices".

#### *The complexity of HEP structures; regulations and procedures*

The findings show how both staff students can struggle with the complexities of HEP processes. Ursula and Margaret spoke of students' difficulties with the regulations and Ursula stated students prefer to speak with their personal tutor about how to apply the regulations. Margaret reported challenges when applying the regulations to individual circumstances: "frequently, you're reiterating what someone has told you and the student says, 'what's that about' and they give you another scenario that... you haven't thought about it". Rachel was uncertain about the rules concerning a research student, stating, "I don't even know whether she is allowed to come back". Pauline, the programme

administrator spoke of uncertainties regarding procedures following the merger, “things are really unclear about what a student needs to do in order to interrupt and I think that’s because of the merger...procedures seem to change by the minute”. Fergal, the funding advisor, was unsure how each department conducts the interruption process, and is concerned there may be funding implications for students with health issues: “I’ve got a feeling that some of the faculty administrators who are doing the COCs (change of circumstances, relating to students who are interrupting their studies) are ... not aware that a student can get 60 days funding”.

Regarding the students, there was some confusion regarding the use of terminology. Freda for example, referred to the interruption as a deferment. The students also were initially unaware of the option to interrupt, and both Kate and Nancy learnt of the option through colleagues. Kate said the option to interrupt “wasn’t relevant to me until it happened”. Moreover, she subsequently realised she could have taken a longer interruption of study and had to take further mini breaks after returning to study. Patrick, Christine, and Nancy experienced difficulties when directed to seek information concerning the interruption process on the HEP website.

As discussed in the literature review, the research on student retention refers to the complexity of HEP structures (Regan, Dollard, & Banks, 2014; Roberts, 2018) citing one student’s description of how stressful it can be when seeking support and the challenges of processing large amounts of information (Dent et al., 2017). The academic staff spoke of problems when seeking help for students who are unable to access the support themselves. As stated above, students often need to access support from a number of different services. The staff’s references to the support and guidance students need regarding the complexity of regulations and procedures related to the interruption process, exemplify the importance of staff support for students. As one member of staff, Pauline, stated, students are often ‘baffled’ by the terminology used in the regulations. One student, Freda, said how much it meant to receive personal guidance from her course administrator. Some of the students, Freda, Kate and Ralph, received assistance when completing the forms for the interruption process but those students who completed the process independently felt challenged, reporting difficulties finding the correct information and form, and how to complete the form, when directed to online resources. Studies acknowledge the importance of professional and support staff in helping students to

navigate HEP structures (Graham & Regan 2016; Regan et al., 2014; Roberts, 2018). As the findings show, the provision of support is important when helping students find the appropriate support services and understand the regulations and procedures related to an interruption of study.

### *External organisations*

A number of concerns were expressed with regard to external organisations. The support staff expressed their concerns regarding external organisations that provide support for some students during the interruption period. Fergal was concerned that many students are unaware of his role to liaise with SFE on behalf of students “to advocate on their behalf, to try to prove additional hardship to get funding”. In addition, some students think, erroneously, they are eligible for welfare benefits during an interruption. Fergal stated they “think they can apply saying they are not a student anymore ... we would actually tell them that ‘no you wouldn’t be entitled to those benefits’, but not every student comes to see us”. The Wellbeing Team expressed concerns about external resources for students who are interrupting for mental health issues, stating “the support for a UK student ... is so fragmented”.

All the students reported challenges when engaging with external organisations. Freda received conflicting information concerning the effects of previous study on her funding entitlement, comparing her interactions with Student Finance England to “juggling with sand”. Kate attributed her funding issues to a lack of coordination between the HEP and Student Finance England. Employment issues were also cited. Christine’s voluntary redundancy and Nancy’s promotion impacted on their studies. Freda had just commenced employment as a teaching assistant and felt unable to request a reduction in working hours when experiencing her issues: “you start a new job you don’t want to go and hear all my problems really”.

There is very little research concerning the challenges staff and students may face when seeking support from external organisations. Roberts’ (2018) concern regarding the importance of student funding for students is also expressed in this study by the funding advisor and finance administrator. However, the literature does not address the concerns that arose in this study with regard to the challenges students face when interrupting their studies because of lack of awareness of their funding entitlements, issues relating to a lack

of coordination between HEP and external funding resources or communication difficulties and delays with external funding providers. The students also experienced some challenges with regard to school placements and employment providers. With regard to external resources for mental health issues, the academic staff and Wellbeing Team's concerns for mental health support for students during their interruption of study relates to concerns regarding the need for an improved coordination between HEP and external support services (Royal College of Psychiatrists, 2021).

### *The staff and student relationship*

Although the staff student relationship is viewed as an important enablement when students are struggling (Gabi & Sharpe, 2019; Thomas, 2012) there are also constraints to be considered. The findings in this study raise concerns for both staff and students regarding student disclosure of personal concerns when struggling on a study programme. Studies refer to the reluctance of students to disclose their concerns because they do not want to appear needy or overdemanding and according to some studies (Cotton et al., 2017; Jazvac-Martek et al., 2011; Thomas, 2012) the students who are most in need are the least likely to seek support. In this study members of staff reported similar challenges regarding students who are unable or reluctant to disclose their personal issues. What is not considered in the research is how students may struggle to process their thoughts and discuss their concerns when experiencing a crisis. As will be discussed in Part Four, the students in this study expressed feelings of vulnerability when experiencing their crises, speaking of emotional and mental health concerns, their fear of failure, confusion, and difficulties in processing and communicating their concerns.

In this study the staff spoke of their awareness of the challenges for some students when needing to disclose their problems. Ursula stated, "it takes a lot of courage for someone to disclose what their issues are" and some students feel unable to speak with families or friends. She said students need "someone they feel comfortable" with adding "as with other organisations... there are approachable and non-approachable people". Rachel spoke of a student who was "was feeling so much worse than I had realised because she was hiding it". Margaret said the timing of disclosure can create problems: "The first challenge of course is getting the student to tell you before the mad rush to get the interruption set up happens". Pauline reported the challenges of reaching students who do not communicate their concerns and that some students are also reluctant to seek help

from other departments. The Wellbeing Team said “communication ... becomes too overwhelming” for students suffering from depression. There are also issues of confidentiality. Sharing student concerns with other departments requires the student’s consent.

The students’ concerns regarding disclosure were varied. As stated above, and discussed further in Part Four, the students experienced some challenges relating to their emotional and mental health when needing to disclose their concerns. Moreover, when Kate did disclose her concerns, she was initially advised by her tutor that her problems regarding her mother’s illness were “just life”. Patrick and Ralph felt their concerns regarding their school placements were not addressed and Freda, as a new member of staff, felt unable to disclose her concerns in her work placement. Furthermore, students often delay disclosing their concerns because they are reluctant to interrupt, as exemplified by Freda, Kate and Nancy, whose concerns are related to the impact that extending their studies may have upon their career aspirations

Another challenge to the staff and student relationship is the increase in student numbers and a decrease in resources (Grey & Osborne, 2020; Tett et al., 2017; Webb et al., 2017). The academic staff in this study reported the difficulties they face when trying to keep track of the students who have interrupted their studies and the students’ experienced difficulties when seeking support. Only two students, Freda and Christine, referred to the important relationship they had with a course administrator and a supervisor.

In addition, not considered in the literature, is the degree of uncertainty when students initially experience personal issues, which may also explain some reluctance to disclose. Moreover, the fear of failure expressed by some of the students in this study if they did not continue, could be attributed to lack of information concerning the option to interrupt their studies and the support available to them. Accordingly, students often reach crisis point before seeking assistance which provides a further challenge for staff when supporting students. One academic staff member, Margaret, stated arrangements for the interruption of study are often made in haste and the students in this study all reported how hastily the interruption of study was arranged for them. Although the urgent nature of some interruptions may be unavoidable, arguably, if students were more aware of their options

and staff could be more accessible, students may feel able to discuss their issues and receive support before reaching crisis point.

In this section, Part Two, I have discussed the concerns that arose from the findings of this study that relate to the enablements and constraints experienced by the staff and students when managing the interruption process. In the following section, Part Three, I will consider how staff and students exercised their agency when navigating the enablements and constraints they encountered to their agency during interruption process.

### **Part Three: How staff and students exercise their agency**

Archer's theory concerning how individuals exercise their agency when navigating the structural enablements and constraints relevant to their 'constellations of concerns' provided a framework to consider how staff and students exercise their agency when managing an interruption of study. In this section I will discuss the findings with regard to how staff and students exercised their agency and the challenges they faced when doing so. I will then consider the impact of structural constraints upon individual agency as experienced by the students in this study in relation to the literature concerning student agency and student support services.

#### ***Academic Staff***

The findings reported below show how the staff used their agency to support students in a number of ways. All academic staff in this study are personal tutors who take their role seriously and carefully consider the wellbeing of their students. They promote the personal tutor system, seek to build relationships with students, express the importance of being available and approachable, offer face-to-face meetings, find and provide support for students, help students understand the regulations and procedures related to an interruption of study and, where possible, keep in touch with students during the interruption period.

Ursula used her agency to promote the personal tutor system: "so personal tutors meet students once a term plus any other time students need". She consults the regulations to ensure accuracy when advising students and emails students who do not communicate to check how they are. She searches online to find contact details for students who are unable to access support, sending an email stating: "I am programme leader ... can you please help my student". Ursula's concern for students with mental health issues who lose access to HEP resources when interrupting means that she is "always trying to see whether supporting them to stay within the university might be a better option rather than interrupting". Ursula also reported challenges to her agency when contacting students during the interruption period since, "you can't offer much help apart from your personal interest, can you?". She was also concerned about the change of the programme administrator's location, following the merger, "So, we will just have to find ways ... and not let that move affect the degree, although I doubt, it but we will try".



Margaret uses her agency to make “clear to the student what interruption means”, emphasising the importance of regulations and procedures and how she would advocate for students if necessary: “I think it’s only fair that they know there are standard procedures, ... for equity purposes, ... but that in some cases I would argue for a student if I felt that they had a very good case”. Although unsure who to contact to support a student she would “find someone because our students have a right to that”. She was also concerned that students understood they will no longer have access to the HEP resources and maintains contact with students during the interruption period. She “would not refuse ... discussion with a student, so, I ask them to keep in touch with us, to tell us how it’s going”. To address the problem of students ignoring emails, she has adopted “a more personal approach” when sending information to students. She keeps her own records to keep track of students rather than relying on central services and contacts students prior to their return to study. Notwithstanding, Margaret expressed some constraints on her agency when stating there is no adequate training for supporting students with mental health concerns,

Rachel uses her agency to help students decide whether or not to interrupt their study programme. She would also maintain contact with students during the interruption period. She expressed the importance of her relationship with students, using her agency to be supportive whilst also providing stipulations. For example, referring to a student returning after a prolonged interruption, “I think if the supervisor is supportive ...what I’ve gone back to her with is ‘we would love you to come but you would effectively have to come to start a new project’ ”. She expressed several constraints to her agency concerning communication with other departments and the difficulty of monitoring research students with complex issues and multiple interruptions without administrative support.

### ***Support Staff***

The support staff used their agency in several ways when seeking to improve the support available to students. They reported their endeavours to improve communication and coordination between different departments, raise awareness of, and access to, support services, and improve the provision of information and coordination of resources for students. Pauline expressed the use of her agency when speaking of her role, “My primary responsibility is to make sure the student is ok” working closely with the academic staff to

ensure “none of the students fall through the cracks”, and checking the attendance register to see when students might be struggling: “I would say the trigger points are to do a lot with attendance and that’s when I would come in”. She contacts students who may have problems, stating the importance of ensuring they received support when needed. She uses her agency to build relationships with the students:

I work really hard with the students when it comes to developing that relationship because I want to know what is going on and I like them to come to see me. Because if there is anything I can do to help, I would be more than happy to do that.

She expressed a responsibility for students who are reluctant to interrupt their studies: “we have a duty of care towards you...I don’t feel comfortable allowing you to continue like that because it will put a huge pressure on you to complete” . She explains the benefits of the interruption: “you do not have to worry about your studies now ... because it’s your chance to take a break from your studies”, explaining the regulations and assisting with the completion of the Interruption form. She maintains contact with students during the interruption period “I want them to return the following year” and contacts students before they are due to return: “I usually let them know, ‘you guys may need to re-enrol because your start date is different to other people. ... this is what you need to do, this is who you need to contact’ ”. Pauline’s location meant she was accessible to the students on her course: “I am the one in the office all the time and they ... are happy to come and talk to me”. Regarding the change of office location, she will “keep them updated as to where I am and how they can get in contact with me”.

Mary uses her agency to address the confusion about tuition fees liability. She requests accurate reports from departments to ensure students are charged the correct fees: “we want a list of students, and we want to know which ones to charge an additional fee to and which ones not”. However, Mary was unable to advise students about their fees liability before an interruption because “it’s not exactly certain when they come back”. Fergal uses his agency to raise awareness of his role and the funding available to students: “So, it’s making that more visible and promoting the fact that they need to come and see us to see if they are going to be in financial hardship”. He was

planning to improve information on the website: “the funding implications haven’t been set out. So, we are looking to add that on”. He was also investigating ways of speeding up the change of circumstances process for students: “When we meet up with the faculty administrators, we can find out exactly the ways they’re doing it and get an idea, maybe say this is the best way to do it”. However, he feels unable to prevent delays from external funding providers: “We can’t obviously tell them that they need to speed it up”. The Wellbeing Team signpost students to other services such as counselling or funding advice and help students find external support for their mental health concerns during the interruption period. They would also, with student consent, contact the academic department when concerned about a student. They were proactive in reassuring students about the Return to Study Meeting, Clare states

Sometimes I think students interpret that as more of an obstacle ... like it’s a panel and we are trying to say you’re not well enough ... and you know we do everything we can to make it a supportive thing.

The Wellbeing Team also aim to ensure students are supported when returning to study. Laura stated: “we email them after the return to study appointment, and we put any support they should link up with”.

### ***Challenges to the agency of staff when supporting students.***

As stated in Part Two, research studies refer to increased numbers of students and decreased resources as factors that challenge the ability of staff to support students and argue that staff need support themselves when supporting students (Giannakis & Bullivant, 2016). However, there are no references in the literature to the challenges facing staff when managing an interruption of study. In this study staff members reported a number of challenges to their agency. They had difficulties keeping track of the students during an interruption of study and Rachel, as a research supervisor, reported the challenges of managing a range of students belonging to different academic departments, and at different stages in their research, without an administrator. As reported in Part Two, staff also experienced the difficulties of seeking support for students and the reluctance or inability for some students to disclose their concerns. The staff also expressed concerns

regarding the mental health of students particularly during the interruption period when there is no university support available. As Ursula stated, it is difficult to check in on students during the interruption period because she would not be able to offer any assistance if a student was struggling. Margaret's concern about the lack of training to support students with mental health concerns echoes Morrish (2020) who advocates increased training for HEP staff. Mental health concerns are of particular importance for staff when supporting those who are experiencing crises and may need to interrupt their study programme.

### ***How students exercise their agency***

The students reported on their sense of agency, regarding what they generally felt they were able to do, and how they exercised their agency at different stages of the interruption period. The students reported on how their personal concerns, and lack of information regarding their options, impacted upon their sense of agency and how their sense of agency was restored following the confirmation of the interruption. Freda and Kate reported how they were then able to exercise their agency and address their concerns during the interruption period. They continued to exercise their agency despite further impediments of structural constraints on their return to study. Despite his anxiety, Ralph expressed a strong sense of agency in his determination to continue his studies, but he faced a range of structural constraints that challenged and restricted his exercise of agency during his interruption. Despite the lack of information and support that impacted upon his sense of agency he nevertheless expressed a determination to return and complete his study programme. Conversely both Christine and Nancy's sense of agency and exercise of agency were impacted by the structural constraints they experienced throughout the interruption process. Christine's sense of agency was further impacted by health concerns and the effects of stress upon her dyslexia. Patrick's sense of agency was impacted by feelings of anxiety and uncertainty. His sense of agency and exercise of agency were also arguably constrained by a lack of information and support.

In the findings the students spoke of how they exercised their agency when facing several challenges during the interruption process. Freda reported a strong sense of agency at the beginning of her course stating: "I am going to start my degree and then I will start a new job and it's all going to be fine". However, her sense of agency was impacted when she became "very fragile... just exhausted", and "under massive pressure". Notwithstanding, it

took her some time to accept she needed to interrupt her studies. Her initial response was “that’s a really bad idea and I don’t want to do that”. She was reluctant to delay her career plans: “starting to work in education and retraining to be a teacher’s a big thing ... starting a degree and then stopping was such a big deal” . Unable to change her working arrangements and realising she had “just too much going on” the programme administrator managed the interruption for her. Her sense of agency restored, she then felt able to exercise her agency to negotiate more flexible working arrangements for the following year, “you know I had the plan. I knew what I needed to do ...So, coming back...having the systems in place where I knew it was going to be different was really, really important”.

Kate described the negative effects of personal concerns on her sense of agency: “my positive outlook was going”. Like Freda, she was concerned about her career prospects, “you are just so aware of being a mature student and time’s ticking on. And you don’t want to drag it out for any longer and ...you want to think about employment”. However, she was struggling and, losing her sense of agency, was fearful of failing her course. Her tutor “had taken things in hand”, advising an interruption of study and completing the interruption form for her. Like Freda, her sense of agency was restored when her interruption was confirmed. She stated: “I got a support plan before the interruption just you know because of the stuff that was going on”. Accordingly, she exercised her agency to access support: “when I wanted support ... I did ask for it or I did find it” and was proactive in checking the processes for her programme when she returned to study “I had to be proactive about putting the bits of the course back together”. and found ways to navigate the complex departmental communication structures.

Ralph’s sense of agency was negatively impacted when he was withdrawn from his school placement. Nevertheless, he expressed a sense of agency when speaking of his determination to complete his PGCE course. Despite the challenges he faced and his anxiety, he exercised his agency when suggesting an interruption at a meeting with his mentor and tutor:

I felt anxiety too much. I never wanted to give up. I think it was this and “what I want to do?” And I said “interrupt?”. And they said “Yes”. They agreed. “Yes”, and that’s the best decision to take.

Despite a lack of guidance and support, Ralph continued to exercise his agency and managed to find employment during his interruption of study: "What cheered me up was when I got a place in a school as a supply teacher". He was also looking for a school placement for his return to study, stating: "It will be very difficult to find and that's why I tried to contact schools". However, the uncertainty concerning his school placement and his funding entitlements suggest there may be constraints on his sense of agency when returning to study.

Conversely, Patrick had to interrupt because there was no school placement for him, and his expressions of uncertainty denoted a lack in his sense of agency which impeded his exercise of agency in seeking support. Regarding the retraction of a cause for concern that arose from a misunderstanding in his school placement, he stated: "In some ways I was delighted, in other ways not. So, it's quite complex". Some development of his sense of agency was evident when he stated "Well, I am learning something ... it is sometimes to trust your instinct". However, his uncertainty about finding employment during his interruption and apprehension about returning to study suggested further constraints on his sense of agency. Moreover, a lack of information and support can be viewed as structural constraints upon his potential to exercise his agency.

Christine voiced her sense of agency prior to the interruption of her studies when speaking of the next stage of her doctorate. However, "things started going very badly wrong" and health problems and difficulties at her workplace impacted negatively upon her sense of agency. She felt the need to take voluntary redundancy which meant she would be unable to collect data for her research project. This raised concerns for her supervisor, who expressed a duty of care, advising her to interrupt her studies until she felt better and found new employment. She reported a sequence of challenges to her sense of agency throughout her interruption period including mental health concerns. There were further challenges to her agency when returning to her study programme including unexpected changes in the requirements of her course which left her feeling "very uncertain". Despite feelings of anxiety and uncertainty, she exercised her agency when arranging to see her supervisor to establish her current progress. She said: "I need to make that meeting to let him know where I am and what's happening".

Nancy reported several challenges to her sense of agency before her interruption of

studies. However, her sense of agency was evident when voicing a positive view of her decision to interrupt, “I thought a bit, and then stop. You’re working too hard, ... so that is when I stopped ... and I am glad I did”. She also expressed her sense of agency before returning to study: “I wanted to come back while I was still in school time to get back into that and then I move forward and again, my motivation to study the method of wider education in which I work”. However, the negative effects of stress on her sense of agency and the impact of structural constraints on her exercise of agency when returning to study left her with “quite a bitter feeling”.

### ***The impact of structural constraints on the exercise of agency***

Research studies are divided concerning the benefits of supporting students and one study suggests that student support can restrict the development of student agency (Bartram, 2009). However, the students in this study reported the challenges they faced when experiencing personal crises with very little or no support. I would argue the students’ accounts regarding their experience of the interruption process demonstrates, as maintained by McAlpine et al. (2012) how a lack of support can constrain the exercise and development of student agency. This study shows how a lack of support and information constrained some students’ sense of agency and ability to make informed choices regarding their personal concerns and thereby negatively impacted upon their ability to effectively manage the interruption process. Ralph’s apprehension regarding his return to study can be related to the impact of a lack of funding information on his sense of agency. Patrick’s exercise of agency is constrained by a lack of careers support which would help him to find employment during the interruption period. Similarly, Christine and Nancy’s sense of agency is impacted by the lack of support they received on their return to study. The way in which staff exercised their agency to support students can be viewed as examples of good practice. Conversely the constraints to agency experienced by both staff and students when managing the interruption process help to identify areas that would benefit from improvements.

In this section I have considered how staff and students exercised their agency when managing the interruption process. In the following section, Part Four, I will discuss how staff and students used their reflexivity when exercising their agency in their management of the interruption process.

## **Part Four: How staff and students used their reflexivity**

In this section I will consider the findings concerning how staff and students exercised their agency in relation to Archer's theory. I will also consider the importance of students' ability to externalise their internal conversations. I will then discuss reflexivity in relation to the effects of the emotions and mental health concerns. This will be followed by a consideration of the different modes of reflexivity in relation to the accounts of staff and students regarding their reflexive deliberations and then I will relate the different modes of student reflexivity to the different stages of the interruption process to identify areas that may benefit from improvement.

Archer's theory regarding how individuals exercise their reflexivity provides a useful approach when considering the effects of structural enablements and constraints upon staff and students' reflexive processes when managing the interruption process. As discussed in Chapter Three, Archer maintains that individual agency is "driven" through the unseen processes of the internal conversation or reflexive deliberations concerning the management of structural constraints and enablements that individuals face when they are engaged in a project. According to Archer the reflexive processes are subject to individual thoughts and beliefs, and emotions and are instrumental in the individual exercise of agency. The processes of reflexivity, as they relate to the staff and students' experiences of the interruption process in this study can be viewed, in accordance with Archer's theory, as the medium through which staff and student agency is exercised. The impact of structural constraints and enablements, and the effects of individual thoughts, beliefs, and emotions upon the reflexive processes, can be viewed as factors to be considered with regard to the management and experience of the interruption process.

### ***Reflexivity and student support***

Archer describes the process of reflexivity as an "internal conversation" or "reflexive deliberation" whereby individuals consider their aims and make decisions according to the "constraints and enablements" they encounter. She acknowledges that the internal conversations of individuals can only be accessed indirectly (Archer, 2003) and individuals cannot communicate the minutiae of their internal reflections but, she argues, we are able "to communicate the gist of it" (Archer, 2007, p. 81). Accordingly, the concerns expressed



by the participants can be viewed as indications of “the inner world’ of their internal conversations, which, as underlying causal mechanisms, with ‘real causal powers’” (Archer, 2003, p.69), facilitate the participants’ exercise of agency when managing the constraints and enablements of the interruption process (see Chapter 2, Theoretical Framework). Indications, or the “gist” of their reflexive processes can be discerned, when the staff relate, as outlined below, how they provide support for students and when the students relate their experiences of the interruption process.

### ***Academic Staff***

The concerns of the staff indicated a relationship between their reflexive processes and their commitment to supporting students. Ursula’s reflexive powers were implied when expressing her commitment to the Personal Tutor System, and her wish to ensure that vulnerable students receive the support they need. Her concern for students who have difficulties finding support was evident when reporting her attempts to contact the appropriate department or take the student to the department herself. She was aware that students do not read the Handbook, and preferred more “face to face” support, and to “take them to the person who can help them” because “when you leave it you lose the momentum” and “you have to again [sic] go through it”.

Her reflexivity was also evident from her concern that students lose access to HEP support during an interruption, leading her to question the benefits of an interruption for students with mental health issues. She considered students who are vulnerable and those who do not return following an interruption. She therefore reflects very carefully whether an interruption is appropriate, advises students accordingly, and endeavours to maintain contact with students who do interrupt. Her reflections that conditions need to be improved for students returning to study, were expressed when she suggested an induction and a period of transition to help students settle back into their studies “assessing how well they are, what support they might need coming back and what changes occurred during the interruption of studies that might have affected that person”. However, her statement that, although it should not be her responsibility, the task of managing the return of students to study will probably be assigned to her, implies her reflections about the increasing demands on her role and of some constraints upon her agency.

Evidence of Margaret's reflexive deliberations about supporting students were discerned when she spoke of the importance for students to understand the regulations, and ensure they make informed and appropriate decisions. She stated students need to understand the meaning of an interruption and that they would lose access to HEP resources. She was also concerned that processes were followed correctly to maintain "equity" for students. Her concerns that students are supported throughout the interruption period were evident when relating her personal approach to emailing students during the interruption period to encourage a response from them. Her reflections regarding her concerns for supporting students were also implicit when stating that students should know they have a right to be supported and she would advocate for a student where appropriate. However, she denoted some reflections regarding constraints when seeking support for students following the recent merger, "I have then gone to someone and said who do I talk to about this but that was pre-merger, and I am unsure about what I would do now". Margaret's concerns for students who withdraw denoted an acknowledgement of some constraints upon her role "but I have a high per cent of withdrawals and that could be to do with not seeing a way forward for themselves. So instead of interrupting they choose to withdraw".

Rachel's reflexive deliberations regarding her support for students could be discerned when she expressed the importance of having a good relationship with her students, and her concerns for students with mental health issues and those with complex difficulties. Rachel's consideration whether students should interrupt indicated her reflexive deliberations concerning the advantages and disadvantages an interruption may have for students. She said it may not be advisable for students suffering from depression, for example, to interrupt because their research provides them with a focus. Conversely, she reflected an interruption can give students time to address their personal concerns. As with Ursula and Margaret she was concerned for students losing access to HEP support and is happy to maintain contact with students during an interruption of study, stating it is difficult for research students to break from their study, "because you are interrupted you are not expected to engage so much but there is some expectation that you cannot really have a complete blank". Reflections concerning the constraints to her agency that she faces when supporting students were implied when she related issues about communication with departments. For example, regarding one student who had interrupted several times, "I

mean I'm the person in charge ...but I don't even know whether she is allowed to come back".

### ***Support Staff***

Pauline's reflexive deliberations could be discerned when expressing her sense of responsibility and a "duty of care" for students, in addition to the concerns she expresses relating to the reputation of the department when students do not return to study: "[it] doesn't look good on the programme when you don't have someone returning back". She is aware there are non-traditional students with families and caring responsibilities, which combined with the demands of a work-based learning course, can result in interruptions of study. Her reflections on how she manages the constraints when communicating with other departments are evident when she states she has to choose her "battles", or she will not get her work done. Indications of internal conversations concerning her limited agency are also evident when she reports the challenges presented by students who do not communicate: "it's difficult when you are working with students if they are not forthcoming... you can't force them to give information". She was also concerned about those students who do not follow up referrals,

I don't know the reason, whether they just don't feel comfortable, whether it's just a new person they have to deal with they don't want that anxiety, added pressure to do it and that's when we often get like a stalemate.

She also spoke of feeling helpless when trying to access support, "students would often email me and say, "I have emailed the generic email, and no one is picking anything up ...is there someone in particular, I can email?" and I feel so useless ... because I can't help them".

Mary's 'inner conversation' can be discerned from her concerns about students' anxiety regarding their fees liability. Mary reflects on the effects of the merger and the changes in processes and procedures, expressing her concerns that misunderstandings regarding the regulations and terminology can result in incorrect fees assessments and cause stress for students. Her reflections indicate her endeavours to address these concerns. Fergal's concerns for students' funding entitlements during an interruption of study denoted his

reflexive deliberations regarding his role in supporting students when they interrupt their studies. He is aware that not all students come to see him and relates his aim to raise awareness of his role by meeting with members of staff in the faculties and improving information on the website. Fergal's concern that he was unable to speed up the funding processes of external agencies indicated an internal conversation concerning a structural constraint on his agency when supporting students.

The reflexive deliberations of the Wellbeing Team were evident in their concerns for students who feel overwhelmed and unable to articulate their issues. They expressed an awareness that many students are anxious when returning to study because they will need to resit exams and are apprehensive of further failure. They also related their concerns for students who are anxious about the Return to Study Meeting, and they assure students the meeting is meant to be supportive. The challenges they expressed regarding the provision of external resources for students with mental health concerns, for students who feel unable to return to their parental homes, and for securing support for students on return to study indicated reflections of the constraints on their agency when supporting students with mental health concerns.

Research studies consider staff reflexivity in the context of teaching and learning but not in the context of student support and retention. There are however, as discussed above, studies that look at the challenges that staff may face when they are supporting students. The findings show how staff reflect upon the concerns of students and how their reflexivity drives their exercise of agency when supporting students. The staff members' accounts in this study also show how they reflect upon their concerns regarding lack of coordination, communication issues, and lack of resources and how these impact upon their agency when seeking to support students. The findings indicate how these challenges can impact upon staff when using their reflexive powers to consider the options available when supporting students. They expressed their concerns regarding the difficulty of finding the appropriate staff to support students and their awareness that students prefer face to face support rather than going to online resources and reading the student handbook. As they stated, students often find it difficult to understand the regulations and procedures and the actual meaning of an interruption. They expressed their concerns for vulnerable students and how they help students to decide the best options for them when they are struggling. For example, they consider that an interruption of study may not always be the best option

for some students, such as those who are experiencing mental health problems with no access to support during the interruption period.

### ***Students***

The students' accounts suggest ways in which their reflexive deliberations were influenced by their thoughts, beliefs, and emotions and by the enablements and constraints they encountered during the interruption process and how this impacted on their agency at the different stages of the interruption process.

#### *Freda: Foundation Degree*

An optimism and determination in Freda's internal conversation was implicit when she described the commencement of her study programme "as you do, thought I ... it's all going to be fine". However, her account of the period prior to her interruption indicated changes in her internal conversation. Experiencing a number of issues including grief and caring responsibilities, she was "Just walking through it". A change in her mental deliberations was evident when she reported an "epiphany", realising a need to explore her options because "this picture isn't working". She was then able to reflect on her circumstances and accept the need to interrupt her study programme. Her account of the period during the interruption denoted a restoration of agency, "knowing that grief is a process", she could focus on her personal concerns and make arrangements for the following year. Experiencing an "enormous peace of mind" she "had the plan" for her return to study, reducing her working hours to make enough time to study and care for her daughter. However, on returning to her studies, evidence of constraints upon her reflexive powers were apparent when she reported confusing interactions with her student funding provider and the university finance department. She stated, "I'm not sure really what's going on". She stated the support she received from her department was "very important" suggesting how this facilitated her reflexive powers despite the "Kafkaesque" experiences of her enrolment.

#### *Kate: PGCE Primary*

Kate reported "a very positive outlook" at the beginning of her study programme that denoted a confidence in her reflexive deliberations. However, her mother's illness impacted on what had been "an exciting time". A change in her reflexive processes was evident when she reported feeling very stressed and she "wasn't focused any more". Her

expression of relief when the interruption of studies was agreed denoted a restoration of her reflexive processes. She spoke of the interruption period as a time when she was able to reflect and consider how she might do things differently when she returned to study: “I was kind of gathering myself ... getting back to it, what was I going to do different then, there was a lot of reflection going on about ... the next time around”. Her reflexive processes were also evident when reporting her wish to focus on her studies rather than her personal concerns on her return to study. She was proactive in contacting different departments because she was aware of issues concerning communication between different departments and between the HEP and her funding provider. She felt the need to ensure correct procedures were followed, aware that she was at a different stage to the other students in her group and the potential for errors to be made. Some constraint on her reflexive powers was indicated when reporting she had not been aware that she could have interrupted for two years. She stated, this would have been a better option for her because she needed to take further mini breaks following her return after one year. Although her hope for a “more straightforward” return to study suggests an optimism in her an internal conversation, there may also be some apprehension concerning further challenges to the completion of her final teaching practice.

*Ralph: PGCE Secondary*

Ralph, an EU student with English as his second language. reported high levels of anxiety and burn out. There are indications of the effects of anxiety on his internal conversation during the events leading up to his withdrawal from the second placement: The impact of the challenges he experienced during his school placement upon his reflexive processes are evident when he states “I was so out of myself because of the anxiety... I could not be judging things”. Nevertheless, his wish to complete his course denotes a determination in his reflexive processes. Following the confirmation of his interruption, he reported an intention to address concerns regarding his anxiety and perfectionism and to be more strategic in his lesson planning. However, some apprehension was evident in his reflexive deliberations when reporting his difficulty finding employment in a school to improve his teaching skills and to earn some money before returning to study. He spoke of the challenges of financial insecurity, “I can prepare myself ... the interruption was an important experience, but it’s not steady ...its unstable”. There was also an uncertainty in his reflections, denoting a challenge to his sense of agency, concerning his need to find accommodation for a school placement which was yet to be confirmed. He was also

confused about his funding entitlement which was impacting on his agency because he did not know “where to ask for help” and despite his enquiries, “nobody could tell me clearly what ...would be happening and when”.

*Patrick: PGCE Post Compulsory Part Time*

Patrick's indecisive reflections regarding his experience of the interruption can be viewed as indications of the restrictions of anxiety and lack of support upon his sense of agency. It is evident when he states he found the course very challenging and was “in two minds as to whether I should be...on the one hand happy, on the other hand, not be happy” and he was undecided about continuing on the study programme. There is also some apprehension in his reflexive deliberations concerning challenges during the interruption period and on his return to study. Although he felt the interruption would give him “some breathing space” he anticipated the difficulty of finding employment in schools during the summer months which would mean he would lose some teaching experience and “you need to keep it up”. He feels “everything is up in the air”. He referred to an assignment which required interviews with students, but this would not be possible during the summer months. He was also uncertain as to whether his mentor support would resume on his return to study. Some reflexive deliberations concerning what he needed to do were evident when he reported the importance of an appropriate teaching placement, at a higher level, on his return to study. Furthermore, some resolve in his mental deliberations could be discerned when he related the lesson he had learned from his teaching observation “If you think it's wrong don't do it”, He also reflected that he needed to get things right and that “I flap about a bit too much”.

*Christine: EdD*

Christine reported problems with her reflexive powers when trying to arrange her interruption of study. Her ill health meant that she “really wasn't thinking straight at the time. I was feeling pretty bad”. She reported her relief when the interruption of studies was arranged, and she was able to take a break. However, she expressed some hesitation prior to her return to study “shall I, shan't I go back” before what became a “nightmare process” when she did return. Challenges to her reflexive powers were evident when relating her confusion about arrangements for her to return study. She had received no information during her interruption period regarding changes following the merger and she subsequently discovered her supervisor received no information for EdD students. The

impact of this on her reflexive powers were evident when she described re-joining her cohort, “I’ve come back in and I’ve no idea where I am, I’ve no idea what’s changed, I’ve no idea what I’m meant to be doing”. She stated she still doesn’t “know where I am going”.

*Nancy: EdD*

The process of Nancy’s reflexive deliberations prior to her interruption of study is evident when she stated

It’s like saying, keep going, keep going, keep going and that’s what I had been doing through everything and it’s like “no stop” and it’s like if I was to stop what does that look like, so that’s when I went on to the website and I went through the guidance.

A change Nancy’s reflexivity is evident when she reported that her experiences of the interruption resulted in ‘quite a bitter feeling, and her motivation was now “shrouded in all that negativity”. An indication of how structural and environmental change can impact upon an individual’s reflexivity was evident when Nancy expressed her feeling that the HEP appeared to change following the merger, “it feels like the flavour of the place has changed a lot” and it is a different place to the one she had “signed up to”. Nevertheless, a determination in her reflexive deliberations was evident when she expressed her wish to return to study and complete the course.

The students’ accounts of how they thought through the options available to them revealed some constraints regarding their lack of awareness of available support and thus, I would argue, limited the scope of their reflexive powers. Research studies, considering the role of student resilience and determination when facing personal crises, also view the role of HEP support as an important factor in helping students to make decisions about their study programme (Cotton et al, 2017; Gabi & Sharpe, 2019). This study shows how structural constraints can restrict a student’s reflexive powers and their agency in the process of decision making. All students in this study demonstrated levels of resilience and determination when going through their personal crises but it was evident from their accounts that their reflexive processes were impeded through a lack of information and the challenges of engaging with uncoordinated organisational structures. For example, one student, Kate, who reported the need to take further breaks following her return to study



because she had not been informed that it was possible to interrupt for two years. One EdD student, Christine, whose struggles to access information about changes that had taken place during her interruption period made her feel uncertain about her return to study. A PGCE student, Patrick's indecisiveness about his return to study can be related to his uncertainty about whether his mentoring support would continue. Another PGCE student, Ralph's anxiety concerning his return to study can be attributed to a lack of information about accommodation and the funding available to him.

### ***The externalisation of the internal conversation***

Students' ability to articulate their reflexive processes, or internal conversation, is regarded as an important factor in the development of their individual identity and agency. As stated in Chapter Two, one study (Kahn, Qualter, & Young, 2012) considers the importance of students externalising their internal conversations with a range of different staff in the sphere of higher education in order to allow the development of social and individual identity and full agentic potential. A student in the current study, Freda, expressed the importance of being able to discuss her personal situation with a member of staff and how helpful that was. Members of staff also expressed their concerns that students were able to discuss their personal issues, as stated earlier with regard to issues concerning student disclosure, but acknowledge how challenging this can be for students who are feeling vulnerable and overwhelmed. The ability for students to externalise their internal conversations regarding their personal concerns to appropriate staff members is an important factor when they are unable to focus on their studies and may need to take time out of their study programme. The findings show how students struggle to process their reflexive deliberations when feeling anxious, stressed or confused, and how their reflexivity can be further impeded by structural constraints and lack of information and support.

### ***Reflexivity and the emotions***

Archer refers to the importance of the emotions in the management of an individual's reflexive processes (See Chapter 3, Theoretical Framework). The findings from this study show the emotional aspects of an interruption of study that can be related to Archer's theory. As stated in Chapter Three, Archer acknowledges the influence of emotions on individual reflexivity and agency and states the emotions are "the fuel of our internal conversation. (Archer, 2000, p. 194) referring to them as the "shoving power" (ibid, p196) of individual agency, but they also need to be aligned with the more rational concerns.

Archer states that we generally only become aware of our emotions when we experience significant events, and our reflexive deliberations facilitate a connection between the emotional and rational aspects of individual concerns. An interruption of study normally concerns a significant event where students may struggle to reconcile their emotional needs with the rational demands of a study programme. The participants' accounts can be viewed as indications of the relationship between the emotional and rational aspects of the interruption process and of how students may struggle to manage their emotions through their reflexive processes.

### *Academic and Support Staff*

The academic staff expressed their concerns for students' emotional wellbeing when they reported their personal issues, such as a relationship breakdown or a bereavement that causes students emotional and psychological distress. Ursula expressed her awareness of the emotional issues associated with an interruption of study and this drives her commitment ensure they receive appropriate support. Aware of how difficult it can be for some students to disclose, she states "I feel like I have to help them without pushing them to have to repeat everything again". Ursula's wish to reconcile the rational and emotional aspects of the student experience is evident when she speaks of "A lack of doing things more humanely rather than filling in forms", the importance of being approachable and seeing students face to face, and of students receiving the support and guidance they need.

Margaret emphasised the importance of pastoral support for students when they are struggling to process the emotional aspects of their personal concerns and the rational aspects of the interruption process. She states "it is a traumatic time for them and managing regulations when you're caught up in something like that is hard", adding that is when "the regulations can fall down" when related to the emotional experiences of an interruption of study. Rachel stated she felt "doctoral teaching is an emotional thing" when referring to the challenges of working one to one with students, especially when they are struggling with serious personal issues. She expressed a sense of responsibility towards students, stating she finds it "heartbreaking" when a student does not make progress. At the same time, she is aware that she has to maintain boundaries when for example, she needs to explain to students the requirements, such as assignment deadlines, relating to their research programme.

The support staff expressed similar concerns to the academic staff regarding the emotional aspects of supporting students. Pauline, as programme administrator, indicated her emotional concerns when relating her awareness of students' vulnerabilities, and her sense of a duty of care towards students. She endeavours to ensure she has a good relationship with students and helps them to make appropriate decisions regarding their interruption of studies. Mary, as fees administrator, endeavours to mitigate students' anxieties concerning their fees liability. Fergal's concern for students who find it "really hard" to access funding leads him to seek ways of raising awareness of his role. The Wellbeing Team reported their concerns for students with emotional and mental health issues and endeavour to reassure students who are feeling anxious about their return to study.

### *Students*

Freda and Kate reported their emotional responses to the personal concerns that impacted upon their ability to continue on their study programme and the resulting conflict of their academic concerns and caring responsibilities that challenged their sense of identity as students. Freda expressed feelings of grief following the bereavement of her father, and her concerns for the emotional wellbeing of her daughter. Her experience of an "epiphany" when, completing an assignment, she declined to comfort her daughter, signified the importance of her daughter's emotional wellbeing. Kate experienced a similar conflict between her academic aspirations and emotional needs when her mother became seriously ill. She reported high levels of stress and a fear of failure when she was unable to focus on her studies. Her sense of relief when she interrupted and was able to focus on her mother's health signified the importance of her emotional wellbeing.

Christine and Nancy's accounts indicate how the negative experiences of an interruption impacted upon their emotional responses to their study programme and their emotional wellbeing. Christine reported feeling a very unexpected "emotional hit" on returning to study when she realised, from being at the front of the group before her interruption, she was now behind everyone else. Nancy reported feeling "teary" when relating her experience of the interruption and on reflection, she "became more and more demoralised through the whole process".

As discussed in Chapter Two, Archer (2000) speaks of first and second order emotions where the emotions are reconciled through the process of reflexive deliberation with the rational aspects of individual experience. As outlined above, the findings in this study show evidence of students experiencing emotional stress when they were struggling prior to the interruption of study. The students had a range of emotional concerns including family bereavement, caring responsibilities, in addition to concerns for completing their studies and their future career prospects. The students' accounts of their experiences prior to their interruption of study may signify the process of first-order to second-order emotions and how students used their reflexivity to process their emotions in accordance with the need to prioritise their concerns. For Freda and Kate, there is a conflict between their ultimate concern to complete their studies and their need to address their personal concerns regarding their caring and family responsibilities. Prior to the interruption they are stressed and engaged in an emotionally charged conflict concerning their personal issues and academic aspirations. The students reach a second-order of emotions denoted by their sense of relief and ability to exercise their agency when they realise an interruption of study would address their personal concerns. They are then able to reflect upon their circumstances and make practical arrangements. Their sense of relief can be related to the realisation that they are able to address their personal concerns without jeopardising their identities as students and their ultimate concern to complete their study programme.

Conversely, with regard to the emotional experiences and concerns of Christine and Nancy, their decision to withdraw from their study programme following their negative experiences when returning to study accords with Archer's acknowledgement that individual concerns are subject to an ongoing revision of ultimate concerns. Christine and Nancy's withdrawal from their studies following the negative impact of their experiences when returning to study on their emotional wellbeing suggests they reviewed their constellations of concerns. The completion of their study programme and identity as students became subordinate to other concerns that may relate to their sense of wellbeing, professional needs and aspirations. Notwithstanding, their concerns may be subject to further future revisions.

As stated in Chapter Two research studies are divided when considering the importance of the emotional aspects of the student experience in higher education. While there is some acknowledgement of the emotional aspects of embarking on a study programme

(Bartram, 2015; Bradley, 2017), one study claims that students' emotional concerns are being pathologised (Ecclestone, 2017). There are also concerns that students may exploit their emotions to gain unfair advantage (Bartram, 2015, 2017). Notwithstanding a need to take these concerns into account, the findings in this study accord with Archer's view, supported by Beard et al. (2007), that the emotions play a pivotal role in the development of agency and identity and how individuals respond to their personal concerns, as expressed by one student, Freda's 'epiphany' when realising the importance of her daughter's emotional needs. Moreover, there is no evidence in the student accounts to suggest emotional bargaining or exploitation.

The views expressed by Beard et al. (2007) regarding the importance of the emotions in the sphere of learning can be applied to the emotional aspects of an interruption of study. The strong interrelation between emotional and cognitive concerns is evident in the students' accounts. Students report being unable to focus on their studies because of conflicting emotional and academic concerns. One member of staff, Margaret, reported that students struggle to understand the regulations when feeling traumatised by personal issues. Another staff member, Ursula, advocated a more humane approach to helping students rather than an emphasis on form filling and directing students to online services. The emotional responses of the two EdD students, Christine and Nancy, to their negative experiences when returning to study resulted in them leaving their study programmes.

### ***Reflexivity and mental health***

As stated in Chapter Three, among the criticisms of Archer's theory is her underestimation individual concerns of the 'subconscious' (Luckett, 2008). With the exception of her fractured mode of reflexivity, she does not explore the effects of mental health concerns. As stated in Chapter Two, this study allowed only a brief consideration of the large body of research concerning mental health issues in higher education. Notwithstanding, the findings show how mental health can impact upon individual powers of reflexivity and agency. Staff expressed their concerns about the mental health of students and Margaret was concerned that staff do not have mental health training: "I think mental health is an area that we haven't really thought about and none of us have necessarily been trained to manage well".

The students accounts denoted how feelings of stress and anxiety can impact on their reflexivity. Freda described her experience of stress as a “pressure cooker” when dealing with her family’s grief and struggling with work and study and how she was on “autopilot” before realising the need to interrupt her studies. Kate spoke of how she “wasn’t focused anymore” and how stress and grief mean that “you don’t always communicate things in a timely fashion”. Ralph described how his experience of anxiety affected his reflexive powers: “I could not be judging things” and he struggled to “make a clear focus” when managing the interruption of his studies. Patrick’s anxiety and depression may have contributed to his apprehension about returning to study. He also reported difficulties when reading the course handbook,

I mean if you are already in a state of anxiety some people are very laid back about things but. If I read one of these course books and I don’t understand something I get really agitated about it ... I don’t know why but I do.

Similarly, the impact of stress on Christine’s reflexivity can be noted when she described how stress was affecting her dyslexia:

Now when I’m really stressed I go really into a kind of dyslexia head because I’m dyslexic and when I’m in dyslexia head I can see so many different ways to go and at the moment I can see 101 different ways in my research to go and normally I can, I’m quite good at narrowing that down, but I’m so stressed at the moment it’s not happening.

As discussed in Chapter Two, many studies concerned with student retention refer to feelings of stress. This study shows the effects of stress on student’s mental health, their agency and reflexive powers. The importance of providing support for vulnerable students is acknowledged but the challenges students may face when stressed and trying to navigate the complexities of organisational structures are not considered. The students in this study experienced a range of mental health concerns including depression, anxiety, grief, and stress, and related how their mental health impacted upon their ability to concentrate, communicate, focus or make judgements. Moreover, Christine’s account

highlights the negative impact of stress upon dyslexia. In addition, the findings show how stress levels can be increased by the challenges of trying to navigate an uncoordinated system of structures. The student accounts concerning the increased stress they experienced on their return to study demonstrate the negative effects of structural constraints upon students' mental states and thus upon their reflexive and agential powers.

### ***Modes of Reflexivity***

Archer describes four main types, or modes, of reflexivity: the communicative, the autonomous, meta reflexive and fractured mode (see Chapter 2, Theoretical Framework). While acknowledging frequent overlaps, she maintains that most individuals possess a predominant mode of reflexivity. She states that individual modes of reflexivity can measure the degree of "active agential intervention" (Archer, 2007, p. 97) and accordingly the potential for individual and social change. Archer's "modes of reflexivity" can thus be viewed as indications of an individual's ability to reconcile the objective "Me" with the subjective "I" when managing a range of objective structural enablements and constraints in order to attain a social "You" (Lockett, 2008) as discussed Chapter Three. In the case of students who interrupt their studies Archer's concept regarding individual modes of reflexivity can be related to the students' ability to exercise their agency at different stages of the interruption process in order to complete their studies and achieve the personal goals relating to their social "you", thereby realising their social mobility. The staff and students' modes of reflexivity, as suggested from the findings of this study are discussed below.

### **Staff**

The findings show how the academic staff demonstrated "active agential intervention" (Archer, *ibid*) through autonomous modes of reflexivity, with expressions of confidence and commitment to supporting students. Their accounts of how they support students demonstrate self-motivation and a preparation to take risks for the benefit of students. They are also prepared to consult the expertise of those members of staff in different departments. Although Archer presents the communicative mode of reflexivity as indicative of limited social mobility the staff accounts of the challenges regarding their working relationships with other HEP departments suggest that it is also important for them

to engage in a communicative mode of reflexivity within the workplace to achieve a more consistent and coordinated system of support for students. Rachel also showed some aspects of meta-reflexivity, for example, when reporting concerns for her feelings of responsibility for the students and her tendency to blame herself when students were failing. She added that she was learning from experience to be firmer when supporting students who were challenging. Some concerns could be attributed to her lack of administrative support, her account of difficult relationships with different departments, and a sense of isolation in her role.

The support staff also demonstrated a predominant mode of autonomous reflexivity in their self-determination and commitment to their roles. There is also a suggestion of communicative reflexivity regarding their endeavours to work with 'similar and familiar' in other departments. For example, Mary seeks to ensure that information obtained from HEP departments regarding fees liability is accurate, and Fergal is developing his working relationships with departments in other faculties to ensure that processes for the interruption of study is consistent for all students. Fergal and the Wellbeing Team showed indications of meta-reflexivity when reporting their concerns for some students and the limitations of the support they could provide. For example, the Well-being team expressed limitations regarding what can be done for students with mental health issues.

## **Students**

When applied to the students' experiences of the interruption process the application of Archer's modes of reflexivity suggest the combined effects of personal issues, structural constraints, and emotional and mental health concerns upon individual reflexivity and potential "agential intervention" (Archer, *ibid*). The findings also show that modes of reflexivity may overlap and also vary according to individual students and the different stages of the interruption process. The students generally expressed a predominance in autonomous reflexivity when reporting their aspirations, confidence, and sense of commitment at the commencement of their study programmes. Freda for example stated, 'it's all going to be fine' and Kate referred to her 'positive outlook'. However, their accounts of personal difficulties, with expressions of uncertainty, self-doubt, anxiety, and confusion, when reporting their experiences of the interruption process, suggest a fractured reflexivity that can be attributed to their increased stress levels and also a lack of information and support. All the students expressed indications of an autonomous mode of reflexivity when



granted the interruption of study when they felt they were then able to focus on their personal concerns and make plans for the period during the interruption of study.

However, three students expressed a fractured mode of reflexivity following their negative experiences of the interruption when returning to study. Patrick expressed his uncertainty about returning to study and Christine's fractured mode of reflexivity is apparent from her expressions of anxiety, self-doubt and loss of confidence following her experiences of the interruption. Similarly, Nancy also showed evidence of a fractured mode of reflexivity through her expressions of negativity in response to environmental changes following the merger. Conversely Freda and Kate expressed a strong sense of autonomous reflexivity in their determination to address the challenges they faced when returning to study. A sense of meta reflexivity is also evident in the students' accounts. Kate and Freda, following the confirmation of their interruptions, consider their circumstances in the light of the interruption. Freda, for example, related her realisation that 'grief is a process' and Patrick considered how he could better manage his anxiety.

Indications of overlap in the students' modes of reflexivity are also evident. For example, despite expressions of a fractured mode of reflexivity when experiencing their personal issues, there is also evidence of the autonomous mode. Ralph's expressions of a fractured reflexivity concerning his return to study, for example, is combined with expressions of a more autonomous mode, evident in his determination to return and complete his studies despite the challenges he may face. Patrick's fractured mode coincides with his meta reflexive mode when he considers the effects of his anxiety.

Three of the students showed some indications of a communicative reflexive mode. Patrick referred to the discussions he had with his partner about his study programme, and Kate and Nancy both referred to conversations they had with their colleagues. As stated, Archer views the communicative mode of reflexivity and its limited associations with 'similar and familiar' as an indication of reduced potential for social mobility. However, Patrick's conversation with his partner provided him with valuable support when he was experiencing difficulties during his teaching placement and Kate and Nancy's conversations with colleagues provided them with important information regarding the option to interrupt their study programme. Notwithstanding, it may be noted that the

students discussions with 'familiar' may be indicative of the students' difficulty in accessing the expert guidance of professional colleagues within the university.

### **Modes of reflexivity and the stages of the interruption process**

As stated in Chapter Two, studies also suggest that modes of reflexivity may vary according to social contexts (Caetano, 2018, Dyke, Johnston, & Fuller, 2012). Similarly, the students' accounts suggest that different modes of reflexivity can be related to their experiences at different stages of their interruption of study. As outlined above, when reporting the commencement of their studies they all denoted an autonomous mode of reflexivity in their expressions of self-motivation and determination. However, during the period of personal crises, with high levels of stress, self-doubt, and confusion, there is evidence of fractured reflexivity regarding their uncertainty of what to do. This may be attributable not only to the uncertainties related to their personal crises but also to a lack of information and support. The students express a restored mode of autonomous reflexivity when the interruption of study is confirmed but there are also indications of fractured reflexivity expressed in relation to the interruption period and the students' return to study.

The findings thus highlight how students' experiences at different stages of the interruption process may impact upon their reflexive processes and their potential for "active agential intervention" (Archer, 2007, p. 97). As such, students' modes of reflexivity can be viewed as potential indicators of the enablements and constraints that enhance or restrict students' agency when managing an interruption of study. Table 19 below outlines the students' different modes of reflexivity at different stages of the interruption process and the corresponding areas of support that may facilitate informed decision making and enable students to optimise their reflexive processes when managing an interruption of study.

**Table 19 The Different Modes of Reflexivity at each stage of the interruption process with relevant support**

<b>Stage of Interruption</b>	<b>Mode of Reflexivity</b>	<b>Characteristics</b>	<b>Support</b>
Before the Interruption	Autonomous	Confident Committed to the course	Information regarding available support when experiencing difficulties.  Personal Tutors and Staff who students can see regularly and build up a relationship.
First Stage	Fractured  Communicative	Self-doubt Anxiety, Uncertainty Unaware of options Fear of failure  May seek information and support from friends	Information about the option to interrupt.  Support and guidance regarding regulations and procedures  Information about support available during the interruption period.  Careers guidance if seeking employment.  Mental health support if required
Interruption Period	Meta  Autonomous  Fractured	Reflects upon concerns  Able to focus on personal concerns and make plans.  Some anxiety and uncertainty about returning to study	Students may need access to the University regarding support and information.  It would be helpful to maintain contact with students.
Return to Study	Fractured  Autonomous	Anxiety about returning to study but motivated to complete the study programme.	Information and support should be available with a formal induction programme in place for returning students

## **Part Five: Morphogenesis regarding improvements to the interruption process**

Archer's theory, with regard to her concern for the process of morphogenesis, has thus helped me to identify several areas related to the interruption process that would benefit from improvement. Research studies consider a number of areas for improvement in the provision of student support that accord with concerns arising from this study. Despite the aims of the Widening Participation Strategy, issues remain regarding the need to improve student support structures in higher education and increase student awareness of the support available to them, including the option of an interruption of study (Quinn, 2013). Other recommendations include more contact with students who are interrupting their studies (Kilmister, 2015), better student and staff relationships, and a more coordinated support system for students (Thomas et al. 2017), and more support for staff when supporting students (Berry et al., 2021; Cornell, 2020).

The findings in this study, echo the concerns expressed in the literature. The staff endeavours to surmount the structural constraints they encounter when supporting students who interrupt their studies signify the need for improved coordination with other departments and increased support for both staff and students. The students' accounts regarding their experiences of the interruption process highlight the need for raised awareness of available support, more contact and individual support, and coordination of information and support. In addition, when related to Archer's theory, the findings highlighted concerns regarding the effects that structural constraints can have upon students' emotional and mental health, and upon students' reflexive and agential powers during an interruption of study.

Archer's theory and its concern with the development of individual and corporate agency in the morphogenetic process of organisational structures can be related to the need to engage both staff and students in making policy and recommendations for good practice. In this study the staff and students had shared concerns regarding the challenges they faced through all stages of the interruption process. Notwithstanding, some discrepancies arose from the findings regarding staff and student perceptions of available support that are indicative of concerns regarding a lack of coordination, and communication. Members of staff expressed the importance of being accessible, but some students experienced difficulties in finding support. Members of staff were seeking to raise awareness of available support and improve coordination of support services but some of the students in

this study were unaware of the support available to them. Moreover, as reported in one study (Wakelin, 2021) staff are not always fully aware of students' needs or of the range of support services available to students.

The constraints that may restrict students' ability to discuss their personal concerns can be related to the constraints that can restrict students ability to discuss academic concerns in the classroom. As stated in Chapter Two, Khan et al. (2012) argue the need for an active interrelation between individual and corporate reflexivity in order to facilitate the development of student agency in the sphere of teaching and learning. A similar interrelation between individual and corporate reflexivity can be applied to the need for students to express their personal concerns in the sphere of student support. As Lockett and Lockett (2009) state, students' concerns are intrinsic to their identity and sense of agency and the externalisation of individual concerns is an important stage in the process from "from students to professionals" (Lockett & Lockett, 2009, p. 477). At the individual student level, the interruption of study is an event that brings students' personal concerns to the surface and highlights the need for the structural enablements that can facilitate students' ability to externalise their concerns in order to receive the information and support they need to complete their studies.

With reference to studies concerned with student engagement (Buckley, 2018; Thomas, 2012; Tight, 2019), the involvement of students in the process of policy making may facilitate an active interrelation between individual and corporate reflexivity. Discussions between staff and students about students' personal concerns could address the discrepancies between staff and student perceptions of available support, that would be beneficial for the effective management of student support services and of the interruption process. The findings show that staff and students have a shared interest in students, where possible, completing their study programmes. As one member of staff stated, it does not look good for the institution when students do not return to their studies and the students in this study were all initially committed to completing their study programmes. I would add it is not good for the institution, or for the students, if students do not return to their study programme because of a lack of support and information.

Archer's concern with the process of morphogenesis requires the active engagement of both primary (individual) and corporate agency (Archer, 1995). The engagement of both

staff and students in the process of identifying and addressing areas of the interruption process that may benefit from improvement would enable both staff and students to effectively manage all stages of the interruption process. A morphogenetic process may then be generated whereby more students are able return following an interruption of study and successfully complete their study programme. At the corporate level it is important that students are able to discuss their personal concerns with senior staff members. They may thereby, in accordance with Archer's model of the morphogenetic process, develop their primary agency to become corporate agents engaging in policy making processes in order to ensure appropriate and effective student support services that meet the needs of both staff and students. The interruption of study process may then become a solution rather than a problem.

Below, I provide an outline of suggestions for the improvement of the interruption process drawn from my use of Archer's theory. Although similar suggestions of improvements may arise from the application of other theories, I would argue that Archer's theory has provided a multi-dimensional approach that has allowed an in-depth consideration of the experiences of both staff and students and the structures they engage with. Her theory has signified the need for a holistic approach when considering the concerns of students when they are struggling on a study programme and highlighted the impact of structural constraints, and emotional and mental health concerns, upon individual reflexivity and agency, thus impeding the effective management of the interruption process. Her theory denotes the importance of a coordinated system of support services and the staff and student relationship in facilitating students' disclosure of their concerns. In addition, her theory addresses the need to develop a more effective interrelationship between staff and students in the process of policy making with regard to improvements to student support services and the interruption of study process. I would argue that Archer's theory has enabled me to explore many different aspects of the interruption process and, as stated in Chapter Three, helped me to 'untangle the knots' (Lockett, 2008) of the staff and students' experiences when managing the interruption of study.

### ***Suggested improvements to the interruption of study***

This study has considered aspects of good practice with regard to staff endeavours to support students, raise awareness of available support and improve the coordination of support services. In answer to my research question concerning improvements to the interruption process, and the implications of the findings for my professional practice, the application of Archer's theory, with its concerns regarding the impact of structural enablements and constraints on the exercise of individual agency has suggested a number of improvements that would enhance the experiences of staff and students when managing the interruption process. The following areas of improvement may be considered:

1. A designated coordinator for the management of student interruptions who will improve the coordination of support services for students who are interrupting their studies throughout the interruption process, including when students return to study.
2. Timely access to support and information concerning the interruption of study with one-to-one guidance for students, where possible, prior to the student's interruption of study.
3. A greater awareness of the issues experienced by students when undertaking an interruption of study, including their mental health and emotional concerns.
4. A promotion of good relationships between all staff and students so that students can feel comfortable when discussing their personal issues.
5. There should also be support for staff, especially for those who are supporting students with mental health concerns.
6. Students should be able to engage with staff in discussions concerning policy and practice with regard to their support needs, including students who are struggling with personal crises and need to interrupt their studies.

## The Main Stages of the Interruption Process

With reference to the Findings of this study and my MOE2 study, this study also suggests an organisation of the interruption process into different stages to facilitate available support and the administration of the process. See Table 20 below.

**Table 20 Stages of the Interruption Process with relevant support**

<b>Stage one</b>	<b>Before the Interruption</b>	Students need to be informed of available support and may need to be guided through their options and appropriate support services because their stress, emotional and mental health concerns often impact on their ability to process information
<b>Stage Two</b>	<b>During the Interruption</b>	Students should be provided with a resource of contacts, information and support regarding any concerns that may arise during the interruption period.
<b>Stage Three</b>	<b>Before Return to Study</b>	Students should be provided with information and guidance regarding any concerns they may have regarding their return to study.
<b>Stage Four</b>	<b>Return to Study</b>	There should be a formal Induction and Welcome Event for students when returning to study where they are provided with information regarding any changes, procedures they need to follow and available support.



## **Findings and Discussion: A Summary**

As demonstrated, Archer's theory of structure and agency has provided an in depth and multidimensional approach to the interruption process that has highlighted a number of concerns. Her theory is concerned with how individuals interact with organisational structures and how structural enablements and constraints can impact upon individual agency. The findings in this study show how structural constraints can negatively impact upon students' agency when managing the interruption process and may result in students leaving their study programme because of lack of information and support. The study thus shows the importance of providing a coordinated and holistic system of support for students who experience personal crises in order that they feel able to disclose their issues, receive the information and support they need, and effectively manage their interruption of studies. The study also shows that a coordinated system of support is important for members of staff who are supporting students through the interruption process. Furthermore, it is also important to consider that those students who decide to leave their study programme are fully informed and not leaving because of a lack of information or support.

The theory, which accounts for the interrelatedness of students' concerns, denotes the importance of providing a coordinated holistic structure of academic and pastoral support services, particularly when students experience significant events that may require an interruption of study. Contrary to views that student support can impede the development of the independent learner this study shows how a lack of support and information can negatively impact upon the agency of staff and students when managing the interruption process. Both staff and students reported the importance of the interruption of study as a structural enablement, but their accounts show how structural constraints regarding communication and coordination issues, and a lack of information and support for students, can increase stress levels for students who are already experiencing challenging circumstances and negatively impact upon their experience of the interruption process.

Archer's theory has also shown how individual reflexive processes relate to individual agency when managing an interruption of study. This study shows how students, when experiencing personal issues may find it not only difficult to focus on their studies but also to express their concerns when feeling stressed, anxious, and fearful of failure. In addition, the findings show how a lack of information and support can restrict the range of students'

reflexive processes and negatively impact upon their management of an interruption of study. Archer's theory highlights the role of the emotions in individual reflexive processes when experiencing significant events such as those experienced by the students in this study. Moreover, although Archer does not account for the impact of mental health upon individual reflexivity, her theory allows a consideration of the effects of stress, anxiety, and depression upon students' reflexive processes. All the students in this study reported how their mental health concerns impacted upon their reflexivity and agency. The findings highlight the need to consider emotional and mental health concerns when students are interrupting their studies and also the need for more support for staff when supporting students with emotional and mental health concerns.

Archer's theory concerning individual modes of reflexivity can be helpful when considering the different stages of the interruption process. The students reported a number of challenges during each stage of the interruption and the findings suggest that the students exercised different modes of reflexivity according to their experiences at each stage of the interruption process. The application of Archer's modes of reflexivity can thus help to identify the main areas of concern for students when undertaking an interruption of study and the areas of the interruption process that may benefit from improvements.

Although there is a large body of literature that considers similar concerns related to the student experience and retention there are very few references to the interruption process in the literature. The reasons cited in the literature as to why students leave their study programmes are similar to the concerns expressed by the students in this study when undertaking an interruption of study. However, there are no studies that consider the multidimensional aspects relating to students' concerns that Archer's critical realist approach to structure and agency allows. Moreover, the perception of the interruption process as a problem can be viewed as an example of an "epistemic fallacy" (Bhaskar, 2008, p. 36) where, as stated in Chapter Two, the interruption process is seen as a problem where the reasons for the problem are associated with the number of students who do not return to study, rather than the concerns as expressed in this study, arising from issues related to organisational structures. The students' accounts of the negative effects of structural constraints upon their experience of the interruption process may provide some indications as to why some students do not return from an interruption of study. The study also suggests that some students may leave their studies because they

feel unable to disclose their personal concerns, are unaware of the support available to them and of the option to interrupt their study programme.

Thus, I would argue the need for more research on concerns relating to the interruption process. The interruption of study can play an important role in helping those students who experience personal concerns to take time out rather than leaving their course.

Furthermore, in the context of the aims of the widening participation strategy and social mobility, an effective management of the interruption process may help students to achieve their aim for social change and improve the completion rates for Higher Education providers.

In the next chapter I will discuss the limitations of the study with regard to the merger, the scale of the study, my role and positionality and the generalisability of the study.

## **Chapter 6: Limitations of the study**

There are a number of limitations to the study which I outline below. The merger which occurred following the confirmation of my proposed study, and shortly before my collection of the data is referred to by a number of participants and requires consideration. The merger also impacted upon my role as student welfare officer. The small scale of the study is considered with regard to the number of participants. I also consider my positionality as a researcher and welfare officer and the limitations of generalisability, with regard to the small scale of the study.

### ***The merger***

This study took place during a period of structural change. As stated earlier, the data for this study was collected shortly after the merger of two higher education providers. All six students, three academic staff and two support staff belonged to the smaller institution. Three support staff belonged to the larger institution. Two students had interrupted prior to the merger and four students interrupted during the merger. The four students who had returned did so following the completion of the merger. All references to the merger were made by two members of staff and two students from the smaller institution. With the exception of the restructuring of the student support centre, it is difficult to identify the structural constraints that can be related directly to the merger. A number of constraints concerning lack of information and support and coordination of services existed prior to the merger, as reported in my MOE2 study.

### ***The scale of the study***

The study was of a small number of participants and limited to UK residents, including one EU student who was resident and working in the UK. The study does not include international students who are likely to have similar but also a range of other issues, including immigration concerns, that could not be addressed within the scope of this study. The study programmes were also limited to one student attending an undergraduate work-based learning course, one a full time primary PGCE, one a full time Secondary PGCE, one part-time PGCE Post Compulsory student and two students following the EdD programme. Although other courses such as the MA courses and PhD were not represented by the students, they were represented by two members of the academic staff. The members of staff are limited to three academic staff and five staff from student support services, including an academic administrator. There are a number of references

to administrative services with regard to structural constraints, but in this study was limited to the finance administrator and the course administrator.

### ***My Role***

Following the merger there were significant changes to my role and location. Having supported students as a Student Welfare Officer for over 14 years, with a range of supporting responsibilities that covered funding and pastoral concerns, I became Student Funding Welfare Advisor with an emphasis on the funding aspects of my previous role. The change in my role and location to premises in the larger institution, which occurred during my collection of data, impacted my accessibility to staff and students. Following the collection of data and the changes in my role as welfare officer, I made the decision, one year later, to take voluntary redundancy. Although this impacts upon my original identity as both a welfare officer and researcher, it has not changed my concerns for the challenges that students may face when interrupting their studies.

### ***Positionality***

As stated in Chapter Four (Methodology) the subjectivity of my role as Student Welfare Officer/ Student Welfare Funding Advisor requires consideration. As Bell (2010) states:

Many factors can result in bias and there are always dangers in research carried out by individual researchers, particularly those who have strong views about the topic they are researching. It can occur in many ways, deliberately or unwittingly (2010, p.169).

It is also the case that my position, and therefore this study, is unique to the context and environment to which it belongs and another Welfare Officer, in the same context may produce different results. As Huberman & Miles (2002) say, "it is always possible for there to be different, equally valid accounts from different perspectives" (2002, p .41).

As a Student Welfare Officer my bias, or perspective, can be related to the main concern of my role which was the wellbeing of the students. I mainly saw students in need of support and guidance, a number of whom needed information concerning the interruption of their study programme. I did not see students who did not need support, or whose

experience of the interruption process was trouble free. Although a major aspect of my role was to provide information concerning funding I would frequently need to liaise with members of staff from different departments and with staff in external organisations such as the student's funding provider when students were interrupting their study programmes, as discussed in the Rationale.

Furthermore, with the exception of two PGCE students and the two Wellbeing Staff, I had experience of working with the staff and students who are participants in this study prior to my collection of the data. Although there may be advantages, such as trust, there are also several challenges to the dual role of employee and researcher within the institute. For example, the researcher may have the advantages of in-depth knowledge of the research area and therefore a number of assumptions that may result in a "premature conclusion" (Sikes and Potts, 2018, p. 140). Members of staff and students may be keen to provide data that is agreeable and be hesitant to disclose sensitive information that may be important to the research. Robson (2002) comments on a number of pitfalls, including the hazards of disclosing confidential insider information that could have compromising effects upon working relationships. Furthermore, there are potential instances where my role as researcher becomes blurred with my role as Welfare Officer which was a concern whilst interviewing the student participants. For example, it transpired that the two students who I had not met previous to the interviews, required welfare support with regard to funding issues in addition to information concerning careers guidance and accommodation. I informed both students of the support services available and provided them with contact details of the services. They also had my contact details should they require further information.

With these concerns in mind, I wished to mitigate some of the hazards regarding the subjectivity of my role as student welfare officer by including in this research participants from three areas related to the interruption process: the students, support staff and academic staff, to provide a more diverse representation of the interruption process from different viewpoints. Furthermore, although the students shared a range of concerns, they also represented individual circumstances and some experiences drawn from different study programmes. Similarly, the support staff were from different departments, working in different areas related specific student concerns. The academic staff also belonged to different departments, namely undergraduate, master's degrees and research.

Whilst acknowledging “it is necessary to surrender the idea that researching the meanings and interpretations that we make of people in social situations can be objective” (Smyth & Holian, 2008, p. 36) I feel that, nevertheless, in agreement with Smyth and Holian (2008) this research has contributed some unique perspectives concerning individual experiences of the interruption process.

### ***Generalisability***

The size of this study limits the transferability of the findings. As Bell (2010) states, generalization is unlikely in small studies, although it may be possible to consider the study’s reliability with regard to policy making in areas concerning interruptions of study. In the case of this study, the collection of data and the accounts of the staff and students relate to a unique time during a restructure following the merger of two universities. What may be relatable are those aspects of the study that consider the concerns expressed by students when interrupting their studies, including concerns for students’ emotional wellbeing and mental health and the importance of a coordinated and whole institute approach to supporting students through an interruption of study.

In the next chapter I draw my conclusions regarding the implications for my professional practice, dissemination of the findings and suggestions for further research.

## **Chapter Seven: Conclusion**

In this chapter I will discuss the implications of this study for my own professional practice, the importance of disseminating the findings and suggestions for further research. Archer's theory has provided an understanding of how the challenges of an interruption of a study can impact upon students when they are already experiencing the effects of personal crises. The study has also provided a deeper understanding of the problems facing staff in their endeavours to support students who interrupting a study programme.

### **Implications of this study for my professional practice**

With reference to my own professional practice when supporting students through an interruption of study Archer's theory reinforces the importance of:

- consistent and coordinated support for students throughout an interruption of study.
- raising awareness for both staff and students, on a regular basis and across all HEP departments, of student concerns and how students can be supported.
- good working relationships with both staff and students across the HEP to ensure the advice and guidance for an interruption of study is consistent with the requirements of the study programme.
- keeping departments informed of any changes and potential issues that may arise for students who are interrupting their studies.
- good working networks with external organisations related to the interruption process.

### **Dissemination of the findings**

Archer writes about how the exercise of individual agency can evolve into corporate agency and generate a morphogenetic process for structural change. There may be some potential for the development of corporate agency through a dissemination of the findings of this research to members of academic and support staff. The raising of greater awareness and understanding of how structural constraints can impact upon individual reflexive and agential powers, may highlight the importance of staff and students working together to achieve a better understanding of shared concerns. It may then be possible to achieve a more enabling environment, where an interruption of study is viewed as solution



rather than a problem, generating a better student experience of the interruption process and more students returning to complete their studies.

### **Suggestions for further research**

- This study was conducted during a period of structural change regarding the merger of two universities. It would be helpful to conduct a study of interruptions during a time of stability.
- It would be helpful to consider the experiences of International students who were not included in this study. Their experiences are quite different to UK students with regard to the challenges they may face when managing immigration requirements, international funding bodies and other concerns.
- It would also be helpful to consider the experiences of HEP administrators who manage administrative processes relating to the interruption of study.
- My research began prior to the Covid pandemic. A study of the experiences of students who interrupted their studies during the pandemic may raise awareness of concerns for its impact upon staff and student experiences of the interruption process.
- This study raised concerns regarding the challenges of finding support for students during the actual interruption period. Further research in this area would be helpful.
- It may also be helpful to consider students' modes of reflexivity and how they relate the management of their personal and academic concerns during a study programme.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion the aim of my study was to achieve a greater understanding of the staff and student experiences of the interruption of study and identify areas of good practice and areas that may benefit from improvement. As I stated in my introduction to this study, there is very little research in this area of the student experience. With regard to my role as Student Welfare Officer and my own experience of supporting students I supported a number of students who faced challenges that were additional to their personal issues when undertaking an interruption of study. Although many students may not experience difficulties when interrupting their studies, the challenges considered in this study may offer some explanation as to why, as discussed in Chapter One, many students do not return after an interruption. I hope this research on student interruptions of study will make an important contribution to the literature concerning student retention and, in the context

of my own professional practice help to improve the experiences of both staff and students when managing an interruption of study.

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## **Appendices**

**Appendix A. Email Invitation to students**

**Appendix B. Email Invitation to staff**

**Appendix C. Interview Guide for students**

**Appendix D. Interview Guide for staff**

## Appendix A

### Email Invitation to Students

Dear Student

My name is Bridie Woods, the Student Funding Welfare Advisor at UCL (from December 2014) and formerly Student Welfare Officer at the Institute of Education (2000 – 2014). I am conducting a research study on the interruption process for my final EdD thesis of 45,000 words. The EdD is a professional doctorate and is therefore closely connected to my work in Student Welfare. From my professional experience as a Student Welfare Advisor, having supported a number of students who have undertaken an interruption, I am very interested in this area of the student experience and would like to research the process with a view to improving the process, where possible, for both staff and for students.

I am looking for students who have experienced an interruption, and who would like to participate in the study, to provide information about their perceptions and experiences of the interruption process.

The interviews will last approximately 30-45 minutes and will be semi structured in design. All students and students' accounts will be treated anonymously and confidentially, and in keeping with BERA (The British Education Research Association) ethical guidelines (2011).

Students will be able to withdraw from the study at any stage and those who are interviewed will be able to decline to answer any questions they feel unwilling or unable to answer.

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If you feel happy to participate in the study, please complete the statement of consent provided below. If you have any questions about the study or your participation, please feel free to contact me. [bridie.woods@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:bridie.woods@ucl.ac.uk)

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#### **Statement of consent:**

I have read the above information and I give my consent to participate in this research. I understand that my participation in this research is voluntary, and my data will be treated

in confidence and kept anonymously. I understand I can withdraw from this research at any time and request that any information provided be withheld. Any questions I have about the research have been answered to my satisfaction. I consent to participate in this study.

**Name of Participant** (Please print)

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**Signature of Participant:**

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**Date:**

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With Many Thanks for your participation

Bridie Woods

EdD Year 3 (IOE)| Student Welfare Advisor|UCL (University College London)

## Appendix B

### Email Invitation to Staff

Dear Staff Member

I am sending this message to you to see if you would be willing to partake in a study for my final research thesis for the EdD programme.

My name is Bridie Woods, Student Funding Welfare Advisor at UCL and formerly Student Welfare Officer at the Institute of Education (2000 – 2014).

I am conducting a research study on the interruption process for my final EdD thesis of 45,000 words. The EdD is a professional doctorate and is therefore closely connected to my work in Student Welfare. From my professional experience as a Student Welfare Advisor, having supported a number of students who have undertaken an interruption, I am very interested in this area of the student experience. I would like to research the process with a view to generating a greater understanding of the process, and identifying, if applicable, any potential improvements for both staff and for students.

I would like to interview a number of staff members who have experience of the interruption process. The interviews will last approximately 30 minutes and they will be semi-structured to allow participants to provide an account of their experiences and perceptions of the interruption process.

No information will be used without the consent of participants at any stage of the study. All staff who participate in the study will be treated anonymously and all information treated confidentially, in keeping with BERA ethical guidelines (2011).

Participants will be able to withdraw from the study at any stage and those who are interviewed will be able to decline to answer any questions they feel unwilling or unable to answer.

If you would like more information about the study, contact me: [Bridie.woods@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:Bridie.woods@ucl.ac.uk)



If you feel happy to participate in the study, please complete the statement of consent provided below and return it to me.

---

**Statement of consent:**

I have read the above information and I give my consent to participate in this research. I understand that my participation in this research is voluntary and my data will be treated in confidence and kept anonymously. I understand I can withdraw from this research at any time and request that any information provided be withheld. Any questions I have about the research have been answered to my satisfaction. I consent to participate in this study.

Name of Participant (Please print)

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Signature of Participant:

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Date:

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With many thanks in advance for your participation  
Bridie Woods/EdD Year 5 UCL Institute of Education

## Appendix C

### Interview Guide for students

Begin with a brief introduction, thanking the participant for agreeing to assist with the research on student interruptions and provide some information concerning the research. Provide the participant with ethical assurances regarding confidentiality, anonymity, and the participant's right not to answer a question, and the right to withdraw from the study at any stage if they wish to do so.

The Main Questions regarding the students' experiences of the interruption process:

- 1) What was your experience of the interruption process?

Ask questions where appropriate about the following aspects of the interruption

- the reason for the interruption?
- the initial stage of the interruption process
- did you receive any support?

- 2) What was your experience during the interruption process?  
How did you feel during the interruption period?  
Did you have access to the university?

- 3) What was your experience on return to study?  
Did you receive any support?

- 4) Do you have any suggestions about what might have been helpful? For students when they need to interrupt their study programme?

## Appendix D

### Interview Guide for staff

Begin with a brief introduction, thanking the participant for agreeing to assist with the research on student interruptions and provide some information concerning the research. Provide the participant with ethical assurances regarding confidentiality, anonymity, and the participant's right not to answer a question, and the right to withdraw from the study at any stage if they wish to do so.

The interview guide is as follows:

- 1) How would you describe the interruption process?
  - 2) Can you describe your engagement with the interruption process for students?
  - 3) Can you say something about your interactions with the students who are interrupting?
  - 4) What kinds of support are available to students during the process?
  - 5) Are there variations according to individual students, for example regarding their individual circumstances or the study programmes they are taking?
  - 6) Can you describe any interactions you may have with other departments or services in relation to the interruption process?
  - 7) Are there variations in your involvement regarding the different stages of an interruption – for example before, during or following an interruption?
-