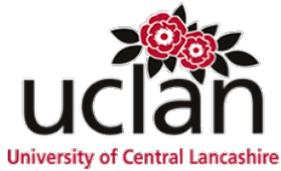


# **Looking beyond the label: What are the educational experiences of a cross-section of four cohorts of students labelled as ‘non-traditional’?**

A Thesis submitted in partial fulfilment for the requirements for the degree of Professional Doctorate in Education at The University of Central Lancashire

**Jacqueline Dawn Dodding**

**January 2017**



# STUDENT DECLARATION FORM

Professional Doctorate in Education

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School of Education and Social Science

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*Sections marked \* delete as appropriate*

## 2. Material submitted for another award

I declare that no material contained in the thesis has been used in any other submission for an academic award and is solely my own work **X**

### Use of a Proof-reader

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## **Abstract**

This practitioner research has explored the past and present educational experiences of mainly mature female students who are labelled as 'non-traditional' in a College-based Higher Education (HE) establishment in the 13<sup>th</sup> most deprived borough of the United Kingdom (UK). Semi-structured interviews with 19 student participants labelled as 'non-traditional' were undertaken to investigate their experience of compulsory and post-compulsory education. Further data was collected to understand staff experience of teaching 'non-traditional' students and relevant college documents were analysed to provide understanding of policy.

This research was undertaken within the interpretivist paradigm utilising elements of the bricolage approach and phenomenography. Student data was analysed using elements of phenomenological methods, I-Poems and Word Clouds, which allowed emphasis to be placed on personal rather than collective experience. The intention of the research was to allow the 'voices' of the student participants to be foregrounded in order to portray their individual stories.

This research offers insight into personal educational experiences of students labelled as 'non-traditional' and their decisions and choices regarding the pursuit, or not, of HE. The inclusion of analysis of staff participant data and college documents informs this study, setting the educational experiences of the students in wider context.

The primary findings of this study propose that there are often multiple factors to be considered when contemplating progression to HE study by students from lower socio-economic (LSE) groups who are labelled as 'non-traditional'. Decisions whether to progress to post-compulsory education are often based on personal circumstances at the time, and not because the student is suffering from 'low aspirations' as is often suggested in the literature. However, when students from LSE groups do engage with HE study, this is often due to a number of factors such as support offered, diagnosis of learning difficulties, increased confidence, change in personal circumstances and local provision of HE courses.

This research contributes to the understanding of personal motivations of LSE students who are labelled as 'non-traditional' when considering HE study and the barriers they may face in doing so. It contends that education is a very personal journey, and policy makers should take a less linear approach to education provision, avoiding the use of language, which detrimentally portrays those who they are attempting to persuade into HE. There should be recognition that there may be multiple factors, which prevent participation in HE, and non-participation should not be treated as being 'low aspirational' or 'deficient'. People may engage later in life when factors conspire to allow them to enter into HE.

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Finally, this is for my Dad, who would have been so proud of me.

**'The moment you doubt you can fly,  
you cease forever to be able to do it'**

(J.M. Barrie)

**‘Success is no accident. It is hard work, perseverance, learning, studying, sacrifice and most of all, love of what you are doing or learning to do.’**

(Pele)

## Abbreviations

BAHSS	Business, Arts, Humanities and Social Science
BSC (Hons)	Bachelor of Science Honours Degree
BTEC	Business and Technology Education Council
BERA	British Education Research Association
BME	Black or Minority Ethnic
CAM	Complementary and Alternative Medicine
DFES	Department for Education and Skills
EdD	Professional Doctorate in Education
FD	Foundation Degree
FdSc	Foundation Degree Science
FE	Further Education
FT	Full time
GCSE	General Certificate in Secondary Education
GT	Grounded Theory
HE	Higher Education
HEFCE	Higher Education Funding Council for England
HEI	Higher Education Institution
ICT	Information and Communication Technologies
LPN	Low Participation Neighbourhoods
LSE	Lower Socio-Economic
MSc	Master of Science Degree
NAO	National Audit Office
NT	Non-traditional
NVQ	National Vocational Qualification
OFFA	Office for Fair Access
OU	Open University
p.a.	Per annum
PT	Part time
RAF	Royal Air force
UCAS	University and College Admissions Service
UCLan	University of Central Lancashire
UK	United Kingdom
WP	Widening Participation

## **Presentation of this Thesis**

The use of the bricolage approach has influenced how this thesis has been presented and therefore an entirely traditional method when delivering this research report is not employed. In keeping with the bricolage, there is a lengthy discussion regarding the chosen theories for the research, my positionality within the research and relevant literature is woven throughout the thesis, rather than a traditionally placed stand-alone literature review. Berry (2006: p.89) concurs with the reasoning behind this thesis presentation, writing 'Bricolage works with elements of randomness, spontaneity, self-organisation, far-from- equilibrium conditions ... all features of the world of chaos and complexity'. The intention has been to tell the story of the research with pockets of relevant theory and contextualisation interwoven throughout, and this is reflected in the non-traditional layout. Initially Chapter one will contextualise the research and introduce how I have been 'present' in the research throughout. Chapter two discusses the policy context and explains the role of the college in this research and Chapter three focuses more fully on the policy to evaluate the impacts initially of the power of labelling people and then the impact on Widening Participation (WP) or 'non-traditional' students. Following this, the ethical considerations and how I have positioned myself in the research are discussed, with Chapter five analysing how I chose the methodology. The theoretical perspectives that I subscribe to have been placed near the end of Chapter five. The reasoning behind this is that I wanted to demonstrate how my perspectives had developed during the consideration of the methodology. The ensuing chapters then follow the more traditional layout expected of a thesis.

# Chapter one

## Introduction

This doctoral research seeks to provide insights into the educational experience of students labelled as 'non-traditional', as defined by The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) (2000), in the Higher Education (HE) establishment in which I teach as a fractional lecturer. HEFCE (2000: 35) defines non-traditional students as:

*'young full-time entrants from disadvantaged backgrounds; students with disabilities; mature students (aged 21 year or over) and part-time undergraduate students. Other categories include: first generation students (young people with no family history of HE participation); students from ethnic minorities; refugees and asylum seekers and students from low-income families' (HEFCE, 2000).*

Subsequent categories included in a 2013 literature review undertaken by Moore et al. for HEFCE on research into Widening Participation (WP) are; 'vocational and work-based learners; disabled learners and care leavers' (p.ii) (i.e. those who have been in foster care or adopted).

Recent and current government educational policy has encouraged the diversification of the HE student population; policy initiatives such as WP (HEFCE, 2000), the development of College-based Higher Education (Dearing, 1997) and more recently the white paper 'Students at the Heart of the System' (BIS, 2011) have placed increasing demands on HE establishments to develop strategic student policies, which help to support students both in their academic endeavours and pastorally (Jordan et al., 2008). The diversification of the student population has brought many challenges for HE establishments such as, for example, students enrolling on degree courses without previously attaining what are deemed traditional qualifications; thus demonstrating the need for support mechanisms to be in place. This situation and the diverse nature of the student population where I teach originally interested me when considering the area for doctoral research, as I had experience of teaching students who perhaps did

not initially have the academic skills required to complete degree level study. I had witnessed the efforts, not only of myself but also of my colleagues, in supporting students to achieve their potential. However, I had previously been unaware and perhaps even disinterested in the policy contexts, which potentially encouraged students labelled as 'non-traditional' into HE study.

When planning this research, I discovered that two different approaches to WP have been suggested (Gorard et al., 2006); the deficit approach lays the blame for non-participation with students from lower socio-economic (LSE) groups, and suggests that it is the students who should change to 'fit' with the existing HE provision whilst the structural approach focuses on replacing the existing system in order to accommodate the diversifying needs of students' educational backgrounds and skills (Baxter et al., 2007). According to Baxter et al. (2007), deficit models have the potential to undermine the WP discourse since school pupils who do not achieve the grades required for HE or who choose a different path following school and FE college may feel stigmatised since the education system generally concentrates on those potential HE students who fulfil the standard criteria.

These theories provided an increased awareness of some of the implications of labelling students who had not followed what is generally considered the traditional route into HE. I also experienced a sense of discomfort that students were potentially being labelled as 'deficient', when in fact, current policy direction aims to encourage students from LSE groups to aspire to engage with HE (Burnell, 2015). This is particularly pertinent, not only as I am employed by an institution where 'non-traditional' students are in the majority, but also because, on reflection, both myself and more recently my son could also be labelled as 'non-traditional students' or being 'deficient' as we had not followed the traditional educational route. This personal situation and its role in this research will be examined more fully later in this Chapter. However, it has been due to this increasing understanding of the complexities of my own, my son's and my students' educational circumstances and the policy contexts surrounding this, that I have undertaken my doctoral research in this area.

## **Theoretical Framework for this Doctoral Research**

In order to be able to contextualise and interpret the findings of this doctoral research, it was first necessary to consider which theoretical framework(s) may best provide 'an interpretive lens through which to view the data' (Savin-Baden and Howell Major, 2013: p. 134). It is with this in mind and because of the nature of the subject of this doctoral research that Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, field and cultural capital were utilised as a structure to support the analysis and draw conclusions from it (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990). However, it was also important to not uncritically accept Bourdieu's theoretical framework without first examining its potential application.

There are differing views regarding the application of Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, field and cultural capital. For example, Winkle-Wagner (2010) proposes that the theories are intended for use as a conceptual whole; however, others propose that one of the concepts (specifically habitus) is considered more extensively with the other concepts applied and discussed to a lesser extent (Bathmaker, 2015; Clegg, 2011; Leahy, 2012; Reay, 2004; Thomas, 2002). Holton (2017) suggests that capital is best seen as a sub-concept to habitus. This is in direct contrast to other authors (above), who consider the concepts as equal and integral parts to the whole theory. In order to be able to assess whether all concepts are pertinent to this research, or whether one concept should be given greater primacy than the others, it is critical to discuss their meaning individually and explore their continued development during Bourdieu's lifetime and thereafter.

## **Bourdieu's Concepts of Habitus, Field and Cultural Capital Explained**

### ***Introduction***

Bourdieu is commonly categorised as a 'conflict theorist', a term that often accompanied the emergence of Marxist inspired theorists, who suggested that there was a permanent struggle and conflict between social classes (Winkle-Wagner, 2010: p.3). Conflict theories can be positioned within the radical structuralist approach focussing on the role structures play in reproducing and maintaining inequalities (Burrell and Morgan, 1979). Whilst Bourdieu's thinking can be linked with Marxist class dichotomy, since he believed that the existing class structure ensured the maintenance of the 'dominant-subordinate' discourse, he also claimed that class struggle endured as a struggle for 'distinction' (Bourdieu, 1984). Theorising in a different era to Marx, Bourdieu expanded Marx's theories beyond the 'economic constraints' imposed on people, which may have helped perpetuate class division (Musoba and Baez, 2009: p.156) in order to place them within and problematise 'the modern views of meritocracy' (Winkle-Wagner, 2010: p.4); the belief that opportunity is based on one's individual abilities (Boronski and Hassan, 2015). Bourdieu's examination of meritocracy enabled him to theorise how material conditions and education combine to ensure unequal social conditions prevail and are reproduced; how privilege in society is preserved and protected; and how inequality is legitimised and maintained (Winkle-Wagner, 2010). Further elaborating on Marxist theory, Bourdieu advocated that society was divided into three classes rather than the two originally put forward by Marx, and that cultural habits, practices and preferences are determined initially by one's level of education followed by social class origin (Bourdieu, 1984). His suggestion was that in terms of cultural habits, some cultural habits are determined by the dominant class in society and are thus more important; reinforcing status and that the possession of the required culture, or more potently 'cultural capital' by the elite in society excludes those who are not deemed to possess the appropriate culture (Sullivan, 2002).

It could be argued that researchers, authors and academics are drawn to Bourdieu's theories in order to develop an understanding of, or attempt to solve social inequality (Winkle-Wagner, 2010). However, the focus on the domination of the higher classes

and how they preserve their status in society to the disadvantage of the lower classes suggests that his theories are 'theories of domination' (Musoba and Baez, 2009) with Winkle-Wagner (2010) proposing that Bourdieu's theory does 'not readily lend itself to altering the domination' (p.83). It could be suggested that in order to address inequality, those who lack the cultural habits and practices of the dominant classes should aim to acquire them in order to become more equal; thus the implication is that those without the appropriate cultural habits and practices are deficient since the practices of the dominant in society are the 'norm' (Winkle-Wagner, 2010).

This idea of cultural wealth (those cultural habits and practice deemed to be of value in society) is transmitted from generation to generation of the elite or dominant in society. For educationalists the application of this concept is to help explain how (or if) educational plays a role in cultural reproduction and sustains inequality. Meritocracy proposes that everyone has equal access to the acquisition of appropriate cultural wealth but Bourdieu (1984) discusses the notion of 'cultural competence' (p.72) whereby only those who have the 'means of appropriation are able to decipher particular cultural codes and habits' (p.72). This situation involves what is termed 'symbolic violence' where a social distinction is assigned to those who do not have the means to appropriate the correct cultural 'wealth'. Symbolic violence is the 'façade of choice' in Bourdieu's theories (Winkle-Wagner, 2010: p.15) and relates to the unconscious acceptance of existing and structurally unequal social distinction (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). Thus, those from the dominant classes accept their dominance whilst those from the non-dominated classes accept the cultural wealth of the dominant classes as normal and just.

Applying Bourdieu's theories to this doctoral research, suggests that key messages that can be gleaned from it are the role of domination/subordination, which should be considered in relation to the student participants. It is important to contemplate how those who are considered not to have those cultural practices and habits deemed to be the norm may be viewed as 'deficient' in terms of current status and aspiration. As a theory grounded in radical structuralism it focuses attention on power, those in powerful roles and the accepted norm that education should be pursued in a certain way, for example, that aspirant young people should choose to enter HE. As set out

below in Chapters two and three, this 'deficit discourse' (Burke, 2012: p. 94) is applied to students outside the norm and the concept of a linear process or series of progression between settings (Powdthavee and Vignoles, 2007) prevalent in education is problematised (also discussed in Chapter nine in relation to the findings of the investigation).

## **Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, field and cultural capital**

### ***Habitus***

Habitus is a multifaceted concept that is central to Bourdieu's theories, but could also be described as somewhat intangible within Bourdieu's own writing (Bourdieu, 1990). Bourdieu (1984) framed 'habitus' as the product of a person's personal history and their conditions of existence as 'necessity internalized and converted into a disposition that generates meaningful practices and meaning giving perceptions' (p.166). It functions below the level of consciousness (Winkle-Wagner, 2010) and it is suggested that the direction towards a certain habitus begins early on in life (Swartz, 1997).

Thomas (2002) provides a clearer explanation of habitus suggesting that: -

*'The habitus refers to a set of dispositions created and shaped by the interaction between objective structures and personal histories, including experiences and understanding of 'reality'. (p.430)*

Although this seems to provide greater clarity on the concept, habitus remains resistant to simplification. Thomas (2002) further elaborates on the definition, corroborating Swartz's (1997) key point, that significantly habitus is acquired through the experiences of the family. He suggests, however, that habitus is also influenced by other structures, for example, educational experiences. It seems there is a dual aspect to 'habitus' that is both collective and individual and although the concept of habitus allows for 'individual agency', individuals are predisposed to behaviours consistent with their collective habitus (Reay, 2004: p. 433). Both collective and individual histories of people are essential, therefore, when attempting to understand the concept of habitus (Reay, 2004).

Habitus, whilst in part influenced by family and everyday experience (collective habitus), may also be modified and impacted upon by experiences throughout life resulting in potentially a re-structuring of future experience (individual habitus) (Di Maggio, 1979; Thomas, 2002). Reay (2004) captures this in her discussion regarding the 'permeability' of habitus (p.434) proposing that whilst individual experiences are

essential to provide an understanding of the meaning of habitus, the habitus is responsive to collective events that a person may be undergoing, and thus adapts, and as Burnell (2015) discusses 'A change in one's circumstances may mean a modification to one's habitus' (p.95). This is significant in terms of understanding how collective educational experiences can be interpreted individually.

Habitus does not, however, provide a singular influence on a person's practices, as there is an 'unconscious relationship' (Bourdieu, 1993: p.76) between habitus and field. Habitus only represents one part of the influences on a person since there is also the influence of a person's personal circumstances (field) at that point, which also influence their actions (Maton, 2012). Reay (2004) provides a visual dimension to this concept suggesting that habitus may be viewed as a continuum; at one end habitus is replicated through generations due to an unchanged field whilst at the other end of the continuum, habitus can potentially be transformed by a change in the field that may raise or lower a person's expectations. She proposes that there are implicit suggestions in the concept of habitus where there is potential for trajectories to impact on an individual, thus enabling a very different habitus to the original one experienced.

A further dimension, suggested by Bowl (2003), is that one's original habitus does not change but is overlaid by a new habitus following different experiences. At times this may cause conflict due to lifestyle, expectations of self, previous internal dispositions and expectations from others, possibly causing the uncomfortable feelings of being a 'fish out of water' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: p.127); potentially causing the person to return to the original habitus. Habitus is, therefore, not static and in essence is a person's history which shapes the present as it ensures a person acts, reacts, makes decisions and choices in a certain way (Chudzikowski and Mayrhofer, 2011; Hurst, 2013). Winkle-Wagner (2010) theorises that a return to the original habitus actually reinforces existing social stratification and a person's location within it, as it seems that unconscious dispositions always control and govern the agent.

The concept of habitus appears, therefore, to be a dynamic and evolving entity whose complete meaning is complex to grasp. Indeed, Bourdieu (1990) warned of the

'vagueness and indeterminacy' of the concept explaining that there are no fixed principles which determine people's behaviour. He further suggests that the concepts are 'open concepts' (p.107) in that they may evolve and change, as they become more deeply understood. Reay (2004) corroborates this suggesting that '(Habitus) takes many shapes and forms in Bourdieu's own writing, (and) even more so in the wider sociological work of other academics' (p.431). However, habitus provides a useful theoretical concept in first exploring and then seeking to explain 'non-traditional' student's individual and collective experiences.

### ***Field***

Bourdieu's concept of 'field' can best be understood as a 'social space in which 'interactions, transactions and events occurred' (Bourdieu, 2005: p.148). The field is, however, competitive with people in the field implementing strategies that may improve or maintain their own status in the field; the field is not level and people may be advantaged or more powerful if they have more of a certain type of capital than others (Thomson, 2012). Field was utilised by Bourdieu in conjunction with habitus and capital not only to comprehend social practice but also to analyse the workings of power and inequality in certain social spaces (Bathmaker, 2015). In educational contexts field allows the exploration of power, how it is exercised and with what consequence. When undertaking analysis of the field, the relationships between positions of the agents (people or institutions) are also significant since there may be multiple fields and sub-fields which may contain their own norms and implement their own rules (Hurst, 2013). A further consideration when analysing field is the degree of autonomy a field has, how autonomous or interdependent it is in relation to other fields and whether there is mutual dependency between the fields or even conflict (Bathmaker, 2015; Hodkinson et al., 2007).

Similar to 'habitus', the concept of 'field' seems to be an ever-evolving concept with Burawoy (2012) suggesting that it is essential to analyse how those who inhabit one particular field adapt to entering another. McLeod (2005) examines the potential impact of moving back and forth from one field to another and whether this may cause instability or disruption. Contrasting views between McLeod (2005) and McNay (1999, 2000) occur when considering movement between fields as McNay believes that whilst

there may be the disruption or instability as suggested by McLeod (2005), opportunity for disruption could potentially achieve positive change.

### ***Capital***

As with habitus and field, the concept of 'capital' has been refined and expanded, building on Bourdieu's original definition (Moore, 2012). It was clarified by Bourdieu (1998):

*'any property (any form of capital whether physical, economic, cultural or social) when it is perceived by social agents endowed with categories of perception which cause them to know and to recognise it and to give it value'* (p.47)

Essentially, capital is whatever is valued by the agents in the particular field under scrutiny, and can potentially increase in value if it is also valued by different fields (English and Bolton, 2016). Therefore capital has values within a specific field and some has more in that it has transfer value. In relation to education this can be likened to the greater status conferred on awards in further and higher education and differentiation in terms of the value assigned to programmes within either setting.

Different types of capital recognised by Bourdieu were economic, social and cultural capital. Bourdieu (1986) suggested that economic capital underpinned all other forms of capital as it had universal value since all groups in all fields valued it. Accruing economic capital results in the agent holding a privileged position of power and/ or influence (English and Bolton, 2016). Social capital is defined as the social connections that one has which influence one's social transitions, providing access to positions and opportunities that may not have been accessible without this type of capital (Chudzikowski and Mayrhofer, 2011).

Probably the most relevant type of capital for this doctoral research is that of 'cultural capital' which is defined as: -

*'a non-economic, largely intangible, and difficult-to-measure form of capital that is represented in manners, taste, bodily deportment, dispositions, dress,*

*consumption patterns, and forms of knowledge that are approved – or not approved*

(English and Bolton, 2016: p.57)

Cultural capital extends beyond the understanding of financial inequalities inherent in 'economic capital' in order to explain how privilege and power are maintained (Winkle-Wagner, 2010). In effect, the value of cultural capital in any given field is determined by the dominant agents in society who define what is deemed to be of value in cultural capital terms (Yosso, 2005). Cultural capital is something of an intangible concept relating to the specifics of cultural awareness, educational credentials, and aesthetic inclinations (Prieur and Savage, 2013). Bourdieu, when discussing cultural capital, implicitly infers the deficiencies of LSE groups; he sets the standards in his writing of the norm being the cultural capital of white middle class culture and all other expressions of cultural capital are compared to this norm in a deficit manner (O'Shea, 2016). Winkle-Wagner (2010) suggests that this is a pitfall when exploring the concept of cultural capital as the implicit deficit approach blames 'those who lack the cultural capital that is valued in particular settings for their insufficiencies' (p.ix). Whilst the value of cultural capital may be set by the dominant classes, there may be other forms of cultural capital which are just as valued by more marginalised and less powerful groups of people. Yosso (2005) suggests that 'Traditional Bourdieuan cultural capital theory... places value on a very narrow range of assets and characteristics' (p.77). Cultural capital can be increased over a period of time when the agent is in contact with a particular field (Bourdieu, 1991); the permeability of the habitus may become apparent as it gains the cultural capital required in the field that the agent is residing in (Reay, 2004).

## Habitus, Capital and Field applied to the Educational Research Context

There has been much discussion and research utilising Bourdieu's concepts as a framework in the educational arena which have resulted in a plethora of articles applying and developing the principles further (Bathmaker, 2015; Burnell, 2015; Clegg, 2011; Duckworth and Cochrane, 2012; Dumais, 2006; Holton, 2017; Hurst, 2013; Kettley, 2007; Leahy, 2012; Leese, 2010; Reay, 2004; Silva, 2005; Thomas, 2002; Webb et al., 2017).

In the context of education, Bourdieu utilised a person's habitus to explain the gaps in working class participation in HE highlighting that they are 'more likely not to enter than to be eliminated from it by the explicit sanction of examination failure' (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990: p.153). He described the 'field of education as being very structured, highly organised and separated into establishments... that reproduce the principles of social classifications' (Bourdieu, 1998: p: 140). In terms of cultural capital, when applied to the area of education, Bourdieu (1973) explained that the level of education an individual attained corresponded closely to cultural wealth. Whilst education may facilitate the acquisition of further cultural capital, it is those who acquire cultural capital believed to be of 'high value' by the dominant classes that would be deemed more successful or cultivated (Winkle-Wagner, 2010).

In educational terms, the dominant cultural capital is perhaps legitimised by the institutionalisation and professionalisation of knowledge; thus confirming HE establishments as noteworthy settings for the reproduction of power relations (Mallman, 2017). Indeed the HE setting was historically constructed by those who had the appropriate cultural capital to feel justified in participating and were confident in their position to participate; whilst those students from LSE groups may have a different cultural capital which is not recognised by the dominant culture as being of any worth. However, Yosso (2005) reminds us not to confuse such cultural worth with an alternative 'worthless', so alternative forms of capital may be valued in LSE groups equally or even more than those deemed to be more broadly of value. This may result in students from LSE classes viewing their own cultural capital as inferior in value

(Mallman, 2017), but it also encourages us to seek what leads to the rejection of alternatives.

Utilising Bourdieu and drawing on his concepts, then applying these in an educational arena, shows that conflict theory allows the exploration of group conflict that occurs due to unequal social conditions and how this may be explored theoretically (Collins, 1971), resulting in a deeper exploration of the way that some groups in education are privileged over others (Winkle-Wagner, 2010). In the HE arena, Horvat (2001) claims that applying the concept of cultural capital specifically allows the power dynamics that support the current stratification of Higher Education Institutions (HEI) to be revealed, and Bourdieu (1984) challenges the value of meritocracy in HE, maintaining that HE establishments are created and maintained by the elite, the dominant class in the field. It also allows the rejection of socially promoted educational opportunities to be considered.

Bourdieu's theories also allow consideration of agency within unequal fields and how the individual agent enjoys some leverage when engaging in a certain field (for example, education) (Horvat, 2001). An individual could potentially reflect on their own cultural capital, and respond by attempting to acquire more of the type of cultural capital valued in the particular field (Winkle-Wagner, 2010) or they could reject it. It is still emphasised though, that those who come from more privileged social backgrounds can exact a greater advantage throughout their educational career (Martin and Spencer, 2009; Salisbury et al., 2009; Zweigenhaft, 1993), whilst those from lower social classes may only engage with post-compulsory education if they have an understanding of the education system (Clegg, 2011; Dumais, 2006; Freeman, 1997; Mallman, 2017; Valadez, 1993; Walpole et al., 2005; Watson and Widin, 2015). Furthermore, it has been demonstrated through research utilising a Bourdieuan framework that there are certain aspects of an individual's social background factors which impact on success in the HE field such as parenting styles (Dumais, 2006; Lareau, 2003; Silva, 2005), teachers' interpretations of family involvement in education (Dumais, 2006; Lareau, 1987, 2000; Lareau and Horvat, 1999; Perna and Titus, 2005) and encouragement by compulsory educational establishments for students to apply for HE (Bathmaker, 2015; Chamberlin-Payne, 2015; McDonough, 1997).

## The Relevance of Bourdieu's Theoretical Framework to this Doctoral Research

This doctoral research, as previously stated, is seeking to provide insights into the educational experiences of students who are enrolled on the courses I teach as a fractional lecturer. The purpose was to understand why the students did not initially engage at age 18 years; whether there were any common characteristics in their decision-making processes; why they had chosen to engage at the present time; and what their perceived support needs were. The student participants in this study were from LSE groups, were all female and in the main mature students as defined by HEFCE (2000). Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, field and capital have, as demonstrated above, been applied in research into education participation in general. In particular, there has been widespread application when investigating students from LSE groups, labelled as non-traditional, in order to understand their motivations to participate in the wake of the on-going WP agenda (for example, Adcroft, 2011; Archer, 2003; Bingham and O'Hara, 2007; O'Shea and Stone, 2014; Quinn, 2004; Taylor and House, 2010). There have also been investigations into the impacts, both present and on-going, on the HE landscape in general drawing on Bourdieu's theoretical concepts (Bathmaker and Thomas, 2009; Bowl, 2001; Bradley and Miller, 2010; Brimble, 2013; Glassey et al., 2012; Leahy, 2012; Philips, 2009; Reay et al., 2001; Thomas, 2002; Widdowson, 2005).

This previous research has created the environment for investigating whether Bourdieu's concepts are applicable to the findings of my own study; they will be explored further and applied to the findings and analysis of this study. The area of investigation in this research, the participants recruited and the situation/ type of HE establishment in which this study is situated warrants the exploration of the intersection of habitus, field and capital. This will allow an exploration between the individual (participant – individual habitus) and the group (collective habitus), and the group and the social structure (the field of education) (Winkle-Wagner, 2010). During the Discussion and Analysis Chapter (Chapter nine) an evaluation will be undertaken to explore whether Bourdieuan theory is applicable to this research, or whether there are limitations to its application.

As Reay (1995) suggests, using Bourdieu's concepts provide:

*'a way of looking at data which renders the 'taken-for-granted' problematic' suggesting a whole range of questions...; How well adapted is the individual to the context they find themselves in? How does personal history shape their responses to the contemporary setting?' (p. 369).*

Nonetheless, Winkle-Wagner (2010) warns against the clumsy application of Bourdieu's theory, which may be cultivated by a lack of understanding of their concepts, 'resulting in misinterpreted research findings and the absence of nuances in the analysis and interpretation of data' (p.3). Both Reay's (1995) and Winkle-Wagner's (2010) views are therefore important when undertaking analysis of the data in order to determine the applicability and/ or the limitations of Bourdieu's theories to this doctoral research.

Reay (2004) discusses that 'habitus is primarily a method for analysing the dominance of dominant groups in society and their domination of subordinate groups' (p. 436). Furthermore, cultural capital can be interpreted as the property of the dominant classes, rather than being accessible to everyone (Kingston, 2001; Lamont and Lareau, 1988; Lareau and Weininger, 2003). Bourdieu's primary focus in his writing is that of social class and how those from the lower social classes may be viewed as deficient by the dominant classes due to lack of connectedness between their habitus, field and cultural capital. 'Normal' in society is portrayed as the dominant groups' values and ethos, whereas 'abnormal' becomes 'deficient' when applied to those agents who do not conform to the 'normal' view (Winkle-Wagner, 2010).

Similarly, the WP agenda focuses on how those who do not engage with HE in this climate of mass education are 'deficient' and suffer from 'low aspirations'; the focus on engagement in HE can be attributed to policymakers and educationalists (the dominant groups) whose cultural capital is deemed high value and should be that to which all agents should aspire. Yosso (2005) suggests that the dominant groups are the standard against which all other groups are judged in comparison to this norm. However, in terms of this doctoral research, the aim is to attempt to gain an understanding from the student perspective, allowing their voices to be heard, thereby

potentially challenging the dominant culture which suggests that those who do not have the correct habitus or cultural capital may always be considered 'deficient' in educational terms.

## **Locating Myself in this Doctoral Research**

Scott et al. (2004) discuss the motivations for undertaking doctoral study, and I have discovered that I straddle two different types; career development (extrinsic-professional continuation) and intrinsic-personal/ professional affirmation, which includes in its categories personal fulfilment and professional credibility (p.123). Whilst this doctorate in education has been engaged with to hopefully implement a change in career direction, personal fulfilment is high on my agenda, as I have, since the beginning of my undergraduate studies, wanted to achieve a doctoral qualification. This will hopefully provide affirmation of my credibility as an academic.

Fox et al. (2007) suggest that practitioner researcher often develops research 'with expert power derived from recognised knowledge and expertise in relation to a specific area of practice' (p.90). Whilst this may be true of undertaking doctoral research in your own discipline, my choice of doctoral study has provided a huge learning curve in terms of assimilating the nuances of a new area of discipline; that of education. Although I obviously work in education, and perhaps the suggestion might be that I am an expert as I teach in HE, the background to policy, educational motivation and theory have been a new trajectory. My doctoral journey has therefore provided much in terms of personal and professional growth. I have developed greater knowledge of research philosophy, analysis, writing, and research and also confronted a prevailing fear, which is that of presenting to peers and experts in the field of education.

The process of undertaking the fieldwork has provided an understanding of what the student participants perceive they require in terms of support, both academically and pastorally. They have discussed their educational journey and provided an insight into the difficulties they have encountered in terms of feeling as though they are not 'clever' enough to study for a degree. This has resonated with me, not only with how I have felt regarding undertaking my doctorate but also in terms of my late entry onto an undergraduate programme at the age of 31. Thinking back to my 18-year-old self, I was in the top stream of an all girls' school, and encouraged to apply to university. I decided that I did not want to study beyond 'A' level at that point, since I was

uncertain which career path to follow, and therefore did not wish to undertake degree-level study for the sake of going to university. Further guidance either on potential career pathways or in my chosen 'A' level subjects was withdrawn, and the teachers focused on those students deemed 'aspirational' because they intended to engage with a university education. This approach undermined my confidence in my academic abilities and my 'A' level grades were not what I had expected, I felt that they were not representative of the academic promise I had originally demonstrated. There could be a link between my own self-perception and its effects on performance and those of my current students. I slowly re-built my confidence and undertook further 'A' levels during my twenties in preparation for the undergraduate degree I intended to begin when my children were school age. I was completely surprised by how well I performed at undergraduate level, and this equipped me with the confidence to continue at postgraduate level. Undertaking a doctorate, however, initially highlighted my deep-rooted fear of not being 'clever' enough as it seemed such a huge step in intellectual terms, echoing how I had felt at 18 years old post 'A' level.

This experience has, therefore, provided me with greater empathy for the participants and their own educational journey, which they have agreed to share. I have listened to their stories, and sometimes am in awe of the difficulties they have overcome to eventually enrol on a degree course, and marvel at their determination to succeed in order to make a difference to their lives and those of their families. There have been incidences of 'reciprocity' with my research subjects where I have been 'hearing, listening and equalising the research relationship – doing research 'with' instead of 'on' my research participants' (Pillow, 2003: p.179). These experiences have shaped both my research process and my practice. In terms of my research process, I have become aware of how my education has impacted on the direction of my research, not only in terms of the subject I have pursued but also the research questions. Du Preez (2008) proposes that the types of questions we may ask of our research participants may equally be directed towards the researcher, especially when the researcher resonates with the research topic in terms of their own education, which is entirely accurate when I contemplate my interview schedule. I am interested in the students' reasons for studying at this time, their personal educational journey and why they

have chosen to study at this particular establishment. When I reflect on this, themes that are presenting themselves resonate with me as it being the right place and the right time for the individual under scrutiny. However, the apparent connection between researcher and participants in such situations requires special attention to be paid to acknowledging ways in which the participants are both like and unlike the insider researcher (Chavez, 2008).

Therefore, whilst I have acknowledged my own distinct presence in this research, and some of the literature suggests that this may enrich the fieldwork, reporting of the results and even the writing up of my thesis (Fox et al., 2007; Lee, 2009; Scott et al., 2004), I am aware that the research does not have me at the centre and I must not influence the reporting of the outcomes because of my own personal bias (Lee, 2009). Although having a personal connection with the chosen research area may provide benefits in terms of personal knowledge and empathic understanding of the research participants, research with a personal connection can also be a complex process as it may pose significant challenges when undertaking data collection, analysis and reporting of the outcomes (Greene, 2014). However, whilst I have acquired an understanding of the influence of my educational journey when undertaking doctoral research in this particular area, I have also had to acknowledge that my experience will have a bearing on how I have analysed and presented the data collected. My positionality within the research has allowed me to engage with intense personal reflection to develop strategies to hopefully reduce bias during analysis and dissemination resulting in a rejection of the phenomenographic method of data analysis in favour of a more person-centred relational method triangulated with a more structured, less reductionist method. This is detailed and explained in greater detail during Chapter five (Methodology) in 'The Problem with Phenomenography' section, Chapter seven (Data Analysis Methods) in the 'My Chosen Data Analysis Techniques' section and Chapter nine (Discussion and Analysis) in the Potential for Bias and Issues of Power within this Doctoral Research section.

Through reflection, I have discerned that I initially had a hunch regarding the type of students that are attracted to the establishment in this research without ever paying much attention to the available college documentary evidence, but my overriding

impulse was to undertake research because I felt some resonance with our students. This is demonstrated in my reflective diary excerpt: -

*'The more fieldwork I undertake, the more I resonate with the participants. I have come to understand how my own educational experience has impacted on my choice of research field.'*

(Dodding, 2014)

## Potential of this research

The input from both students and lecturers could provide information, which may potentially change the way in which the college offers support prior to and throughout their studies. Good practice may be shared by lecturers, which may impact on the rest of the HE sector of the college, and be implemented when supporting non-traditional students. Costley et al. (2011) concur with this discussing that work-based research can potentially provide the evidence to make a change at policy and decision-making level, thus impacting on the individual practice of the staff involved.

At times, due to the nature and individuality of HE establishments, it is difficult to transfer the results from one college or university to another. Drake and Heath (2011) suggest that there is a requirement to locate oneself within the research as an active participant, as well as understanding that the research is too small to be generalisable to a wider audience. While this may be true, Bassey (1999) has identified 'fuzzy generalisations' (p.12) which means that an aspect of the research may be transferable to other institutions that are undergoing similar situations. Indeed, the research that I have undertaken may well have aspects, which may be transferable to other institutions, as the main aim is to investigate the educational experiences of both students who are labelled as 'non-traditional' and of the staff who teach them, and 'non-traditional' students enrol at many HE establishments.

Finally, the following quote seems to summarise what I would like to achieve with my doctoral research: -

*'Although qualitative research, ... , does not prescribe applications to practice, it does influence a thoughtful reflective practice by its revealing of conceptions of human experience'*

(Sjostrom & Dahlgren, 2002: p.34)

## Chapter two

### Contextual Positioning of the Research Setting

This chapter will provide an overview of the educational policy context, which affects the chosen area of research; however in order to further contextualise the focus of this research, it seems pertinent to discuss the project's setting. The College-based Higher Education establishment examined for this research is situated in the North West of England, in the 13<sup>th</sup> most deprived borough of the UK (Lancashire County Council, 2015). The establishment where I teach and have undertaken this research has more than the average numbers of students who are labelled as 'non-traditional' (HEFCE, 2000) and 8% of students declare a disability compared with the national average of 4%. Support of students, although to some extent dictated by government policy (BIS, 2011), seems high priority on the college agenda, and support mechanisms include a dedicated department aimed at supporting students with disabilities, an inclusive studies department, student engagement officers for each school, a personal tutorial system and a mental health department.

Academic and pastoral support is, therefore, in keeping with the ethos of the college, a high priority for the lecturing team on the courses upon which I teach. Statistics for the previous cohort recruited for the Foundation Degree (FD) highlight the importance of the high priority afforded by the teaching team with 70% of the cohort declaring a disability, and 90% enrolling on the course without traditional 'A' level qualifications. The intention of this doctoral research is to understand each student participant's educational experience from their individual perspective, understand the staff experience of the required student academic and pastoral support, and analyse college documents to comprehend how HE establishment policies reflect the requirements for pastoral and academic support for students.

With this in mind, the research questions are:

- What are the factors that determine decision-making amongst WP students?
- Do students initially unwilling to progress to HE share any common characteristics?
- How are WP students supported during decision-making about their options?
- What support is offered to WP students who choose not to progress to HE?
- What are staff perceptions of the academic support required by the WP student?

## Policy Contexts Surrounding the Research

This initial literature review has been included in order to contextualise, near the beginning of this thesis, the educational policy context which has impacted on HE participation for those groups of students who have traditionally been under-represented, and who are currently actively encouraged to participate by policy makers. The intention within this section is to demonstrate the significance of policy intervention in widening participation in HE and highlight the approaches, which are taken to encourage WP.

Post Second World War, the Robbins Report (1963) provided the catalyst for extending university education's availability stating that: -

*'courses of higher education should be available for all those who are qualified by ability and attainment to pursue them and who wish to do so'*

(Robbins, 1963: p.8)

Robbins' recommendation was that HE should be available to anyone with the desire to engage and ability to succeed, and that education should be free of charge since any public benefits (i.e. for the country's economic output) outweighed any individual private benefits (Robbins, 1963). Another key point of the report was that individuals have different starting points in their education and the government has a function to play in equalising life chances and opportunities (Robbins, 1963). However, it seems that growth in participation in education was already evident at this point in time and Robbins merely foregrounded this, acknowledging that inequalities could potentially be tackled through state intervention (Blackburn and Jarman, 1993).

Post-war consensus in politics shaped the development of the welfare state and in particular educational policy; key principles upheld were those of equality of opportunity and diversity in education (Boronski and Hassan, 2015). Whilst the label of 'Widening Participation' was only framed in the late 1990s, following the Dearing Report 'Higher Education in the Learning Society' (1997), Robbins' new policy direction for HE could actually be acknowledged as the beginning of WP in terms of accepting how education could perhaps attempt to address some social injustice. Significantly,

however, there was an interruption in the belief that education was innate in the creation of social justice and equality during the late 1960s and 1970s, specifically during the economic recession, with the focus turning to standards in education, global economic competitiveness and anxieties regarding welfare state spending (Boronski and Hassan, 2015).

The election of a Conservative government in 1979 heralded an era of far-reaching economic and social reform, which saw education become more business-like responding to the demands of its consumers (Abbott et al., 2013). This neo-liberalist educational direction and the reduction in state intervention impacted on many areas of education. For example, during the 1990s HE funding was deemed unsustainable, resulting in conversion of the education system from the public service advocated by Robbins (1963) into a more business-like model (Ball, 2013; Ward and Eden, 2011). Power to implement educational policy decisions was transferred from local authorities to central government, and the effects of this were that available grants were gradually eroded and replaced with the student loan system (Abbott et al., 2013). The laissez-faire ideology of successive Conservative governments sought to encourage individual responsibility and choice, self-interest, competition and enterprise (Atkinson et al., 1996; Ball, 1997; Halsey, 2000; Hodgson, 1999; Loxley and Thomas, 2001). The Conservatives regarded market and consumer choice as the most proficient way of distributing resources; further subsequent inequalities were viewed as expected and essential for the efficient management of the economy (Loxley and Thomas, 2001), resulting in the omission from government rhetoric of concerns regarding disadvantage and social exclusion (Ball, 2013).

In 1997 the 'New Labour' government was greatly influenced by what became known as the 'Third Way' (Blair, 1998; Giddens, 1998; Hargreaves, 2009; Powell, 2000). Tony Blair defined this in the Labour Party's 1997 manifesto as: -

*'a new and distinctive approach, which has been mapped out, one, that differs from the solutions of the old left and those of the Conservative right'*

(Labour Party, 1997: p.1).

The Third Way endeavoured to offer an alternative path to the existing 'Old Labour' policy of high levels of welfare spending and low accountability and the 'New Right' approach, which had a tendency to disregard the effects of lack of employment and welfare support (Boronski and Hassan, 2015). Prime Minister Tony Blair's declaration that 'education, education, education' was a key priority in 1997 highlighted the belief that the economic success of the country could be achieved through education (Hoskins, 2012); thus once more focusing on education as a route to social equality (Abbott et al., 2013).

Whilst the rhetoric of New Labour was that they would adopt the 'Third Way' approach that aimed to 'fully develop a market-led system with social justice' (Abbott et al., 2013: p.131) they continued with the marketisation of education with many policies being a continuation of previous Conservative government education policies (Ward and Eden, 2011). However, Prime Minister Tony Blair tried to distance himself from the previous Conservative administration in terms of their lack of attention to disadvantage and social inclusion, suggesting that whilst New Labour had adopted neo-liberalist tendencies, the party also stood for social justice and equality (Abbott et al., 2013). He clarified an agenda where those members of society he considered as having been neglected during Conservative rule would have opportunities to enhance their lives through engagement with education and training (Boronski and Hassan, 2015). During New Labour's initial year in power, The Dearing Report was published (1997) which firmly positioned the expansion of HE as central to government policy in education (Burke, 2012). Further themes incorporated into the report which have impacted on HE were greater collaboration between institutions, an emphasis on lifelong learning initiatives, improvements in HE teaching, an emphasis on the importance of utilising information and communication technologies (ICT) and ensuring transparency of learning outcomes and objectives for students and employers (Dearing, 1997).

The Labour government, during the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, attempted to encourage students from all socio-economic groups to participate with the aim of increasing the participation of 18-30 year olds to 50 per cent by 2010 (Burke, 2012). It was during this period that the discourse of WP became increasingly important with its

focus being directly on 'equity, diversity and expansion of educational opportunities' (David, 2012: p.22). Initiatives such as the New Deal, Sure Start Programme and Aimhigher were established to provide education, training and raise aspirations for those considered to be from the poorest families but results of these enterprises were varied (Bartlett and Burton, 2016).

Dearing (1997) acknowledged that there was a requirement to demonstrate that HE was a good investment for LSE groups especially since it had been demonstrated that this group of students are more at risk of failure and face uncertain rewards (Archer, 2003). This is reiterated by David (2012) who suggests that students from LSE groups have lower retention figures and that in order to benefit from a HE qualification, LSE students need to secure a good classification in their undergraduate degree. Exceptions to this are mature women students who are less likely to discontinue their studies and are more likely to achieve a higher degree classification than their younger peers (David, 2012). Official rhetoric regarding the value of HE for working class groups, however, seems to focus on the increased economic benefits of a university education as it is anticipated that people's earning potential is increased post-HE, and therefore it is assumed people's personal satisfaction is increased and they are more fulfilled (Brine, 2011). Whilst government policy aims to help grow participation by offering incentives to lower barriers to engaging in HE, it does not and perhaps cannot in terms of time and money, acknowledge the individual reasons for non-participation and places non-participation into one homogenous set of reasons emphasising the benefits in terms of increased social mobility and equality (David, 2012). This is reiterated by Hinton-Smith (2012: p. 9) who proposes that: -

*'The catch-all categories of WP and non-traditional students unhelpfully mask the diversity of experience and need represented by those historically excluded from HE learning'*

Although successive governments have continued the WP approach with bursaries and other incentives on offer for students from under-represented groups (Bibbings, 2006); significantly there has been a shift from WP's original discourse regarding equity and diversity in education to one of a focus on education as a means to social mobility (David, 2012). However, the marketisation of HE has been unrelenting with Acts such as the 2004 Higher Education Act, which allowed Higher Education

Institutions (HEI) to increase fees up to £3000 per annum (p.a.). There was significant debate as to whether this tuition fee rise would deter under-represented groups from enrolling in HE (Watson, 2006). Blair promised there would be no further tuition fee rises; however, Labour commissioned the Browne Review in 2008, which further scrutinised HE funding (Bartlett and Burton, 2016). Its findings were implemented under the elected Coalition government, in the form of the White Paper 'Students at the Heart of the System' in 2011. This was in spite of the Liberal Democrat's election promise to oppose further fee rises and abolish fees completely (Liberal Democrats, 2010). The Coalition approved many of the White Paper's recommendations in order to make significant budget cuts, stating their belief in the main points of the report, one of which was 'Those who are beneficiaries of higher education should make a larger contribution to the cost' (BIS, 2011:p.4).

It was considered that the White Paper could impact negatively on HE participation by students of LSE groups because of their attitudes to debt incurrence (Callendar and Jackson, 2008), but research has demonstrated that this has not happened (HEFCE, 2013). The impacts of the policy, however, have been widespread; current evidence suggests that the White Paper has not discouraged students from LSE groups from studying in a full-time capacity, but there continues to be significant gaps in participation between different groups of students. Since 2010/2011 part-time undergraduate entry has fallen, which may eventually prove significant in terms of diversity and equality for non-traditional student cohorts. Mature student numbers fell in 2012/2013, which continues to be worrisome with regards to equality and diversity (HEFCE, 2013). Indeed, the Russell Group response (2011) to the White Paper suggested that the government risked focusing too much on regulation of universities rather than resolving real problems of social mobility, such as underachievement at school, poor advice on best 'A' level choices and choice of university degree courses.

Furthermore, the introduction of and then subsequent increase in tuition fees has increased the importance for HE establishments to view their students as stakeholders and partners in the establishment. The outcome has been for a growing tension between the increasingly diverse student population, the marketisation of HE and the traditional view of HE as 'providing a challenge to students' values, assumptions and

habits of thought' (Haggis, 2006: p.531). A study by Higgins et al. (2010) discusses that the majority felt that HE was a good investment, yet only 40% of this sample felt that their course was 'Value for Money' at the end. This highlights the conflict between discovering what the student wants or needs and providing a suitable response for this, whilst challenging the student to become an independent autonomous thinker.

Whilst The Dearing Report (1997) was pivotal in opening up university education for under-represented groups in society, this review of the literature has demonstrated how the Robbins Report (1963) was perhaps the first to acknowledge the requirement for a more diverse group of HE students. Both the Robbins Report (1963) and the Dearing Report (1997) had dominant messages that participation in HE was crucial to economic growth of the UK in a global economy and social mobility. The Dearing Report (1997) constructed the widening participation of HE as a route for social justice, in terms of the inclusion of students from lower social classes, thus promoting equality of opportunity and the tackling of social inequalities (Abbott et al., 2013; Archer, 2003; Ward and Eden, 2011).

## **The Impact of the Introduction of The Foundation Degree**

The introduction of the Foundation Degree (FD) qualification by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) with the Department for Education and Skills for England (DfEs, 2007) in 2001/2002 following the Dearing Report (1997) has been an important step in the evolution of HE. Its introduction was significant in the government's evolving WP strategy and focus on Lifelong Learning, as it was anticipated that these degrees would encourage more students from underrepresented groups to engage (Fenge, 2011). The provision was intended to encourage students from underrepresented groups as it offered part-time study and distance learning options with potential for students to engage who did not possess traditional 'A' level qualifications (Wilson et al., 2005). Foundation degrees are developed in collaboration with employers and therefore tend to provide an increased focus on work-based learning and employability (Fenge, 2011), which again has been shown to appeal to those underrepresented groups in HE, as they are able to work and study simultaneously (Wilson et al., 2005). Since the emphasis of FDs do require a focus on employability and key vocational skills, the traditional academic culture in HE has been challenged (Brain et al., 2004; Thomas, 2002), representing a 'detraditionalisation' of HE (Johnson, 2003). The FD has represented a shift in HE ethos in terms of greater student-centred teaching, learning and support strategies, which seems more akin to the traditional FE culture (Bamber, 2005).

One of the targets of the Dearing Report (1997) was a greater collaboration between institutions, and it may be assumed that this is one of the results of the introduction of the FD since the FD has represented a challenge to the ethos of HE (Hatt and Baxter, 2003). Furthermore, elite institutions, which potentially have decided not to widen participation with the introduction of other types of educational provision such as FDs have increased collaboration with FE colleges (Fenge, 2011). Indications are that more progression routes have developed which take students from FD qualifications based at HE in FE colleges to top-up degrees in Universities (Foskett, 2005), with a HEFCE analysis (2007: 57) proposing that many mature students may not have enrolled in HE if FDs had not been introduced; therefore it can be suggested that this type of qualification has made a significant contribution to WP (Craig, 2009).

## **Effects of WP Policies on HE Institutions**

As educational policy since the 1960s has encouraged the diversification of the HE student population, more recent policy initiatives have placed increasing demands on HE establishments to develop strategic policies which help to support students both in their academic endeavours and pastorally (Jordan et al., 2008). There are varied views regarding the value of WP across institutions (Hogarth et al., 1997; Squirrell, 1999) and whilst there are financial incentives offered, at times opinion is divided as to whether WP has affected the quality of HE (Archer, 2003). Although the WP strategy was introduced primarily to address known variation in participation rates amongst different socio-economic groups, The Dearing Report (1997) and subsequent focus on implementing strategies to widen access to HE were set against the backdrop of Social Inclusion promoted by the New Labour government following the 1997 general election. This diversification of the student population has brought many challenges for HE establishments such as, for example, students enrolling on degree courses without previously attaining what are deemed traditional qualifications (McDonald and Stratta, 2001). As institutional data on retention, success and student satisfaction has recently become publically available; the management of HE establishments seem to be placing more demands on staff to retain students at all costs (Crosling et al., 2008).

The diverse nature of HE establishments in the UK can be regarded as a stratified system in terms of status and includes the Russell Group universities, pre and post 1992 universities, and latterly those FE colleges who offer HE provision either within the same building or on the same campus. How much these provisions differ in terms of their ethos and culture has been intensely evaluated in the literature (Archer, 2007; Bathmaker, 2015; Leahy, 2012), but HE has been in a constant state of transition since the Robbins Report (1963), trying to accommodate an increasingly diverse student body. The types of students recruited into the diverse range of institutions in the HE sector and the expectations of both students and the institution have been divided into several different categories by Trow (1973); an 'elite system' aimed at the ruling classes to help to develop their knowledge and character; a 'mass system' aimed to develop skills in students to enable them to undertake technical employment; and a 'universal system' aimed at the masses which prepared students to undertake

employment in an industrial society. Trow (1973) also suggested that students' expectations relating to participation changed in line with the HE establishment they attended where elite education was seen as a privilege, a mass system was a right and the universal system was an essential requirement. Bathmaker and Thomas (2009) discussed the application of this typology to English HE in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century and found that the current system of HE incorporates 'elite, mass and universal features all at the same time, with different parts of the system functioning in different ways, and serving different purposes' (p.121).

One of the significant features of WP has been highlighted as the concentration of students labelled as 'WP' or 'non-traditional' in non-elite HEIs which despite the trend being addressed by WP quotas does not demonstrate any signs of abating (Hinton-Smith, 2012). The largest increase in WP student numbers has been recorded in post-1992 establishments or former polytechnics (Jones, 2006). Suggestions for why this is the case are that WP students 'both self-select and are selected out of elite institutions' (Hinton-Smith, 2012: p.10) which weakens social mobility. Reasons for self-selection out of elite institutions have been highlighted as the choice to attend local HEIs as these are considered more accessible in terms of locality, availability of familial support networks (especially for mature students with families) and constraints on financial resources (Smith, 2012). This could be attributed to the developed habitus and acquired cultural capital of these students as whilst self-selecting out of elite universities for the reasons portrayed in the literature referred to above, the students may also feel that they 'fit' with this type of institution (O'Shea, 2016).

In addition to these constraints, earlier research has suggested that institutional barriers such as prior educational attainment are the foremost hurdles for participation (Chowdry et al., 2010; NAO, 2008; Raffe et al., 2006). As students from LSE groups have been shown to achieve lower levels of attainment during compulsory education, this impacts on their ability to participate in HE (Gorard et al., 2007); especially if their chosen HE establishment is less flexible on their entry criteria (Smith, 2012). Therefore, WP students may be inhibited by lack of confidence in their academic abilities, perceiving that local institutions may be more welcoming and

supportive; thus rejecting elite institutions (Fenge, 2011). Hinton-Smith (2012) proposes, however, that the disproportionate number of WP students engaging with lower-status HEIs could demonstrate the 'superior emphasis placed on student support by institutions for which teaching is their bread and butter' (p.11). It seems, therefore, that WP students should be applauded for actively pursuing undergraduate education in those establishments where they feel they may be more supported, both academically and pastorally (Measor et al., 2012).

Burnell (2015: p.103) proposed that: -

*'Widening participation has altered the structure of HE, and disrupted the cycle of reproducing social inequalities within higher education as access can now be gained by non-traditional groups who were once excluded'.*

This may be so, but a National Audit Office (NAO) (2007) report suggested that in terms of retention and success of students, Russell Group establishments were the most successful, but the post-1992 universities, who recruit more WP students, were less successful, and had the highest withdrawal rates. These figures reflected the types of students enrolled and their pre-entry qualifications, which were often lower than the expected average; this claim is further supported by research into the area of WP and the engagement of NT students (Crozier and Reay, 2011; Klinger and Murray, 2012; McDonald and Stratta, 2001; Reay, 2001; Watts and Bridges, 2006). It is often suggested that the collective/ individual habitus as well as the cultural capital characteristics of WP students ensure that they position themselves differently in terms of their expectations of HE participation (Lareau and Horvat, 1999). However, Webb et al. (2017) propose that the influence of 'field' is often underestimated when discussing the participation in HE of WP students.

Transformation of the HE system has not occurred as idealised in the White Paper, 'The Future of Higher Education' (Department for Education and Skills, 2003) and the lack of cultural capital of those WP or 'non-traditional' students has often been highlighted for the lack of participation in elite HE institutions. Wyn (2009) suggests, however, that the concept of cultural capital has limitations when attempting to explain why, in spite of the expansion of HE, there has not been transformation of the HE system as a whole. It could be argued that certain dominant groups in the field of

HE have resisted change in order to ensure that WP students are unable to access the system or parts of the system by not adopting pedagogic practices designed to encourage and help the transition of WP students who do engage with HE (Webb et al, 2017).

As HE in FE based educational establishments have developed, and become increasingly important in the HE sector, they are constantly in a state of transition to develop and increase their provision to accommodate those students who enrol on their courses. Bathmaker and Thomas (2009) suggest that these 'hybrid' or 'dual sector' institutions do not fit into one type of institutional habitus, as their duality requires them to diversify into both institutional habitus of the FE and HE field. They discuss that Bourdieu and Passeron's (1990) work highlights that the HE system 'contributes to reproducing and legitimating the social structure' (p.121). Indeed, Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) claim that implicit social classification is acutely affiliated to academic classification in terms of the type of institution a student attends, and their expectations of their education from then on. However, they do emphasise that this is problematic for the HE system as a whole, rather than being confined to individual HE institutions, and the suggestion is that it is the stratified system of HE which creates hierarchies of respected/ less respected HE experiences.

Leahy (2012) reiterates this suggesting 'In general, the underlying doxa is a negative comparison with universities, not an appreciation of the potential distinctiveness (of HE in FE)' (p.170), whilst Philips (2009) argues that the belief that there is a 'real' HE is out-dated and hypocritical; HE in FE should provide a unique HE experience rather than trying to compete with 'traditional' HE establishments. The financial collapse of 2008 has impacted on student choice of establishment, meaning that the pursuit of HE in those establishments deemed 'lower down the hierarchy of prestige is an increasingly risky and uncertain choice' (Bathmaker, 2015: p.62), since scarcity of graduate employment means that employers tend to choose those educated at more prestigious universities over those who have attended establishment lower down the hierarchy.

One of the key institutional effects of WP identified by Brian et al. (2007) is that there has been significant movement towards a business model for HEIs. Whilst HEIs have recognised the importance of achieving national policy, targets for access and inclusion in order to achieve the required levels of funding, Brian et al. (2007) identify that many establishments are giving little consideration to how 'widening participation and promoting student diversity may actually make institutional economic sense' (p.8). They suggest implementing a business approach to WP for each institution, as the competitiveness of enrolling students increases. However, it is essential that they consider the wider stakeholders when adopting this approach and identify themselves with their local community. In turn, this will potentially encourage more students from the local district to attend that particular HEI. Some universities, in particular those that are deemed more prestigious, have historically not paid much attention to the idea of promoting relationships with the community (Archer, 2003), but research has demonstrated that many WP students do attend those HEIs which are closer to home for a variety of factors such as the ability to live at home, thus incurring lower educational costs (Callendar and Jackson, 2008).

## **The Development of the HE in FE Environment**

This section contextualises the research further as the research setting is a HE in FE College, which has had to respond continually to legislation regarding the nature of its educational provision. Whilst the previous sections have highlighted how HE has developed from the 1960s and the effects WP has had on HEIs, it is important to funnel the general nature of the context into the more specific policy contexts, which have impacted this particular type of provision.

Traditionally there was always a well-defined boundary between HE and FE establishments that was demarcated by a definite cultural divide in the provision of vocational (FE) or academic courses (HE); skills versus knowledge (Hall, 1994). During the initial expansion of HE in the 1990s, there was a blurring of the boundary as government policy concentrated on skills development and employability impacting on both FE and HE courses, resulting in a move towards a policy of cross-sector partnership (Bird, 1996). Two main outcomes developed, which were; key skills were introduced into the curriculum for both FE and HE and there was an increase in collaboration between FE and HE establishments to cultivate progression routes for students (Paczuska, 1999). The introduction of the Lifelong Learning Policy with the aim of providing wider educational opportunities in the post-compulsory sector (Leader, 2003) and The Learning Age Green Paper (DfEE, 1998) allowed for an even greater collaboration between HE and FE since more extensive local educational provision at higher educational levels was required (Paczuska, 1999).

The hybrid nature of the FE sector (Bathmaker and Thomas, 2009) and the introduction of HE provision within it, however, has meant there is constant need for re-invention due to continually evolving government policy expectations. Significant government policy such as the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act forced FE colleges to operate and compete in a 'quasi-market' (Callendar and Jackson, 2008: p.405), and then in 1993 control of colleges was removed from local authorities. Feather (2011) suggests that the FE environment is in a constant state of flux, responding to initiatives such as WP, 14-19 and HE in FE, and nothing seems to be allowed to settle properly before the next policy initiative is introduced.

One of the outcomes of the collaboration between FE and HE has been the enrolment in further study by mature people and students from groups which were traditionally underrepresented (Gilchrist et al., 2003). Research into WP, however, has demonstrated that non-traditional students may lack confidence in their academic abilities requiring high levels of individualised support to succeed in their studies (Burke, 2012; Hinton-Smith, 2012; Hoskins, 2012; Taylor, 2012; Wilkins and Burke, 2015). Whilst traditional university courses are designed to accommodate students with traditional academic qualifications, the 'new' students progressing through an FE environment often enrol to study at HE level with prior skills-based qualifications which generally require little engagement with academic writing and critical analysis; therefore HE and HE in FE have had to adapt their course delivery, support mechanisms, curriculum and assessment, resulting in a new model of HE which is more in keeping with the FE model of student-centred learning, flexible delivery, learning support and study skills programmes (Paczuska, 1999). Indeed, Greenbank (2007) defines one positive characteristic of HE in FE environments as offering a culture of support for students with a 'teacher-intensive' educational ethos (Bamber, 2005: p.29). This allows a more student-centred, individualised and humanistic (in scale and philosophy) education to take place.

The policy of Lifelong Learning and the change in student demographics have therefore encouraged the development of locally provided HE courses in FE colleges. This has removed some barriers to participation such as travel to a more locally situated HE provider and presented the opportunity to engage once more with education to gain further qualifications (Holton, 2017). FE colleges have therefore continued to fill the gap in providing for a multitude of educational needs and providing 'a second chance at education' (Green and Lucas, 1999: p.230).

## **Implications of WP Policy for the Research Setting**

As demonstrated in the previous section, the nature of College-based Higher Education is in a constant state of flux. This has impacted not only on the leadership and management styles of the research setting, but also on the development of policies publically outlining the protocols in place to ensure students are supported and successful in their HE study. It seems appropriate at this stage in the thesis, therefore, to examine this aspect of college life aligning it with theory on the subject.

The management and executive in the college have developed policies such as the HE access agreement (2016-2017), Single Equality Scheme (2014-2017) and the Teaching, Learning and Assessment Policy (2015-2016), which are the frameworks for supporting the students. These have been analysed for this doctoral research in order to demonstrate how the establishment address educational policy directives in the public domain and how these may impact on the staff (see Chapter eight). Theoretically, however, these policies demonstrate a top-down approach to dealing with WP, and as discussed by Knight and Trowler (2001) seem to present a technical-rational approach which assumes that the 'organisation is a coordinated unit with a common understanding of objectives' (p.14). However, it seems that when reflecting on the implementation of policies produced to support students, there is an element of employing the 'bureaucratic process theory and change' (p.4), which focuses on lower levels of the organisation and the enactment of the policy there.

Whilst there are organisational policies in place designated to support the stakeholders, the staff on the ground that actually deal with students on an individual basis, have to respond to the requirements of individual students and all the complexities and unpredictability of human nature. Knight and Trowler (2001) posit that staff interpret 'government policy or management vision as they put it into action in ambiguous situations' (p.5) suggesting that staff often have to 'work round' problems which are unexpected or not anticipated by policy makers or managers. Therefore, when supporting students either academically or pastorally, the college approach which addresses support students may require in a collective manner, may

be inappropriate or unsuccessful, and it is the course teams that have to use their knowledge of individual students to ensure the retention and success of students.

The organisational structure employed at the college means that the policies are developed assuming that all students are a homogenous population presenting with the same types of support needs, and therefore the implementation of the policy will result in addressing all the students' needs. It would be impossible to develop policies at institutional level to address individual needs, and government policy requires the information on how students are supported to be publically available, usually on the HEI's website. However, at ground level, staff are involved in their own 'policy-making' rather than simply executing institutional policy as they know their students and understand their needs individually rather than as a whole. This is an example of 'street level bureaucracy' (Lipsky, 1980: p.xii), where the lecturers hold considerable power due to their expertise in dealing with the situation in hand. The realities of dealing with students' needs on a day-to-day basis are examined in this thesis, following the staff participant data collection, in Chapter eight (Findings and Data Analysis) and Chapter nine (Discussion and Analysis).

However, Knight and Trowler (2001) suggest 'They (street level bureaucrats) have their own situated rationality, which can lead them to amend or ignore aspects of centrally derived policy' (p.5) and whilst this seems a realistic proposition, how the establishment and staff deal with supporting students can be also be linked with Giddens' (1979) theory of structuration. This posits that social construction derives from the on-going input from both individual and collective participants, and 'institutional processes operate not only in a top-down, but also a bottom-up direction' (Scott et al., 2008: p. 440). Assuming this is the case, then the technical-rational approach to change (Knight and Trowler, 2001) and the street level bureaucrat approach (Lipsky, 1980) both have an essential role to play in the organisational structure of the college in this research; thus theoretically allowing for policy development and implementation from the management of the college to be effectively filtered down to teaching staff in implementing policies to support students on an individual basis. The relationship between staff perceptions of required student support and that of the establishment as a whole will be explored in more depth

following analysis of staff data and college documents in Chapters eight and nine (Findings and Data Analysis and Discussion and Analysis).

## Chapter three

### Labelling – A Self-Fulfilling Prophecy?

This Chapter will explore some key concepts, which have been developed when discussing ‘non-participation’ of students, and explore the impact in terms of labelling students. It will discuss how this doctoral research questions the linearity of the educational process promoted by policy makers, and how labels such as ‘dropout’, ‘non-participant’, ‘non-traditional student’, ‘low-aspirational’ and ‘deficit’ are outdated in a system where ‘widening participation’ is a key phrase.

It seems there is an essential human need to label and categorise everything in our world, and educational attainment is no exception. Indeed, Tajfel (2010) writes that: -

*‘Any society which contains power, status, prestige and social group differentials (and they all do) places each of us in a number of social categories which become an important part of our self-definition. In situations which relate to those aspects of our self-definitions that we think we share with others, we shall behave very much as they do...’ (p.14)*

However, it seems that this requirement to label or categorise can sometimes have detrimental effects on those who are labelled. Hebding and Glick (1987) suggest that the labelling of an individual as ‘different’ can potentially shape a distorted self-perception; in turn teachers, parents and peers may alter their expectations of the labelled person, potentially in a detrimental way. This may further reinforce the label assigned to the individual affecting future interactions or in educational terms, a label may affect further participation, as people do not willingly subject themselves to situations where they may feel they are labelled or judged.

One of the key texts regarding labelling in education is Rosenthal and Jacobson’s publication ‘Pygmalion in the Classroom’ (1992) which highlighted how the expectations of the teacher can impact on the educational development of the pupil, and also how teacher expectations caused pupils to behave in ways consistent with the expectation placed upon them. During the research, teachers were provided with

information about certain randomly selected pupils, who were allegedly demonstrating a 'spurt' in their intellectual capabilities. Following further testing, the pupils who had expectations placed upon them demonstrated significantly higher levels of intellectual growth compared to the control group (Rosenthal and Jacobson, 1992).

Rosenthal and Jacobson (1992: p.53) explored the idea of 'self-fulfilling prophecy', demonstrating that those students whom were labelled as having academic potential fulfilled this prophecy. McGrew and Evans (2003) and Rosenthal (2002) suggest that a self-fulfilling prophecy may only result if a person assimilates the label placed upon them into their self-conceptualisation, potentially resulting in expectations of reduced performance and lowered self-esteem. The conclusion reached was that teachers frequently base their expectations for pupils on their ethnic, cultural and economic status, leading to the development of stereotypes of pupils with expectations based upon these, rather than viewing the pupil as an individual.

This piece of literature serves to further contextualise this doctoral research as it demonstrates the power of the label in education, and how teacher expectation of students from certain groups can affect levels of attainment, sometimes placing the blame directly with the student. Conversely however, whilst being an innovative piece of research, intense criticism of the study followed its publication as a result of the failure to replicate its findings. Brophy (1983) suggests multiple reasons for this including the heightened awareness of teachers to the successful results of the Rosenthal and Jacobson study and unwillingness to believe instructions regarding their pupils' attainment abilities from outsiders, but suggests that, in spite of these points, the positive results from the study are still valid.

It can be suggested, therefore, that through this analysis of a key piece of literature, labels attributed to certain characteristics in pupils can lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy in terms of attainment. Those students who have labels of 'low attainment' placed upon them, may reject school, and begin to display what is termed 'deviant behaviour' (Becker, 1963: p.5). Deviant behaviour is not in keeping with the functionalist beliefs as proposed by Durkheim (1997) who suggested that there was a need for a common

moral code for equilibrium in institutions to exist (here relating specifically to the education institution) and social solidarity to exist. Callinicos (2007) suggests that school can be regarded as a miniature version of society and as a result pupils should learn social values there which are for the greater good of wider society; therefore, any pupil who is seen to be underachieving is presented as a challenge, and labelled as deviant since they may upset the equilibrium which the value consensus of society dictates should be at the forefront of society (Wexler, 2009). Wexler (2009) further propounds that according to the functionalist view: -

*'The social function of education is to represent the dominant values of 'the society' and to socialise students into accepting these values as integral to their self-definitions and personalities' (p.51)*

Furlong (1991) suggested that education policy seemed to place greater weight on the 'psychological' aspects of deviance and disaffection of pupils, and how this could be treated, rather than focussing on the sociological arguments for deviance and disaffection proposed by Durkheim, who suggested that deviance is not pathologically pre-determined, but merely a rational response to social circumstances (Slee, 2014). The response to this assertion was to develop research strategies around these thoughts (Connell et al., 1982; Furlong, 1985; Willis, 1977). However, still dominant in educational policy is the assumption that deviant behaviour is psychological rather than sociological (Slee, 1995). It is evident that the definition for deviance in education has been developed by policymakers who subscribe to a set of values long laid out in educational policy; however as suggested by Becker (1963: p.11) 'Whether an act is deviant, depends on how other people react to it'. Furlong (1991) suggested two main causes for what is termed social deviance in education or the rejection of schooling; these were that emotional difficulties or pressures in the home or social life outside school resulted in the rejection of education, or the pressure of school resulted in deviant behaviour outside of school.

Essential to education policy is the fact that schools are 'attempting to construct students in a preferred form' (Slee, 2014: p.449). This is driven by educational policy, which has become more and more reliant on statistical analysis of students'

performance to enhance the individual establishment's standing in the educational arena. The prescriptive nature of education potentially may alienate some students of differing intellectual abilities or talents, and this will be demonstrated in Chapter eight (Findings and Data Analysis). Indeed, Slee (2014) points out that 'schooling enshrines a set of official values including values about knowledge, behaviour and aspirations for the future' (p.449-450) to which students must subscribe unless they wish to be labelled as deviant. Here, deviance has been ascribed a meaning by educational structures, but Becker (1963) argues that the different perspectives of those labelled as deviant and those who are the 'labellers' should be accounted for, as a 'person may feel that he is being judged according to rules he has had no hand in making and does not accept, rules forced on him by outsiders' (p.16).

Miller and Satchwell (2006) suggested that students labelled as 'not very academic' at school often had this categorisation following them throughout their FE career, and that it may contribute to a 'negative expectancy effect' (p.135). This is similar to Watts and Bridges' (2006) argument suggesting that the value placed on education in society may quite easily influence potential students into thinking that they are failing if they choose not to participate at some time in their life, and especially straight after FE. Rather than their research participants having 'low aspirations', they merely discovered that they had different aspirations. Francis (2006) concurs with this suggesting that the prevalent discourse is that those academically-able, working class pupils who decide not to pursue HE are repositioned as misguided and wilful, labelling them as failures.

This is also true of another label that has been introduced during the last 50 years and can be strongly associated with deviant behaviour and is that of 'dropout' (Dorn, 1996: p.3). This label, according to Dorn (1996) is a social construction first originating in the 1960s, when American high schools seemed to assume responsibility for adolescents, fostering dependency through social control of their education. As the demands for qualifications to perform some jobs increased, which previously had not required higher levels of educational training, those students who decided not to continue in education were labelled 'dropouts'. Prior to the 1960s when this term was adopted, many students left their education earlier than deemed suitable in order to go into

employment, which in turn supported their families financially. Decisions not to progress further in education were and still are influenced by family connections, cultural and material capital (Slee, 2014).

In spite of these influences, Dorn (1996) suggests that the resultant power of this label has allowed the rationalisation of the belief that by dropping out of education, the impact of this decision will be felt throughout the student's whole life. Whilst this might be considered true in the eyes of governmental policy and educationalists, for the potential student, this might be an over-simplification of the multitude of decisions they may have to make when considering HE. This suggestion places all potential students into one homogenous group, rather than perceiving the individual nature of their decisions not to continue into HE at that time. For them, the label of 'dropout' might not be appropriate, as they may potentially engage with HE at a later stage of their life when circumstances are more appropriate. It seems that there is too much emphasis placed on the HE experience being a 'linear' process with measurements of success being widely recognised as the student completing a HE degree in the allotted amount of time; this is too simplistic and account should be taken for those students who may have to withdraw from education early but then perhaps re-engage later in life (Powdthavee and Vignoles, 2007).

Maringe and Fuller (2006) suggest that in terms of educational policy, there is little that presents a positive image of non-participation in HE and that the actual terminology of 'non-participation' promotes a negative representation of those who do not participate. They discuss that 'At best, there is a 'policy silence' around those who choose not to participate, pursue alternative routes and who have different concepts of what constitutes success' (p.18). This linearity does, however, seem to be undergoing a transformation with the advent of the new apprenticeships under offer, which allow people to work and learn at the same time, with the potential of obtaining degree level qualifications whilst studying part-time during employment. This development can be heralded as important as it demonstrates the recognition by policymakers that people are not a homogenous group who will all follow the same direction, and alternatives should be on offer. Another recent development that potentially may address the imbalance of advice when a student does not wish to

pursue post-compulsory education is an overhaul of the career guidance service provided in schools and colleges. This is contained within the Technical and Further Education Bill, which became law in April 2017. A system of impartial careers advice provided by external advisors and local businesses will be implemented and there will be specific guidance provided for those students who do not wish to progress to HE (Long and Hubble, 2017).

## **Social Inclusion and Social Mobility in Higher Education – What the Available Research Says**

The focus of much research into HE and social mobility has concentrated on economic cost/benefit analysis and the potential cultural benefits of engaging in HE. What is interesting is that there is little focus on research into other socio-economic groups and their reasons for non-participation in HE, and whether it is as a result of a cost/benefit analysis or other factors, or whether providers offer the courses and/or quality of provision that students value when making the decision to participate in HE. As the research setting recruits the majority of its students from LSE groups, and with what are deemed 'non-traditional' qualifications, it could be considered important to investigate reasons into non-participation in HE as suggested by the available research.

### **Cost/Benefits of Participating in HE**

Historically, fewer people from LSE classes have participated in HE than those students from other social classifications. Whilst many theories have been proposed suggesting reasons for non-participation (Adcroft, 2011; Archer, 2003; Archer and Hutchings, 2000; Bamber, 2005; Basit et al., 2006; Brimble, 2013; Burke, 2012; Callendar and Jackson, 2008; Cook et al., 2004; Forsyth and Furlong, 2003; Glassey et al., 2012; Marandet and Wainwright, 2010; Powdthavee and Vignoles, 2007; Reay et al., 2001; Taylor and House, 2010; Yorke and Longden, 2004), Beck (1992) implies that 'risk' is an important theme when considering the cost/benefits of participation in HE by working class students as research has demonstrated they are more risk averse in terms of weighing up the costs and the uncertain nature of the benefits of a higher education in the future. Potential students from LSE groups may be debt averse and therefore the consideration of incurring debts through HE engagement, without the assurance of graduate employment, is daunting (Forsyth and Furlong, 2003). Archer and Hutchings (2000), therefore, would argue that participation by those students from LSE groups is inherently more risky, costly and uncertain, whilst Collier et al. (2002) discovered further inhibiting factors which may potentially prevent working class students from choosing HE. Factors identified were that HE represented insufficient value in terms of the time and effort required to complete a qualification, in turn representing three year's loss of potential earnings or three year's progress in another profession or trade. Crucially, students from LSE groups may lack the necessary entry qualifications

to assure their access to HE. Reasons given are that they are unable to apply to HE because of limited qualifications, or that if they apply they would be rejected. Other potential hardships identified by Forsyth and Furlong (2003) were student poverty, poor student accommodation, and the lack of financial safety nets.

### Cultural Barriers to Participation

To some extent cultural barriers to participation have been analysed in the Theoretical Framework section of this thesis in Chapter one. However, it is important to discuss this further in the current chapter as this section is examining what the available research suggests about social inclusion and social mobility in HE. As previously discussed in Chapter one, Bourdieu suggests that education is a form of social reproduction favouring the dominant classes (Paton, 2007); the more cultural capital one has, the more advantageous this is when engaging in any particular field (for example, education) (Smith, 2012). He highlights that 'the cultural capital held at a given moment expresses, among other things, the economic and social level of the family of origin' (Bourdieu, 1984: p.105). Hoskins (2012) suggests that Bourdieu's cultural capital concept is valuable when scrutinising how a non-traditional student's background or 'habitus' influences their HE choices and aspirations and highlights that 'Opportunities to access and accumulate educational capital can serve as a levelling mechanism that fosters social justice' (p.238). However, as demonstrated in the section titled 'Effects of WP Policies on HE Institutions', whilst the encouragement of underrepresented groups engaging with HE has been a priority for policymakers during the last two decades, social mobility and social justice has not been as widely attained as at first suggested (Burke, 2012).

In terms of cultural barriers to participation, Thomas and Quinn (2007) suggest that students from LSE groups tend to not share a sense of entitlement to participate in HE that other groups do, and therefore are unprepared on many levels for university life. Furthermore, families of LSE status, as well as facing economic constraints, may also be unaware of educational systems and social networks that exist to help them make appropriate choices about HE (Reay et al., 2001). With this in mind, Reay et al. (2010) posit that it is therefore more likely that students choose institutions where they will feel at ease.

In cultural terms, Collier et al. (2002) discuss the possibility of HE posing a threat to potential students from LSE classes in terms of their 'identity, social position and solidarity' (p.94), which is reiterated by Reay et al. (2010) and Thomas and Quinn (2007) who suggest that some working class parents fear that if their children attend university, they may move away both physically and mentally 'abandoning the family and its norms and values' (Thomas and Quinn, 2007: p.63). According to Smith (2012), this is a case of 'dispositional barriers to participation' (p.111) and can manifest itself in a number of ways such as not applying to an elite university due to the fear of not fitting in to a perceived culture in elite HEIs (Forsyth and Furlong, 2003; Reay et al., 2005); a lack of knowledge regarding the amount and time which should be allocated to studying (Gorard et al., 2007) and the fear of isolation due to lack of motivation to participate in extra-curricular activities (Cooke et al., 2004). This is where Bourdieu's concept of habitus comes into play as members of different social groups 'learn what to expect out of life, how likely they are to succeed in different projects, how others will respond to them if they behave in particular ways and so on' (Paton, 2007: p: 11-12).

Historically, a university education was regarded as inaccessible by those from a working class background (Williamson, 1981) but this suggestion seems to lay the blame for non-participation with LSE groups, rather than the prevailing institutional cultures. Within the existing literature the non-participation of LSE groups is often subject to discourses that apportion blame, rather than identifying social inequalities for the inability to access HE (Archer, 2003; Archer and Hutchings, 2000; Bowl, 2000; 2001; 2003). As discussed in Chapter two, universities have historically played a part in the non-encouragement of LSE groups in HE by excluding them through social, cultural and financial factors (Archer, 2003). However, this implicit or explicit assertion of the 'deficit' residing in working class students' (their families or culture) regarding access to HE is challenged by Bowl (2004); Quinn et al. (2005) and Thomas (2005) who suggest that in order to increase access, universities should change their tactics to encourage non-traditional students to participate. Indeed, Reay et al. (2001) and Bowl (2001) have proposed that due to their 'institutional habitus', many universities remain unwelcoming places for students from LSE groups.

## **Motivation of WP Students**

This section of analysis of the literature has been included as the student participant data in this research explores why students chose to engage with HE at this point in their lives; discussion of the sample's motivation is included in Chapter nine (Discussion and Analysis). Motivations of WP students to engage with HE have been widely analysed (Adcroft, 2011; Archer and Hutchings, 2000; Bingham and O'Hara, 2007; Bye et al., 2007; Francois, 2014; Murphy and Roopchand, 2003; Taylor and House, 2010). Taylor and House (2010) suggest that motivation for transition to HE can be related to the chosen subject and possible future career prospects. For example, those studying computing envisage improved future employment prospects and earning potential, whereas those opting to study Humanities may be undertaking study due to an interest in the subject rather than an instant career pathway with good salary prospects.

Research into subject choice amongst WP or non-traditional students has demonstrated that they often opt for vocational subjects, which will provide a pathway into a graduate job. A good example of this is Psychology; Zinckiewicz and Trapp (2004) analysed the reasons for choice of this subject and discovered that Psychology attracts more non-traditional students in terms of mature students, but less of Black or Minority Ethnic (BME) students. This was reiterated in Maras et al.'s (2007) study which examined the motivations of WP students at secondary school who expressed a desire to participate in HE, concluding that one of the main motivations was for material gain rather than the prestige of acquiring a degree level qualification.

McCune et al. (2010) conducted a longitudinal study examining mature and younger student motivations for studying at HE level. Amongst the mature participants' motivations were a desire to prove themselves, pursue a personal interest in their chosen subject, or seek a higher level of education in order to enhance career progression. Whereas, Reay et al. (2001) proposed that above everything else, mature students expressed a desire to search for understanding. Taylor and House (2010) examined intrinsic and extrinsic motivations for studying by students from low participation neighbourhoods (LPNs), and their results reiterated those of previous studies (Murphy and Roopchand, 2003) in terms of non-traditional students aged 21

and under displaying extrinsic motivations for participation such as better job or career prospects and specialist training required to achieve this. They also found that mature students displayed an equal leaning to both intrinsic and extrinsic factors for participation in HE. These were analysed in themes such as developing an understanding of people, experiencing university lifestyle, gaining life experience, widening their social group and self-development.

It has been demonstrated that mature students often choose a HE establishment which is close to home due to family commitments and employment (Marandet and Wainwright, 2010; McCune et al., 2010). Other motivational factors in pursuing further study include the availability of a course that they wish to pursue, and the fact that the HEI is in the locality (Francois, 2014). Compton et al. (2006) note that mature students returning to education often have undergone life-transforming situations such as separation, divorce, unemployment or re-location; this may be true but some students have found that the wider accessibility of further study prompts them into undertaking HE study (Compton et al., 2006). Whilst mature students may face greater barriers to returning to study than other students such as fears regarding returning to study, lack of time, financial support problems, childcare issues and possibly a lack of self-confidence (Marandet and Wainwright, 2010), Bye et al. (2007) reported that mature students demonstrated a higher level of intrinsic motivation than those described as traditional, meaning that their university experience was generally a positive one (Xuereb, 2013). The intrinsic motivation associated with this group of students in terms of return to study and the difficulties associated with it demonstrates robustness when dealing with study-related problems, and it is evident in that they are less likely to withdraw from HE in the face of difficulties (Xuereb, 2013).

## Chapter four

### **Ethical Considerations**

This research was undertaken in accordance with the Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research produced by the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2011), and was reviewed internally before being submitted to the Business, Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences (BAHSS) ethics committee at The University of Central Lancashire (UCLan) for ethical approval.

The data collection has included interviewing students enrolled on the course upon which I teach and also interviewing the staff who teach on them. Initially I gained permission from the head of school to interview both sets of participants and also to access and evaluate the relevant policy documents, which would provide information on the college's position in terms of educational and pastoral support and equality and diversity protocols. Once this was granted, I was required to procure a letter confirming my employer's approval to send to the UCLan ethics board as part of the ethics application.

Students and staff were initially approached via an email requesting their participation with an attachment describing the nature of the research. Following this, those that agreed to be interviewed were provided with a document that sought their written informed consent (Appendix 1). A written record detailing the purposes of the research documenting that pseudonyms would be utilised throughout the reporting of results in order to protect anonymity was provided to each participant prior to interview.

## **Positioning Myself in the Research**

There has been an increasing amount of 'insider research' being conducted in recent years; much of which is conducted in the field of education (Greene, 2014). This doctoral research exemplifies insider research as I have prior knowledge of the participants, an understanding of both student/ staff participants as their lecturer/ colleague and am also a member of the group under study. Throughout this research I have played three distinct roles; that of researcher, lecturer and colleague. Therefore, in order to minimise the potential for bias during analysis and reporting of the results of the research and to attempt to achieve 'trustworthiness' of this research, I have employed a number of strategies which are detailed in Chapter five (Methodology), Chapter seven (Data Analysis Methods) and Chapter nine (Discussion and Analysis).

I have been aware, however, that there is the issue of 'power relationships' throughout the whole research process to be considered as a researcher undertaking investigation in the establishment where I am employed. Drake and Heath (2011: p.47) suggest that there is a requirement to clarify the ethical considerations as an insider researcher from the view of 'situatedness'. As an insider researcher one is a member of an organisation where it is essential to carefully consider one's positionality especially for the continuation of personal and professional relationships (Greene, 2014). Insider researcher positionality refers to 'the aspects of an insider researcher's self or identity which is aligned or shared with participants' (Chavez, 2008: p.475). During the period of the research, the researcher must consider the changing nature of their persona and adapt to it sensitively; for example, a colleague may become an interviewee. Difficulties may arise if the participants feel that they are being criticised or put under scrutiny. Informed consent, to some extent, does seek to diminish the power dynamics in the research relationship as it provides protection for the participant, in that it allows them to understand how they may withdraw and protect their own interests (Crow et al., 2006). Without this the participants may have felt powerless to admit they did not want to be included in the research; thus informed consent provides a benchmark for ethical research.

However, Murphy and Dingwall (2007) contest this suggesting that whilst informed consent can be considered to provide protection in terms of beneficence, non-

maleficence, justice and autonomy for participants in biomedical research settings where a strict protocol is developed and adhered to; within research settings where one is an 'insider researcher' informed consent is constantly re-negotiated due to the nature of the data collection methods employed and the familiarity developed between researchers and participants during the period of investigation.

This could, therefore, be applied to my own research setting where I have interviewed students and staff, with whom I am very familiar. This raises the issue of power dynamics once more, as participants, through their familiarity with me as a lecturer/colleague and not a researcher may have divulged more information than required. Whilst informing my data collection, this may not be what I had originally asked them for. In fact, although I had an interview schedule the participant was encouraged to elaborate on points made through additional questions; this, at times, provided very interesting data and definitely increased my understanding of the research participants' experiences. However, this was also where I became increasingly concerned about the power dynamics between my research participants and myself. I considered this problem during the data collection and came to the conclusion, aided by Murphy and Dingwall (2007), that whilst the participant has provided informed consent, the very nature of qualitative research is that it constantly evolves from the original research proposal and therefore the researcher is required to have 'the kind of ethical sensitivity and situational judgement that cannot be enforced by anticipatory regulatory regimes' (p.19). Whilst I always gained informed consent from the participants and had considered potential power relationships between researcher and participants, I was unable to account for the potential reaction to the research questions by every participant. Therefore, I had to acknowledge this and ensure that I treated each participant with care, sensitivity, discretion and the utmost respect.

Many ethical tensions may become apparent whilst undertaking research within one's own institution. One of the criticisms of insider-research is that the researcher is not sufficiently distant from the research being undertaken and therefore may be less critical in their approach (Drake and Heath, 2011). Often the belief is that the researcher should maintain neutrality during data collection; however, Webb (1997) opposes this proposing this is not possible, as every researcher will bring their own

beliefs to their own research. Examination of your beliefs and how they may impact on the research being undertaken may lead to increased understanding of the data produced, resulting in a more critical examination of how the beliefs of the researcher have influenced the outcomes (Orgill, 2007). Berry (2006) concurs with Orgill (2007) stating 'identifying how and why the researcher is positioned in a study is a must' (p.90). The engagement with reflexivity during this doctoral research has ensured that I have actively engaged with questioning my own motivations and beliefs (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992) during my attempt to provide a true portrayal of my participants' individual experiences.

With this in mind I have considered the effect I might have had on the data collection and analysis because of my previous educational experience. I was deemed a 'non-traditional' student according to HEFCE (2000), and this, together with other experiences of the education system in general, has been a major influence on my doctoral research area of interest. Similar to Parr (1998), my position as a mature student situates me within my research and I have had to consider the impact of my experience on the research process, which is detailed earlier in this section. Mies (1993:p.68) describes this concept as 'conscious partiality' which appeals to me, as he suggests that situating myself within the research can enhance the transparency and in turn the rigour of the research process.

I can draw parallels on many levels between the research I have conducted and my own experiences, although I have to be conscious that my experience occurred almost 30 years ago and lifestyle and educational contexts have changed; therefore, whilst my experiences may be similar, I may be making assumptions that I am sharing experiences with my participants. However, it is clear that my chosen research area is not only underpinned by my own educational experiences, but also that of my son, who was undergoing his own transition from further education to the workplace at the time of developing the doctoral proposal. For him, the experience of not wanting to go to university at 18, preferring to gain employment was similar to mine three decades earlier. As a high-achieving student, the automatic expectation was that he would apply to and attend university; his decision to enter employment was frowned upon and further support and advice in trying to achieve his career goal was

withdrawn. He is now enrolled at university on a part-time basis paid for by his employers but has, of course, been placed under the auspices of the 'non-traditional' label.

Therefore, I have to consider my positionality in the research in terms of the ethical implications of power and involvement. Undertaking research is essentially viewed as a power-driven act (Kincheloe, 2004) and requires the researcher to be aware of the many contexts in which they are functioning.

Walkerdine (1990: p.157-158) reflected on her own positionality in the research she was undertaking: -

*'I went into the home of a white working-class family to conduct some research. Where and who was I: the working-class child of my fantasies, or the middle-class researcher who was part of an attempt to tell a truth about 'The Working Class'?'*

I identified whole-heartedly with this reflection in terms of the ethical dilemmas of power, fluid identity of the researcher, potential impact on data collection and analysis and identifying oneself with an area of research because of personal experience, but also acknowledging that the contexts may have changed in the intervening years. Brooks et al. (2014) suggest that in addition to other more obvious ethical implications, it is essential to consider the possible influence that the 'researcher's identity-biography' (p.108) may have on data collection and analysis. They argue that the shared biographical aspects may alter the 'power' in the researcher-researched relationship in favour of the researcher, who may use their former experiences to prompt the participant into providing more in-depth data, thus exploiting the relationship with the participant. However, Oakley (1981) suggests that when both researcher and researched participate in the same culture, there will always be occurrences of reciprocity and support.

When evaluating my own position regarding these views, I have considered the ethical implications of my own-shared biographical characteristics within this research. I have been aware of the potential of them to become a power-related aspect in the data

collection and analysis and tried to avoid this. One key skill, which may have helped, is my training as a homeopath. During a homeopathic consultation with a patient, the homeopath must conduct an interview, which encompasses questioning about many different aspects of their life. The homeopath must employ Roger's Core Conditions (1961) of empathic understanding, congruence and unconditional positive regard whilst being consistently aware of the interplay between the therapist's experience and the patient's story, which they are relating. The homeopath is acutely conscious that they should 'bracket off' their own parallel experiences so as to allow the patient the space to fully present their own story (Fox, 2008: p.23). In retrospect, I have employed this concept and therefore have refrained from allowing mutual biographical details to become a part of the data collection process.

Fox et al. (2007) suggest that 'reflexivity proposes that one's identity and lived reality reflect one another, that is, that they are co-constructed' (p.186); this opinion resonates with me, as my experiences are reflected in the research I am undertaking. Employing reflexivity during data collection and analysis has also facilitated my navigation of such ethical dilemmas. In order to achieve reflexivity, I have continually written memos when transcribing data and producing the analysis detailing my reaction to participants' responses together with keeping my reflective diary, which I have added to following each individual interview, providing detailed information to return to when I began data analysis. Breuer and Roth (2003) suggest that in order to consider how the researcher's own presence affects the process of research, the researcher should adopt a 'de-centred and reflexive position' (p.17) which should, in turn, encourage the researcher to be conscious of and sensitive to their own experiences which may shape the research (Creswell, 1997). Alternatively, Lichtman (2013) suggests that the researcher should concede that whilst she influences the research, she is also influenced by it, and the use of self-reflexivity can be viewed as a benefit to the research process. It has been essential, therefore, to develop new levels of self-reflexivity to be completely aware of the numerous contexts in which I am working within my research as lecturer, researcher, colleague and member of staff in a HE in FE establishment. Kincheloe et al. (2013) term this as 'focusing on the clarification of her position in the web of reality... and the ways they shape the production and interpretation of knowledge' (p.350). As previously stated, I am aware

that my own educational experiences have been very influential in my choice of research area, but through the process of reflexivity I am acutely aware that I have been equally affected by the research, data collection and data analysis process, and this is demonstrated through reflexive sections woven throughout this thesis.

Drake and Heath (2011) discuss the development of 'multiple integrities' as an insider-researcher (p.31) as the researcher will generally have some loyalty to their institution, no matter what they discover during their research. They further suggest that the researcher may find themselves being critical of current practices whilst potentially continuing to engage with them. However, Read and Proctor (1995) have identified 'idealised criteria' (p.195) for practitioner research in healthcare that can be transferred to the educational setting. There are certain aspects of it which I identify as being pertinent in this research, namely a focus on aspects of practice in which I have the ability to initiate some change, the identification and exploration of socio-political and historical factors which are affecting practice, a research design which will allow all participants to be heard, and information which may be yielded which potentially could be generalised to wider practice.

## Chapter five

### Methodology

#### Introduction

This chapter explains my chosen approach to research the experiences of students labelled as 'non-traditional' (HEFCE, 2000). Whilst there has been much research devoted to analysing the engagement and success rates of WP students (Basit et al., 2006; Brimble, 2013; Brunsdon et al., 2000; Callendar, 2011; Glassey et al., 2012; Hewitt and Rose-Adams, 2012; Leese, 2010; Quinn et al., 2005; Richardson, 2010b; Smith, 2007; Thomas, 2002; Yorke and Longden, 2004), little has been written about the experience from the students' own perspective, or if it has the data has been reduced during data analysis to provide a summary of their experiences within developed themes (Bradley and Miller, 2010; O'Shea and Stone, 2014; Redpath et al., 2013). This chapter begins with a discussion of differences between phenomenology and phenomenography, and why the phenomenographic approach was chosen as the methodology within this research. Following on from this, there is an explanation regarding my concerns about phenomenography, which sets the scene for the progression of the methodology into elements of the bricolage approach. I have situated the theoretical perspectives section of the thesis after demonstrating the development of the methodology. Whilst this is not the natural order for this chapter, I have displayed it in this way in order to explain the development of the ontology and epistemology as a direct result of the developing methodology.

## Why Phenomenography and not Phenomenology?

Initially, I explored the phenomenological paradigm and whilst this seemed, at first, appropriate I eventually decided that the phenomenographic approach was more suited to this research. Included in this section is a justification of why I initially chose to use the phenomenographic approach over the phenomenological approach, and the following section will further explain why embracing the phenomenographic approach fully would not have expressed the research findings in the detail I wished to present them.

Phenomenology, as defined by Husserl, is essentially the study of the lived experience or the life world (Van Manen, 1997). Its emphasis is on the reality of the world in which the participant lives in an effort to understand the meaning of the experience as it is lived (Polkinghorne, 1989), and attempts to provide a description of the collective experience of the phenomenon under investigation (Finlay, 2009). Initially this appealed, but what I felt was essential to this research was the interpretation of the individual research participant's experience rather than describing a 'universal essence of the phenomenon' (Giorgi, 1997: p.236). I wanted to acknowledge what was individual and unique about the students and their experience of both compulsory and higher education, and the potential changes they acknowledged in themselves.

At this point, therefore, I had to contemplate other approaches, which allowed me to achieve a description of individual experiences, and this led to consideration of the Phenomenographic approach. Phenomenography refers to how people perceive experience and conceptualise a phenomena (Marton, 1981). Savin-Baden and Howell Major (2013: p.218) describe phenomenography as 'an approach that investigates the qualitatively different ways in which people experience something or think about something'. This approach emerged during the late 1960s and early 1970s from educational research undertaken in Sweden. Its intention is to seek the lived reality from the participant perspective and its focus is to understand the described experience rather than that generated from objective facts concerning the world (Ashworth and Lucas, 1998). Barnard et al. (1999) suggest within phenomenographic research: -

*'The emphasis is on how things appear to people in their world and the way in which people explain to themselves and others what goes on around them and how these explanations change.'* (p.214)

This approach was initially used to answer questions about thinking in learning, but was later acknowledged as an approach whereby the qualitatively different understandings of people's experiences in any circumstances could be analysed. As Savin-Baden and Howell Major (2013) discuss 'phenomenographers do not make statements about the world as it is but seek to understand people's conceptions of the world' (p.220). Phenomenography focuses on the differences in experiences of the phenomenon under investigation, which was the direction I wanted to take the research in, whilst conversely, phenomenology is focussed on the similarities of phenomenon being experienced in order to establish a description of the essence of the phenomenon (Giorgi, 2000). Furthermore, unlike phenomenology, which aims for a 'first order perspective' of describing various aspects of the world (Marton, 1981: p.177), phenomenography draws on the conceptual thoughts of participants. These are deemed 'second order' thoughts unlike 'first order' thoughts, which produce a 'description of realities' (Laverty, 2003: p.5). Instead phenomenography seeks to study 'what is there in people's conceptions of the world' (Webb, 1997: p.200) or describe, analyse and understand the experiences of the participants.

Willis (2002) suggests that phenomenological research should 'arrive at an accurate understanding and description of moments of knowing as they appear in the consciousness of individuals' (p.2). However, whilst this is true, what appears to be truly important within phenomenological analysis is that although understanding these moments of knowing is key, it is the collective intersubjectivity of the participants, which is of interest to the researcher. Key to this research is the subjectivity of the response of the individual participants, which is why I decided to utilise the phenomenographic approach, which embraces the individual subjective experience. Whilst this stance may suggest that I have rejected 'intersubjectivity' as a whole, and thereby rejected the notion that all human beings are connected relationally, the application of this belief is purely for this doctoral research as understanding individual

experience rather than collective intersubjective experience is fundamental to this investigation.

Problems with the phenomenographic approach are highlighted by Saljo (1997) who discusses that, at times, there may be discrepancies between what the researcher observes as the experience of the participant with regards to a particular phenomenon, and what the participant describes as his experience of the phenomenon. Furthermore, Richardson (1999) observes that phenomenographers do not tend to examine the effects of the environment or the socially constructed behaviour of the participant. However, whilst not dismissing these suggested problems, Orgill (2007) highlights that one of the only methods of advancing our understanding of ways in which people experience a phenomenon is by asking them to describe their experience. There is actually no physical way of examining how a person reacts or experiences a phenomenon, and they may never be absolutely accurate in describing their conceptions of the experience. Therefore, whilst phenomenographic accounts of experience may not be the whole truth, they are still useful ways of gathering data. In spite of the difficulties of undertaking phenomenographic research I still believed it to be the correct approach to utilise for this research.

The methodology associated with the phenomenographic approach is qualitative, and most often semi-structured interviews are employed, as is the case in this doctoral research. The intention during data collection was also to use documentary analysis of the college's policies to deepen the contextualisation of the students' experience; this is at odds with much of the literature surrounding phenomenography. However, I believed documentary analysis was necessary in order to provide the perspective of the HEI and give some indication of the rhetoric surrounding their interpretation of 'non-traditional' and any associated 'labels'. I was initially unsure whether this method would be appropriate to the philosophical paradigm that informed my research; however, Costley et al. (2011) suggest that during work-based research the methodology can be developed to 'fit' the research being undertaken, further highlighting that any major work-based project will probably require more than one perspective. This viewpoint has endorsed the realisation that my proposed research is

similar to a jigsaw, where I am moving all the parts around to achieve the best fit and produce a whole picture.

To situate documentary analysis further within my research approach, Jupp and Norris (1993) propose that there are three paradigms for documentary analysis – positivist, interpretivist and critical. Within this research, documentary analysis sits within the interpretivist paradigm as having been a socially constructed phenomenon, and therefore concurs with my chosen ontology. Cohen et al. (2011) suggest that sources of documentary analysis may favour a top down view of education as policymakers write the documents. Whilst this may be the case, the utilisation of documentary analysis has counterbalanced the subjective views provided by both staff and students.

## The Problem with Phenomenography

In the previous section I demonstrated why I had chosen phenomenography rather than phenomenology when considering which research approach to utilise. Within this section, I will highlight the difficulties I faced when contemplating analysis of the data, and the bearing this has since had on the overall research approach.

Some of the difficulties associated with the phenomenographic approach became first apparent during my research into phenomenographic analysis; the analysis decontextualised the individuality of the gathered data and seemed to over-structure it in terms of reducing the data to an 'outcome space' described by a metaphor (Yates et al., 2012: p.106). I was also concerned that the reduction of the data during analysis would allow for me to imprint my educational experiences on the metaphors for the outcome spaces rather than allow for the individual participants experiences to be foregrounded. I was prompted, therefore, to explore other research approaches and data analysis techniques to elicit answers to the research questions due to the generalised nature of analysis and the reductionist tendencies, which were displayed by phenomenographic analysis. Reassurance was found from Savin-Baden and Howell Major (2013) who highlighted some challenges presented to the phenomenographic researcher, suggesting that phenomenography displays a 'tendency to over-structure and de-contextualise data, generating categories from interview data during which context and individuals are separated' (p.220).

Therefore, the decision to use phenomenographic data analysis techniques was reviewed, favouring instead the utilisation of data analysis techniques, which would allow analysis and presentation of the data in accordance with the original vision for the research. Kincheloe et al. (2013) discuss this in terms of actively choosing from 'the tools at hand' (p.350) rather than using those pre-determined existing guidelines, terming this approach to research as 'bricolage'. My initial introduction to the bricolage approach was accidental when reading an article (Frost et al., 2010) that suggested that qualitative research was so complicated it required the utilisation of a pragmatic approach where the researcher could choose the methodology and/ or data collection methods or analysis procedures to suit the phenomena under investigation.

Bricoleurs operate outside the normal structure of pre-defined methodologies and therefore, as a result subsume a more active role for 'humans both in shaping reality and in creating the research processes and narratives that represent it' (Kincheloe et al., 2013: p.351). They further suggest that by choosing to use elements of different approaches, the researcher refuses to standardise the production of knowledge, thereby signifying 'approaches that examine phenomena from multiple, and sometimes competing, theoretical and methodological perspectives' (Rogers, 2012: p.1).

## Adopting Elements of the Bricolage Approach

This section will describe how I have embraced elements of the bricolage approach during data collection and analysis, and provide insights and explanations into how it has been employed it whilst combining with the phenomenographic approach.

Levi-Strauss defined bricolage as a 'Jack of all trades or a kind of professional do-it-yourself person' (Levi-Strauss 1966: p.17), using methods to produce a 'a bricolage, a complex, dense, reflexive, collage like creation that represents the researcher's images, understandings, and interpretations of the world or phenomenon under analysis'. These images appealed as I searched for an appropriate methodology, leading to the choice of a cross-boundary study design, which would hopefully help to capture the essence of the holistic experience of the student participants without solely reducing them to a list of themes. Rogers (2012) corroborates the choice of the bricolage approach as acceptable within this research as he discusses 'it (bricolage) denotes methodological practices explicitly based on notions of eclecticism, emergent design, flexibility and plurality' (p.1).

It was difficult at first to conceptualise myself as a 'bricoleur researcher', but clarity was provided by Denzin and Lincoln (2011) who discuss the different types of bricoleur that they have classified. It seems I straddle the methodological and interpretive bricoleur dispositions; the methodological bricoleur is identified as 'adept at performing a large range of tasks, ranging from interviewing to intensive self-reflection and introspection' (p.5). It seems that I have achieved this by employing different forms of data collection, reflexivity during which came the realisation that my educational experiences have very much become a distinctive part of this research agenda, and acknowledging my positionality in the research. Rogers (2012) suggests that a methodological bricoleur often begins the research with one approach, but then soon realises that the application of another or a multitude of approaches will enable the researcher to develop a more complex picture of the phenomenon under examination. This leads to Denzin and Lincoln's (2011) definition of the interpretive bricoleur whom they suggest 'understands that research is an interactive process shaped by one's personal history, biography, gender, social class, race, and ethnicity,

and those of the people in the (research) setting' (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011: p.5). This is therefore, interlinked with the discussion regarding the reflexive process and how I have, through constant reflection and introspection, discovered that this doctoral research has been formed by my own experience.

Bricolage embraces the use of interdisciplinarity as the researcher employs multiple methods or perspectives when undertaking research. However, criticisms levelled at this approach suggest that it represents a superficial attempt at research as one cannot become an 'expert' in multiple methodological or philosophical approaches, and bricolage is rather like being a 'jack of all trades, but a master of none' (Kincheloe, 2004). However, during this doctoral research, the employment of elements of the bricolage has only been undertaken after much reading around methodological approaches, and many hours of trying to adapt the research to fit into just one approach without success. Further justification for this decision is discussed by Kellner (1995) who suggests that sometimes employing a single research approach can be weighed down in suppositions, blindness and limitations, and suggests that researchers should avoid this biased reductionism in research by employing numerous ways of interpreting research in the quest for knowledge.

Bricolage seemed to offer the opposite to other more restrictive research frameworks, where the approaches seemed to be 'self-contained, individualistic, singularly applied, isolated from one another or merely laid out in a block pattern' (Berry, 2006: p.89). Kincheloe (2005) concurs with this suggesting that the bricoleur should actively consider which research methods suit their research leading to a methodological eclecticism, rather than passively receiving accepted research methodologies and attempting to place your own research within their accepted protocols. Bricolage resonated with me from the outset, as I had tried to conform by constraining the research within the walls of an individual process. Yet I never felt comfortable with just one approach because I could perceive strands of other approaches, which would suit the research as well. Finally, it seemed my initial instinct to question why I should endeavour to squeeze the research to fit into a singular approach had been answered and it was possible, within appropriate research convention, to 'step outside the box'.

Kellner (1995) suggests that employing multi-perspective approaches to research requires situating the research objects historically, which in turn will force the researcher to consider the wider holistic view of the research purpose and its participants. Within this document, I have attempted to provide a holistic overview of the research providing an analysis of relevant governmental policies which have impacted on the research participants' education, usually without them realising or considering this has occurred. From my reading around the bricolage approach this suggests that I have employed historicity within the methodology as I realise how historical educational policy impacts on the research participants. It is impossible to divorce them from the context within which they are studying. Kincheloe (2004) substantiates this view suggesting that sometimes during research 'entities are often removed from the context that shaped them, the processes of which they are a part, the relationships and connections that structure their being in the world' (p.74). Rogers (2012) concurs with Kincheloe (2004) suggesting that removing the research phenomenon from its context, or not acknowledging the context in which it is positioned, actually prohibits the examination of the multiple factors, which have influenced the phenomenon.

When considering utilising the bricolage approach within this research, I searched for literature which would substantiate the belief that phenomenography could be included within bricolage. There are many suggestions within the literature for combinations of different approaches which could be used within bricolage; these include traditional quantitative and qualitative analysis, case studies, action research, grounded theory research, ethnography, phenomenology, psychoanalysis, historiography, semiotics, textual analysis, hermeneutics, rhetorical analysis and discourse analysis (Kincheloe and Berry, 2004). However, there is nothing in the literature, which would propose the potential utilisation of phenomenographic methodology in a bricolage approach. As an early career researcher, this requirement for validation of the rationale for the chosen methodological approach from the literature seems extremely important. Berry (2006) provided some clarity following the decision to combine the original chosen approach of phenomenography with elements of different approaches such as documentary analysis, grounded theory memo writing and annotations, plus various methods of data analysis such as I-poems, qualitative

content analysis, thematic analysis, and phenomenological analysis into a bricolage of methods. She suggests that some key features of bricolage are using 'many different tools,' 'collecting different parts from different sources,' 'creative, unique and no two look the same', and 'you don't use all the parts' (p.88). This is exactly what I wanted to achieve, as utilising a variety of data collection methods with different groups of participants has provided an in-depth data not only from the perspective of the students, but also the staff and the establishment.

Similarly with the data analysis, there was a need to be pragmatic in my choice of data analysis techniques as the intention was to portray individual experiences in full rather than reducing them to a selection of occurrences of similar themes. Denzin and Lincoln (2013) reiterate this when discussing if paradigms are commensurable in terms of amalgamating paradigms into each other; they suggest that whilst it may be problematic with those that do not share axiomatic features which are similar or resonate, the blending of paradigms may be ideal with those that resonate strongly; therefore elements of interpretivist/ postmodern, critical theory, constructivist and participative inquiry can be combined comfortably. Kincheloe (2004) also points out that the multiple perspectives employed during the bricolage approach challenge the researcher to confront their beliefs and pursue things in a new light, suggesting that 'A basic dimension of criticality involves a comfort with the existence of alternative ways of analysing and producing knowledge' (p.16).

Parallels with my choice of research approach can be drawn with my outlook on life. The decision not to pursue a single research approach and consider the multiple complexities of the participants' experiences very much appeals to my psyche. Often I perceive situations from the many different angles proffered, and opinions of the people who are involved, suggesting that I consider the complexities and multi-dimensional nature of situations I find myself in. I then have the information to negotiate for a positive overall outcome for everyone involved. I consider myself very much a 'free spirit' who, whilst externally appearing to conform to extrinsic norms, will perceive an element of control, quietly rebel, and do whatever it is the way I think is best; hence my decision at 18 not to engage in HE study. Indeed Rogers (2012) seems to endorse the choice of the bricolage approach and my place within this research,

challenging 'the traditional principle that researchers should remain neutral observers' (p7). My wish was to be a 'co-constructor of knowledge, of understanding and interpretation of the meaning of lived experiences' (Guba & Lincoln, 2005: p.196). This further highlights why I felt that I could embrace elements of the bricolage approach, as it has allowed conscious decision-making regarding the research whilst still appearing to conform, albeit in a much narrower way, to the norms of social science research.

Finally, I understand from my reading around bricolage that using this approach will not allow a definitive conclusion to the research questions, but may result in producing as many questions as it answers. Kincheloe (2004) supports this view suggesting that research involving human subjects cannot be a linear process, is often untidy and cannot produce universal truths. Blackler (1995) concurs with this suggesting that bricoleurs understand that tensions may develop in social research as insights into the research phenomenon changes and evolves. As Villaverde cited in Tobin and Kincheloe (2006: p.340) suggests 'it is possible to view research as a multilogical life long effort that continues well after each project is completed'.

***The Link between Critical Theory and the Bricolage explained***

Traditionally Critical Theory (CT) is defined as 'engaging in a form of criticism of social formations' (Dant, 2003: p.2) or perhaps more eloquently as the 'emblem of a philosophy which questions modern social and political life through a method of immanent (inherent) critique' (Devetak, 2012: p. 162). It is concerned with trying to understand the historical and social development of contemporary society, analysing the forces of power that may shape it or even dominate it, and how these forces might be overcome (Horkheimer, 1972). At heart there is a concern with emancipation, or liberating participants, or at least challenging inequality. The belief is also founded on a concern for democracy, and the promotion of an egalitarian form of civic and social relationship, and that any research conducted within the CT paradigm is undertaken for 'the emancipation of individuals and groups in an egalitarian society' (Cohen et al., 2007: p.6) and should challenge dominant discourses (Mack, 2010). Thus the researcher within the CT paradigm is not only concerned with providing an account of the behaviours of certain groups, but also seeks to challenge these behaviours, often by exposing and challenging dominant discourses.

It could be proposed, however, that the present research was not undertaken in order to emancipate the participants; this was not the explicit intention of the research. It links to CT in the concern to expose and explore dominant discourses, but it does not assume those less dominant need 'liberating' or that the CT researcher is the most appropriate person to do this (rather than themselves). Rather, the link between CT and the bricolage in this thesis is proposed due to the continual evolution of CT as suggested by Kincheloe et al. (2013) during the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. They intimated that a very precise definition of CT is problematic since any attempt to encapsulate it specifically would deny its continual evolution.

Bricolage embraces the use of interdisciplinarity as the researcher employs multiple methods or perspectives when undertaking research (Kincheloe, 2004). This is similar to the suggestion that contemporary CT encompasses many different disciplines (Crossley, 2008). This interdisciplinarity is what defines it and is one of the ways that

the bricolage can meld with CT. Kincheloe and McLaren (2005) describe the bricolage as 'a key innovation in an evolving criticality' (p.304), and suggest that the 'basic dimensions of an evolving criticality involve a comfort with the existence of alternative ways of analysing and producing knowledge' (p.319). Thus, since the continued evolution of 'blurred disciplinary genres' (p.320), it has become acceptable for those researchers trained primarily in one discipline to begin to employ other disciplines in their work to appropriate wider outcomes (Kincheloe and McLaren, 2005).

One of the limitations identified by Mack (2010) to the CT paradigm is that the assumption that everyone requires emancipation means that Critical Theorists, themselves, already assume they are emancipated and therefore are better equipped to employ CT to emancipate others, rather than being shaped by and limited by the same dominant discourses they expose. This is in contrast to the bricoleur researcher who chooses to incorporate CT within their research, as whilst there is a desire for the instigation of social change, the bricoleur considers their primary aim is to attempt to acquire a hermeneutic understanding of the experiences of the research participants.

The criticality involved in utilising the bricolage approach ensures that the researcher develops an awareness of the multiple dimensions of experience, which as Kincheloe (2004) suggests is one of the important aspects of CT. He further discusses that there is a synergy between 'the blurred boundary between the hermeneutical search for understanding and the critical concern with social change for social justice' (p.15). Thinking about whether this research may contribute critically to social change, I have to retrace my thoughts to the beginning and reflect on why I wanted to undertake doctoral research in this area. I understand from my reading around the bricolage approach that in order to effect social transformation the bricoleur pursues information about the power constructs that affect people's lives, in order that the researcher can report their findings and 'remove knowledge production and its benefits from the control of elite groups' (Kincheloe, 2004: p. 15).

### ***The Role of Critical Theory in this Research***

It is suggested that in order for research to be regarded as critical, it must endeavour to attempt to challenge any injustices faced by a particular group (Kincheloe and McLaren, 2005). Within this thesis, as previously stated, the aims were to examine the educational experiences of students labelled as 'non-traditional' in an attempt to discover why they had not engaged in HE, more specifically not progressed directly after their compulsory education. This, in turn, may provide a challenge to the general discourse of linear progression and of status as achieved through (higher) education as espoused by the dominant social groups (Winkle-Wagner, 2010), which implies that those who do not participate in HE are 'deficient' or 'low aspirational' (Gorard et al, 2006; Gorard et al., 2012) and that a lack of linearity is associated with lack of ambition or ability.

Howell (2013) proposes that 'power constitutes the foundation of social existence in that it constructs social and economic relations; that is, power is the basis of all political, social and organisational relationships' (p.6), and further suggests that people consent to their own domination through subjugation to the hegemonic elite. I would argue that rather than construct, it shapes, constructs and *reconstructs* these relationships. Within this research, I have become aware of the role of power whilst conducting the interviews with students and staff. In this instance the role of power is two-fold; there is the 'power' which may be exposed as I am the participants' lecturer requesting that they volunteer to be interviewed; and also my role as an 'insider researcher' (Drake and Heath, 2011: p.2) researching practices from within my own institution. These aspects have, therefore, been examined during the reflections in this thesis.

Secondly, the participants have demonstrated during the interviews that they have also been subject to inequalities of power during their previous educational experiences. For example, they may have accepted that they were not intelligent enough, or not of an acceptable educational standard to continue to HE, but as will be demonstrated in the analysis of the research, are also seemingly unaware of the WP policies, which have increased the chances of engaging in HE at this point. Further

examples of power in this thesis are provided by the analysis of college documents, which have demonstrated what those in power (policymakers and college senior management) consider important when trying to encourage people to participate in HE.

Howell (2013) suggests that hegemonic ideology permits the researcher to move beyond the notion that power is simply coercion and view the role of media, education and politics as contributors to individuals accepting the status quo, and thinking that change is impossible. Foucault (1977) also theorises that powerful groups maintain their power by continuously undermining the development of alternative knowledge. However, Kincheloe (2005: p.342), whilst agreeing with this to some extent writes: -

*'Critical theory is always concerned with the ways power operates, the ways various institutions and interests deploy power in the effort to survive, shape behaviour, gain dominance over others.'*

The suggestion is that critical theory requires a 'reconstruction of worldviews in ways that challenge and undermine what appears normal or natural' (Howell 2013: p.11), which is another distinct part of this doctoral research. WP policies and documents attribute labels to students who are deemed 'non-traditional' and it could be assumed that those students who have generally been excluded from HE have been encouraged to engage by government initiatives (Brian et al., 2007). However, this research challenges this dominant discourse, and demonstrates that the participants are often unaware of the government initiatives or institutional funding they attract, and may not even recognise that these initiatives are central to their chance of studying for and achieving a degree.

Phenomenographic analysis, as I have previously discussed, seemed too reductionist for the portrayal of the participants' experiences. When rationalising this further, I also viewed it as too positivistic as it reduced the data to specific categories (Booth, 1997) determined by the amount of times my participants mentioned the themes and risked granting significance on the basis of this enumeration. Applying this to the critical theory approach, I discovered that this positivistic approach to data analysis would have directed me further towards a reductionist analysis, rather than

concentrating on the holistic individual experiences elucidated in this research (Howell, 2013; Steinberg and Kincheloe, 2010). Phenomenographic analysis, therefore, would not have allowed a full exploration of the whole experience of the student participants, and therefore potentially would not have challenged the 'deficit' and 'low aspirational' discourse attributed to those who decide against participation in HE (Burke, 2012; Gorard et al., 2006, 2012; Smith, 2012; Taylor, 2012). The narrowness of phenomenographic analysis would have only allowed an understanding of the phenomena under investigation, whereas the employment of the bricolage approach has served to broaden the analysis to draw on the participants' lived experiences more widely in order to present a challenge to the dominant discourses suggested above (Mack, 2010).

Furthermore, it is highlighted that CT always views the researcher as part of the research study, rather than objectively separate from it. To remain neutral or separate from the research is to support the dominant power structures (Steinberg and Kincheloe, 2010). This, once more, concurs with the earlier discussion of my positionality within the research. I am inextricably entwined within this research in terms of my personal educational experiences, and also my role in telling the holistic story of the participants' own experiences. At times, I identify with the student participants as my HE experience was traditional for me in the respect that I engaged with HE when a number of factors (for example, a course that interested me; the desire to engage) conspired to allow me and I was unaware of the 'non-traditional' or WP student label attached to me as a mature student/ first generation student. Thus, the inclusion of a discussion regarding critical theory in relation to bricolage is significant when applying elements of the bricolage approach to this research. Berry (2004) suggests that one of the central tenets of the bricolage approach is the desire for the research to instigate social change and challenge power dynamics, thus alluding to how CT, with its desire to expose structural inequalities and challenge dominant discourse (Mack, 2010), can lie within the bricolage.

Therefore, in response to the precept of instigating social change, this research was born from an initial reaction to the homogenous label attributed to students who cannot be placed into the category of 'traditional students', and how policy places

them under the label of 'non-traditional' with sub-groups within this. This doctoral research seeks to address this by telling the stories of 'non-traditional' research participants; thereby highlighting that they should not be treated as a homogenous whole, but rather as individuals with individual stories.

It seems important to emphasise that participants engaged in education at university at a point in their lives, when, for whatever reason, it was the 'right time' for them to engage. The participants exhibit different motivations and come from different familial backgrounds, and therefore the suggestion is that they should not be categorised by one label. Politically, WP in HE has been motivated by the requirement to sustain and develop economic growth in order to remain a global economy (Leitch, 2006) but the student community have different motivations such as, for example, career development when engaging with HE (Tomlinson, 2014). The impacts of educational policy may, however, be implicitly acknowledged as HE is more accessible in terms of a wider selection of courses, institutions and student funding. The potential for instigating social change within this research is to provide information to address the absence of the student voice in current WP and 'non-traditional' student research in order to demonstrate how they define their own educational journey rather than how policy rhetoric defines it.

## **Participants**

Initially a convenience sample of participants was sought, as I hoped to be able to interview students from the full range of the three cohorts of students studying on the FdSc Complementary Therapies and BSc (Hons) Professional Practice in Complementary Therapies on which I teach as a fractional lecturer. The students were informed about the scope of the research in group tutorial sessions; volunteers who wished to take part in a semi-structured interview were encouraged to contact me by email to organise this. Whilst initially the sample was identified as convenience, they were, in fact, a voluntary convenience sample as they were students studying on a particular course on which I taught. Although the literature (Cohen et al., 2011; David and Sutton, 2001; Robson, 2002) suggests that this is 'one of the most widely used and least satisfactory methods of sampling' (Robson, 2002: p. 265), this form of sampling seemed perfect for this research since it was the experience of the students studying on the course I taught upon that was of interest. Cohen et al. (2011) discuss that the use of convenience sampling renders the research less generalisable, and whilst this is often true, there may be other courses at the same institution or even other college-based HE establishments where an aspect of this research may be utilised. Furthermore, the use of this type of sampling method within the research provided participants, who, on analysis, were representative of all of HEFCE's categories of 'non-traditional' students.

## Theoretical Perspectives

### Ontology

When considering the first choice of research approach of phenomenography; ontologically, it is placed within the interpretivist paradigm, which presumes that human beings process their experiences and develop meaning from them to construct a social reality (Glesne, 2006). Burns (2000) suggests that social reality is constructed from the perspective of the involved participants, rather than from the observer or researcher's perspective. Phenomenography endeavours to distinguish the variations in the ways human beings experience reality (Bowden, 2000), and the interpretivist researcher seeks to elucidate the meanings of the participants' realities according to the area under study. The interpretivist paradigm relates to the 'degree to which the research participants' viewpoints, thoughts, feelings, intentions and experiences are accurately understood by the researcher and portrayed in the research report' (Burns, 2000: p.251). This, therefore, seemed an appropriate stance for this doctoral research as, of the utmost importance, is the social reality that the participants have constructed with regards to their experience of higher education.

The ontological stance which has a bearing on phenomenography asserts that the two worlds of objectivity and subjectivity do not exist, rather as Marton (2000) states: -

*'There is only one world, a really existing world, which is expressed and understood in different ways by human beings. It is simultaneously objective and subjective. An experience is a relationship between objects and subjects encompassing both. The experience is as much an aspect of the object as it is of the subject.'* (p.105)

Akerlind (2005b) reiterates this feeling by interpreting phenomenography as providing 'a way of looking at collective human experience of phenomena holistically' p.72.

This ontological stance seems equitable when considering my own feelings surrounding the world of objectivity and subjectivity, and the complexity of human understanding, but in reality the interpretivist ontology seems too simplistic for the reality of the phenomena I have been investigating. The ontological perspective within

bricolage, however, seems a more complex matter, as multiple perspectives of phenomena require multiple shifting ontologies. As Denzin and Lincoln (2013: p.355-356) suggest: -

*'The bricolage is dealing with a double ontology of complexity: first, the complexity of objects of inquiry and their being-in-the-world; second, the nature of the social construction of human subjectivity, the production of human 'being'*

This is in keeping with Kant's ontological theories regarding noumena and phenomena (Kant, 2000). His premise is that noumena are the objects in the world (the reality) and therefore within this doctoral research would be the students themselves, whilst the phenomena is my perception of the phenomena (that is, my perceptions of the student experience), and whilst I can never really know the noumena in this situation, it is my perception of the phenomena which is challenged by listening to their experiences. Kant's theory, therefore, is that we can never know the real world (that is the students' experiences) objectively, but can only perceive them subjectively (Moses and Knutsen, 2012). However, the view that both realities can be separated like this is challenged by Hegel who took a holistic view of the world 'whereby the progress of knowledge is seen as a journey to one complete system' (Williams and May, 1997: p.72); thus challenging Kant's belief that one can separate the objective from the subjective.

Turning therefore to further literature on the ontology of the bricolage approach, it highlights that key to the theoretical perspectives in social research is the exploration of the relationship between the individuals and the contexts in which they exist. Since bricoleurs utilise multiple methods for data collection and analysis, they are acknowledging the multidimensionality of the phenomenon under investigation, without reducing it to a set of pre-specified conceptions (Kincheloe, 2004). With regards to this doctoral research, the underpinning literature suggests that complex social data cannot be reduced in terms of attempting to manipulate it into very narrow categories of description, and then disregard their intricacy and their own (and my) subjectivity.

Essential to the ontology of the bricolage therefore, is an understanding of the 'concept of difference' (Kincheloe, 2004: p.16), which allows the researcher to navigate multiple research approaches and theoretical perspectives. This is in contrast to Husserl's definition of intersubjectivity, which assumes how the world presents itself to me at that moment is the way in which it would present itself to my participants if they were to change places with me (Duranti, 2010). However, if we did not change places there would be multiple views of the same phenomenon. This recognition of multidimensionality seems to enable the researcher to become at ease with optional methods of knowledge production and analysis, and is central to a critical approach to knowledge production.

The phenomenon under investigation cannot produce static knowledge as it entirely depends on the part of the phenomenon which is under scrutiny at the time of analysis and who is conducting the analysis. This means that I had to be aware of intersubjectivity when I was conducting data analysis, as my current experience of the phenomena might have been challenged. Husserl (1991) suggests that this is 'apperception' which means that our perception of a phenomenon is always comprised of more than we can actually see, and therefore there are hidden sides to the phenomenon, which the researcher has to be aware of (Crossley, 2008); thus the inter-subjectivity of a phenomenon is always changing (Crossley, 1996a). Kincheloe (2005) supports this view suggesting that 'researchers will produce different descriptions of an object of inquiry depending upon what part of the fabric they have focused – what part of the river they have seen' (p.333). This complex ontological view assumes, therefore, that bricoleurs understand that social structures do not determine individual subjectivity but constrain it in remarkably intricate ways.

I acknowledge that my ontological stance is as complex as the approaches I have used within this doctoral research. Following the previous discussion, I believe that my ontology is consistent with the interpretivist paradigm; however, the inclusion of CT within the bricolage approach demonstrated that my ontological assumptions also have evolved to include elements of the ontology of CT, as my understanding of this concept has grown. My ontological beliefs, therefore, stem from both the interpretivist and CT paradigm, in that I believe that social reality is subjective

(interpretivist), but it is defined by people in society (critical theory), people interpret and make their own meaning of events (interpretivist), but it can also be socially constructed through media, the establishments and society (critical theory). Events cannot be generalised and there are multiple perspectives of one experience (interpretivist) but at times social behaviour can be dictated by dominant and repressive influences, which do not operate in the general interest of the population (critical theory).

## Epistemology

Epistemologically, the research can be situated within the constructivist paradigm. Constructivism proposes that knowledge is constructed through interaction and socialisation (Silverman, 2000) and its primary purpose according to David and Sutton (2011) is to generate reflexivity and the awareness that what we believe to be tangible and real is actually not. Constructivism asserts that social processes create and maintain knowledge and furthermore, social processes and knowledge become woven together (Young & Collin, 2004). Initially, my affinity with the constructivist stance was surprising since its philosophy seems to fit appropriately with how I often view life situations. However, Clough and Nutbrown (2012) suggest that a fundamental feature of social sciences research is the inseparability of the research and the researcher and the chosen research methodology is often to do with personal values as much as the rigour required for the research. They propose that choosing methodology is not only about making research decisions, but also equally understanding why we have chosen that particular research. This reasoning has allowed an appreciation of why the research and methodology I have chosen to pursue have been influenced by my personal beliefs.

As I have situated this research within the Constructivist epistemology, which suggests that our world is always shaped by our experiences and our context (Cousin 2009), I feel I need to justify this further, having also considered the constructionist epistemology in relation to the prospective research. Crotty (1998) makes the distinction between the constructivist and constructionist epistemology by highlighting that constructionism seeks to determine the way culture influences the way we think and view the world. Furthermore, according to Silverman (2000) constructionism concentrates on the behaviour of people 'prioritising interaction rather than meaning and, therefore, prefers to look at what people do without any necessary reference to what they are thinking or feeling' (p.10). In comparison, constructivism emphasises the individual's unique experience. Constructivism is concerned with the individual's construction of their meaning of reality rather than the focus being on the construction of meaning pertaining to the collective group (Crotty, 1998). The distinction between both constructivism and constructionism therefore further aids the alignment of this doctoral research within the constructivist epistemology as I am

seeking to understand the individual's reality with regards to being labelled as 'non-traditional', rather than the collective reality, which therefore links back to why I initially chose phenomenography over phenomenology.

Although phenomenography can be positioned within the constructivist epistemology, Moses and Knutsen (2012) suggest that constructivists tend to be epistemological pluralists who, in order to appreciate the uniqueness of the social world, utilise whichever tools necessary to fully understand it. Therefore, when being constrained by fully abiding to the details of the phenomenographic approach, I realised I could not reduce the experiences of the participants in their own social world to the sum of its parts. What they had experienced could not be explained fully by reductionist tendencies, but I needed to understand how their full experiences related to each other holistically.

Turning to the bricolage approach; it seems to require the researcher to develop understanding of epistemology from multiple perspectives in order to employ different research approaches in their work, releasing them from the confines of a single research methodology, and thus, in turn, pre-specified inflexible research processes (Kincheloe, 2005). However whilst bricolage's epistemology embraces complexity, the bricoleur does not merely choose research approaches in a random manner, but rigorously considers approaches in an informed multiperspectival way in order to conduct research in the socially constructed world (Bridges, 1997; Foster, 1997; Morawski, 1997). Central to the rigour of the bricolage is the epistemological understanding of the researcher (Kincheloe, 2004).

However, bricolage can also sit within the constructivist paradigm as it is commensurable with approaching 'research with different styles and methods that can produce multiple forms of data' (Guba & Lincoln, 2005) and provides opportunities for the researcher to become a participant in the research and the participant to become a researcher (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013).

The epistemology associated with the Bricolage 'places the researcher in the world that is constructed through people manipulated through power' (Howell, 2013: p.8).

When analysing the meaning of this statement, it seems to suggest that the epistemology of constructivism has a role in critical theory, but the inference is that it is the individual construction of reality in critical theory, which is associated with power and the manipulation of people by this. Further reading around the epistemological stance of critical theory suggests that the researcher and their participants are intrinsically connected through historical values, which Howell (2013) states must exert some influence on the research inquiry. Therefore, the constructivist paradigm is well suited to this research as new knowledge regarding the subject area and participants is pursued whilst interpreting how they perceive and interact/ react within a social context (Lincoln et al., 2013: p.224).

## **Problematizing the Research**

During this doctoral process I have continuously been challenged by both staff teaching on my course, colleagues in my doctoral cohort and even by myself, exploring why the research I have been conducting is a 'research problem'. This has been a puzzle, which I am only now towards the end of the research process able to begin to understand. Prior to undertaking doctoral research, I had not acknowledged the impact on my self-confidence and self-worth of being deemed 'deviant' because I did not wish to study at HE level following my sixth form education; then the joyful feeling that I had managed to accomplish a first class degree to be followed by further feelings of marginalisation because of the degree title of both my BSc (Hons) and MSc. Both of these experiences have allowed me to accept the power of a 'label' being attached to a person. Having worked in an establishment where the majority of students are labelled in terms of government educational policies and the funding they attract, I have, therefore, developed a far greater awareness of the power that attaching a label to someone has, in spite of that person potentially not being aware of being 'labelled'. This is an example of symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1998) whereby the students are subjected to forms of violence (for example, being labelled as low aspirational), but they do not perceive it as a problem as they may not be aware of it or if they are it is assumed that the condition is a normal situation (Webb et al., 2008).

Being aware of the nature of the constructivist epistemology in the social construction of knowledge and the importance of human subjectivity to the research process ensures that the bricoleur researcher acquires a consciousness of their own and other's 'historicity' (Kincheloe, 2004: p.83). Hermeneutics may be employed to understand how power operates in a historical and social manner shaping meaning-making in the research process; thus alerting the researcher to the process by which power aids the construction of social, cultural and economic conditions. The hermeneutic tradition understands that meaning does not merely 'happen', but is imposed on the world by those in authority, and researchers who do not acknowledge these dynamics, unconsciously become involved in the imposition of power over others, and thus do not challenge the status quo for those who require social justice. Kincheloe (2004) suggests that power is further exerted by preventing those who live

marginalised lived experiences to help shape meaning-making in social processes. The bricoleur, therefore, has an essential role in employing their consciousness of constructivism and historicity to highlight these omissions and the effect they may have on the production of knowledge, bringing criticality to the process. Thus, in returning to the initial issue of problematising this research, I feel that my role is to ensure that the voices of those who have no power in the process of being 'labelled' in their education, and are potentially unaware of the processes that they are being subjected to, are heard in terms of their own individual experience. Whilst they may have been labelled in some form or another, whatever their educational experience, or life experience, it is just that – 'their own' and should not be labelled or confined to a single homogenous title with little acknowledgement of the diversity of the individual. They should be celebrated as individuals who perhaps are achieving in their educational endeavours because this is the right time for them to be doing so.

The bricoleur seeks to identify what may be absent in a particular situation (Kincheloe, 2004) and it is, with this in mind, that I have identified that whilst much research has been undertaken from an establishment or government perspective into the success or not of non-traditional students' accomplishments in HE, there is very little written discussing the experience of HE from the student perspective. This has, therefore, allowed the positioning of this situation as a doctoral research problem. It is a problem precisely because, in order for social justice to be achieved, the voices of those who are labelled should be heard from their own perspective.

## Chapter six

### Methods

#### Gathering my Data

#### Semi-structured Interviews with Students

Although the approach to this research has evolved since the original intention of using phenomenography, the data collection method of semi-structured interviews indicated in phenomenographic literature has been implemented. Whilst interviews are utilised frequently in the qualitative paradigm, the instructions provided in terms of conducting a phenomenographic interview have specifically been referred to. Booth (1997) suggests that the phenomenographic interview should be deep with no particular structure. His reference to 'deep' requires that the interview continue along one line of enquiry until it is exhausted and whilst there may be an interview schedule, the intention is that it is flexible enough to encourage the participant to narrate their own story in their own way. Orgill (2007) indicates that the interview should continue along one particular line of enquiry whilst the participant continues to reflect about his experiences. Once the researcher and the participant feel they have come to a mutual understanding of the experience of the participant they can move on. The interviewer, meanwhile, must not attempt to judge the answers to be right or wrong, but should allow the participant to express himself or herself clearly and as fully as possible (Sjostrom and Dahlgren, 2002). The intention is not to understand the phenomenon itself, but to understand the participant's individual insight into the phenomenon (Hasselgren & Beach, 1997).

I chose to use a conversational approach during the interviews, although I did have a formalised interview schedule with questions that required answers in order to elicit information to formalise the research outcomes. The conversation I attempted to initiate with the research participants was in an effort to allow the participant to provide an illustration of their personal experience and provide space to elaborate on their answers. If I perceived that there was a need to include further questions that would prompt the participant in providing a fuller explanation of their experience, I did so. At times this worked well, allowing me to gather a full and rich narrative of their story, but at other times, participants were reluctant to elaborate further.

My attempts at conversational interviews was a strategy to widen the discussion to include personal experiences and elicit information in a wider context than the original questions and answers would yield. If I attempt to relate this to the bricolage approach, Berry (2006:p.106) suggests that: -

*'Bricoleurs frame their questions not just to evoke conversation but to push the topic under scrutiny beyond the immediate context and link the responses to other contexts which visibly or invisibly shaped or influenced the interviewee's knowledge, beliefs and actions.'*

Ashworth and Lucas (1998) discuss the need for bracketing or the *époché*, which Husserl (1991) posits as the ability to set aside research theories, preconceptions and ready-made interpretations of data in order that the real-life lived experience is revealed. Ashworth and Lucas (1998) debate that it is imperative that effort is made by the researcher to bracket earlier research experience, theories and findings although they simultaneously recognise that often such experience becomes part of the 'researcher's taken for granted world' (p.420). A failure to bracket off one's own experience may result in the participant's data being veiled by the researcher's attention to previously acquired knowledge. It seems there is a tension between knowing the prior literature in the area of research and potential problems this may create for the researcher when conducting, interpreting and analysing the research.

However, whilst the use of bracketing is deemed necessary in both phenomenographic and phenomenological research approaches, the bricolage approach suggests that the researcher's experience and prior knowledge inform the research process, and that the researcher should demonstrate reflexivity when discussing their own position within the research in the thesis. This has been a difficult process for me, in terms of my own training as a homeopath. The homeopath is trained to become an 'unprejudiced observer' (Hahnemann, 1999), and as such must bracket off all their prior experience of conditions and diseases, as well as any patient's experiences which are recounted which may seem synchronous with their own experiences. Although reflection and reflexivity are also widely utilised in the homeopathic profession, the actual act of 'positioning' myself within the research and acknowledging that the research has come to fruition due to my personal educational experiences has been

difficult and at times uncomfortable. I was completely unaware of the associated labels of being a mature, first generation student. Whilst this label is unavoidable in educational terms, I still resist it being attributed to me, as I have always thought of my educational experiences as merely a part of my personal life journey, rather than something to be categorised.

## Semi-Structured Interviews with Staff Members

This research also included interviews with staff participants from programmes on which I teach as a fractional lecturer. Similar to when I was conducting student participant interviews, I was conscious of the impact of my experience of teaching at this establishment. Initially I conducted the interviews with a carefully constructed schedule. However, during transcription, an obvious omission in the data provided by staff participants became evident in terms of their own educational experiences and how that may impact on their provision of academic and pastoral support to the students. This omission was not immediately apparent but developed within my consciousness over a period of weeks. I began to reflect on how the student participant stories had provided insight into how my education had impacted on the direction of this doctoral research. An increasing focus had been placed on the subjectivity of me, the qualitative researcher, and the importance of 'who I am, who I have been, who I think I am, and how I feel affect data collection and analysis' (Pillow, 2003: p.176). Perhaps, I thought, the staff participants' own education could have some influence on how they viewed the needs of the students, and if this was so, could there be any correlation between the amount or type of support they provided the students with and whether they understood the potential academic needs of the 'non-traditional' student. Pillow (2003) suggests that being reflexive 'becomes important to demonstrate one's awareness of the research problematics and is often used to potentially validate and legitimize the research precisely by raising questions about the research process' (p. 179). The outcome of this was a revision of the interview schedule, and a further interview with those staff participants who had impacted on my thought processes in order to request information regarding their own educational journey.

## Documentary Analysis

Documentary analysis sought to provide the perspective of the institution and how they view and potentially support students labelled as 'non-traditional'. Documents which were analysed included the College Access Agreement (16/17), Teaching, Learning and Assessment Strategy (2015-2016), and the Single Equality Policy (2014-2017).

## Chapter seven

### Data Analysis Methods

#### Introduction

Within this section of the thesis I will discuss the chosen data analysis techniques, and analyse the decisions to use them. Although the initial approach to this doctoral research was phenomenography and whilst I still recognise that this approach is one of the central aspects to the research, I have, as previously stated, employed elements of the bricolage approach in terms of methodology and data analysis procedures. I have discarded the phenomenographic approach to data analysis, preferring a pluralistic approach (Frost et al., 2010), which I feel will reflect the individual nature of the educational experiences of the participants. I have struggled when deciding upon data analysis techniques and have felt a sense of unease, especially initially when I decided that the bricolage approach incorporating phenomenography would be employed since I have not been able to find any incidences of this combination in the literature. However, much of the literature regarding qualitative data analysis does not seem to impose analysis methods and as such has provided me with confidence in my chosen techniques. For example, Ribbens and Edwards (1998) suggest: -

*'Dilemmas occur at every stage of the research process. From the outset, there is a difficulty in 'letting go' of established academic bodies of knowledge, theories and methodologies. There are dilemmas around needing to be acceptable to others, ... Yet if we cling to those authoritative ways of knowing, we run the risk of silencing, or shaping in particular ways private, domestic and intimate ways of knowing, meaning and experience.'* (p.16)

In other literature, Frost et al. (2010) make a suggestion that resonates; they propose that since there are many techniques employed in qualitative research, then the use of a single approach during data analysis limits the meanings extant in the data. Employing a pluralistic approach to data analysis may ensure multiple interpretations of data and provide different dimensions and enrichment of analysis, whilst potentially enhancing its transparency and reliability. Indeed, Kincheloe (2005) concurs that in

order to fully understand the context of the experience of the participants the researcher should employ multiple research data collection methods and interpretive strategies to fully understand the manifold aspects of the situation. This is reiterated by Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Kincheloe, 2001 and Onwuegbuzie & Leach, 2005 who suggest that a 'bricolage' or 'pragmatic' approach may be more fitting when addressing the understanding of human beings. Finally, Todd et al. (2004) suggest that all methods of analysis are equal, advocating that one should use the analytical methods that are most suitable for the research being conducted. Therefore, it is with renewed confidence that I will evaluate my choice of data analysis techniques in the next section.

***Student Data Analysis Methods***

Having rejected phenomenographic data analysis techniques for the student participants in this doctoral research, it has been difficult to know how to proceed. Much reading has ensued, and so armed with new knowledge I have decided that in order to portray the participants' experiences as holistically as possible, I had to engage with two procedures; elements of phenomenological analysis, which will be outlined later in this chapter and I-Poems. Although I have previously argued for not using phenomenology during the research and analysis, since its aim is to describe the collective experience of the phenomena under investigation, I have adapted this to 'fit' with this research and the way in which I wanted to foreground participants' experiences. Utilising multiple methods of data analysis has, I feel, enabled the transparent telling of the whole story of the research, and this is reiterated by Kvale (2011) who suggests that when analysing interviews it is not essential to utilise one specific analytic method and that researchers may choose to move between a multitude of techniques and approaches, which ultimately 'bring out connections and structures significant to a research project' (p.115).

Initially, all of the data has been input into NVIVO. However, this has not been utilised as a data analysis tool but rather as a repository to efficiently organise the information. I did, however, develop some loose themes for the student participants' information in order to allow for further organisation of the data, and whilst these have informed the analysis, they have been further developed using elements of the Stevick-Colazzi-Keen method of phenomenological analysis. As previously stated, I have veered away from utilising this data analysis technique as the sole analysis tool as I wanted to demonstrate the wholeness of each participant's experience. During reading of the transcriptions I also utilised some principles of Grounded Theory (GT) data analysis such as summarising interviews which has allowed me to pick out key moments in the participants' journeys, and memo writing to record any thoughts I have on the unfolding stories; these have been used to enable me to make further sense of the data. This is where the utilisation of GT within the data analysis ends as I have discovered that as it generates new theory, it reduces the experiences of the participants to categories to underpin the theory it is supposedly generating (Kvale,

2011). Furthermore, this approach seemed to have parallels with the development of outcome spaces in the phenomenographic approach, which I had previously rejected in favour of utilising a more participant-centred approach.

In order to further develop the themes present in the data, I employed elements of the Stevick-Colazzi-Keen method of phenomenological analysis (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994) which helped provide some much needed structure when I felt overwhelmed with the amount of data requiring analysis. This method of analysis follows six steps to achieve an essence of the collective experience of the phenomena. In my quest to present the individual experiences of the participants rather than the collective, I have not utilised the final two steps of this method which are the structural description, whereby the researcher provides a subjective experience of how they imagine the experience of the phenomenon happened, and the composite description step whereby the collective essence is described. Reassurance regarding this decision was found in the literature as Mauthner and Doucet (1998) suggest that anxiety may arise during data analysis as the researcher may adapt the analytical method to 'fit' the data they have collected rather than following the original analytical steps developed. They further discuss that including reasoning as to why one has chosen not to follow prescribed data analysis procedures can only serve to enhance the openness, transparency and trustworthiness of the qualitative analytical process.

The Stevick-Colazzi-Keen method of phenomenological analysis begins with a description of the researcher's experience of the phenomenon under investigation. This, I feel, has been achieved in other chapters of this thesis (see Chapter one, two, three and four) where I have explored my experience of education and how this phenomenon has impacted on me in terms of labelling and my progression through the education system. I have also explored the impact of my son's experience 25 years later and multiple perspectives of relevant literature, which has also influenced the choice of research area, but I have also acknowledged that both mine and my son's experiences may be very different to that of the student participants' experiences. This first step of the Stevick-Colazzi-Keen method has to be undertaken in order to 'attempt to set aside the researcher's personal experiences (which cannot be done entirely) so that the focus can be directed to the participants in the study' (Creswell,

2013: p.193). Therefore, in positioning myself within the research as I have previously shown, I have now attempted to remove myself or bracket my experience outside the data analysis, in order to attempt to portray the individual educational experiences of my student participants.

Further steps, which I have followed in this method are the development of a list of 'significant statements' (step two) (Creswell, 2013: p.193) which have moved the analysis into advanced themes, initially developed loosely when organising the data in NVIVO (step three). When displaying the data in Chapter eight, participants' narratives to support the themes that I have developed are included and this forms the fourth step of this method, where I attempt to provide a 'textural description' (Creswell, 2013: p.193) aimed at describing, with the inclusion of direct participant quotes, of 'what the participants experienced' (Creswell, 2013: p.194). Employing elements of this technique, therefore, has allowed the provision of a descriptive narrative of the collective participants' experiences, together with supporting quotes emphasising individual experiences. Although this approach seemed appropriate to this research and the methodological approach I had taken, I worried that it might not provide the in-depth new knowledge I knew I should seek for doctoral work. Koopman (2015: p.7) eased these anxieties by suggesting: -

*'A descriptive account does not provide an effective theory with which to explain and control the world of the individual, but it affords the researcher the possibility of attaining plausible insights which might bring about a more direct contact with the world of the individual participant.'*

In terms of further data analysis techniques, I have utilised the I-poem from The Listening Guide developed by Gilligan (1993) to foreground the participants' individual educational experiences. It is a 'qualitative, relational, voice-centered feminist methodology primarily used in the analysis of interview data' (Woodcock, 2005: p.49) studied during one of the doctoral modules. Having experienced its potential in portraying the participant's narrative, I felt it would present a powerful interpretation of their experiences. Koelsch (2015) concurs with my point suggesting that 'The creation of poems out of participant voices is one way to emotionally engage the

reader or audience' and 'resists the urge to turn a participant's complex story into a single linear narrative' (p.96). This was exactly what I wished to achieve when presenting the data as I have discovered there seems to be a lack of participant voice foregrounded in research on 'non-traditional' students. Utilisation of this method of analysis may also hopefully prevent bias in the interpretation of the data since, as previously stated, the area for this doctoral research is of great interest because of the recognition of potential similarities between my educational experiences and those of the student participants since it is derived from the verbatim transcription of the participant's interviews. Much of the research conducted on 'non-traditional' students focuses on one aspect of the HE experience or one particular category of student. For example, Chipperfield (2012) investigated the effects of group-diversity on learning in a cohort of mature students on a university based FD, analysing her findings utilising Grounded Theory techniques. Similarly, Fenge (2011) explored the experience of mature students on a Health and Social Care FD to understand how they perceived themselves as learners in HE. She used thematic analysis to portray her findings. Esmond (2012), meanwhile, focused on part-time students studying at a Further Education (FE) college and their perception of their student identity. He also used thematic analysis but included participant narratives to demonstrate the experiences of the sample, which is comparable to Benson et al. (2010) who also used narratives to demonstrate potential transformational experiences prior to engagement in HE and Burnell (2015) who included narratives to emphasise mature 'non-traditional' students' HE experiences.

As previously suggested, therefore, I have used I-Poems to allow the student's individual experience to be predominant in the data analysis. The process adopted for The Listening Guide analysis consists of four sequential readings, which are: 'listening for the plot'; constructing the 'I-Poem'; 'listening for contrapuntal voices'; 'composing an analysis' (Balan, 2005: p.4). I have developed an I-Poem for each participant which is preceded by a short narrative which explains the context, and is followed by a short analysis which details the themes or 'contrapuntal voices' or multiple voices that can be heard in the poems (Balan, 2005: p.4). I am aware that the analysis and the I-Poem I have created may not be the same as another researcher who analyses the data using the same tools but as Ribbens and Edwards (1998) suggest: -

*'...whilst data is of a subjective interpretative nature, we (the researchers) have to interpret the respondents' words in some way, knowing there are probably any number of other ways in which they could be interpreted...'* (p.122)

### ***Staff Data Analysis Methods***

Turning to the analysis of the data gathered from staff members during this research, I have contemplated and discarded different analysis techniques such as GT analysis, narrative analysis and discourse analysis; instead I have employed thematic analysis. When examining the literature surrounding this form of data analysis, according to Bryman (2012: p.578) 'this is not an approach to analysis which has an identifiable heritage', which seems troublesome, especially as I have to justify the approach to data analysis that I have taken. However, Gibson and Brown (2009) discuss that although thematic analysis may not have any 'identifiable heritage' in the literature on data analysis techniques, it is an approach commonly used in qualitative data analysis such as narrative analysis, hermeneutic genre analysis and GT. Key to engaging in thematic analysis is the identification of repetitions in the text, transitions from one subject area to another, and similarities and differences and missing data (Ryan and Bernard, 2003).

Initially a reading of all the transcripts was undertaken, followed by an initial coding in coloured highlighters of the emerging themes. The transcripts were then uploaded to NVIVO, where taking the initial themes, the GT tool of inserting memos to develop and explain the themes was employed (Charmaz, 2006). This deepened the understanding of why the original themes had been developed and what they added to the research in terms of answering the research questions. One further aspect that was contemplated was if there was anything in the transcripts which demonstrated an aspect of practice not previously considered, and whether this should become a developed theme in the data analysis. When displaying the analysed data in this thesis, some direct quotes from the transcripts and narrative to illustrate the themes have been incorporated.

Initially there was a concern that the implementation of this data analysis technique would reduce the data down until it became decontextualised or generalised, but hopefully the inclusion of direct quotes and narratives has prevented this. My concerns are reflected in the phenomenological literature where Van Manen (1997) suggests that the use of themes in data analysis fractures the data, thus representing an insignificant alternative for the description of a 'lived experience' (p.35). This

suggestion led to reading further literature to validate the use of thematic analysis. Gibson and Brown (2009) discuss Van Manen's critique of thematic analysis; however, they provided a balanced argument for the use of thematic analysis where they suggest that 'analysis is, in many respects, about storytelling and as any novelist will attest, themes are a useful device for narrative construction' (p.129). This resonated with my views regarding thematic analysis as I have used the themes generated by the data analysis as a basis for the reporting of the staff data results, but also have included further information to support the themes, thus avoiding the reduction of the data to a de-contextualised report. Gibson and Brown (2009) further debate that thematic analysis can re-contextualise and present the data in order to promote deeper understanding of the experiences of the participants. It seems that Van Manen's critique can be used as warning against reductionist or careless thematic analysis, rather than as a warning against the use of thematic analysis at all.

### ***Institutional Documents Analysis Methods***

The decision to analyse some of the educational establishment's documentation was taken in order to develop an awareness of the discourse surrounding the support offered to the students in general, both academically and pastorally, at institutional level and what is expected from lecturers at course level. In particular, those documents chosen for analysis were the latest versions of the College Access Agreement (16/17), Teaching, Learning and Assessment Strategy (2015-2016), and the Single Equality Policy (2014-2017). The documents are classed as 'regular' documents, having been prepared by the institution in response to external factors (Gibson and Brown, 2009: p.73) and were purposely chosen to provide guidance on institutional policy for two reasons. Firstly their analysis may provide some information with which to address the research questions, and secondly, they would demonstrate the institutional information prepared for government and public consumption. It was hoped that the inclusion of institutional documentary analysis would provide the establishment viewpoint for this doctoral research, demonstrating the utilisation of multiple perspectives when conducting data collection. This is reiterated by Gibson and Brown (2009) who discuss that 'documents can offer distinctive analytic possibilities, particularly when combined with other data generation methods' (p.65).

A greater understanding of the 'meanings' of the documents in terms of their context has been gained through further reading. During analysis, memos detailing the social, political and economic perspectives, which have served to contextualise the contemporary significance of the documents have been written; that is 'how they are understood in the context of their time' (Cohen et al., 2011: p.253). Harding (2013) suggests that as well as understanding the context of the documents for analysis, careful consideration should be given to the producer of the document, suggesting that the researcher must consider who has written the document and for what purpose, as this will influence the language and content of the document. Macdonald (2008) questions the objectivity of some documents as they may be socially produced and therefore the content in terms of authenticity, credibility and representativeness should be considered carefully. It is with all these opinions in mind that content

analysis was chosen and employed for the documentary analysis during this doctoral research.

Content analysis can be described as an essentially quantitative form of analysis where the text is analysed and grouped into pre-defined categories (Silverman, 2011). However, over time, distinctions have been drawn between quantitative and qualitative content analysis, as this form of data analysis offers the qualitative researcher an opportunity to manage voluminous data more efficiently. Within qualitative content analysis, categories are drawn up and utilised in the first instance but it is assumed that as analysis progresses, further categories will emerge (Bryman, 2012). Therefore, with this in mind, categories were drawn up which were expected to emerge from the data. These were developed whilst considering the original research questions, but the categories were further developed as I moved through the data. The findings of this data analysis are displayed in tables using themes as headings but also include short illustrative statements, which are examples of the themes developed.

The inclusion of hermeneutics within the content analysis resonates with my insistence that the data analysis of the research is holistic rather than reductionist. Bryman (2012) suggests that the hermeneutic approach to documentary analysis insists that the researcher 'must seek to bring out the meanings of a text from the perspective of its author' (p.560). This could be deemed difficult as the documents are written from an institutional perspective, possibly by departmental employees employed to write establishment documents. For the purposes of this research, however, the author of the documents was taken as being the college under scrutiny, and analysis of the documents was undertaken from that perspective. The hermeneutic approach proposes that the researcher be fully aware of the context in which the documents were written, in order that full analysis of the text can be undertaken dependant on contextual knowledge of the social and historical perspectives of the analysis (Bryman, 2012). This concurs with both Harding's (2013) and Macdonald's (2008) points of view. During analysis, therefore, this viewpoint was respected and whilst there were some pre-formed categories, others were allowed to develop from the data dependent on

my institutional and organisational knowledge of the context in which the documents were written.

### ***Concluding Remarks on my Chosen Data Analysis Methods***

Within the research analysis I am not in any way attempting to generalise the findings, but rather my wish is to explain the ordinariness of the participants' experience. As will be demonstrated in the Findings and Data Analysis (Chapter eight), the participants do not perceive themselves as different from other students who are described as 'traditional'; they merely view their educational experiences in both the compulsory and HE sectors as a part of their life journey, and that they have entered post-compulsory education because the time and opportunity is right for them. Similar to the suggestion presented by Van Manen (1997) which discusses that phenomenological research does not aim to problem solve or prove a hypothesis, this research does not seek to provide answers or generalisations regarding the lived experience of the participants as this may prove problematic, and as Van Manen (1997) suggests 'The tendency to generalise may prevent us from developing understandings that remain focused on the uniqueness of human experience' (p.22).

What I had to bear in mind when I interpreted and analysed the data is that any conclusions I came to, are merely my own, and that another researcher may have completely different outcomes than me. This at times has seemed daunting; I have wondered how I could ensure that the analysis of the data could have some effect on my practice. Charmaz (2006) seemed to offer some solace to this anxiety writing that '... any analysis is contextually situated in time, place, culture and situation' (p.131) Whilst the importance of the values of the researcher are emphasised within the constructivist paradigm, there is an awareness of any pre-suppositions that the researcher may bring to the work and how this may impact, but equally, how through reflexivity the researcher can explore this (Mills et al., 2006a).

## Trustworthiness of this Research

Validity and reliability of any research has often been presented as a positivist concept and applicable to quantitative research, although some qualitative researchers have utilised these concepts in their own work to help validate their research within the natural scientific approach (Ely et al., 1991). However, other qualitative researchers reject these criteria in favour of values such as trustworthiness, honesty and transparency (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013). In order to ensure the credibility of qualitative research a number of steps were developed by Guba (1981) which, when employed, could potentially enhance the trustworthiness of the qualitative research being reported. These included demonstrating the credibility of the research by reporting a true account of the phenomenon being investigated; and demonstrating the transferability of the research by including sufficient contextualisation of the research setting, in order that others may realise the potential of transferring the findings to other settings. Confirmability, which demonstrates through the research report that the findings have emerged from the research data, rather than from the bias or predisposition of the researcher; and finally potentially the most difficult step to achieve is dependability where the researcher should, once more through the careful reporting of their research, ensure that there is potential for their research to be replicated. Reasons noted for 'dependability' being the most difficult step to achieve are that the very nature of the phenomenon investigated during qualitative research (i.e. people and their thoughts, feelings and experiences) means that it is an ever-changing phenomenon and therefore the likelihood of it being completely replicable is slight (Marshall and Rossman, 1999).

Shenton (2004), following his PhD research, recorded further provisions under each of Guba's steps, providing detail as to how to achieve these and thereby potentially enhancing the trustworthiness of the qualitative research being undertaken. I have utilised both Guba's steps and Shenton's detail of provision to demonstrate the trustworthiness of this doctoral research, which I will detail in ensuing paragraphs. However, whilst I have addressed Guba's steps, it has been difficult because of the nature and scope of this research, to attempt to address all the in-depth provisions detailed by Shenton. However, having scrutinised these, it seems it would be difficult for any qualitative research project to attempt to address all the provisions.

Therefore, in order to demonstrate credibility within this research, I have adopted research methods, which are well established within the Interpretivist tradition, and these are discussed at length in the Methodology (Chapter five). Reflexivity is considered important and can potentially increase the credibility of qualitative research. With this in mind, I have considered and re-considered my position/positionality throughout this thesis, which is detailed during many of the chapters and sub-sections.

Shenton (2004) details that there is a requirement for 'thick description of the phenomenon under scrutiny' (p.69), which may enhance the credibility of the present research, thus allowing for comparison of any future research in the current area to the present research. Key to this research is facilitating participant voices to be heard and this is achieved by employing techniques such as the I-poem to create rich narratives demonstrating the participants' stories, thus concurring, once more, with one of Shenton's suggestions to boost the credibility of the research.

The dependability of qualitative research is likened to the issue of reliability in the positivist approach where if the same techniques, same methods and same participants were employed once more, comparable results should be obtained; however, as highlighted previously, dependability is a difficult concept to achieve within qualitative research due to the varying nature of the phenomena under scrutiny (Marshall and Rossman, 1999). This, therefore, may be problematic when considering dependability within this research, although Shenton (2004) suggests that the research processes during the current study 'should be reported in detail, thereby enabling a future researcher to repeat the work, if not necessarily to gain the same results' (p.71). With this in mind, therefore, I have reported the methodology and data analysis methods in great detail to allow reproducibility.

Confirmability of qualitative research is explained as:-

*'steps (which) must be taken to help ensure as far as possible that the work's findings are the result of the experiences and ideas of the informants, rather than the characteristics and preferences of the researcher'*

(Shenton, 2004: p.72)

Suggestions to enhance confirmability are researcher reflexivity and detailed methodological description to demonstrate how the findings of the research are teased from the data collection methods and careful analysis, both of which are demonstrated within this thesis. This is essentially an audit trail detailing the exact steps of the research in order to demonstrate objectivity in the research process.

## Chapter eight

### Findings and Data Analysis

Throughout the preceding chapters I have presented literature which contextualises this doctoral research, and discussed the methodology and proposed means of analysis of the different data I have collected. This chapter will present the key findings of the research beginning with the student participant perspective, followed by the staff participant perspective and finally documentary analysis. The research questions initially posed are as follows: -

- What are the factors that determine decision-making amongst WP students?
- Do students initially unwilling to progress to HE share any common characteristics?
- How are WP students supported during decision-making about their options?
- What support is offered to WP students who choose not to progress to HE?
- What are staff perceptions of the academic support required by the WP student?

This findings section will provide the responses to these questions throughout, and I will highlight the key findings for each question at the end of this chapter following the initial analysis. However, within the research proposal I did highlight that further research questions may develop during the process due to the methods employed both with the student and staff participants. The nature of the conversational semi-structured interview I used during fieldwork often means that more than the data required is collected (Kvale, 2011), so with this in mind, I developed the following research questions from responses during the fieldwork and analysis: -

- What factors have meant that the WP student is now willing to participate in HE study?
- What are the academic or personal impacts, if any, for WP students studying at HE level?

## **Analysis of Student Participant Demographics**

Following analysis of the demographics of the students who engaged in the research process, the following was discovered; Of the 19 volunteers, 17 were mature students, two had engaged with HE directly following completion of FE qualifications, but were both 19 years old at commencement of study and had spent some time deliberating their future HE study changing courses or re-sitting previous qualifications. One student studied for the FdSc on a part-time basis undertaking four modules per year until completion; 14 out of the 19 participants had achieved a National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) Level 3 in either Beauty, Holistic Therapies, Health and Social Care or Indian Head Massage prior to enrolment on the FdSc. Three out of the 19 had achieved A levels; one of these also had gone onto further FE study at NVQ level 3 in beauty therapy and one had undertaken a university access course, prior to engaging with the FdSc as her 1970s A levels were no longer current due to the time lapse. It is important to note that all the participants were female which is consistent with the demographic of the courses from which the sample was drawn, and also the Complementary Therapies industry as a whole (Tollefson et al., 2016). This situation, therefore, may have an effect on the generalisability of the research findings to other populations of NT students as female mature students often exhibit different motivations when engaging in HE which can be both extrinsic and intrinsic (Feinstein et al., 2007). Extrinsic motivations may be to gain a recognised qualification, increase future employment options and opportunities, a change in career direction, improved opportunities in current employment or to enable further postgraduate study (Feinstein et al., 2007; Swain and Hammond, 2011). Intrinsic motivations exhibited by female mature students may be interest in the subject area, proving to themselves or others that they are capable of achieving at HE level or purely for enjoyment (Feinstein et al., 2007; Jackson and Jamieson, 2009; Swain and Hammond, 2011). Furthermore, female mature students often choose HE study at establishments which are closer to home due to family commitments or enrol to study at a local HE establishment due to the availability of a course they may be interested in (Swain and Hammond, 2011).

The criteria for acceptance on the FdSc are a minimum of NVQ level 3 and General Certificate in Secondary Education (GCSE) English Grade C or level 2 Functional Skills. In general, for university entrance the complete university guide (2016) suggests that

traditional qualifications for entry to HE courses are a minimum of 48 UCAS points which are comprised of A levels and/ or BTEC National Diploma at level 3 (thecompleteuniversityguide.co.uk, 2016). Whilst it is suggested that NVQ level 3 is equivalent to 2 A levels, this qualification is not regarded as a traditional qualification for entrance to HE study as it is more practice-based than theory-based (gov.uk, 2016). Students who have achieved NVQ level 3, in general, may already be working in the field of chosen study, be assessed on practical skills and be unused to academic writing and analysis (Flude and Sieminski, 2013). Therefore, as a result, students enrolling on the courses under scrutiny often have little experience of academic writing, referencing and studying.

### **Implications of the Participants' Demographics**

One of the aims of this research has been to investigate the educational experiences of those students labelled as non-traditional (HEFCE, 2000; Moore et al., 2013). The analysis of the participant demographics has highlighted that all the categories of non-traditional student have been included. However, whilst this may be true, the sample is not truly representative of non-traditional students in general, as all the participants are women who are, in the main, mature students. Analysis of the data will, therefore, produce a biased view of the educational experiences of non-traditional students in favour of mature female students. It is, therefore, essential to consider the implications of this for the transferability of the research. Transferability of work-based research may be limited as generally the scale of the research is small and the results may not directly transfer to another setting (Costley et al., 2011). However, as mentioned earlier in this thesis (Chapter one), 'fuzzy generalisations' can be drawn whereby aspects of the research may be transferred from one context to another (Bassegy, 1999: p.12).

In order to gain a wider perspective on the educational experiences of non-traditional students, a study could have been undertaken whereby the participants could have been recruited from other courses across the College since the student demographic is diverse. However, the decision to recruit a sample of participants from the courses upon which I teach was driven by a personal desire to undertake this research in order to develop a deeper understanding of the context and experiences of my students,

thereby potentially effecting change in my own practice. Costley et al. (2011) suggest that when undertaking work-based research the researcher's goal should be 'to find a project that adds value to your work situation' (p.4). Whilst it must be acknowledged that the biased nature of the sample recruited will not and cannot truly represent the educational experiences of non-traditional students in general, the analysis may contribute to the evidence base for mature women's motivations to engage with HE (Adnett and Coates, 2000; O'Brien and Whitmore, 1989; Reay, 2003; Sheard, 2009).

## **Student Participant Analysis**

Within this section I will present the student participant data analysis. The structure of this may, at first, seem somewhat complicated but the way it is presented seems necessary in order to explore the complexity of the student experience of education. Initially, phenomenological analysis utilising elements of the Stevick-Colazzi-Keen Method has been employed to develop themes and these are illustrated using verbatim narratives from some of the participants.

## **Matrix of Participants' Characteristics Aligned with HEFCE's 2000 Definition of 'Non-traditional Students'**

There were 19 student participants, and as the matrix (Table one) demonstrates the sample of volunteers came from Year one and two of the FdSc, the BSc (Hons) top-up degree, and some students who had recently graduated. The inclusion of this matrix is important to provide an understanding of the characteristics of the participants and to align them with the different classifications of 'non-traditional' student as defined by HEFCE (2000). However, whilst some of the classifications are self-explanatory in that the participants intentionally or unintentionally divulged them during the interview (e.g. disability, ethnic origin), others are assigned definitions by HEFCE. For example, mature students are defined as being over 21 years of age at the beginning of HE study and first generation students are defined as those students whose parents/ legal guardians have not completed an undergraduate degree. It was more difficult to discover HEFCE definitions for students from disadvantaged backgrounds or low family income.

The HEFCE website does not detail definitions for either 'disadvantaged' or 'low family income' categories (HEFCE, 2000), and therefore I turned to government websites for clarification to determine whether the participants could be included in these categories following analysis of the interviews. Low family income as defined by gov.uk (2010) are those people whose household income is 60% of the contemporary household median income; whilst the definitions for HE students in the disadvantaged category were harder to determine, as the information often pertained to pupils in compulsory education. The definition of this disadvantage was pupils who had been eligible for free school meals in the previous six years, pupils who were continuously looked after for one day or more, or those adopted from care (RAISEonline, 2016). This definition was impossible to apply to the student participants in the research. Therefore I deduced from various research papers on the subject of the education of disadvantaged students, that disadvantage in terms of HE students can include those whose social or economic circumstances could hinder their ability to perform in educational environments (Archer and Yamashita, 2003; Bingham and O'Hara, 2007; Brimble, 2013; Bye et al., 2007; Cook et al., 2004; Hogarth et al., 1997; Quinn et al., 2006; Smith, 2007). Having found reasonable definitions for both categories of HEFCE

characteristics of non-traditional students, the decision was taken not to complete either of these sections when analysing the data for the matrix of participants. To do so would require an imposition of these characteristics onto the participants due to my prior knowledge of their circumstances, rather than an interpretation from the data acquired. As is demonstrated by the matrix, during analysis of the different characteristics of the students who had volunteered to participate, all the categories of non-traditional student as defined by HEFCE had been unintentionally covered.

**Table one – Matrix of participants**

Participant Name	Year of Programme	FT/PT	Disabilities	Mature Student	First Generation Student	Ethnic Minority/ Refugee
Natalie	3 <sup>rd</sup> – graduated 2014	FT	Yes – dyslexia	Yes	Yes	No
Dana	3 <sup>rd</sup> – graduated 2014	FT	No	Yes	Yes	No
Andrea	3 <sup>rd</sup> – graduated 2014	FT	No	No	Yes	No
Roz	2 <sup>nd</sup> – FdSc – not continued onto 3 <sup>rd</sup> yr	FT	Yes - dyslexia	Yes	Yes	Yes
Julie	2 <sup>nd</sup> year FdSc – present	PT	No	Yes	Yes	No
Vera	3 <sup>rd</sup> – present – FdSc at different college	FT	No	Yes	Yes	No
Lisa	2 <sup>nd</sup> year FdSc – present	FT	Yes - dyslexia	Yes	Yes	No
Edith	2 <sup>nd</sup> year FdSc – present	FT	No	Yes	Yes	No
Sally	2 <sup>nd</sup> year FdSc – present	FT	No	Yes	Yes	No
Arlene	2 <sup>nd</sup> Year FdSc – present	FT	Yes – depression, anxiety, schizophrenia	Yes	Yes	No

Participant Name	Year of Programme	FT/PT	Disabilities	Mature Student	First Generation Student	Ethnic Minority/ Refugee
Brenda	3 <sup>rd</sup> year – present – FdSc at different college	FT	No	No	Yes	Yes
Freda	3 <sup>rd</sup> year – present – FdSc at different college	FT	No	Yes	Yes	No
Tricia	3 <sup>rd</sup> year – present – FdSc at BB	FT	Yes – RHS paralysis following stroke, Chronic fatigue and FM	Yes	Yes	No
Laura	3 <sup>rd</sup> year – present – FdSc at BB	FT	No	Yes	No	No
Michelle	1 <sup>st</sup> year – present	FT	No	Yes	No	No
Sabina	1 <sup>st</sup> year – present	FT	Yes – diabetes	Yes	Yes	No
Bella	1 <sup>st</sup> Year - present	FT	No	Yes	Yes	No
Katherine	1 <sup>st</sup> Year - present	FT	No	No	No	Yes – Orthodox Jew
Melissa	1 <sup>st</sup> Year – present	FT	No	No	Yes	No

## **Themes Developed from the Interviews**

Key themes developed from the initial phenomenological analysis of the student participant interviews are discussed within this section. This will be followed by the inclusion of I-poems and analyses of the 'contrapuntal' voices in order to foreground the student participants' experiences (Balan, 2005: p.4). I have also chosen to include a 'word cloud' for each participant, which is generated from their I-poem. The inclusion of this tool further demonstrates the power of the student's individual voices when discussing their educational experiences.

## Research Questions Associated with the Following Themes

*What are the factors that determine decision-making amongst WP students?*

*Do students unwilling to progress to HE share any common characteristics?*

### Barriers

#### Barriers to Engagement in Post-compulsory Education

Student participants discussed why they previously had not continued with their education in the post-compulsory sector. Reasons offered were that they had little choice when deciding to participate further in education for many different reasons. They had to find employment to either support themselves or their family and therefore further participation in education was not an option at the time.

Vera, Edith and Arlene had very different family reasons for not continuing with their education, but nonetheless all were prevented from engaging with post-compulsory education. The quotes detailed below demonstrate the variety of reasons provided: -

*'When I was 14 my Dad passed away so when I left school at 16 I had no support so I had to go out and work, and that's why I didn't go into education'*  
(Vera)

*'Because I didn't have anywhere to live and I had to kind of get a job and support myself, and I joined the Royal Air force, so I had a few years working'*  
(Edith)

*'I didn't have a choice. My Mum needed me working'. (Arlene)*

In contrast, Sally had no intention of continuing into post-compulsory education at the time, as her priority was gaining employment to earn money for herself, rather than her family.

*'obviously you are a teenager and you want to earn some money, get some new clothes...so I thought I'll go (to college/university) when I'm older'.*

Other participants discussed their reasons for lack of engagement in post-compulsory studying in terms of their own perceived lack of abilities. They discussed not *'feeling academic enough'* (Natalie and Dana), sometimes due to an undiagnosed learning disability (Natalie, Roz and Lisa) and that at times schools or colleges had not provided them with guidance or advice for future progression in education. In particular Dana highlights this situation vividly

*'they just said, I'm sure you'll be fine in the future, that was my guidance'.*

### Reasons for Non-continuation of Education

Reasons provided for a break before progression to HE were the necessity to gain employment following compulsory education because of family circumstances; a desire to earn a living and already achieving the necessary level of qualification in compulsory education to be employed in their chosen career.

Here Sabina and Vera both identify a personal family situation which prevented engagement with post-compulsory education, whilst Lisa clearly states that at the time she did not require further qualifications to undertake her chosen career.

*'It was a personal family situation that stopped me, and by the time I'd got through that, and I was firmly established in the bank, all thoughts of continuing education went out of the window, apart from doing the exams for the bank' (Sabina)*

*'If I'd had had the opportunity I would have carried on in education, but I didn't have the opportunity because of my personal circumstances (weeps)...'* (Vera)

*'Because I wanted to do beauty therapy and I'd finished at level 3 and that was enough to get a job in beauty therapy so I just got a job.'* (Lisa)

Further reasons for non-engagement with post-compulsory education were a lack of confidence to participate and a feeling of being labelled as unacademic. Two participants suggested that the reason they felt unacademic was due to undiagnosed learning difficulties, which had only been detected following enrolment at university.

The impact of the diagnosis was a relief and there was an appreciation of the measures implemented by the university to support their studies.

Here Natalie describes how unacademic she felt in compulsory education, how she coped with this by labelling herself as more practically capable and how she now realises that a diagnosis of dyslexia had quite an effect on her studying for GCSEs.

*'I didn't feel academic, I didn't think I was capable of ..., cos I didn't do so well in my GCSEs and didn't feel I had the background there, and I struggle with the academic writing aspect. Erm, wasn't diagnosed with dyslexia until later on in life, which I think has a big bearing on it, a real big bearing on why I didn't do so well in my GCSEs. I didn't have the support. I just didn't think I was academic at all, I thought I was more practical, so I just went down the practical route, common-sense, practical – that's how I saw myself.'* (Natalie)

In contrast, however, Dana's self confidence had plummeted during school as illness had meant that she was unable to compete with other students academically. The school had not encouraged her to catch up or provided support to enable this. Her tone during the interview was that of being to blame for her failures during her compulsory education.

*'I've always had an interest in complementary medicine since leaving school, but never had any confidence in myself really, because I was always told that I was never really going to amount to anything.'* (Dana)

## Confidence

Whilst this theme seems to overlap with some of the others, it seemed important to include it as a separate section in order to highlight the significance that a lack of confidence has in non-participation in HE and also how an increase in self-confidence provided participants with the impetus to consider engagement with HE. Participants noted that initially they had little or no confidence to participate in HE, sometimes due to previously undiagnosed learning difficulties; however, diagnosis and subsequent support offered by the establishment whilst studying helped to improve confidence

levels. One participant's experience had not been so positive; whilst she had experienced high levels of support for dyslexia during the first two years of study, this had subsequently not been implemented in the third year as this was regarded as a completely different course since it was a top-up degree, and therefore support had to be reapplied for. This had not only impacted on her experience of third year study, but was also reflected in her grade profile.

For a number of participants, confidence had improved from undertaking further qualifications at FE level such as NVQ in Holistic Therapies, Complementary Therapies, Spa Management or Health and Social Care. However, it was suggested on many occasions (Natalie, Lisa, Brenda, Bella, Melissa) that these types of qualifications were deficient in terms of academic writing and analysis and that this was an important skill that had to be quickly learnt at commencement of first year FD study. Some participants on the first year of the FdSc did highlight that the inclusion of an academic writing skills module during the first year together with tutorial support had assisted with faster development of skills such as critical analysis, Harvard referencing, structure of assignments, and key skills such as spelling, grammar and sentence structure (Michelle, Sabina, Bella, Katherine, Melissa).

This was highlighted by Bella who suggested that the academic writing skills module had an impact on her development during her first year studies.

*'We had academic writing classes. Writing academically was quite bewildering. It helped, otherwise I would have been crying.'*(Bella)

Roz emphasises how the support offered following her dyslexia diagnosis was instrumental in her understanding of academia, which in turn impacted on how she interacted with people.

*'The dyslexic side of things made me feel that I can't achieve anything. When I came here, in the first year, I could see it straight away in the first year. Maybe not in the first two or three months, and after that it just got better and better. I could tell the way I speak to people, I could tell with my writing, understanding.'*

*When I'm reading something, I used to read it 10 times before it sunk in, now I can just read it and it really does sink in.'*(Roz)

## Research Questions Associated with the Following Themes

*How are WP students supported during decision-making about their options?*

*What support is offered to WP students who choose not to progress to HE?*

### Support

This theme has been divided into two sections; the first being the support/ advice or lack of when considering engaging in post-compulsory education following FE or school education and the second being the support/ advice or lack of from the institution under scrutiny.

Analysis demonstrated that for the first theme there had, at times, been a lack of advice on options for further study or employment provided by schools or colleges. Lack of family support when deciding whether to study further or find employment was also highlighted. Total family support was also discussed when finally engaging in HE in terms of childcare support, moral support and financial support provided by partners or immediate family. Lack of support emphasised in previous educational settings was in relation to lack of diagnosis of learning disabilities, resulting in a feeling of being 'unacademic' and lowering of self-confidence and self-esteem.

Here, Lisa highlights how she coped with her lack of dyslexia diagnosis at school: -

*'But I remember at school, like I've never been typical, like Bs and Ds the wrong way round, but I always remember having simple words written on my pencil case. It was kind of all done slyly, so I knew I couldn't spell it so it would be on my pencil case so I'd know where it was. So, it was kind of like a big secret'*  
(Lisa)

Edith demonstrates the gratitude she feels due to her husband's support for her studies. She could not engage in HE at 18 years old due to having to support herself following compulsory education.

*'I had a lot of support really, which shocked me, because my husband is a farmer and he works very long hours and it's always been me with the childcare, but he completely supported me, and he said he could help with the girls, picking them up.'* (Edith)

In terms of support/advice or lack of in relation to the present educational establishment, analysis demonstrated that support received was often instrumental to educational success. This was discussed in terms of contact with the establishment prior to enrolment where advice was offered regarding the course, the academic ability required and the required amount of time needed in order to be successful on the course. Institutional support was triggered by student self-disclosure of learning difficulty or disability, support offered by the institution was to develop academic skills, both at course level and establishment level. However, lack of institutional support was highlighted by some participants in terms of provision for health and well-being and where supportive measures were withdrawn without notice, there were detrimental results for both students and their engagement with the programme. Peer support fostered within the different cohorts was highlighted as being extremely useful to sustain students through their courses, resulting in a feeling of being a bonded group, lessening the feeling of being in competition with one another, and supporting each other when members of the cohort were struggling with either the workload or personal problems.

Sally suggests that support to engage came in many forms, primarily from the course leader who helped build her confidence initially.

*'She sort of built my confidence by sort of saying she's interviewed a lot of people and she knows if anyone's genuine or not, and she thinks I should do it, and that I'm capable of doing it, so I thought 'Right', so it boosted me up a bit. And my family, they were excited, they were supportive. And then that was it, I was here, I was doing it.'* (Sally)

Here, Laura identifies another form of support which was important to her, that of peer mentoring

*'There is that peer mentoring, at 11 O'clock at night, when you still can't get it, so you are talking to one another. But you are not telling one another what to do, but you're just bouncing ideas around and think 'Oh, yep, that's it!' (Laura)*

## Research Question Associated with the Following Themes

*What factors have meant that the WP student is now willing to participate in HE study?*

### Engagement with Post-compulsory Education

Data provided by participants which has been grouped under this heading was intertwined not only with developing confidence in their academic abilities due to up-skilling, a need for a change in career direction, the desire to gain a degree-level qualification in their chosen subject which may widen employment options, but also the course offered and the support provided by the institution in this investigation. Several of the participants suggested the reason for participation in HE at this point in their lives was merely because 'the time was right' and because a local college was providing a course (Complementary Therapies), which they wanted to engage with. The support levels offered by the college such as diagnosis and support for learning difficulties, academic support provided at course level and academic support provided at establishment level were reasons given for participation at this point. The cost of the tuition fees was also highlighted as reasons for choosing this particular course and college, as the tuition fees for 2014/2015 were £7000 per annum rather than the maximum £9000 per annum favoured by other institutions. The size of the university centre, as one participant suggested, was a major factor when selecting an establishment to study at, stating: -

*'I've not seen that whole package anywhere else, and it was close by, and I like it. I like the whole set up of it, the way it looks and it's not, the University Centre isn't too big, so you feel comfortable and it's not hard to get around. I just like everything about it. There's not like thousands of people and I don't feel lost. I sort of feel like I fit because it's small.'* (Sally)

Other reasons offered for engagement with HE study at this point, and in particular with this course were the quality and diversity of modules offered in this degree course combining practical and academic aspects. Other considerations included the validating university, an interest in CAM, and interestingly the lack of choice of other subjects to engage with due to their existing qualifications. This was in contrast to

others who had purposefully engaged with a CAM therapies degree in order to effect a change in career direction.

### *Motivation*

Motivation to study at HE level presented itself as a key theme during analysis and I have further divided this into 'Intrinsic Motivation' meaning that the motivation to do/achieve something is driven internally because the activity is deemed enjoyable or interesting (Cameron and Pierce, 2002) and 'Extrinsic Motivation' meaning that the motivation to undertake an activity is externally driven by rewards or in order to avoid negative consequences (Watson and Davis, 2011). It was important to distinguish between the two in order to differentiate reasons or motivations for undertaking post-compulsory study at this point in the participants' lives.

### ***Intrinsic Motivation***

Intrinsically motivated reasons for undertaking HE study at this point in their lives were suggested as inspirational experiences such as benefiting from CAM therapies or experiencing relatives or friends' relief from chronic health problems, a desire to study CAM because of an on-going interest in its potential, a desire to succeed in academic study and an ambition to gain a degree-level qualification. Other reasons expressed were an increase in self-confidence by gaining level three qualifications prior to engagement in HE, a desire to help people gain relief from health problems, and the feeling that the time was right to engage in HE either to facilitate a change in career direction or simply because the participants acknowledged that it was time to provide space for self-achievement.

Natalie discussed an important transformational event, which influenced her choice of career direction –

*'I watched them do a what I would call grounding relaxation technique with my mum, and my mum was unable to walk distances and things and when she actually finished the relaxation, it was as if she was walking on the moors, and we kind of had my mum back for a short spell and that kind of inspired me to*

*want to do the same, to improve other people's health and the way that they helped my mum and my family.'* (Natalie)

Whilst Arlene is exuberant in describing her motivations for engaging with HE –

*'I did the level 3 at Blackburn College, in holistics and then discovered that they did a complementary medicine degree through the University Centre, so I thought 'Hell yeah, I've always fancied a degree', and doing it in something that I loved.'* (Arlene)

Meanwhile Tricia suggests that she knew she wanted to obtain a degree-level qualification –

*'I always knew that I was going to do a degree, but where I ended up working, was somewhere with the NHS and it was supported living so they were out in houses. I worked with a lot of older people, probably in their 50s that had been in this house working for probably 20/30 years.'* (Tricia)

She further explains what the impetus to engage at this time in her life was –

*'And the same people would say to me 'oh, you'll be the same as us, you're going to be here in 20 years time.' I thought 'I'm not, I'm doing something else, and I think that kind of pushed me to do it. I mean I'm 24, I'm still relatively young, and I have got quite a few qualifications behind me, so I think I've done it at the right time anyway.'* (Tricia)

Bella, on the other hand suggests that her motivation for re-engagement with education was the requirement for self-development –

*'I don't know, I suppose I had my children. I had a little family, and I wanted to make something of my life, and I wanted to... I knew that I needed to go back to college to further my education, and really didn't know what I wanted to do. Someone who teaches beauty said why don't you do it, because it will be really*

*suit you, and I thought right I'll go for it, did it and really loved it, and it just had a knock on effect.'* (Bella)

### ***Extrinsic Motivation***

Extrinsic motivations developed as a smaller theme, but nevertheless provided some interesting data regarding the provision of a CAM therapy course at degree level at a locally accessible college; this was deemed important and essential for engagement in HE due to family and childcare commitments.

Edith describes how family commitments influenced her choice of HEI, and how financial support was an added bonus –

*'Because it's near to where I live. I've got 2 children and so it needed to be local, and I got a scholarship programme here as well, and so it seemed right really...'*  
(Edith)

Julie, on the other hand, suggests that her decision to re-engage was not only due to the course content, but also the fact that she could attend on a part-time basis –

*'I chose this course because I've always been interested in Complementary Therapy, or it seems like I've always been interested in Complementary Therapy, and years ago I did actually go into reflexology, aromatherapy, massage, Bowen, so when I saw this course come up, I saw it was advertised as part time, I thought get on it, so I did.'* (Julie)

A further extrinsic motivation for embracing HE at this point was the requirement to achieve a degree level qualification to further progress career-wise or to instigate a career change. However, limitations were expressed regarding the chosen field of work (i.e. complementary therapies) with participants articulating that previous qualifications limited their choice of degree qualification and that the provision of a CAM degree had opened up the possibility of engaging with HE.

*'I needed a 3 year degree to get a visa, and I only had a two year degree, so I came back to study a top-up, and honestly, at the time, when I was looking into them – didn't care, didn't care about where it was, what it was doing, as long as I finished a 3 year degree with a high enough mark to get a visa.'* (Freda)

## Research Question Associated with the Following Themes

*What are the academic or personal impacts, if any, for WP students studying at HE level?*

### Impact of Studying at HE Level and Aspirations following HE Level Study

Analysis for this theme provided a multitude of different answers from participants in terms of their observations of their self-development throughout the course, and aspirations following the course. It was interesting to note that even those students who were just completing their first year of study could reflect on their own development both academically and personally, although this was to a lesser extent. For the first year student participants aspirations of note were the desire to continue to self-improve, gain a degree-qualification and begin to practice the new practical therapies in which they had become recently skilled. In terms of aspirations in general for all the student participants, particular highlights were the engagement with a new career, development of their own business and a desire to engage in postgraduate study. Whilst the impact of studying both from a personal and an academic perspective was highlighted, it also highlighted an increase in self-confidence, a developed focus on how to be an independent learner, the development of interpersonal skills, and organisational skills for work or life, a knowledge of the research and evidence base for CAM, an increased confidence in academic abilities and an ability to engage in informed discussion.

Bella describes the excitement of beginning her HE –

*'I'm feeling it in my belly now, I want to start my own thing going, but I don't want to rush into it; I want to get it right, I want to get it good' (Bella)*

Whilst Julie wanted to set an example to other family members –

*'I think it was more about proving to myself that I am capable of being educated to degree level, and also partly because I want to be an example to my children and grandchildren, that you can always learn, that there is no age limit to learning' (Julie)*

Lisa describes the impact of viewing herself as academic and the pride other family members would feel –

*'I never thought of myself as very academic and things, and there is nobody in my family who have got a degree or anything, I just thought it would be good if I can kind of have that picture on my Grandma's wall of me in my cap and gown.'*(Lisa)

## Student Participant Data Analysis – Section 2

### Introduction

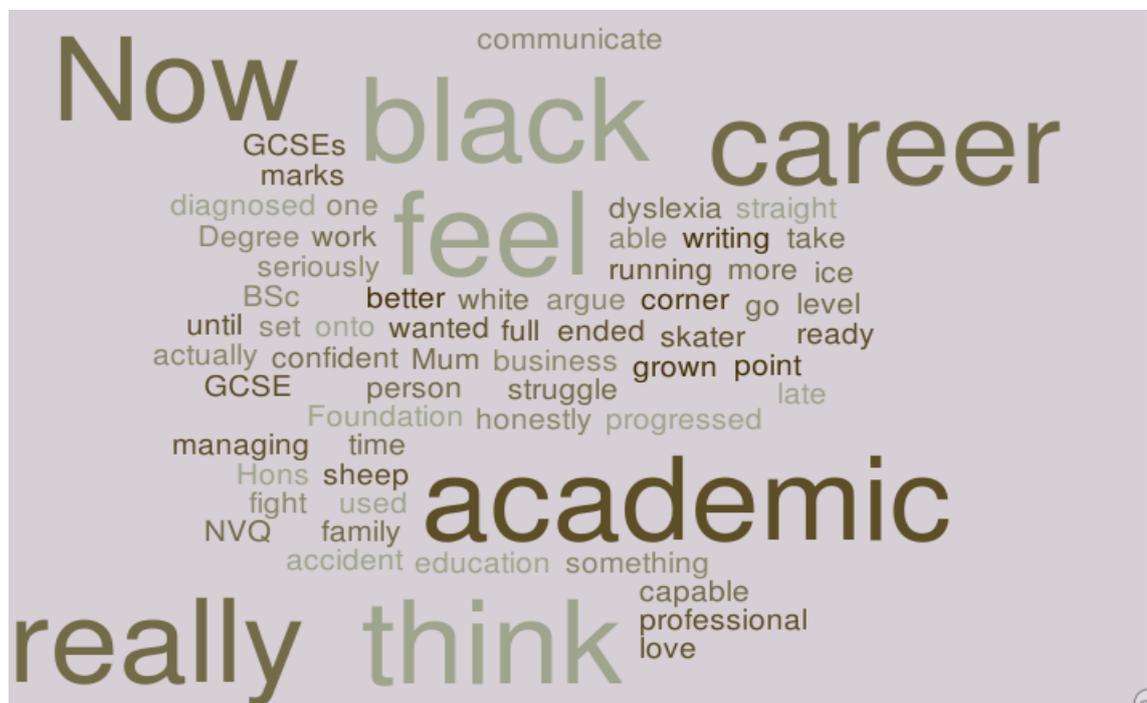
This chapter will analyse the data provided by participants at an individual level. The student participant voices will be foregrounded to tell their own individual story regarding their educational journey. As discussed earlier in this thesis, it is imperative to the research to allow the student participants' voices to be heard, rather than merely my own analysis, imprinting my own version of their story on them. The data is grouped into participant groups for ease of analysis. Initially, I will produce a narrative providing the background story for each participant followed by an I-poem. At the end of each section of participants' narratives and I-Poems, there will be an analysis discussing the different voices of each participant that I feel can be heard within their stories. Gilligan et al. (2003) suggest that listening for the 'contrapuntal voices' (Balan, 2005: p.4) represents the creative step in the Listening Guide method of analysis since the researcher is required to listen to the voices in the data. This may provide answers for the research questions or lead to further findings, which may not have been originally sought. Some of the I-poems are longer than others, and this reflects either the length of the interview or the information offered about themselves in the story.

## Participants – Post Graduates

### **Natalie**

#### **Narrative**

Natalie is a married mother of one who lives in the vicinity of the college. She gained an NVQ Spa and Holistic Therapies from the FE sector of the college prior to enrolment on the degree. She was diagnosed with severe dyslexia after assessment at the university and a support package was implemented. This support enabled her to engage successfully with academic study and she recently completed her BSc (Hons) degree.



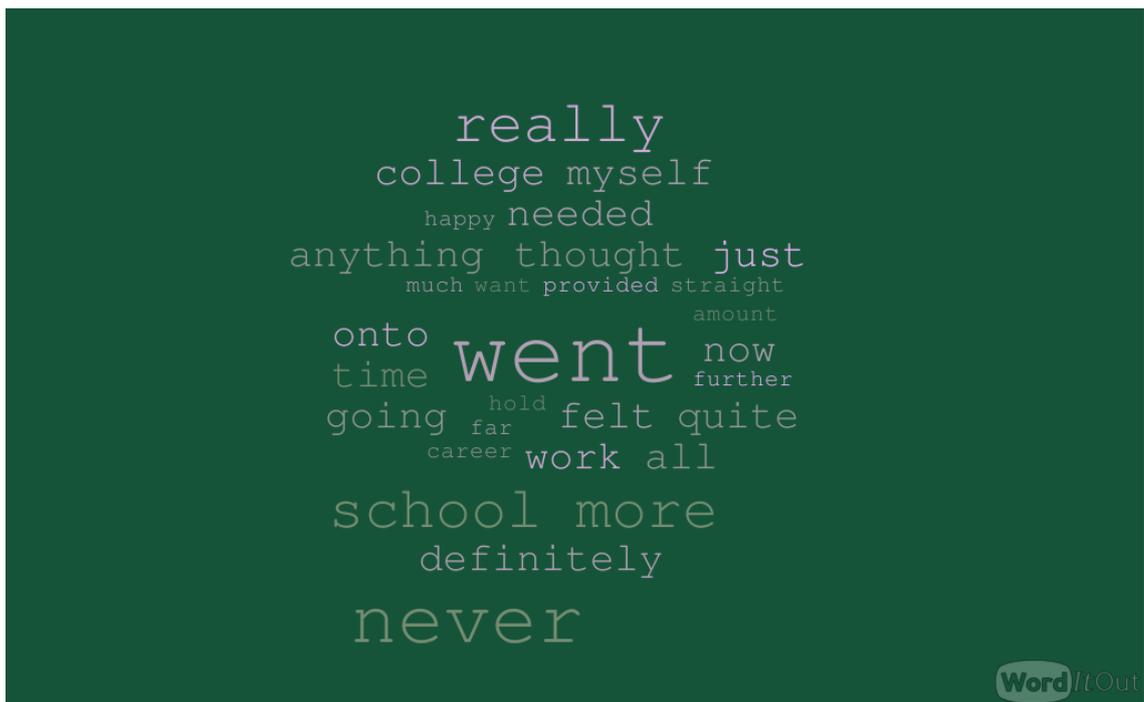
### ***Natalie's I-Poem***

I didn't really take my GCSEs seriously  
I was a professional ice skater  
I had an accident that ended my career  
I didn't get the GCSE marks I wanted  
I didn't really work at it  
I had my career set out  
I didn't feel ready to go straight into full time education  
I did a NVQ level 3  
I progressed onto the Foundation Degree  
I am a Mum  
I didn't feel academic  
I didn't think I was capable  
I struggle with academic writing  
I wasn't diagnosed with dyslexia until late  
I am able to communicate better  
I used to be very black and white  
I'm managing to do something I love  
I have grown as a person, more confident  
I can actually fight my corner and argue my point  
I was the black sheep of the family  
Now, I'm the one with the BSc (Hons)  
I can do it too, and I honestly didn't think I could  
Now I'm running a business

## *Dana*

### **Narrative**

Dana is a married mother of two who has not engaged with education post-16 until very recently when she studied for a level three NVQ in Indian Head Massage at the college's FE division. She studied this with the intention of enrolling on the FdSc Complementary Therapies on successful completion. She disengaged from education at 16 years of age due to a severe lack of confidence in her academic abilities following compulsory education at a private school. Illness had prevented her from successfully achieving at school, and she felt that little notice was taken of her because she fell behind with her academic work due to this. Little guidance was provided by school in terms of what she should do next, and this coupled with her lack of self-confidence led her to totally disengage from education until now.



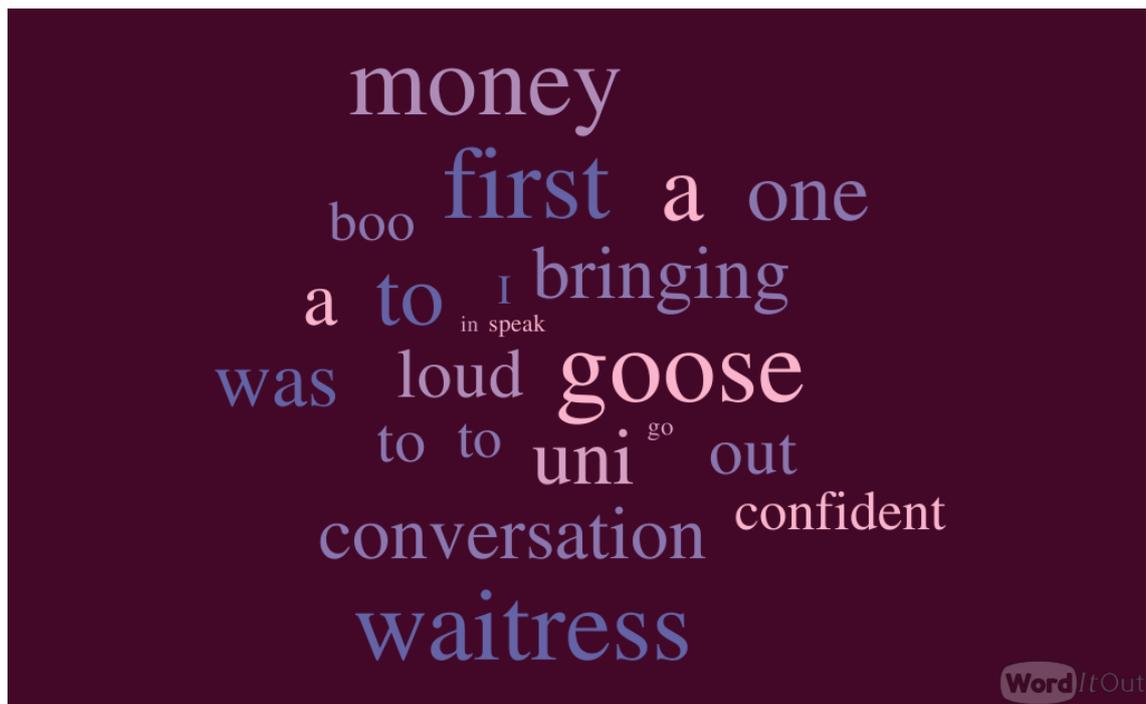
***Dana's I-Poem***

I've never had any confidence in myself  
I was always told that I was never really going to amount to anything  
I went to private school  
I missed a lot of school  
I don't think that helped at all  
I never really caught up  
I just thought I couldn't do it  
I went straight into work  
I was quite happy doing that  
I didn't go onto do 'A' levels or anything  
They just said 'I'm sure you'll be fine in the future.' That was my guidance  
I didn't bother going to college after school  
I went on to have my two children  
I felt it was time to further my career  
I felt old enough and more confident  
I went to college  
I did well  
I went onto do the top up  
It provided everything I needed  
I really want to work for myself  
I was the one who never amounted to much until now  
I am so pleased I did it, even though I was older  
Perhaps all I needed was a bit more time  
I definitely feel like I have grown as a person  
I'm far more capable than what I originally thought  
I'm a good therapist  
I'm quite outspoken now  
I will definitely hold my own

## **Andrea**

### **Narrative**

Andrea is a mother of two who has recently split from her long-term partner. She is good friends with Dana and they have supported each other through their academic studies, both achieving NVQ level 3 Indian Head Massage prior to enrolling on the FdSc Complementary Therapies. Andrea left school at 16 years old with very few GCSEs following her disengagement from study in year 11 as her grandparents had become very ill. Her Mother was pleased that she gained employment and could contribute financially to the household income, but was now less pleased, as she could not understand why Andrea wanted to achieve a degree level qualification which would take three year's studying rather than working as a waitress.



***Andrea's I-Poem***

I did all right in my GCSEs  
I had a lot of family issues  
I disengaged from school  
I could have done better  
I finished school  
I wasn't sure what I wanted to do  
I think I was just stubborn  
I was bringing money in  
I was a waitress  
I had my little boy  
I hadn't done any 'A' levels  
I wanted to do better for them  
I'd be able to provide for them  
I'm the first one to go to uni  
I'm a lot louder  
I speak my mind more now  
I can hold a conversation  
I think I'm a lot more confident  
I started to speak out  
I was just so quiet before I came here  
I wouldn't say boo to a goose and now I will

### ***Analysis of Natalie, Dana and Andrea***

The three participants within this section voice that they disengaged from education following completion of compulsory schooling; however they all cite different reasons for this. Natalie seemed to view her decision regarding the non-continuation of her education as a positive decision initially as she was engaged in the ice skating profession. This is in contrast to both Dana and Andrea. Dana's voice seems to present a defeated tone as she discusses that she fell behind at school, and the consequence of this was that she lacked confidence to continue in education. Within the interview, she discusses that the employment she gained, the stability of her marriage and having to look after her two small children provided her with growing self-confidence, which enabled her to think about re-engaging with education. This was coupled not only with a growing interest in CAM, but also the fact that the college provided a degree-level qualification in this area. Andrea had disengaged from education following her grandparents' illnesses during her final year of study, although she points out that her teachers thought she was capable of progressing to degree-level study. For her, family issues had a significant impact on her decisions to progress to post-compulsory education at that point, and this is represented in the acquiescent tone of her I-poem voice at this juncture.

All three participants discussed the lack of guidance provided by schools and colleges following compulsory education in a resigned tone, as though this situation was the norm and what they expected. However, re-engagement with education for all three of these participants was undertaken in a purposeful manner. Natalie discusses her journey from FE study to HE study, highlighting the impact of the supportive measures provided, whilst both Dana and Andrea achieved a level three qualification in Indian Head Massage in order to progress onto degree level study, following advice from the HE course leader

Significantly, all three discuss the growth in confidence that engaging with HE study has provided them. This is not only in terms of their developing academic abilities, but how they feel in terms of dealing with life situations they may find themselves in. All three participant voices seem to be surprised at this impact of engaging in HE and

express how they now see themselves; for example Natalie can argue her point, Dana says she 'will definitely hold her own' and Andrea highlights that she will give her opinion on matters.



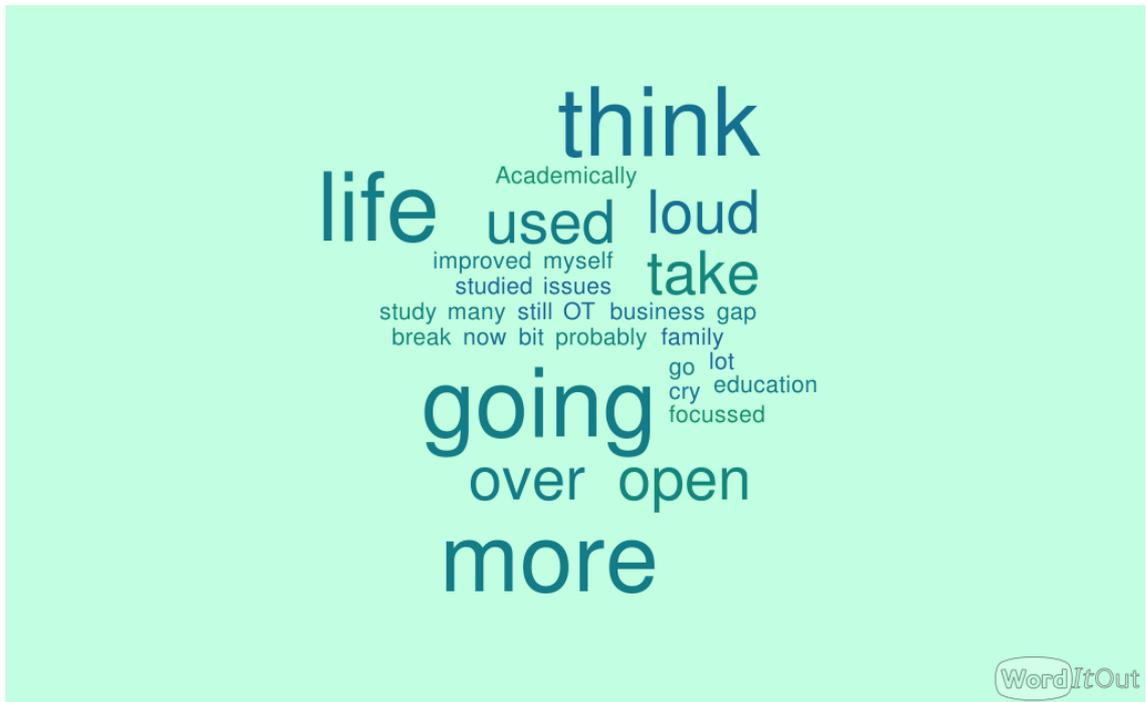
### ***Vera's I-Poem***

I left school at 16 and went straight to work  
I didn't get back into education until 2010  
I would have carried on in education  
I didn't have the opportunity  
When I was 14 my Dad passed away  
When I left school at 16 I had no support  
I had to go out to work  
That's why I didn't go into education  
I realised things were changing  
My life was at that point  
I either do something or stay where I was  
I thought  
I need to do it now  
I had a good think about it  
I thought I'm just going home to sort it out  
It's my time; I need to do it now  
I think I've changed as a person  
I think I've probably always been that person  
I've never been able to show it  
I've really enjoyed my studying  
I might want to work and live abroad  
I think I have obviously learnt a lot  
I have got a lot more knowledge  
I'm actually surprised that I can actually achieve something like this  
I've always worked all my life  
But never had a piece of paper to say that I'd done anything  
I'm more relaxed about everything  
I really love helping people  
I think I'm in the right place  
I've not ruled out further studying  
I want to see how I feel when I've finished

**Brenda**

**Narrative**

Brenda has enrolled on the top-up BSc (Hons), but has previously gained an FdSc in Complementary Therapies from another northwest college. She chose to study at this college for her top-up year because of the optional practical modules offered, and because it is closer to where she lives. She lives at home with her Mother, and hopes to set up her own business following successful completion of her studies.



***Brenda's I-Poem***

I had family issues and stuff

I didn't get into OT

I didn't want to take a gap year

I knew I wouldn't go back into study

I'm hoping to open my own business

I've studied my entire life, and I'm ready for a break

What am I going to do with my life when I don't have studying to do?

I was just under too much stress

I can take this anywhere in the world with me

I have many doors open

I think I've matured a lot more

I used to be very loud

I'm still loud but I used to be very all over the place

I think I'm a bit more focussed now

Academically, I think I've improved

I'm calming down a little more

What am I going to do with my life?

What am I going to do with myself when I've done this degree?

I don't know; probably cry that my education is over

**Freda**

**Narrative**

Freda is a mature student and has moved from another part of the country in order to study for the BSc (Hons) having previously successfully completed NVQ level three Beauty, an FdSc in Complementary Therapies and five 'A' levels. She is the only one from her family to attend university and intends to move abroad to teach English to foreign students following successful completion of her BSc (Hons).



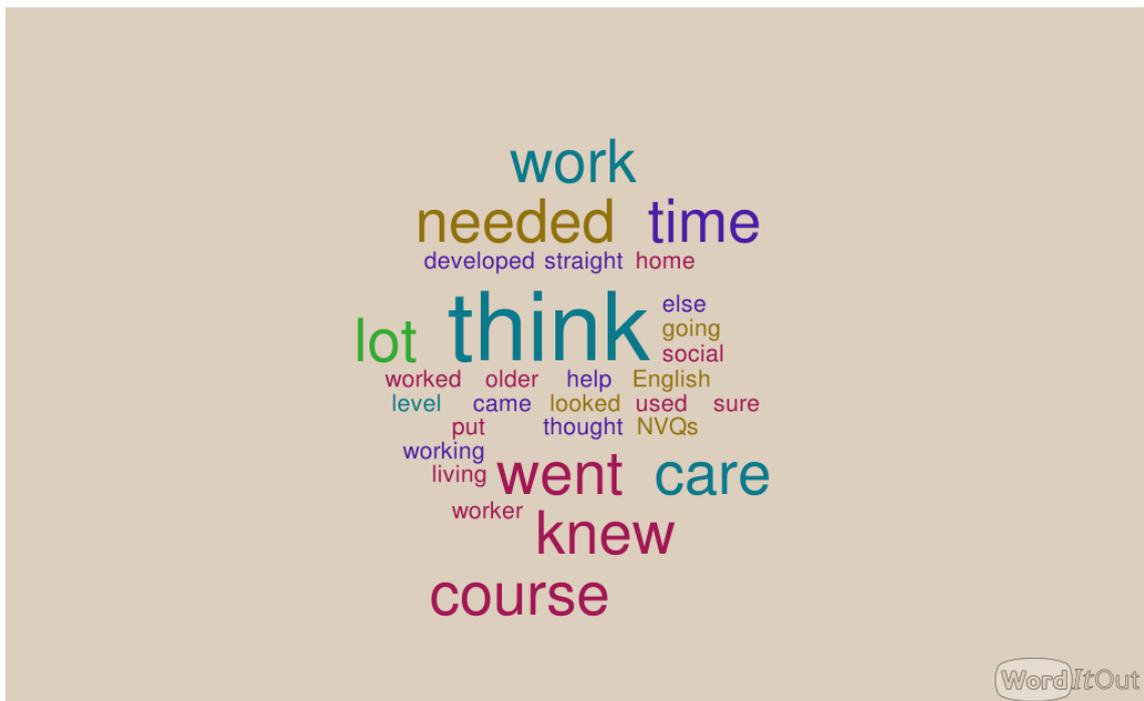
### ***Freda's I-Poem***

I started off in the beauty industry  
I moved to Complementary Therapy because of an experience of illness in my family  
I hated beauty  
I hated being in the beauty industry  
I needed a three-year degree to get a visa  
I didn't care about where it was, what it was doing  
As long as I finished a three-year degree with a high enough mark to get a visa  
I had 5 'A' levels  
I wanted a practical skill  
I could take it abroad  
I changed to beauty NVQ level 3  
I hated every minute of it  
I was engaged, my fiancé wanted me to move to America  
I basically set aside what I wanted to do and took any practical skill  
I had a break until I was 24 to do this  
If I leave it any longer  
I will end up stuck in a rut  
I'll not want to leave  
I might end up finding somebody and end up having ties  
I know that I have always wanted to leave this country  
I don't know how long for, maybe forever  
I definitely want to leave  
I had applied for a university place  
I got a place  
I cancelled my place  
I enrolled on a beauty course  
I'm going to South Korea  
I don't know what it is like over there to live  
I don't think I've changed much  
I've already matured

## Tricia

### Narrative

Tricia is a mature student who has previously worked in a Health and Social Care setting, and enrolled on the FdSc following the realisation that she did not want to continue working there. She developed an interest in CAM after witnessing the beneficial effect of reflexology on the patients in her previous employment.



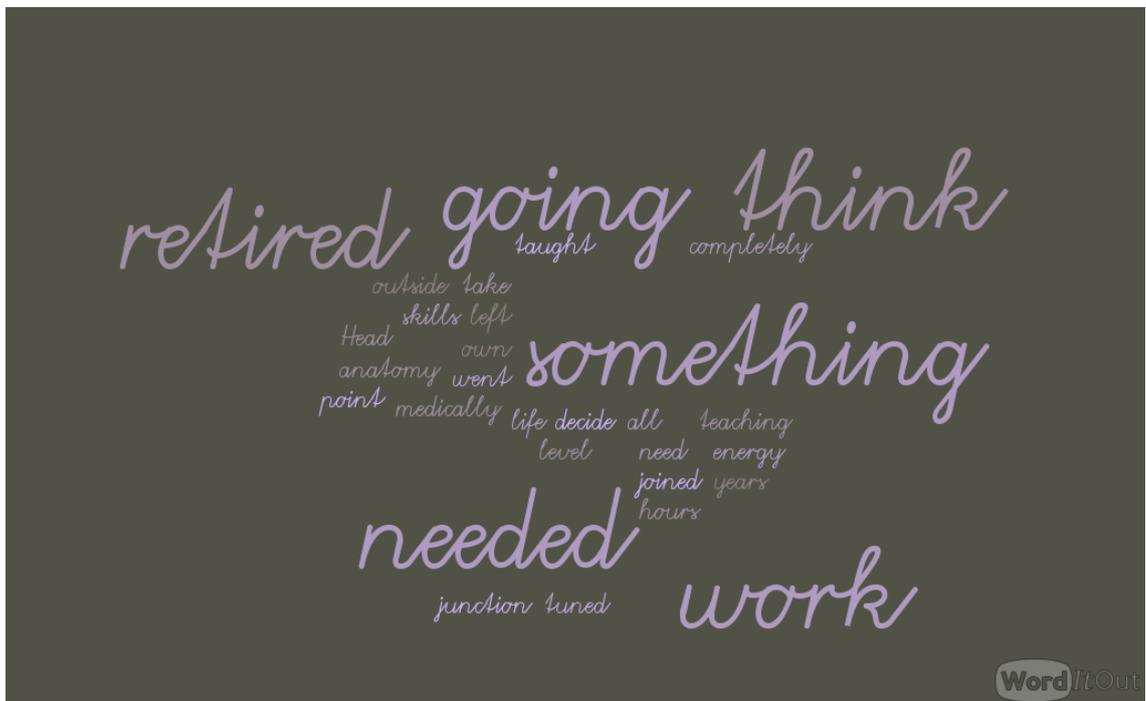
***Tricia's I-Poem***

I left school at year 11  
I went straight into Health and Social Care  
I was working in a care home  
I found that I needed the money  
I was living on my own at the time  
I needed to work  
I put myself through the NVQs  
I am quite self-motivated  
I'm not sure why I came on this course  
I was a support worker  
I used to work alongside reflexologists  
I like what they did with clients  
I looked into the course  
I don't think I went to find any help with tutors  
I knew what I wanted  
I always knew that I was going to do a degree  
I worked with a lot of older people  
I thought 'I'm doing something else'  
I think that kind of pushed me to do it  
I think I've done it at the right time  
I did feel that I had a high level of English  
I have developed that a lot more

**Laura**

**Narrative**

Laura is a married mother of two who has had serious health issues in recent years, so has been retired from her former career. She developed an interest in CAM as it has previously helped her with mobility problems, and taught it at a lower level in another North West college. She now wants to gain a BSc (Hons) qualification before enrolling on postgraduate study.



***Laura's I-Poem***

I left school at 15

I'd done my GCSEs

I joined the RAF

I did education there

When I was retired I thought I would do something completely different

I did anatomy and physiology and Indian Head

I did my teaching

I taught it for three years

I knew that I needed it at a higher level

I'm from Wigan

I think that most of the family went 'there's no point in going to university'

I've got G

I've had support from him

I'd come to a junction

I'd been medically retired

I've got a pension

I needed to decide where, if I was going to work again

I could use something that doesn't take a lot of energy out of me

I can work my own hours

I think that all the skills you need outside in real life are tuned here

### ***Analysis of Vera, Brenda, Freda, Tricia and Laura***

All of these participants were current third years and in contrast to the third year graduates in the previous section, none of these particularly highlight the impacts of the degree outside of their academic achievements.

Voices that can be heard when analysing this section of I-poems are regret, determination, anxiety and delight. However, whilst these voices can be perceived, the participants exhibit different reasons for each one. Regret is demonstrated by Vera as she could not continue in education following school due to personal family circumstances, whilst Brenda regrets that family issues during her 'A' level examinations prevented her from performing at her best, thus prohibiting her access onto an Occupational Therapy degree programme. Freda regrets her original choice of FdSc as it led into a career, which she hated, whilst Tricia did not reveal any regret at her decision to not engage in post-compulsory education initially as she always planned to engage with HE at a convenient point in her life.

The voice of determination was present for all the participants, but once more in very different ways. Vera was determined to succeed at her degree-level qualification at this point in her life due to having been prevented from engaging previously, as was Brenda who also acknowledged the impact of previous educational difficulties. Tricia was determined that in gaining a degree she was achieving more than her fellow workers in her previous employment and this gave her a lot of satisfaction because her co-workers believed that she would be just like them in later life. Freda was determined to achieve a BSc (Hons) as this was required for her to work abroad, whilst Laura's determination is presented as the willingness to engage with HE following a life-changing illness.

The voice of anxiety was present in Brenda's and Freda's I-poems. Brenda was anxious about her finishing her education and what she might do following this, whilst Freda's anxieties displayed themselves in the form of worrying that if she did not achieve her dream of gaining a degree-level qualification and thus working abroad, then she would 'end up in a rut'.

Vera, Brenda, Tricia and Laura conveyed delight in different ways. Vera was delighted that she can help people as she is now trained in CAM therapies, whilst Tricia and Laura's delight is linked with their determination. Tricia's delight is palpable in that she has managed to become more qualified than her previous co-workers and Laura is pleased that her life-changing health problems have not impeded her achievement in HE. Brenda's delight is exhibited in that her degree will help her to achieve graduate level employment.

One of the main voices exhibited by all students in this section of I-poems is that of self-belief; they all believed they could achieve eventually, given the right conditions. However, each of them does acknowledge the growth in academic confidence, albeit sometimes implicitly. For example: -

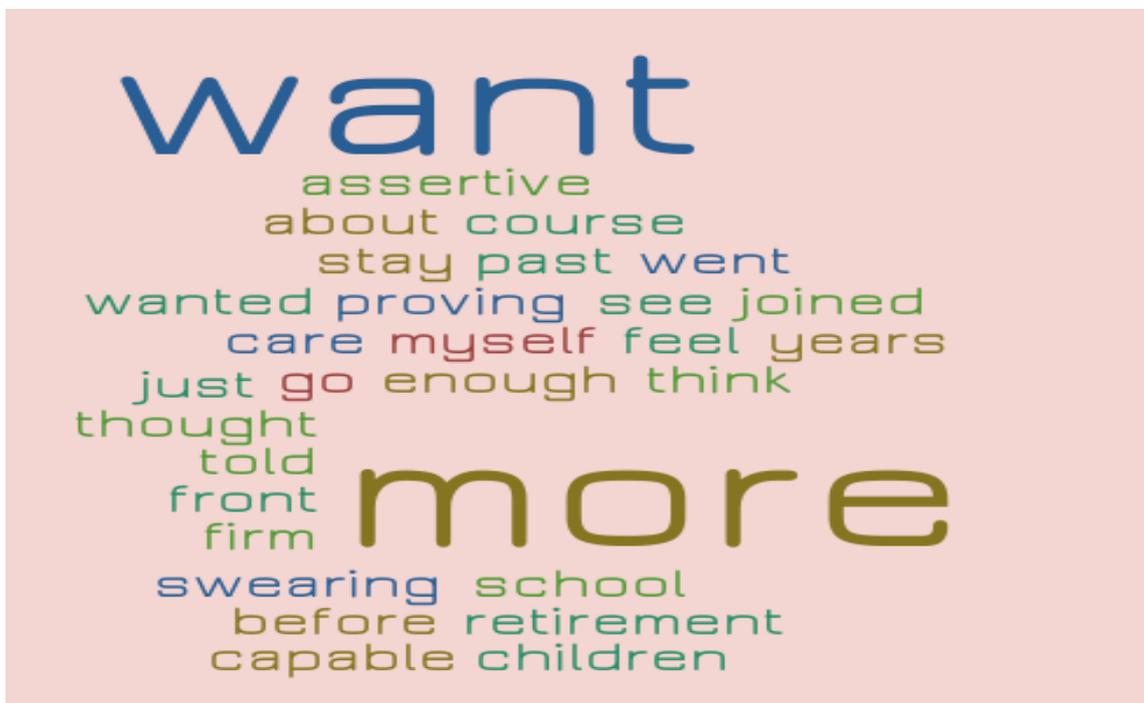
*'A lot of interpersonal skills have been tuned, and patience, tolerance has been tried at times, but it has definitely been developed, and that is true of home as well, because you have to manage your time a bit differently and as the work has got harder, or more concentrated, you have to constantly change routines and what is happening in advance. I think all the skills you need outside in real life are tuned here.'* (Laura)

## 2<sup>nd</sup> Year Participants

### *Julie*

#### **Narrative**

Julie is a mature student who is studying for the FdSc on a part-time basis whilst also working full-time in a care home. She is recently divorced, but is very actively involved with both her children and grandchildren, who take up a lot of her free time. She has also historically gained a number of practical qualifications in manual complementary therapies such as Bowen Technique, Reiki, Massage and Aromatherapy. She discussed multiple reasons for undertaking study just five years prior to retirement; the first is to demonstrate to her family that education and learning can be undertaken at any time of life; secondly, she wanted to engage with the theoretical side of study rather than merely the practical side; and finally she wanted to become knowledgeable regarding the evidence-base for CAM as she thinks that people do not consider that CAM therapies can be a viable complement to conventional medicine.



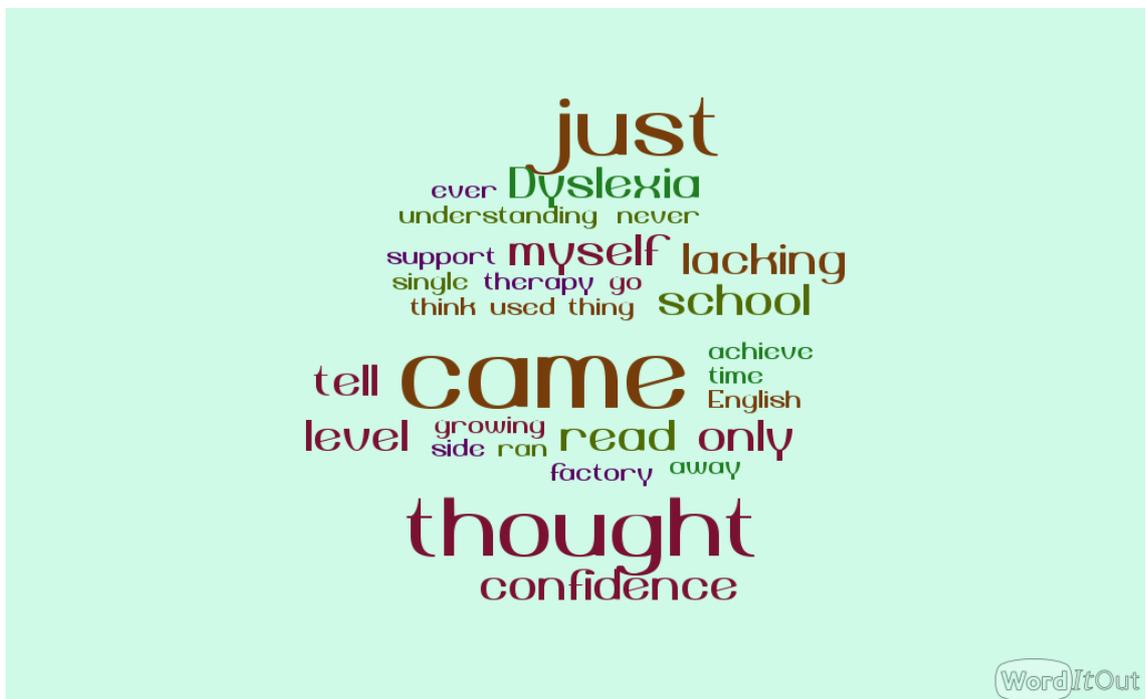
***Julie's I-Poem***

I wanted to see if I was clever enough  
I thought I'll have a go  
I didn't want to stay on at school  
I went for secretarial  
I got a job at a local firm  
I joined the army  
It was about proving that I am capable  
I want to be an example to my children and grandchildren  
I have three years before retirement  
I think I feel more confident and more assertive  
I've surprised myself  
I told them to stop swearing in front of me  
I would not have done that in the past  
I don't care anymore  
I've just gained confidence doing the course

## Roz

### Narrative

Roz is a mature student who has been diagnosed with severe dyslexia. She has re-engaged with education following her divorce and a car crash, which left her with very little self-confidence to achieve anything. Both of her sons have recently left home to study at university. Her previous qualifications were gained many years ago, but since then she has successfully run her own mobile therapist business as well as working in a factory.



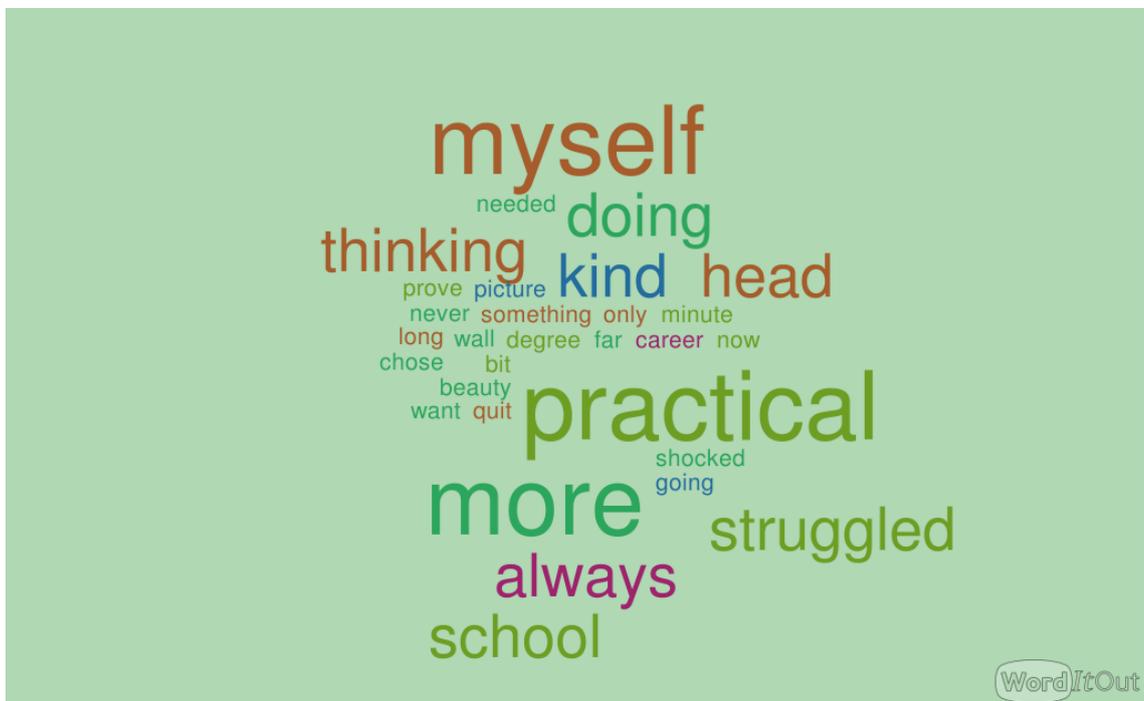
### ***Roz's I-Poem***

I was always a factory worker  
I left school and it was paying the bread  
I'm dyslexic  
I thought that's the only route I can go down  
Dyslexia made me feel I couldn't achieve anything  
I did a level 3 across the road  
I did a level 2 English  
I ran my own complementary therapy business  
I thought that was the only thing I could get into back then  
I realised that I can do the academic side  
I never ever thought I'd be at university  
I just needed to better myself so I could be around the children  
I think the kids were growing up  
I just thought this was my time to improve myself  
I came in very blind, very scared  
I knew that there was some form of dyslexia support  
I just didn't know what it was  
I came to the summer school  
I didn't miss any of them  
I came to every single one  
I came out of a divorce and was lacking in confidence, had a car accident  
I was lacking confidence there  
When I came here, I could see it straight away  
I could tell the way I spoke to people  
I could tell with my writing, understanding  
When I'm reading something I used to read it ten times  
Now I can just read it, and it really does sink in

## *Lisa*

### **Narrative**

Lisa is a mature student and is a single mother of one. She has a successful beauty therapy business, and has decided to engage with HE for a number of different reasons; to offer more therapies in her business, to understand and be able to vocalise to clients in a more authoritative way about human anatomy and physiology and the evidence base for CAM, and potentially to effect a change in her career direction. She enrolled to study at HE level on impulse only a week prior to the beginning of the academic year. Lisa is severely dyslexic, only being diagnosed after a discussion with the course leader at the University Centre who sent her for screening. She discusses that she had difficulty engaging with academic subjects at school, thinking that she was more practical than academic. In the final year of school, she negotiated with the head teacher to attend a local college to undertake training as a nail technician rather than struggling further with one of the academic subjects.



***Lisa's I-Poem***

I always kind of struggled a bit at school  
I was always more practical  
I chose a practical career  
I struggled with GCSEs  
I needed to do something more practical than 'A' levels  
I didn't want to go to university from school  
I sort of got it into my head that you cannot be an old beauty therapist  
I just thought it would be good  
I can have that picture on my Grandma's wall of me in my cap and gown  
It was quite a last minute decision  
I wasn't thinking about it for a long while  
I get an idea in my head  
I need to do it there and then  
I went and had a dyslexia test  
I am doing writing now  
I'm learning more  
I'm getting better at it  
I'm shocked I have carried on this far  
I'm normally like 'I can't do it, I'm quitting'  
I don't have to be here  
I'm kind of doing it for myself in a way  
If I do quit, I'm only letting myself down  
I can prove to myself that I can do  
I am going to do it  
I would never have dreamt of thinking I could get a degree

## Edith

### Narrative

Edith is a mature student who is a married mother of two. She studied at FE level following school, but did not engage with HE study as she joined the Royal Air force (RAF) because she needed to support herself and had nowhere to live. Following the birth of her children she enrolled to undertake NVQ level 3 in holistic therapies. Her decision to study at degree level was supported by her husband and she gained a scholarship, which supported her financially during the first two years of study.



### ***Edith's I-Poem***

I studied holistic therapies

I never thought about going to university, but it just happened

I didn't do well at school

I wasn't really interested at school

I didn't really understand the principles of actually what you are gaining from school

I'm an older student

I did NVQ level 2, then went onto NVQ level 3

I had to leave in the January

I couldn't afford to do college and work and support myself too

I didn't have anywhere to live

I had to get a job and support myself

I joined the Royal Air force

I had a few years working

After having children, I wanted to get some qualifications

I'm financially stable

I've got a husband and two children

I wanted to prove that I could do it

I just think if I don't do it now, then I'll never do it



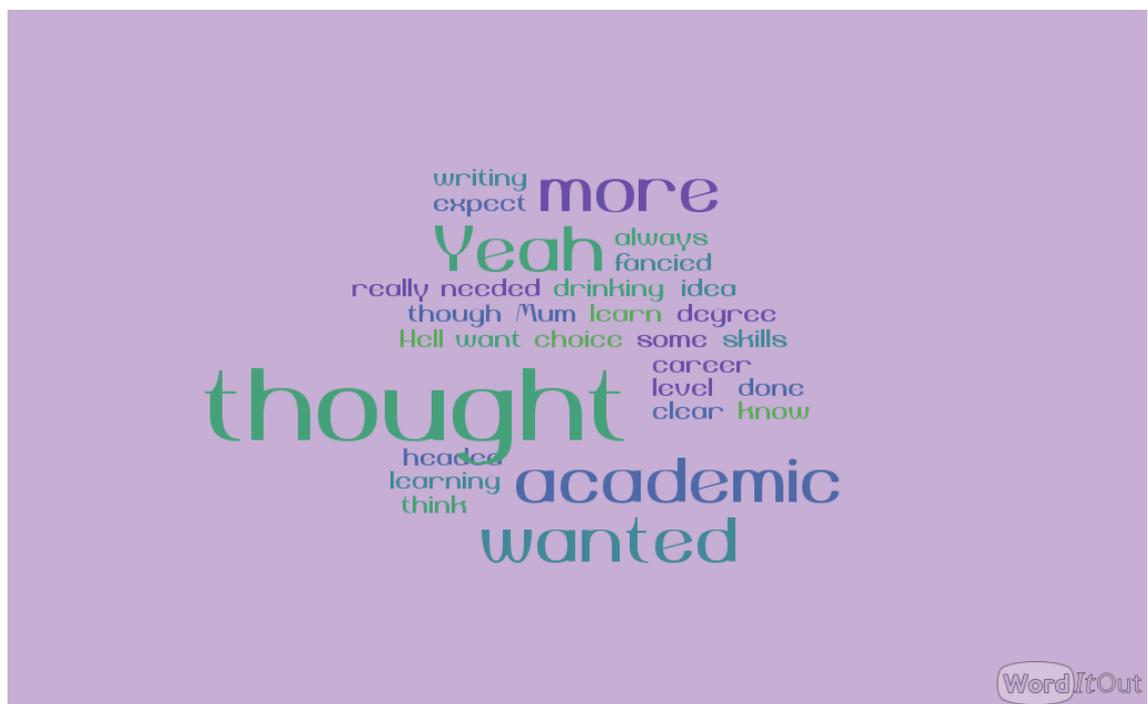
### ***Sally's I-Poem***

I just went to get a job  
I thought I'll go when I'm older  
I didn't think I'd be able to do a degree  
I usually go with my gut instinct  
I just thought I'd give it a try  
I've never done anything like this before  
I went to college but I've never tried for a degree  
I thought a degree; this would be the way to go, to give confidence  
I'm not happy until I can master it  
I like the whole set up  
I just like everything about it  
I don't feel lost  
I sort of feel like I fit because it's small  
I'm still learning  
I'm still learning the therapies  
I build my confidence and my knowledge  
I'm not that academic  
Once I like something I'll put my heart and soul into it  
I thought 'Oh God, a chance to get a degree and I'm going to do it'  
I notice things now that I didn't notice before  
I think, 'Ah, I know what that is'  
I like doing research  
I like looking things up  
I have learnt something, it is important  
I notice a lot more things

## **Arlene**

### **Narrative**

Arlene is a mature student who has had addictions to alcohol and drugs in the past. She has also been diagnosed with schizophrenia and bi-polar disorder, which is controlled by prescribed medications. She left school at 16 years old, and gained employment, but has undertaken Open University (OU) modules previously. However, she was not successful in finishing these due to her addiction problems. She has recently gained NVQ level 3 in Holistic Therapies and then enrolled on to the FdSc. She intends to enrol onto the Top-up degree at the end of her second year of the FdSc.



***Arlene's I-Poem***

I didn't have a choice – Mum needed me working

I did the level 3 at college

I thought 'Hell Yeah, I've always fancied a degree'

I had done some academic writing

I had more of an idea what to expect

I was a drinker

I gave up drinking

I thought 'Yeah it's what I want to do'

I didn't think it would help with my career

I didn't know what I wanted to do

I just thought I'd learn a few more skills

I really wanted to do the academic learning

I thought I could do this is I'm clear headed

### ***Analysis of Julie, Roz, Lisa, Edith, Sally and Arlene***

During this section of I-poems, there is a distinct voice within five of the participants stories highlighting the feeling of being unacademic and the need to prove themselves, not only to themselves but to other people as well; for example, Julie wants to show that studying can be undertaken anytime to her children and grandchildren. Arlene, however, does not express the same feeling of being 'unacademic', which is potentially because she has previously enrolled on Open University modules, but could not complete due to various addictions at the time. Her voice is one of hope that now she has overcome the addictions that plagued her, she will be able to engage academically with HE study in a subject she has come to love. Whilst this voice is explicit in Arlene's story, the other voices in this section discuss impacts of studying in terms of growing self-confidence, the confidence to engage and the delight that they are able to achieve at this level of study.

Interestingly, Julie's, Roz's and Lisa's I-poems reveal that they have all challenged themselves to engage with the academic aspect of CAM therapies, having practiced therapies for a number of years. The feeling is that this will provide them with increased credibility in their professions and increased confidence in their abilities.

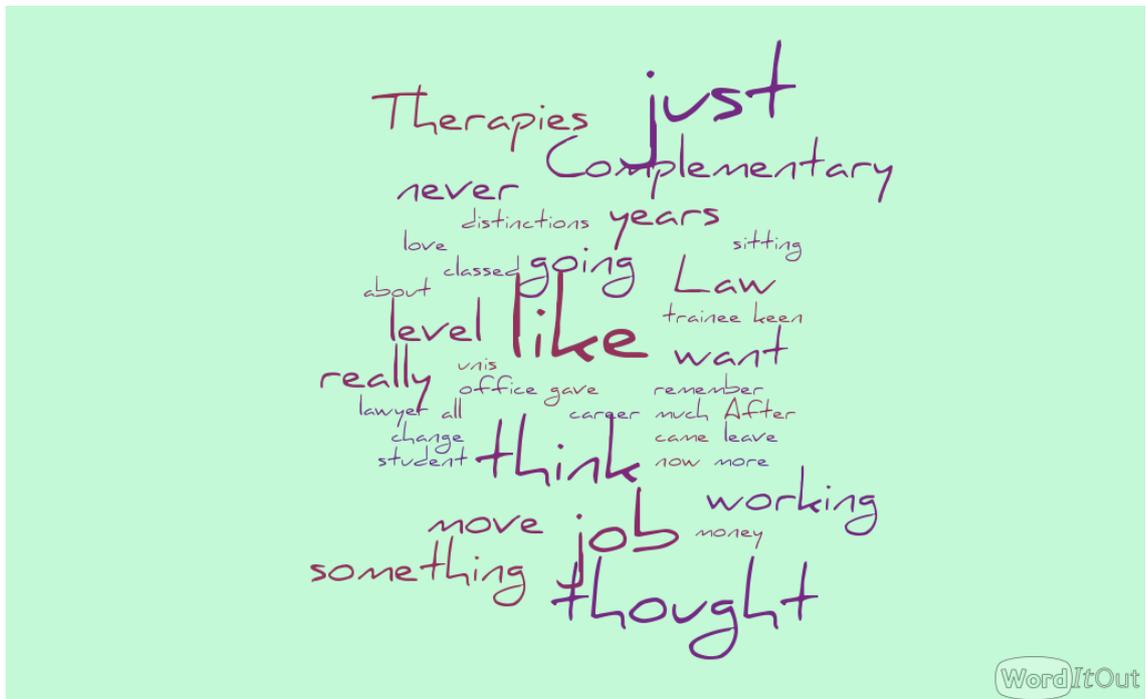
Sally's I-poem highlights that the college has impacted on her wanting to study as she feels that she 'fits' with it, since the building is not too big and there are not as many students as in other universities. There is a sense, once more, within this section of participants that all of them have re-engaged with post-compulsory education as this is the right time for them to do so in terms of their life circumstances at this point.

## Ist Year Participants

### Michelle

#### Narrative

Michelle is a married mother of one and is pregnant with her second child at the moment. She previously had a stressful career, and took the opportunity to study holistic therapies following the birth of her first child, in order to instigate a complete change of direction in her career. She intends to study for the BSc (Hons) following successful completion of her FdSc and then has investigated possible MSc study in research methods.



### ***Michelle's I-Poem***

I had a change of career  
I knew I had an interest in Complementary Therapies  
I did level three Complementary Therapies  
I did Law  
I didn't do a degree  
I got a job as a trainee  
I did that for ten years  
I was classed as a lawyer  
I was a team leader  
I had to supervise all their work  
I was working 60 hours a week  
I was pregnant  
I thought I'm not really going to have much time at home  
I think it gave me a boost to think I wasn't going back  
I need to do something that I will enjoy  
I was 20 when we got our first mortgage  
I just thought it's now or never  
I didn't like working in an office  
After 'A' levels, it was more like 'I'm getting a job'  
I did look at unis  
I had met L by then  
I was keen to move out  
I sort of like... I really like studying  
I love learning, but it just came down to a money thing  
I just wanted to move out  
I remember sitting at my job in Law  
I was there for about 10 years  
You think 'I'll never leave this'  
I just thought I want to do something I want to do  
I was a B/C kind of student  
I did my level 3s  
I loved it

I got distinctions

I seem to excel in the subject

I think it's because I really enjoyed it

I see myself in more of an academic role

I really like, you know like we are doing research and stuff

I really like finding out about stuff

I would really like to do a research role

I need to give myself the best opportunity to get another good job

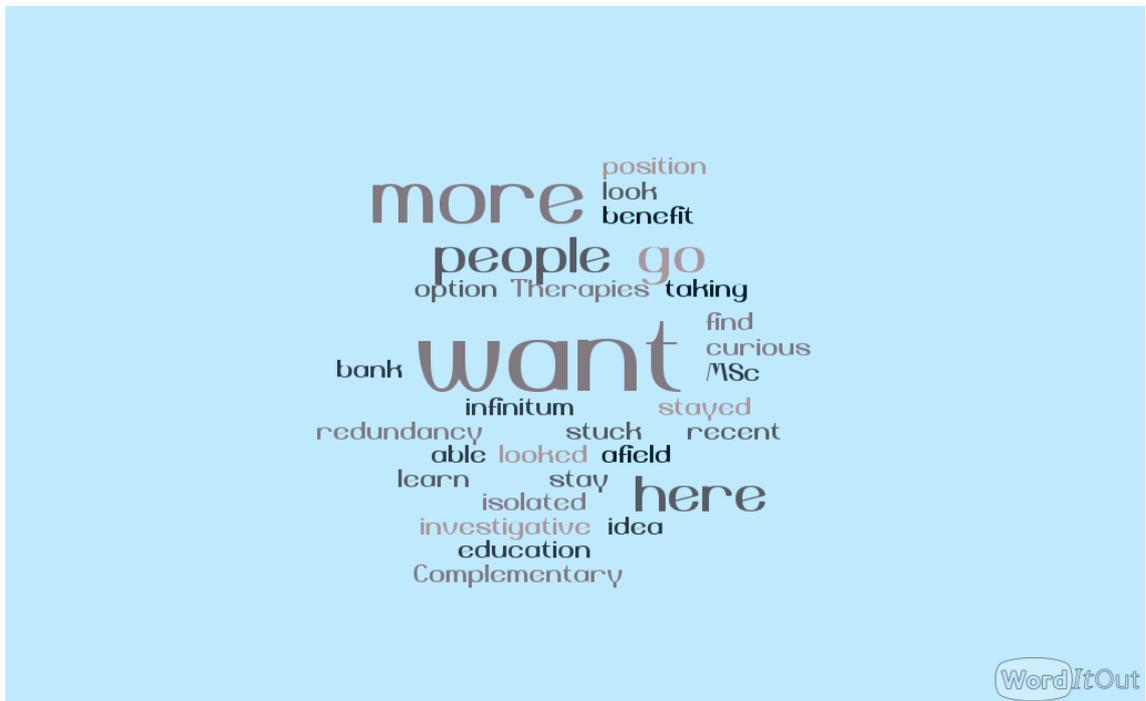
I do not think I would be happy with myself, if I was not striving

I am quite ambitious

## ***Sabina***

### **Narrative**

Sabina is a mature student who has taken voluntary redundancy from employment where she had worked for over 25 years. She has recently had health problems, but decided she was unhappy being labelled as an invalid so has taken positive action and enrolled on the FdSc due to an on-going interest in CAM therapies and their usefulness in helping with chronic on-going health problems. She has undertaken Year 0 study in order to prepare her for the academic requirements of degree study.



***Sabina's I-Poem***

I've always been interested in Complementary Therapies

Personal family circumstances stopped me

I went to work in a bank

I hated it

The resentment stayed with me for a long time

I felt isolated

I didn't look to the idea that I could learn something else

I had the option of taking redundancy

I became ill

I was on incapacity benefit for a while

I didn't want to stay in this position forever

I didn't want to be one of those people stuck on benefits 'ad infinitum'

I looked at the curriculum here

I didn't want to go further afield

I applied

I didn't have any recent education

I did the access course; it got me here

I will be able to provide reflexology treatments

I think I could go down the investigative route

I am becoming much more curious

I want to find out more, more of what I can do

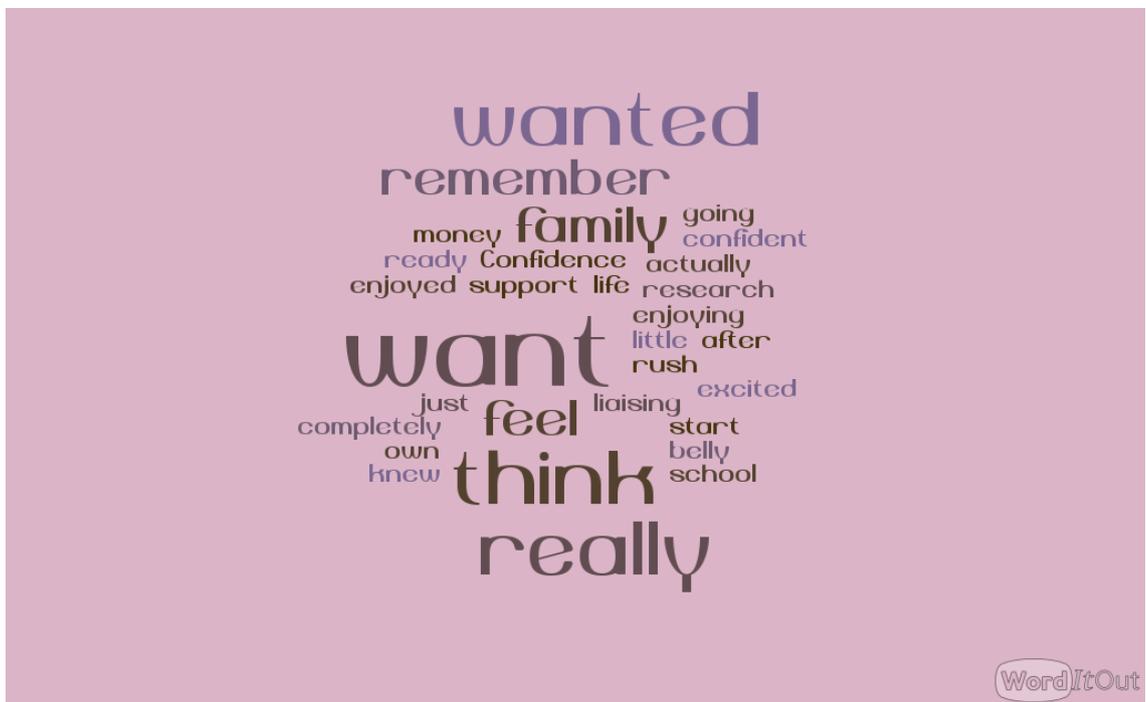
I could inspire other people

I'm going to do an MSc next

**Bella**

**Narrative**

Bella is a married mother of three, who has undertaken level three study at another northwest college prior to enrolment on the FdSc. She is a first year and has found the academic requirements of the course difficult, but with guidance feels that she is improving her academic writing and analysis. She is a first generation mature student and made the decision to study at degree level to improve prospects for both herself and her family.



***Bella's I-Poem***

I went to 6<sup>th</sup> Form after school  
I quit because I wasn't enjoying it  
I don't really think it was what I wanted to do  
I just wanted to earn money  
I don't really think I knew what I wanted to do at 16  
I don't really remember liaising with my teachers  
I can't remember there being any support  
I had a little family  
I want to make something of my life  
I've actually enjoyed research  
I didn't think I would  
I'm the first in my family  
I'm feeling it in my belly now  
I want to start my own thing going  
I don't want to rush into it  
I want to get it good  
I've developed a lot  
Confidence in what I do  
I didn't feel completely confident in what I was doing  
I feel excited and ready

**Katherine**

**Narrative**

Katherine has enrolled on the course following successful completion of two 'A' levels at another northwest college. She decided to study CAM in order to eventually open a CAM therapy clinic in her community, as it is not common practice at the moment. She lives in a closed community in the northwest and feels that her clinic will help to improve quality of life for the inhabitants.



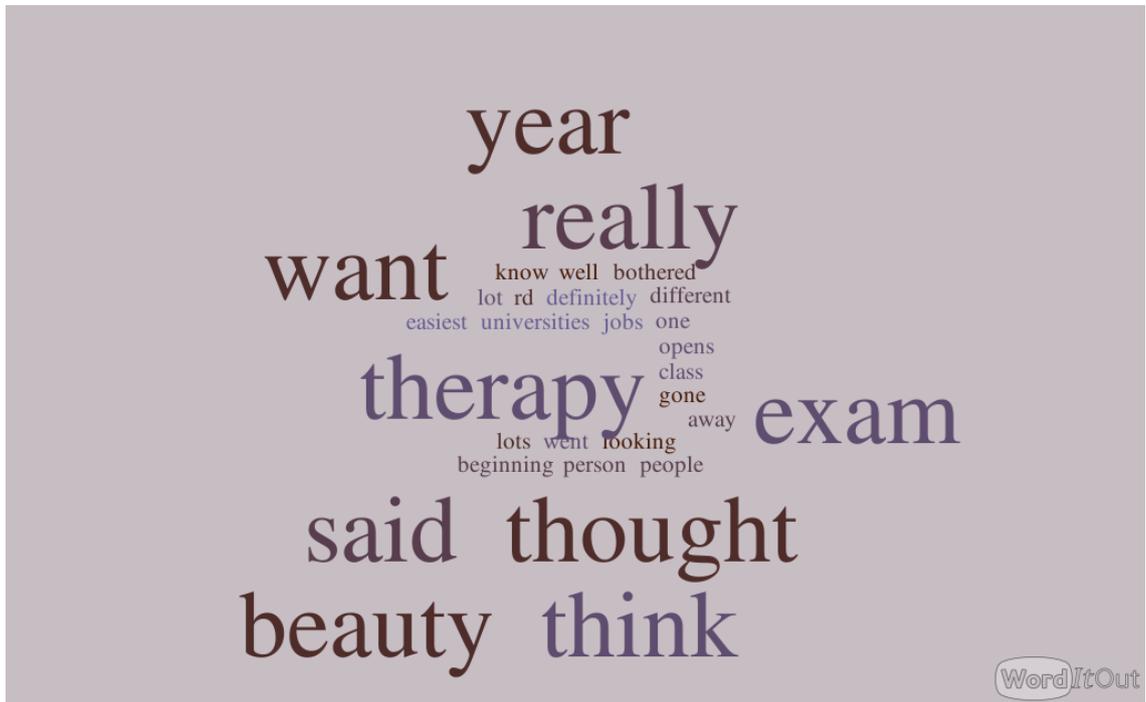
***Katherine's I-Poem***

I really enjoyed massaging  
I was trying to work out what to do  
I was just looking at all the different universities  
This was the only place, so I applied  
I travel here on the train  
I'm Jewish  
The seminary didn't know where I could go  
They helped me with my application  
I'm a lot more confident since doing it  
I'm a lot more happy  
I'd never really gone out of that community  
This is actually only the first time I've come out  
I was very nervous at the start  
Now I'm a lot more confident  
I want to open a clinic in the Jewish community

**Melissa**

**Narrative**

Melissa has previously gained a NVQ level 3 in Spa and Holistic Therapies from another northwest college, but has enrolled to study for a degree qualification at this college, as she was impressed by the module content of the course. She is a first generation student and found the application process difficult because she had little guidance from her previous college and her parents were unable to help her.



***Melissa's I-Poem***

I was doing beauty therapy  
I started looking at universities  
I didn't really want to have to move away  
I thought this one would be the easiest to get to  
I thought that this opens up lots of different jobs as well  
I should have gone onto 'A' levels  
I'm not really an exam kind of person  
I panic in an exam situation  
I didn't know what to do basically  
When I went to do beauty therapy  
They said I shouldn't be there  
I want to do the 3<sup>rd</sup> year, definitely  
I think it makes you grow up  
I'm with a lot of older people  
I'm with a debating class  
I think I wouldn't have said my opinion  
Now I'm not bothered

### ***Analysis of Michelle, Sabina, Bella, Katherine and Melissa***

Once more, with the exceptions of Katherine and Melissa, it seems that the participants have engaged with HE at a time in their life when circumstances have prevailed to allow them to participate. Both Katherine and Melissa are students, however, they have continually been engaged in education, although both are first generation students. Michelle, Sabina and Bella all express that they did not engage with education because they either wanted to or needed to earn some money following compulsory education.

Although both I-poems are very different, Michelle and Sabina exhibit similar voices within the text. They both wanted a change in career but for different reasons. Michelle hated her job in Law and Sabina was made redundant from her job in a bank, but both had a developing interest in CAM, which encouraged them back into education. Both had undertaken lower level qualifications but their voices demonstrate their growing confidence in their academic abilities after having enrolled on the FdSc. They both express that they would like to further their academic careers. Bella's I-poem also demonstrates her growing academic confidence but as well as this she emphasises her growing confidence in her choice of course. This is in contrast to Katherine whose self-confidence has grown since she has engaged with HE, having left the seminary for the first time. Her voice is not one of growing confidence in her academic abilities but growing self-confidence and reduction in nervousness.

Melissa's I-poem is quite different and she does not discuss increase in confidence. Her tone demonstrates her confidence in her abilities already as she describes the choices she has made with regards to studying Beauty Therapy rather than taking the advice of her teachers at school who thought she was capable of studying for 'A' levels. Her tone is not one of defiance against taking advice; rather it is one of knowing what she wants and proving to herself that she can achieve it.

### **Introduction**

The participants within this section of the analysis were all teaching staff on both the FD and BSc (Hons) provisions, and all agreed voluntarily to take part in the research. In terms of HEFCE categorisation, all four participants would be regarded as 'non-traditional' students as three of the four had been mature, first generation students and the fourth, whilst progressing directly from FE to HE, was herself a first generation student. Two of the staff have previously taught in the vocational FE department of the college under scrutiny, whilst a third participant had worked in the FE department of another institution. I have therefore considered that the previous teaching experiences of the staff may have a bearing on the responses to the questions during the interviews in terms of how they view the transitions of students from FE to HE, and whether the academic and pastoral support required changes, or needs to change as the student becomes a more independent learner.

The themes that have arisen from thematic analysis can all broadly be given the title of 'Support', but I have categorised this further into the following:-

- Prior to engagement with HE
  - Support from college for student progression
  - Support from staff for student progression
  - Support from college/ staff if student not willing to engage in progression
- On engagement with HE
  - Academic and pastoral support provided at college level
  - Academic and pastoral support provided at course level
  - Impacts on staff

One further theme arose from the data collected which was not anticipated, and that was that all participants discussed reasons why students (in particular mature students) re-engaged with post-compulsory education. This is therefore discussed under the theme heading of 'Reasons for re-engagement'.

## ***Support***

### ***Prior to engagement with HE***

#### ***Support from College for Student Progression***

Three out of the four participants regarded the support provided from college as 'generic' or 'just putting the information out there' (Kat), and that this was merely marketing rather than supporting student progression, suggesting that 'college as a whole is good at encouraging WP students but it is often more to do with data and statistics' (Hermione).

#### ***Support from Staff for Student Progression***

It was acknowledged that the staff within the sixth form college (for those students studying for Advanced (A) level qualifications), provided high levels of support for student progression. UCAS information sessions were conducted within the first year of sixth form, where students identified potential courses of study, potential HE establishments and began to fill in the required online forms. This was then completed and handed in for the UCAS deadline during college attendance.

However, it was generally thought that information of this kind was not readily available for vocational FE students. Reasons provided were that, in general, following a vocational course there was no requirement for further qualifications to work in particular industries such as beauty or CAM, and therefore little thought was given to progression of students. Another reason provided for lack of information regarding progression was the fact that many tutors in FE teaching hairdressing, beauty or holistics are not qualified to degree level, and therefore progression to HE level study is consequently not considered a high priority for students. It was highlighted that pressure on FE tutors to progress and pass students on courses was high, and thoughts of progression advice provided an added burden for staff. It was suggested by three of the four participants that there should be more interaction between the FE and HE departments of the college, in order that progression from one to the other become the norm for vocational students.

In contrast, however, one of the participants who had until recently taught on vocational FE courses discussed the purpose of one-to-one tutorials with FE students as focussing on progression. All the information and guidance provided was recorded on college databases in order that all tutors could access this information. When probed, this participant could not offer information regarding particular advice given; rather the advice was generic and depended upon the knowledge and experience of the staff member. She also discussed that progression talks from the university department should be more flexible in terms of timetabling, as vocational beauty and holistic students were committed to salon timetabling with members of the public booking for treatments, and therefore it was compulsory that students attend rather than committing to additional information sessions on progression.

#### ***Support from College/ Staff if Student not willing to Engage in Progression***

None of the participants could provide information regarding advice offered on potential career pathways if FE students decided not to progress to HE level study.

#### ***On Engagement with HE***

##### ***Academic and Pastoral Support provided at College Level***

Data suggested that knowledge regarding academic and pastoral support at college level was to a high level, and that staff participants knew where to signpost students when support was required. There was wide acknowledgement that college support levels for HE students were often more than in other institutions, but that students at this college were unaware of this. They viewed the levels of support as normal as they had not attended other universities or college-based university education, and therefore had no other experiences of support offered. Hermione reiterates this discussing '...students do not understand the association... they have no preconceived ideas about their academic requirements until they get here and realise they need assistance'. HE department based academic and pastoral support was highlighted as being provided by student engagement officers, the disability unit and the library, who

provide training on computer literacy, searching databases and using software. At course level, the HE department implemented a recognised tutorial system utilised by all HE courses which helped to engage and monitor students, providing both academic and pastoral support.

All four participants suggested that more work on academic writing and critical thinking be implemented during FE study, particularly for vocational students, as the majority of vocational qualification assessments are either practical or online with multiple-choice questions. Dawn suggested that prior to enrolment for FD level study, those students without 'A' level qualifications or students who had been disengaged from education for some time, should be directed to a Year 0 entry level course which would enable them to acquire academic analysis and writing skills. She expressed concern that if this was not achieved, then students were being failed by the institution, as their confidence levels fall due to failure at HE study. In contrast, however, she further highlighted two students who had recently completed and achieved 2,1 level degrees. They had enrolled with no experience of academic writing, suggesting that students should be evaluated individually to provide concrete information regarding their suitability for beginning the FD.

#### ***Academic and Pastoral Support provided at Course Level***

All four participants emphasised that academic and pastoral support at course level was embedded as the norm for the course team. Academic writing skills were taught in first year group tutorial sessions, and re-visited in both second and third year tutorials. It was highlighted that the students enrolled on the courses under scrutiny were often, initially at least, dependent on the module leaders for academic advice and reassurance regarding their academic abilities. Concern was highlighted by all four participants that levels of support given could lead to inhibiting students' progression to becoming independent learners. Hermione suggested that the levels of academic support should become more limited as students progressed through levels four to six of study in order to encourage them to become 'independent free thinkers'.

### ***Impacts on Staff***

All four participants emphasised the impacts on teaching staff that the requirement for high levels of academic support for students had. Rebecca acknowledged that the diversity of students in just one class impacted on staff lesson planning, whilst both Hermione and Kat suggested that although lessons may be planned, due to the diversity of students' academic skills, the lecturer often has to abandon the original lesson plan, and 'think on their feet' in order to accommodate all the students. Kat further suggests that her current studying has helped her in planning extra in-class activities, which support the multitude of different learning requirements of her classes. All the participants agreed that the nature of the academic and pastoral requirements of the students meant that they became familiar with their needs and nurtured the students individually as required in order to help them succeed in their studies.

### ***Reasons for Re-engagement***

This theme was an unexpected outcome for data collected from the staff participants, and which three of the four mentioned without prompting. Hermione, Kat and Dawn discussed that students wanted to come to study FDs or BSc (Hons) in CAM for many different reasons including 'to better themselves' (Hermione and Kat), for employability reasons (Hermione, Kat and Dawn), and up-skilling to enable employment in the CAM industry (Dawn). It was highlighted by all three that female mature students are the majority of enrolments on the course; all three suggested that these students have come to a juncture in their personal lives where they want to re-engage with education, gain a higher level qualification and potentially provide for their family. Reasons offered for engagement with this particular course were that students thought they could become self-employed, allowing for flexibility of working hours to accommodate family commitments; that they were passionate about CAM therapies and their ability to maintain good levels of health.

## College Documentary Analysis

The college documents chosen for analysis were the (Access Agreement (2016/2017), Single Equality Policy (2014-2017), and the Teaching and Learning Strategy (2015/2016). These documents publically portray how the college addresses WP, intends to support its students and how it engages with the wider local community. The Access Agreement is revised annually and has to be submitted to the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) as the college charges more than the basic amount for tuition fees. It is a public agreement with OFFA outlining how the college will undertake to support/promote fair access for potential students from lower income categories and has to detail their expenditure in areas such as financial support and outreach work (OFFA, 2016).

The Single Equality Policy (2014-2017) is also prepared by the college and remains current for four years before being reviewed. It is a public document found on the college's main website in the policies and procedures section. The context for The Teaching, Learning and Assessment Policy (2015/2016) is the same, but this is revised every academic year. It was important to analyse these documents from the perspective that they are published in the public domain, and therefore the tone of the writing should be considered (Harding, 2013).

When performing content analysis on all the documents, it seems that the tone and language of them is very much conciliatory suggesting what the college does well in terms of engagement and support of students, what it could do to improve in these areas and a discussion of the types of students it attracts (i.e. non-traditional) in the main. This analysis of the tone of the documents concurs with Macdonald (2008) who suggests that the language and content of a document may be influenced by the audience (or indeed policy makers) for whom they are written.

The documents, which have been analysed, have been written against the backdrop of the policy rhetoric surrounding 'non-traditional' students, and therefore it could be suggested that the information they contain, whilst portraying the college to the public and present or future students, also demonstrates how the college is adhering to

educational policy initiatives. Therefore, the college, it seems, is supporting policy rhetoric that focuses on non-engagement with HE as extrinsically motivated, thereby outwardly supporting the 'deficit' approach rather than considering the multiple factors, which may have prevented engagement. The documents only represent one facet of the College's policy on student support which is the one required by educational bodies; perhaps investigation into more college documents and further evaluation of course level support would have further defined whether the college subscribed to the deficit approach or the structural approach to education; however, this is not the remit of this research.

Analysis of the documents in relation to the research questions, established that the main theme portrayed by all three documents was 'support'. This was the initial expectation, but the theme of support was multi-stranded and developed further as the documents were examined in greater detail. With this in mind, sub-categories under the main theme of support were developed, which have been included in Table two (Analysis of College Documents) with supporting statements from the documents to illustrate the themes.

The analysis of the documents has provided an understanding of how policy influences the college when producing information for public consumption, and how the tone and content have to respond to main educational policy initiatives, rather than considering the multiple reasons that students may not engage with HE. The documents subscribe to the 'deficit' discourse, which suggests that students require support to engage with HE. It does not and probably cannot, as this is not within the college's capacity, consider the individual reasons for non-engagement. This data analysis, whilst providing an insight into how policy informs the composition of these documents, has also assisted with contextually placing the students within the college framework. It seems that the documentary analysis has demonstrated the types of support for students that policy makers and the college (outwardly) deem important, rather than examining why the individual students have chosen not to engage with HE.

**Table two – Analysis of College Documents**

<b>Support</b>
<p><b>Pastoral</b> – All three documents suggest that pastoral support is a high agenda item for the college. The college places this type of support as one of its main strengths to ensure the retention and success of students. It highlights the individualised nature of personal tutorials to ensure all student requirements are attended to.</p> <p><i>‘In addition each of the individual Schools has a dedicated Student Engagement Officer working with students and staff on a daily basis supporting and signposting students with their pastoral and academic progress.’ (Access Agreement, 2016/2017: p.5)</i></p> <p><i>‘The College also has well developed systems for encouraging dialogues with learners, including questionnaires, centre student reps, a Learner Parliament and Student Union representation on the Board of Corporation.’ (Single Equality Policy, 2014-2017: p.6)</i></p> <p><i>‘Provide online and/or face-to-face tutorial support’ (Teaching and Learning Strategy 2015/2016: p.9)</i></p>
<p><b>Academic</b> – Academic support is highlighted as a college-wide agenda, and the documents suggest that this is essential in creating an environment for students to thrive and achieve their full potential. The documents also suggest that this type of support is provided at college, department and course level.</p> <p><i>‘Intrinsic to our access and widening participation vision is a dedicated university centre, significant investment in resources, the provision of small class sizes to facilitate learning and teaching and an excellent personal tutorial system which guarantees a personal tutor for every student.’ (Access Agreement, 2016/2017: p.5)</i></p> <p><i>‘We are committed to our learners’ education, training and support’ (Single Equality Policy, 2013-2017: p.8)</i></p>

*'Ensure that inclusion of academic skills (including literacy, numeracy and other study skills) occurs throughout the lifetime of a learner's programme of study.'*  
(Teaching and Learning Strategy 2015/2016: p.9)

**Financial** – Financial support is a priority for the college, as its situation in the 13<sup>th</sup> most deprived borough of the UK (Lancashire County Council, 2015) means that some students face hardship when deciding to undertake HE study. The college operates a bursary scheme based on attendance and success of students, does not charge the maximum £9000 course fees, has a dedicated student finance department and provides short-term hardship loans for needy students.

*'Having reviewed our Access Agreement for 2015-16, we have taken the decision to continue to provide a bespoke package to support individuals. All Undergraduate full time learners will receive a cash bursary of £500 in the first year, linked to student engagement and attainment, and then £250 per year for year 2 and 3.'* (Access Agreement, 2016/2017: p.7)

*'The college provides a number of support mechanisms including financial support mechanisms for learners suffering socio-economic disadvantage, these support mechanisms are intended to support the retention of learners by enabling financial support for travel and course materials.'* (Single Equality Policy, 2014-2017: p.23)

*'A key part of the College's mission is to provide ladders of opportunity that enable its learners to progress from wherever they are on entry to realise their full potential and to contribute to the local economy at the highest level possible.'* (Teaching and Learning Strategy 2015/2016: p.2)

**Access** – Here the documents highlight how the college supports and encourages students to enrol for HE courses. All three documents suggest that if this support strategy was not employed, many students may not be aware of the degree level courses offered at their local college. Key areas that are targeted are local FE colleges,

sixth form colleges, schools, and their own FE provision. The college also suggests that key to supporting and encouraging students is raising awareness that although they may not have the standard entry requirements for some courses, the college can help them to up-skill academically prior to entry on their chosen HE course. This could be either by attending key skills courses or a level 0 foundation course.

*'Providing an inclusive and supportive learning experience, so that all students can fulfil their potential remains fundamental to our Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy.'* (Access Agreement, 2016/2017: p.6)

*'Some Learners are offered Individual Study Programmes in order to access mainstream curriculum'* (Single Equality Policy, 2014-2017: p.14)

*'All learners will have opportunities within or alongside the delivery of their main programme to gain transferrable skills. Learners with poor qualifications in English and/or Mathematics will be provided with opportunities for further learning in these subjects.'* (Teaching and Learning Strategy 2015/2016: p.5)

**Community** – This type of support aims to raise the college profile in the community, thus potentially encouraging students to attend who may not have been aware of the opportunities available at the college. The college emphasises its connections with local employers, and also local schools. It feels that connections with local schoolchildren from an early age may encourage them to bear in mind that their local college has a dedicated HE provision for their future educational progression.

*'Specific events held in higher education have also been offered to FE students and include the Digital Theatre, work with the Children's University, access to subject specific speakers and so forth. To date student feedback from such events has been exemplary.'* (Access Agreement, 2016/2017: p.6)

*'The College provides education and training for a wide range of age groups namely 16-18 and 19+ and is committed to ensuring educational opportunities are available for all people within the community regardless of age.'* (Single Equality Policy, 2014-

2017: p.19)

*'A key part of the College's mission is to provide ladders of opportunity that enable its learners to progress from wherever they are on entry to realise their full potential and to contribute to the local economy at the highest level possible.'* (Teaching and Learning Strategy 2015/2016: p. 2)

## Chapter nine

### Discussion and Analysis

#### Introduction

This chapter will consist of a discussion of the key findings of this doctoral research including an analysis of it in the context of Bourdieu's framework and labelling theory. It is important to highlight that the analysis of the research findings as presented in this chapter, is my own interpretation and does not offer the definitive answers to the research questions, which have been considered. In essence, this research provides a snapshot of the educational experiences of mainly white, all female, mainly mature students engaging with one HE subject in one location (the HE in FE department of a FE college) on a course upon which I teach as a fractional member of staff. This has a bearing on the generalisability of the findings of this research to the wider population of NT or LSE students engaging with HE. However whilst this research has been conducted for the Professional Doctorate in Education (EdD) where the findings should potentially have an impact on one's own practice (Fenge, 2009; Fenge, 2010; Lester, 2004 Pilkington, 2009), it is also essential to acknowledge the limitations of the findings in terms of generalisability and the potential for bias. During Chapter four (Ethical Implications) in the 'Positioning myself in the Research' section, I have considered the implications prior to undertaking the research of potential power imbalance, which could occur as a researcher investigating the staff and students from my own institution (Drake and Heath, 2011). I have also, within the aforementioned section, contemplated the evolving nature of practitioner research, my choice of research area, which has been impacted upon by my personal educational experiences, and how I must not assume that all students' educational experiences reflect my own.

### ***Potential for Bias and Issues of Power within this Doctoral Research***

As suggested by Van Heugten (2004) 'The selection of a topic that clearly reflects a personal interest ... raises the spectre of insider bias' (p.207). As previously discussed in Chapter seven (Findings and Data Analysis) under the section 'Trustworthiness of this Research', there is an increasing awareness in the literature of the inability of the researcher to be objective and detached in qualitative interpretivist research (Shenton, 2004). Recently the positivist concerns of objectivity in research have been discarded within qualitative research in favour of the use of the researcher as a 'human tool' in the research context supplying important sources of knowledge, including context and personal experiences (Savin-Baden & Howell Major, 2013). However, there is still the problem that the researcher's interpretation of the data may provide a biased and personally predisposed slant to the findings, especially when the researcher may have a personal connection with the research area.

During this thesis, I have provided reflections regarding the context of my connection and how my educational experiences and that of my son have impacted on my decision to investigate this subject area (chapters 1, 4 and 11). It is with this in mind, that I have considered my positionality within this research and the importance of minimising my subjective influence during data analysis or reporting of the findings. This, I believe, has been achieved both by utilising a number of methods that have been learnt during this doctoral process and those which I have utilised previously within my professional life as a homeopath and educator. These methods included reflective writing in order to reflexively question and deconstruct my personal educational experiences (Van Heugten, 2004); providing minimal guidance and avoiding self-disclosure during the interview process in order to minimise 'self-reporting' by the researcher (Gregg, 1994; Gubrium and Holstein, 2003; Mercer, 2007) and triangulation of data collected from other sources (within this research sources of information have been staff interviews and analysis of college documents). The utilisation of the above have aided with 'the building of a complex image' of the research problem, potentially diminishing the presentation of the researcher's own subjective views during data collection and analysis (Van Heugten, 2004: p.211).

As detailed in Chapter five (Methodology) within 'The Problem with Phenomenography' section and Chapter seven (Data Analysis Methods) in the 'My Chosen Data Analysis Techniques' section, I believe that I have attempted to redress the potential for researcher bias in my research. I was concerned that the implementation of classic phenomenographic techniques during data analysis would reduce the student participation data to a series of 'outcome spaces' defined by metaphors chosen by myself. This would provide little information when attempting to demonstrate the individuality of experience discussed during the student participant interviews. The provision of a singular analysis of the data as prescribed by the phenomenographic approach seemed very mechanical and would not have portrayed the student data as I had envisioned when I first undertook the research.

Equally the reduction of the data to a series of metaphors defined by myself would have allowed the potential for bias when interpreting the data as I may unconsciously, or perhaps even consciously, have analysed the data with my own educational experiences in mind, including only that information which I connected personally with. The inclusion of the I-Poems and the Wordclouds have minimised the potential of researcher and reporting bias, as they have been constructed directly from the student participants' own words which were transcribed verbatim. Furthermore, the implementation of another data analysis technique when analysing the student data (the Stevick-Colazzi-Keen Method of Phenomenological Analysis) provided a framework, which allowed the development of dominant themes from the data, thereby preventing my assumptions regarding students' educational experiences from emerging in the analysis (Van Heugten, 2004).

It is also important to consider how the issue of being an insider researcher impinged on the collection and analysis of data from staff participants. Although the information sought from the staff participants was less central to the research, it is nevertheless significant as it provided valuable insights into staff perceptions of the academic and pastoral support required by student participants. It also afforded an additional source of data to consider when analysing the students' experiences; in effect, this data aided with the conceptualisation of the students' experiences now they had engaged with HE. Once more, tools such as minimal self-disclosure and

unbiased questions were implemented during the interviews and reflective journal writing was completed directly following the process.

However, with the staff participants it was more difficult to ensure that the interview was unbiased, as I already was aware of the implementation of practices, which supported the students academically and pastorally. This could have effectively prevented further probing of the staff participants on some points they discussed and therefore some information that could have impacted on the study may not have been gained. This has to be acknowledged, but is perhaps unavoidable and Mercer (2007) suggests that this situation, as an insider researcher, is 'like wielding a double-edged sword' (p.7). Whilst I was enmeshed within the culture of practice I was investigating, and this could have resulted in assumptions being made regarding the information being discussed by the staff participants, information may also be absent due to my inability to view the research problem through a stranger's eyes (Hockey, 1993).

Finally, the decision to undertake practitioner research with student and staff participants from my own establishment may inevitably lead to concerns regarding bias and unequal 'power relationships'. However, when collecting and analysing data, I have described that through reflexive writing, theoretical reading, the triangulation of data analysis techniques, careful consideration of interview technique and openness about difficulties with the chosen approach to this doctoral research that I have reflectively self-examined my motives and my approach to undertaking research in this area which has been instigated by my own educational experiences.

Whilst these techniques have helped with my thought processes and the on-going development of this doctoral research in terms of methodology, it is still difficult to be assured that unequal power relationships have not been played out during data collection and analysis. This is where further reading on the subject of feminist standpoint theory (Harding, 1991) helped with developing my understanding of the role I have adopted during this research. Standpoint Theory consciously examines the role of the researchers as well as the phenomenon under investigation (Brooks, 2014). Harding (1991) argues that knowledge is socially situated and Brooks (2014) discusses that 'Feminist standpoint theory requires the fusion of knowledge and practice' (p.55)

and that women's lives as they experience them should be central to research being undertaken about them. I have had three distinct roles during this research; the first is that of doctoral researcher, the second that of female academic and the third is my experience as a NT mature student. These positions have provided me with insights and privileges, as I have been able to access the participants for this research due to my position at the College. However, my educational experiences have essentially shaped this research and permitted the co-construction of knowledge with the participants (Jack, 1991). One of the important points of feminist standpoint theory is that all women's views should be shared and listened to, thus creating a community with empathic understanding of individual experiences (Brooks, 2014). The inclusion of the I-Poems derived from the transcribed interviews allows the unique perspectives of the reality of the participants to be heard by others, thereby ensuring that a multiplicity of standpoints is provided. Feminist standpoint theory also suggests that if one can trust that one's own unique perspective is heard, then one can fully hear and respect other people's views. During this thesis, therefore having reflectively examined my educational experiences and thus allowing them to be heard, I am able to empathise and respect the participants' own experiences of education.

Whilst the findings of this research are not truly generalisable to the wider population of students labelled as 'non-traditional', I feel I can challenge the perception of policymakers and educationalists who assume that certain students are 'low aspirational' (Gorard et al., 2006; Gorard et al., 2012). I will, therefore, consider my findings in relation to the literature discussed in Chapters two and three, the trustworthiness of my findings and the potential for future research in this area.

The discussion will be structured around the key findings, which have been included here: -

### ***Primary Findings***

According to those students labelled as 'non-traditional' who had engaged with HE, it emerged that: -

- Students' decisions not to progress to HE are multi-factorial

- Decisions not to engage with HE are based on personal circumstances at the time
- Students' decisions not to engage with HE are not necessarily an indication of 'low aspirations'

### ***Further Findings***

- Students' decisions to re-engage with post-compulsory education are also multi-factorial
- There can be a lack of support and guidance provided by schools and FE colleges to advise students of potential career pathways should they not wish to progress to HE
- Students may exhibit a lack of confidence in their academic abilities, and therefore fail to progress to HE due to previous educational experiences
- Students enrolled on the courses under scrutiny during this research often require greater supportive academic input from the teaching team
- HE teaching provision needs to adapt to support students who lack some of the necessary academic skills to achieve success at HE level
- Providing HE courses at local FE colleges may encourage students, who ordinarily would not have participated in HE, to enrol for further study
- Impacts of HE academic study can be wide-reaching in terms of personal development, raised self-confidence and self-esteem

This doctoral research set out to examine students' personal perspectives regarding: -

- Their reasons for non-engagement with post-compulsory education
- The support they were offered by educational establishments at this crucial point in their lives
- Their academic requirements now they have engaged with HE.

As will be discussed under the primary findings, one of the main factors suggested by policy discourse for non-progression into HE by students from LSE groups is 'low aspirations' (Gorard et al., 2006; Gorard et al., 2012). As previously demonstrated in this thesis, recent government policy has attempted to encourage students, particularly from under-represented socio-economic groups, to aim to continue

education by encouraging HE institutions in their WP efforts with extended funding. Chapter seven suggested that there is a paucity of research allowing individual student's voices to be foregrounded when discussing the reasons for non-engagement with HE, preferring instead to concentrate on developing theories for collective non-engagement (Francis, 2006) (Chapter three). Both Chapters two and three demonstrated the views of policy makers, the effects on establishments and other research regarding the experience of WP students who do attend HE. It must also be acknowledged that the scope of this research was to investigate the experiences of those students that had overcome the barriers to studying at HE level and therefore represents only one facet of the WP debate. It was not within the remit of the research to investigate those students who have not or cannot engage with HE level study and therefore the data is not available to introduce the experience of those who choose not to participate in HE. This would be, in essence, a further piece of research to be conducted at a later date.

An unexpected outcome from this doctoral research, which will be discussed later in this chapter, has been that each participant, in particular those who were in their third year of study or who had recently graduated, discussed the impact of undertaking HE study. By achieving a degree-level qualification, not only had it raised their self-confidence and self-esteem, but also the feeling that they could achieve their future ambitions if they were determined. The findings from the analysis were outlined in the previous chapter, and in particular the 'voices' of the student participants could be heard through the use of the I-Poem (Gilligan, 1993). This was intentional, as throughout the secondary research analysed for this thesis student participant voices were not particularly emphasised in the data analysis and previously much of the data was fragmented into categories demonstrating collective student HE experiences. Therefore, this 'foregrounding' of student voices, allowing their individual educational experiences to be heard, is an important contribution to the evidence base for students' experience of HE.

This Discussion and Analysis chapter is arranged, for clarity, around the findings for this research. At the beginning of each sub-heading, the findings associated with the

following discussion will be repeated in order that it will be clear to which finding (s) the discussion pertains.

## Decision to not progress to HE

### **Primary Findings**

*According to those students labelled as 'non-traditional' who had engaged with HE, it emerged that: -*

*Students' decisions not to progress to HE are multi-factorial*

*Decisions not to engage with HE are based on personal circumstances at the time*

*Students' decisions not to engage with HE are not necessarily an indication of 'low aspirations'*

The primary findings of this research challenge policy discourse, which suggests that non-engagement with HE may be due to lack of aspirational qualities as discussed by Basit et al., 2006; Forsyth and Furlong, 2003; Gorard et al., 2007; Quinn, 2004. As previously discussed within this thesis, this deficit thinking blames those who choose not to participate, placing them at fault (Yosso, 2005). Policy contexts have constructed engaging with HE as a route for tackling social inequalities (BIS, 2011; Blackburn and Jarman, 1993; Burke, 2012; Calendar, 2011; Dearing, 1997; Gorard et al., 2006; Leitch, 2006; Richardson, 2010b; Robbins, 1963; Thomas, 2001a), but have not accounted for the individual nature of personal circumstances, which may not allow people to engage with post-compulsory education. Policy focus tends to attempt to tackle social inequalities through education. However, for those potential students described as 'non-traditional' or who are from LSE groups, there may be other barriers to engagement such as family or financial commitments as demonstrated by student participants Arlene and Sabina. These are, therefore, incidences of where a student's habitus may constrain their engagement with HE (Reay, 2004); the students may have wanted to engage with HE following post-compulsory education (individual habitus) but their choices and behaviour were constrained due to life events, thereby excluding those practices (i.e. engagement with HE) which were unfamiliar to their habitus (Bourdieu, 1990).

Here, it seems important to consider the connections between habitus, field and the students' cultural capital on students' decisions to participate in HE following compulsory education. Clegg (2011), Hurst (2013), Kettley (2007), Reay et al. (2001)

and Swidler (1986) propose that LSE parents are deficient in the cultural capital needed to encourage their children to succeed in education due to their lack of knowledge required to effectively support them in engaging in HE as demonstrated by Melissa. Conversely, those students from higher socio-economic groups are generally already familiar with the field of HE and therefore can normally navigate it successfully leading to consistent pursuit of academic success since their habitus has provided them with the relevant cultural capital (Lamont and Lareau, 1988). This highlights that, whilst the rhetoric suggests that engagement with post-compulsory education may tackle social inequalities, these still exist in other dimensions. Engagement with HE requires interplay between habitus, field and cultural capital whereby the LSE student may be encouraged into engaging with HE by parents and extended family. However, this interplay is often not available due to lack of experience in the HE field, available cultural capital and the student's habitus at the time resulting in a lack of knowledge of the 'rules of the game that apply in the field of higher education' (Nairz-Wirth et al., 2017: p.15).

For other participants in this study there was a lack of motivation to engage with HE following post-compulsory education due to the desire to earn a living immediately after school (Sally). Whilst in some cases, the requirement to gain employment was to provide financial assistance for the family, in other cases, this was not so and participants either had to support themselves financially (Edith, Laura, Tricia, Vera), or were more motivated to enter the world of work (Lisa, Dana). It could be suggested that those who stated that they were not motivated to engage immediately in post-compulsory education actually were suffering from 'low aspirations' as suggested by policy discourse. However, this is not indicated when analysing the findings more deeply as, for example, Lisa did not require a degree-level qualification to practice therapies. She made the decision to not engage with HE at this point, as she was happy working in the field of beauty therapy. Dana, on the other hand, was so discouraged following her compulsory education that she felt that finding employment was her only option due to not achieving her expected grades at school and the subsequent loss of confidence in her academic abilities. Engaging with employment following compulsory education, however, allowed her self-confidence to build in a different field until she felt capable to engage once more with the field of education.

These stories capture two different aspects of experience prior to engagement with HE. Lisa's individual habitus constrained her initially as she believed there was no need for a degree-level qualification for her chosen profession. She also lacked confidence in her educational ability due to undiagnosed dyslexia. Her decision to engage with HE was last minute as a result of her worry about being an 'old beauty therapist'. She aspired to learn new skills to enhance her employability and the provision of a course at a local HEI provided the impetus for engagement in post-compulsory education (a new field).

Elements of Lisa's story, such as the lack of confidence in her educational abilities, are similar to Dana's but for very different reasons. Dana lacked confidence in her academic ability following her previous educational experiences. She discussed how all of her siblings had engaged with HE following compulsory education, and therefore the assumption might be that her cultural capital was such that progressing into a university education was highly likely. However, her experiences at school contributed to her lack of confidence in her educational abilities and the engagement with a different field allowed her confidence to develop, in turn encouraging her to engage with HE.

A key implication of this doctoral research is that care should be taken when discussing the reasons for non-engagement with HE by students from LSE groups. The language surrounding the non-engagement of students from LSE backgrounds is often considered in terms of a deficit approach and suggests that potential students are lacking. This is evident in Archer and Yamashita (2003) who suggest that the deficit model has a role in their research and note that those students who had chosen not to progress to HE felt 'a clear feeling of deficit and awareness that they are 'not good enough' for the education system' (p.58). They highlight that students from LSE groups are subjected in the main to the deficit model, whereby those who choose not to participate are blamed for their lack of engagement as the WP agenda provides the opportunity to participate; thus non-participating students may be labelled as having low aspirations. It seems that the deficit model is generally applied to potential students from LSE groups entering traditional universities. The structural model, in contrast to the deficit model, provides solutions to encourage those students who may

not traditionally participate. These may include adaptations to course structure and timetabling, distance learning, off campus delivery and part-time options (Baxter et al., 2007; Gorard et al., 2006); some of which are provided at the institution in which this research was undertaken.

As has been demonstrated in Chapter eight in the Student Participant data analysis section there are multiple factors that could impact on engagement with HE level study. However, as previously stated, the findings of this research contradict the suggestion of a lack of aspirational qualities. Primarily, the student participants in this study could not engage with HE post-compulsory education at 18 years of age, because personal circumstances at the time required them to proceed into employment. A recommendation of this research is, therefore, that careful consideration should be given to the language and rhetoric surrounding non-participation of students from LSE groups in order that the 'deficit' and 'lack of aspiration' approaches are not emphasised as the only reasons for non-participation in HE. The students interviewed for this research were not misguided, wilful or even failures (Francis, 2006); for them engagement with HE at this point in their lives was part of their life journey. They had not considered themselves as being errant for not engaging in HE earlier. For them, the opportunity for degree-level study was right at this point in their lives. The various commitments in their lives and the provision of a degree locally, relevant to their needs influenced their decision. It does have to be acknowledged once more that there may be an impact of the demographic of the student participants in this study on the generalisability of these findings. It cannot be assumed this is typical of all NT LSE students. However, that being said, current policy discourse seems to blame students who fail to engage and succeed in HE rather than accounting for 'structural inequalities many encounter at each step of their learning journey and indeed life' (Duckworth and Cochrane, 2012: p.589).

In contrast to the research focusing on LSE students and the reasons for their non-engagement with HE; previous research has not necessarily concentrated on the decisions regarding engagement or non- engagement for all students from all socio-economic groups. It seems that attributing a 'low aspirational' or a 'deficit' approach to students from LSE groups who choose not to participate in HE has become the norm

and does not account for the multiple factors which may prevent engagement with post-compulsory education; the literature often only portrays one side of the debate examining non-participation as a problem for LSE students rather than also considering non-participation in all socio-economic groups.

**Findings associated with this section:**

*Students' decisions to re-engage with post-compulsory education are also multi-factorial*

*Providing HE courses at local FE colleges may encourage students, who ordinarily would not have participated in HE, to enrol for further study*

The findings of this research propose that there are multiple factors affecting why the participants chose to re-engage with HE at this point in their lives. Examples of these are the desire to prove to themselves that they were able to achieve at HE level, to enhance their employment opportunities, interest in the subject and gaining a recognised qualification. Although government policy in recent years has gone some way to addressing non-participation by under-represented groups (BIS, 2011; Dearing, 1997; Leitch, 2006), the predominant focus is to concentrate on the financial support that is deemed to be essential for LSE students to participate in post-compulsory education, rather than addressing the multi-contextual barriers to participation. Education policy supports the deficit model discourse as it is suggested that students from LSE groups who choose not to engage at 18 must require financial support to attend HE. The suggestion is that if 18 year olds from LSE groups choose not to engage with HE directly following post-compulsory education, they are deficient because they have not taken the opportunities for financial support offered by the government. It seems that policy makers are concerned with extrinsic motivations such as financial factors, and what they perceive students from LSE groups need on a practical level to participate, rather than investigating those other barriers that may prevent engagement with HE. This research, however, challenges this discourse since the participants in this study, without exception, based their decision not to participate in HE at 18 on multiple personal factors. Their decision to re-engage with education was, as is demonstrated in the findings, mainly driven by intrinsic motivations; therefore labels such as 'deficient' and 'low aspirational' are misrepresentative for the student participants in this doctoral research.

Within the sample for this doctoral research, many reasons were offered for engagement with HE level study at this point in time such as providing for their family (Natalie, Dana), desiring a degree-level qualification (Dana, Andrea, Julie, Lisa, Arlene, Freda, Tricia, Laura, Michelle), desiring to prove to themselves they could achieve this (Roz, Julie, Lisa, Arlene, Sabina), and setting an example to their family (Andrea, Roz, Julie, Lisa). This is concurrent with Archer and Hutchings (2000) findings which discovered that the most commonly cited reasons for engagement with HE level study by students from LSE groups were 'improving personal and familial economic situations and gaining social status and prestige' (p.123). They highlight that in general, male participants had economic motivations for engaging with HE, whilst female participants cited social, personal or family motivation, which is in keeping with many of the female participants in this research who discussed these aspects. Although it is impossible for policy to account for all the individual factors which may discourage HE engagement, it seems important for the discussion to move away from the 'low aspirational' and 'deficit' discourse and account for other factors which may prevent engagement post-compulsory education.

The growth of HE has provoked the widening of the HE field to include other institutions which may be viewed as 'not quite HE' such as HE programmes offered in FE colleges. It is often suggested that in terms of the hierarchy of HE institutions, the HE in FE College is regarded as the less prestigious of what Bourdieu would identify as two similar but different fields (Leahy, 2012). Bathmaker (2015) proposes, however, that rather than the development of distinct sub-fields (HE then FE), there is still a single but diversified field of HE. However this is framed, whether as a diversified single field or a number of sub-fields, the HE in FE College provider is often portrayed as being less valued in the wider HE field (Bathmaker, 2015), and those students who attend programmes at such institutions are viewed as not possessing enough of the dominant cultural capital to access 'traditional' or 'elite' universities (Smith, 2012). Here again, labelling is inherent as it is implicitly suggested that not only are those students who attend HE in FE establishments 'deficient', so are the establishments they choose to attend (Leahy, 2012).

In contrast, however, the findings of this research suggest that the provision of HE programmes in a local FE college have impacted positively on students' decisions to participate, therefore suggesting that there is an attraction in providing HE courses at local colleges. This may potentially encourage participation by those students who have not previously considered engaging in HE study. The findings also concur with those of Fenge (2011) who found that 'non-traditional' students might have the pre-conception that HE offered in an FE College may be more accessible. However, once more, this cannot be generalised to the wider field of HE in FE, as the scope of this research was to investigate students' experiences on one suite of programmes. Further research could investigate this more widely.

There is much discussion in the literature regarding the choice of HEI and HE courses by LSE students and their position and experiences within the HE field (Leahy, 2011; Leese, 2010; O'Shea, 2016; Reay et al., 2009). Thomas and Quinn (2007) suggest that students from similar class backgrounds are likely to cluster around certain types of institutions and certain degree programmes. O'Shea (2016) discusses that whilst educational stratification may be imposed upon the students by the dominant in the field, it may also be self-imposed, or self-selected. That is students may feel they have limited choice or impose limitations on their choice of setting. This could be due to a lack of cultural capital and knowledge of the field but what is also acknowledged to be of great importance is how the LSE student feels they may 'fit' with their choice of institution; their habitus may influence this.

The findings of this research support the influence habitus plays on institutional choice as student participants (Sally, Natalie, Arlene, Edith, Julie, Dana, Andrea, Roz, Brenda, Bella) suggested that one of the reasons for engaging with HE was because of the college providing degree level study was in the local area (local to them and also 'their' locality); thus they 'fitted' with the institution. The geographical access intersected with a perception of locality and their existing habitus. Reay (2005) discusses how when a habitus encounters an unfamiliar field, change and transformation will occur, but the experience may also be unsettling resulting in insecurity, uncertainty, anxiety and ambivalence. Whilst the students participating in this research highlight reasons for engaging in HE at this point, reasons for choice of HEI may well have also implicitly

been that the establishment 'fitted' with their habitus and cultural capital. The decision to engage was itself a significant step, but the availability of HE study closer to 'home' meant it seemed altogether less intimidating, offering a clear advantage to them whilst they tackled a new field; that of HE.

It seems, therefore, that the WP agenda may encourage a local element; students who potentially would not have participated in HE if they had to travel or re-locate have chosen to attend because of the locality of the HEI. However, this locality is also about habitus, students do not feel 'doubly intimidated' by having to negotiate entirely alien habitus and fields together. Student participant, Sally, supports this point suggesting that one of the main reasons for engaging with HE was the provision of the course at her local college in a purpose-built building, which was small enough for her to feel comfortable in but big enough for it to feel like a university (intimidating). Whilst this may be considered a positive factor for some of the participants in this study, Gorard et al. (2006) argue for all HEIs to seek to engage students from local areas, otherwise 'participation may reinforce and exacerbate existing social divisions' (p.85), thus representing another form of marginalisation for non-traditional students. However, whilst historically universities may not have actively encouraged LSE students (Archer, 2003), there are multiple inhibiting factors such as location, travel, family commitments, course provision, lack of encouragement from HEIs, or lack of confidence to participate. The findings of this research support the assertion that local provision of courses can positively impact on engagement and that HE in FE may, therefore, be perceived as more accessible to students. However, whilst this is important, other factors such as the provision of a course at a local college with which the student wishes to engage, and a personal decision to re-engage with education are also significant.

It seems, therefore, that labelling is inherent in HE, and is not only applied to those students who are 'non-traditional' or from LSE groups, but also affects HEIs which may not be considered traditional universities (for example, HE in FE institutions). Bathmaker and Thomas (2009) suggest that enrolments in dual sector institutions should be viewed in the context of the wider HE sector. Whilst growth in the HE sector could be viewed as leading to a more equitable system, this may not be the case for

all. Those students who may be attracted to HE in FE colleges, whilst engaging with HE, potentially attend a less-valued division within the wider HE sector in terms of institutional status.

Indeed, Widdowson (2005) concurs, suggesting that college-based HE provision draws in students who are less likely to have the social and cultural capital required to grant access to the elite institutions within the sector (Bourdieu, 1997). Here the suggestion is that both the student enrolled at a HE in FE institution and the HE in FE institution itself are 'deficient' as the students are not able (or seen as unwilling) to attend a more elite institution and the college-based HE is less-valued. This research proposes that there is much value placed by students on the accessibility of HE in FE provision. However, Phillips (2009) suggests that although there is a universalised ideal of what a 'real' HE institution should be, HE in FE establishments should provide a distinctive, but not an equivalent educational experience, drawing on the best practices of HE, but adapting them to accommodate a different genre of student. Whilst this provision may be deemed as lower status in the hierarchy of HE, the evidence suggests that students who do attend are comfortable with their choice of institution and course.

Widdowson (2005) suggests that the type of student attracted to the HE in FE institution would be debt-averse, a first generation HE student, view their HE experience in terms of improving employment prospects, require high levels of academic and pastoral support and have the desire to study close to home, thus concurring with much of the other research in this field regarding socio-economic status of students and choice of HE (Archer, 2003; Bingham and O'Hara, 2007; Brine, 2011; Callendar, 2011; Gorard et al., 2007; Higgins et al., 2010; Marandet and Wainwright, 2010; Quinn et al., 2005; Reay et al., 2010; Taylor and House, 2010). However, whilst the findings of this research do concur with some of these suggestions, this is a broad generalisation of who might attend different institutions and seems to allude once more to the 'deficit' discourse. Hoskins (2012) proposes that the WP initiative has only served to reinforce the division in the HE system, directing students to HEIs dependent on their socio-economic status, thus suggesting that the social justice rhetoric of WP is not inherent.

There does, however, seem to be a shift in this stance, as in order to attract and retain government funding, universities have to be seen to be actively encouraging students from under-represented groups. The Access Agreements developed by HEIs are available publicly on the OFFA website, and these have to be updated annually to demonstrate how each institution is developing strategies to help students from under-represented groups. Indeed, this is concurrent with Bowl (2004), Quinn (2004) and Thomas (2005) who suggest that universities should change their policy strategies so that NT students can participate. This research, as previously demonstrated, has confirmed the value of the HE in FE provision for the students that it attracts. Leahy (2012) discusses the unique contribution of HE in FE colleges, in terms of the provision of college-based HE and the levels of support offered to students. The HE in FE College does attract many students who potentially may not have otherwise engaged with degree-level education (Bowl, 2012), and this view has been further confirmed in the data analysis for this research (Natalie, Dana, Andrea, Sally, Sabina).

There is a palpable difference between the research I have conducted and the data I have gathered and analysed to record experiences of students labelled as 'non-traditional' with other research literature I have read in this area. The focus of much of the research surrounding WP focuses on the negative consequences of WP for both the HEI and the students. For example, Archer et al. (2003) report the negative experiences of HE that students from LSE groups have faced in many areas of their student lives. Archer et al.'s research highlights students' concerns from LSE groups, such as the inability to access elite universities, feeling that their degrees will not measure up to other students as they have attended what they describe as 'lower status institutions' (p.129), how they acknowledge that their abilities are less academic and therefore could render them a lower level degree compared to others, how they face a great deal of hardship in their daily lives as students and 'Most respondents positioned themselves as at a greater risk of failing because they were 'non-traditional' learners (p.132).

However, this doctoral research contradicts these points of view, and suggests that it is essential to end the discourse that presents non-traditional students and WP as a problem. For many of the participants in this research, the opportunity to engage with

HE and achieve a degree-level qualification in a conveniently situated HEI was their overriding concern. The data did not suggest that they wished to attend elite universities, or that they felt their degree would not be equivalent to anybody else's. They celebrated gaining their degree-level qualification in terms of their educational achievements and the impacts on self-confidence and self-esteem.

**Finding associated with this section:**

*There can be a lack of support and guidance provided by schools and FE colleges to advise students of potential career pathways, should they not wish to progress to HE*

The findings of this research demonstrate that the majority of the participants discussed the lack of advice offered regarding future career pathways, employment or educational possibilities. Literature analysed within Chapters two and three discussed how information is provided by schools and colleges on progression to universities, but demonstrated how students from LSE groups often did not act on the information provided in terms of engaging with HE (Archer, 2003). The cultural capital of these people is once more discussed in negative terms of deficit since lack of parental support or knowledge of HE engagement is highlighted as a factor in non-engagement (Reay et al., 2001), rather than detailing potential multi-contextual factors inhibiting progression into HE.

Slee (2014) also highlights that the decision not to progress further in education by LSE groups was, and still often is, influenced by family or social connections. Those who possess the dominant cultural capital are often more knowledgeable regarding access to educational opportunities, whilst those students and their families who do not possess the dominant capital may feel a sense of inadequacy when attempting to engage with HE (Reay, 2004). Dominant groups enforce this sense of inadequacy and lack of social mobility is depicted as self-induced rather than oppression of less powerful groups in society (Reay, 2004b). Although cultural capital is often seen to be required to access educational opportunities, the value of socially situated cultural capital cannot be underestimated. Social networks enable people who live or work in a particular society to function effectively and develop a sense of community, thereby being of benefit to that particular community (Podolny and Baron, 1997). However, the dominant in society possess the social networks and experience to gain entry into HE, whilst LSE groups, although possessing social capital which is valuable in their own communities, may be disadvantaged in educational terms. This research proposes, therefore, that educational establishments should address this issue in order to help

provide equal chances for engagement in education for all classes. This may involve offering information and guidance that is less generic and more specific, tailored to individual student needs. There is also potential for widening access to HE by increasing liaison with schools, FE colleges and sixth forms to provide information on HE opportunities. Currently, the culture of educational establishments providing advice and information for those students wishing to engage with HE is that the information is provided and it is up to the individuals responsible to process and implement it.

Furthermore, the data analysis also suggests that there is a lack of information provided by educational establishments to those students who do not wish to engage with HE. In terms of advice provided to potential students from LSE groups, Hutchings (2003) suggested that the reasons for this were; that working-class young people knew fewer people who had participated in HE and therefore lacked the ability to discuss their own experiences of engagement, and that schools and FE colleges supplied less information for students from working class backgrounds. This shortfall of guidance should be addressed by both schools and FE colleges, in order that people be provided with a full and rounded résumé of their potential pathways either into employment or HE. Indeed, both Kat and Hermione (staff participants) highlighted the lack of individual advice provided to students in their interviews. This situation is currently being addressed following a briefing paper in February 2017 which has discussed a new directive on the provision of careers guidance which is not generic but tailored to individual needs (Long and Hubble, 2017). This provision was rolled out across the UK in March 2017 and hopefully the results of providing more individual advice will be successful in guiding young people into jobs, apprenticeships or post-compulsory education as required.

The provision of advice to potential students transitioning from FE to HE sectors of the college was highlighted in the staff participant analysis by Kat and Rebecca, who had both worked in the FE sector of the college, and therefore were aware of the extent of advice on career/ education progression afforded by tutors. Reay et al. (2005) discuss how students from FE colleges decide upon their transition to HE provision within the same college and propose that first generation students often rely upon the

knowledge and direction given to them by their present tutors, which is confirmed during this research by both student (Natalie, Dana, Andrea, Freda, Roz, Edith and Sabina) and staff participants (Kat and Rebecca). However, Reay et al. (2005) further suggest that tutors to whom students turn to for advice, may be inflexible in terms of where they feel the student may 'fit' in terms of HE provision. Those employed by dual sector colleges are often under pressure to achieve targets in students transitioning from the FE provision to the HE sector of the establishment. Recruitment and selection pressure from managers may impede the selection of information given to the student, thereby influencing the student's choice (Moore et al., 2013). This pressure is felt to some extent in the HEI under scrutiny in this research. However, as staff participant, Kat, pointed out, one of the problems when considering career progression from an FE perspective, is that FE tutors are under continuing pressure to progress and pass their students through the FE course they are enrolled on, therefore advice on career progression for students are low on the tutor's agenda. Furthermore, she highlighted that students enrolled on vocational courses can put their skills into practice following a level three qualification ensuring employment potential, and consequently tutors feel there is little value in them continuing in education to a higher level.

Often, tutors who teach on vocational level qualifications, may not have a degree-level qualification themselves, lack knowledge of the HE field and therefore, potentially do not possess the cultural capital to discuss the option with their FE students (Seldon et al., 2010). However, this should not be an inhibiting factor when discussing potential career pathways with students as it has been demonstrated that advice from tutors contributes to determining the aspirations of their students (Abbott-Chapman, 2011; Doo Hwan, 2011). Winkle-Wagner (2010) suggests, however, that this places huge responsibility with educational practitioners who should become aware of their own biases and prejudices when providing career pathway information to students. Whilst the field in which an educational practitioner works and their own cultural capital may have an effect on how career advice is provided to students, the duty of care of practitioners should be that they provide the most comprehensive information possible to their students.

## Student Lack of Confidence

### **Finding associated with this section:**

*Students may exhibit a lack of confidence in their academic abilities, and therefore fail to progress to HE due to previous educational experiences*

As previously highlighted, governmental discourse focuses on non-participation in terms of lack of motivation and desire, and potential impacts of debt-incurrence. However, the findings of this study suggest that few of the participants were influenced by these factors. Reasons for non-engagement implicated in the data were previous lack of individual academic achievement, and lack of motivation to engage immediately following post-compulsory education due to multiple personal factors. For certain participants such as Natalie, Dana, Roz and Lisa, non-engagement was compounded by a failure to diagnose learning difficulties when engaged in compulsory education or disengagement from education due to personal circumstances such as bereavement, rather than deliberate disengagement.

Within Chapter three, the power of attaching a label to a person or persons, has been discussed (Dorn, 1996; Furlong, 1991; McGrew and Evans, 2003; Rosenthal, 2002; Rosenthal and Jacobson, 1992; Slee, 2014; Watts and Bridges, 2006) and the potency of this has surfaced within the findings. Some of the participants (Natalie, Dana, Lisa) suggested that they felt, or were made to feel unacademic at school and this impacted on their progression to post-compulsory education; thus the attachment of a label seems to have been detrimental to their chances of educational progression in these instances. However, as previously discussed, Natalie and Lisa highlighted that labels attached to them in compulsory education were due to undiagnosed learning difficulties which subsequently had been diagnosed on entry to HE study. Here the attachment of a label, that of requiring additional support, has helped these students to engage and be successful in their engagement with HE.

Conversely, Dana discussed the impacts of her schooling on her confidence and how allowing herself time to grow in confidence outside the educational arena, provided her with the self-confidence to engage later in life. She was labelled as an

underachiever at school and this impacted on how she viewed herself in educational contexts. She described vividly the amazement she felt having gained a 2,1 degree classification and further highlighted the impacts on her as a person, in terms of further growth in self-confidence and self-belief. This finding can be discussed in relation to Dorn's (1996) view that if a label is attached to a student earlier on in education, the impact of it will be felt throughout their lives. Whilst Dana's former educational experiences possibly cast a shadow over her earlier life, the impact of her degree classification and confidence she had gained helped to diminish the labelling associated with her previous education. It cannot, therefore, be wholeheartedly accepted that attaching a label will impact detrimentally throughout a student's life; the implications of the analysis of Dana's experience demonstrate this.

As has previously been suggested in this research, the HE in FE environment attracts a diverse student population, creating enormous implications for teaching and learning. Due to previous educational experiences, non-traditional students may lack confidence in their academic ability, and Chipperfield (2012: p.344) suggests that they may potentially perceive themselves as 'inferior to other university students'. In order to increase motivation and self-confidence in diverse students, Thomas (2002) proposes that good relationships between staff and students should be prioritised. Outcomes of this may be that the students are more persistent in their endeavours as they realise that lecturing staff are supporting them to achieve their qualification. However, this research proposes that whilst participants suggested that they might have lacked confidence in their academic abilities initially, the majority stated that their confidence in their abilities had grown during the course (Natalie, Dana, Andrea, Brenda, Julie, Roz, Lisa, Sally, Sabina, Bella and Katherine).

**Finding associated with this section:**

*Students enrolled on the courses under scrutiny during this research often require greater supportive academic input from the teaching team due to a lack of academic writing skills and critical thinking skills*

The growth in HE engagement requires a modification to a range of practices in HE to accommodate the diversification of the student body (Archer, 2007; Leese, 2010). Brimble (2013) reiterates Archer's and Leese's views proposing that 'once students enter an HE course, tutors should be mindful of the individual's entry route and tailor support as appropriate' (p.17). Although there is a tension in HE to develop independent learners as students progress through their studies (Bingham and O'Hara, 2007; Haggis, 2006; Leese, 2010) this means that sometimes individual student's support needs may be overlooked (Brimble, 2013; Smith, 2007), resulting in possible lack of engagement and withdrawal from the course (Young et al., 2007). The findings of this research propose, therefore, that there is a requirement to identify individual student's needs at a very early stage in their studies. Promoting and developing confidence in academic abilities in the early stages of the course would help to provide students with the self-assurance required to become independent learners, thereby potentially maintaining the HE ethos.

As demonstrated in the policy documentary analysis, the overarching aim of the college is to support the students to achieve. It is the college's assumption that in order to succeed students require the support outlined in the documents. However, the policy language is generic and does not provide further direction for staff on how to support the diverse cohorts of students they recruit. Furthermore, the college policy documents do not account for the tension that emerges between being supportive of individual student's needs and forging a dependency on the lecturer (Leese, 2010). Haggis (2006), for example, argues for a clear emphasis on the student taking sole responsibility for their own learning, and in the process becoming 'autonomous' learners, thereby embracing the ethos of the HE experience (Bingham

and O'Hara, 2007). Although one consequence of the emphasis on the independent learner is that the individual support needs of the student may be overlooked (Smith, 2007).

As proposed in the findings, both academic and pastoral support levels for students on the courses under investigation at this HE in FE College were reported as high by student and staff participants alike. The course team are very mindful of the vocational skills learning and potential lack of academic writing skills that are inherent in the majority of students enrolled on these courses. The team have, during the past two years, tailored support in tutorials to the requirements of individual cohorts and also individual students. This more formal implementation of greater study skills support has been developed following the analysis of participant data. Student participants (Natalie, Roz, Lisa, Sabina and Bella) also highlighted that the levels of support provided during their course enabled them to effectively engage with the level of study required. Embedding these skills within the course have instigated a level playing field in this area of the curriculum. It has changed the dynamic as students consider learning these skills to be a modular requirement contributing to their final award rather than potentially feeling inadequate, as they perhaps did not initially have the required academic skills. As suggested by Klinger and Murray (2012) embedding academic skills in this way suggests that 'it is no longer constructed within discourses of deficit' (p.37).

An institutional habitus is noted as assuming the habitus of the dominant group (i.e. middle and upper classes) denoting that this is the 'correct habitus' (Thomas, 2002: p.433). This may potentially impact on student experience of HE and reproduce social and cultural inequalities. It could be suggested that those from a LSE background are less equipped to deal with the conventions and teaching in HE (James et al., 2010). However, development of staff/ student relationships in teaching/ learning interactions can help break down this social reproduction of inequalities as students feel supported and gain confidence, thus perhaps allowing for the development of a more inclusive environment which embraces the diverse nature of the student body (Thomas, 2002). Inclusive, adapted teaching practice should be adopted to account for a diverse student body with individual needs. An awareness of how the potentially

diverse previous educational experiences of students may impact on engagement and, in turn, retention of students is required (McGowan, 2010), as the diversity in educational experience requires the HEI to meet the individual needs of very different students (Klinger and Murray, 2012). However, the addition of inclusive teaching and learning practices can present challenges for teaching staff as it is essential to develop a wide range of practices to accommodate students from a diverse range of educational backgrounds (McGowan, 2010).

**Finding associated with this section:**

*HE teaching provision needs to adapt to support students who lack some of the necessary academic skills to achieve success at HE level*

Much of the focus of literature with regards to WP students has been on retention of students and the ability to sustain student numbers by utilising financial incentives and support, supportive academic activities that enhance retention, such as one-to-one academic support on a regular basis and summer schools (Bennett et al., 2009; Harrison et al., 2007; Wingate, 2006). This is against a background where HEFCE (2000); Quinn (2004); Quinn et al. (2006) and The Select Committee on Education and Employment (2001) all suggest that those institutions recruiting a high proportion of 'non-traditional' students suffer the most from high non-completion rates. Often the belief is that the problem of non-engagement or lack of understanding of what is expected of them in terms of academic study should be located with the student (Mallman, 2017). However, this is challenged by Haggis (2006) who, asks 'what are the features of the curriculum, or of processes of interaction around the curriculum, which are preventing some students from being able to access this subject?' (p.526). She argues for a move away from the 'individual-deficit approach to student problems' to one that allows the student to understand the 'cultural values, assumptions and practices' of HE (p.533). Thomas (2002) argues that if an institutional habitus adopts inclusive practices, which accept and celebrate the individual differences of students, then there will be greater acceptance and respect for diverse student backgrounds that may in turn promote greater levels of engagement with HE.

As a practitioner providing HE in FE there is sometimes a slight tension between the desire to ensure that the students become independent, self-motivated learners and an awareness of the pressures and expectations they bring to the course. Haggis (2006) argues that the responsibility for engaging the student lies with the institution as a whole, and on an individual level with the course team and even further down the line, with the lecturer. She identifies with the idea that there may be a link between prior educational experience and the inability to automatically become autonomous self-directed learners, stating that 'although learners may enter higher education with

a history of 'low achievement', this is not necessarily related to their capacity to benefit from higher education in the future' (Haggis, 2006: p.527). This again places a degree of responsibility with those directly in contact with students rather than those creating or influencing the context in which teaching and learning takes place. Therefore, having considered the views highlighted in the literature and the impacts of the data analysis, I propose that, as a team (and possibly as a college) there is the potential to hinder our students in becoming independent, critical learners due to the high levels of academic support provided, and this may need to be reviewed. However, this being said, on the courses upon which I teach, the levels of structured support are decreased following the end of the first year of study to encourage independent critical thinking (Jordan et al., 2008), and during the third year students can access one-to-one tutorials as required providing individualised academic advice rather than blanket guidance, as highlighted in the analysis by staff participant, Hermione. This is an example of paying attention to the needs of the students whilst still challenging them academically (Devlin and O'Shea, 2011).

As early as 2004, Yorke and Longden suggested that teaching itself could be a barrier to the retention of WP students if not undertaken with an awareness of the needs of the specific cohort. However, Roberts (2011) suggested that rather than expecting students to adapt to systems of HE, in fact, HE should consider adopting or re-developing their pedagogical approaches to meet the requirements of the 'new' student population; whilst Young et al. (2007) argue the need for a re-positioning of HE approaches to teaching and student support to provide for the needs of an ever-increasingly diverse student body. Providing a true HE experience for students enrolling at HE in FE establishments is widely discussed in the literature (Feather, 2011; King and Widdowson, 2009; Silver, 2003). In terms of teaching and scholarship problems become evident as teaching in FE colleges could be framed as 'multi-pedagogical' since they potentially deliver professional training, FE courses, HE courses and apprenticeship training (Feather, 2016: p.99). If students progress within FE colleges from FE to HE provision, they may have become used to a certain style of delivery whereby they are taught everything they need to know to pass the course (Feather, 2011). Fisher (2009) discusses this in terms of the lecturer having to embrace a style of teaching which is target driven to ensure a good position in FE

league tables. HE style of teaching delivery, therefore, may be difficult for the students to become accustomed to, leading to frustration, not only for the student but also for the lecturer who may expect a greater degree of autonomous learning (Feather, 2012). Young et al. (2007) suggest that HE should incorporate different styles of subject delivery and assessment that should not alienate the diverse student body, because these inadvertently contribute to student attrition in non-traditional groups. However, Feather (2012) argues that this may be difficult to achieve in college-based HE provision as it is subjected to many different expectations in terms of results because of the different types of educational provision contained within them.

The implications of the focus on provision of teaching are again this tension where Young et al. (2007) almost seem to 'blame' the lecturer for poor retention; however, Bourdieu reminds us that what we do and how we do it takes place in a context that must take account of the status of our practice and the 'capital' students bring to it. The findings of this research suggest that the students, staff and college are aware of hurdles to overcome in terms of academic and pastoral support and that a two-way process has been implemented whereby the students and staff are aware of their responsibilities in terms of teaching and learning (Devlin, 2013). Students highlighted how supportive practices helped them increase self-expectation in terms of academic engagement and diagnosis of learning difficulties. Staff participants suggested how they adapted teaching practice to accommodate and support diverse cohorts, and college policy documents demonstrate the college's stance on providing support for academic development of the diverse student population. However, the findings of this research only pertain to the experiences of cohorts on the FD and BSc (Hons) of one subject, and therefore cannot be generalised to the wider provision of courses at the college. The experiences of students on other courses at the college may be very different to the experiences portrayed in the current research.

**Finding associated with this section:**

*Impacts of HE academic study can be wide reaching in terms of personal development, raised self-confidence and self-esteem*

An unexpected finding from the analysis was the transformative effects on students' lives that seemed to be beyond the scope of attaining a degree-level qualification. The research found that transformative learning has occurred; with this defined as: -

*'learning that transforms problematic frames of reference – sets of fixed assumptions and expectations... - to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, reflective and emotionally able to change' (Mezirow, 2003: p.58).*

Although the participants provided information about a number of different transformative effects of attaining a degree-level qualification on their lives (Natalie, Dana, Andrea, Julie, Lisa, Sarah, Bella, Katherine), the scale and extent of these effects seemed to be far beyond what they had been taught on the degree. They had become 'autonomous thinkers' (Mezirow, 1997: p.7), allowing them to be more self-confident and analytical in many different situations (Natalie, Dana, Andrea). They felt more able to 'argue their point' (Natalie, Dana, Andrea) and felt confident in their increased knowledge in many areas, and in any discussion with other professional people, which may ensue. They reported tangible changes in how they approached situations in all areas of their lives not just those in the educational arena. There was a sense that the participant's HE experiences have developed them holistically, rather than addressing a single facet of their being (Compton et al., 2006).

This transformative learning aspect of the research findings that have emerged from the student participant interviews can be linked with Bourdieu's theoretical framework. Whilst habitus may have either a transforming or constraining effect on a person (as demonstrated by my research), Bourdieu (1990) suggested that the adaptive nature of the habitus could provide the impetus for change in a person as it becomes active in relation to a different field. As such the student participants in this

research were prepared to engage with an unfamiliar field, that of HE, which led them into adapting their practices in line with the culture of that particular field (Nairz-Wirth et al., 2017)). Many of the participants had felt a sense of disempowerment when previously engaged with education, which had been transformed to empowerment during studying to degree level. The new field that the participants had engaged with demonstrates not only the 'permeability' of the habitus (Reay, 2004), but also that a change had occurred within the agent (Lee and Kramer, 2013) in order for them to undergo transformative learning (Mezirow, 2003).

This transformation of perspective has also added to the students' cultural capital. There was a sense of belonging in the new field, which may be attributed to the acquisition of a degree level qualification, and the move from unqualified to qualified status. Acquiring further cultural capital has led 'to a rupture in the habitus', thus creating space for transformative learning (Duckworth and Ade-Ojo, 2016: p.302). The student participants had not expected this type of change, as the majority of the participants had entered into HE to learn new practical and academic skills. However, engaging with degree-level study had effected greater changes in their lives than had been initially anticipated or assumed (Archer and Hutchings, 2000; Aslanian, 2001). They had, it seems, benefited from both the degree-level qualification in terms of transformative learning and increased cultural capital as a result of engaging with a different, unfamiliar field.

### **Analysis of the findings in the context of Bourdieu's theoretical framework**

As previously discussed in Chapter one (theoretical framework section), the area of this doctoral research can potentially be situated within Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, field and cultural capital. The extent to which these concepts can be applied to this doctoral research and if there are any limitations to their application will be discussed in this section of Chapter nine in light of the previous analysis (detailed above) of the findings.

Within a hierarchical society, what is considered valuable (cultural capital) is determined by the dominant classes (i.e. middle and upper classes). As demonstrated in this doctoral research during the Literature Reviews (Chapter one and Chapter two) and earlier analysis in this chapter, there is much literature discussing the deficiencies in terms of cultural capital of LSE classes in engaging in education as compared to the dominant class who determine the 'norms' in society (Yosso, 2005). The 'deficit' and 'low aspirational' discourse assumes that certain people in society lack the cultural capital that is required for social mobility (Sullivan, 2002) and places value judgements on those unable to access resources of dominant society (Yosso, 2005). However, what has been demonstrated in this research is that whilst the student participants may not possess the cultural capital that is generally deemed of 'high value', they possess a different cultural capital, which is of value to them personally or within their field. The students who were interviewed for this research demonstrated distinctive forms of capital, which were important within their own field such as, for example, resilience, determination and achieving their goal of a degree qualification in spite of the difficulties that they faced. Whilst these forms of capital may not be valued highly by society (O'Shea, 2016; Sullivan, 2002), they are of equal importance to the participants of this research since these qualities helped them gain access to post-compulsory education and achieve within a different field. This concurs with Lehmann (2009) who asserts that those LSE students who achieve in a HE environment often draw on the strength and resilience of their working-class cultural capital, whilst Reay et al. (2009) propose that the aforementioned qualities are far more associated with the working class and become 'productive resources' (p.1107) for them when engaging with HE. The lens of cultural capital places value on 'a narrow range of assets and characteristics' (Yosso, 2005: p.77), but this research suggests that this lens should be

widened in order to assess the value of different types of cultural capital that are valued by more than the dominant classes in society.

In terms of assessing the value of 'cultural wealth' which again is suggested as those practices and habits which are considered important by dominant society, the student participants of this research demonstrated other forms of cultural wealth which are perhaps not as valued generally, but for them are of inordinate value, such as family support which has enabled them to eventually participate in HE and the self-belief to acknowledge they are capable of achieving. Yosso (2005: p.82) describes the importance of acknowledging 'multiple forms of cultural wealth' such as those displayed in the findings of this research. This would allow a greater recognition of the value of those forms of capital considered important to different facets of society but which the dominant classes seldom acknowledge.

The findings of this research, therefore, present a challenge for those educationalists involved in HE. It can be acknowledged that the labels attributed to LSE students allow the implementation of additional funding and academic and pastoral support which potentially assists with HE engagement. However, when policies to encourage engagement with HE do not have the anticipated effect, the discourses of 'low aspirations' and 'deficit' are reinforced (Garcia and Guerra, 2004). These labels carry negative connotations and often lay the blame with those students (and even their families or culture) who do not participate in HE (Berman et al., 1999). They are seen as not possessing the appropriate cultural capital to successfully engage (Smith, 2012), or even as in 'cultural poverty' compared to others. Educators generally tend not to challenge the labels such as deficient, holding low aspirations, or even simply being defined as 'non-traditional' as shaping their perception. These labels convey attributes that are assigned to LSE students but not necessarily held by them. These students are considered to not be the norm, so not 'normal' students and potentially the labels we use contribute to this deficit discourse and even sustain it. However, this research has demonstrated that the labels attached to students assisted in WP initiatives and therefore increased possibilities for their engagement. Moreover, the students themselves were unaware of labelling of the policy discourse surrounding their engagement, as demonstrated in the findings.

It can be proposed, therefore, that students are unaware of the discourses which surround their engagement whether these are positive or rest on a deficit model of their individual, personal, familial or cultural characteristics, attitudes and ability. Their attainment of a degree level qualification shows that they transform through participation. This does not, however, absolve educators in the reinforcement and/or perpetuation of deficit discourses that could deter (other) students from engagement. Educators should challenge these hegemonic discourses since they may endorse the labelling of students; therefore becoming part of the discourse themselves (Garcia and Guerra, 2004).

## Conclusion to the Discussion and Analysis Chapter

This doctoral research demonstrates how the participants have come to terms with what policy discourse labels as deficiencies in their academic abilities. However, for the students involved in this study, engagement with the unfamiliar field of HE has been on the whole a very positive and in some cases a life transforming experience, although there may have been difficulties encountered prior to and during their HE engagement.

It may be suggested that the scope of this research and the demographic of the participants are quite limited and therefore generalisations may be difficult to draw from it; however, popular discourse still views WP as a potentially negative problem (Archer, 2003; Crosling et al., 2008) with LSE students labelled as demonstrating a lack of the most valued cultural capital; there is very little research that presents it as a positive. Similarly with 'non-traditional' students, the dominant discourse is framed negatively and centres on limited academic ability, hardship, failure and finance (Callendar and Jackson, 2008; Chowdry et al., 2010; Collier et al., 2002; Forsyth and Furlong, 2003; Gorard et al., 2007; Raffe et al., 2006; Widdowson, 2005). Whilst all this has its place, the findings of this research propose that it is perhaps time to celebrate the achievements of those students labelled as 'non-traditional' who engage with the field of HE and what WP can offer them in terms of achievement, developing academic ability, success and life transformations.

It is sometimes easier to focus on the negative, and being a student who is labelled as 'non-traditional' or from LSE classes may potentially bring additional challenges for HEIs; however, these students have chosen to engage with HE at whatever point in their life that they feel they are able to participate and this should be celebrated. There is much discussion regarding the value of attending an elite HE institution, the value of the subject studied at undergraduate level and how this may or may not impact on employment opportunities (Ball, 2003; Byrom, 2009; Byrom et al., 2007; Cooke et al., 2004; Davies et al., 2013; Gibbons & Vignole, 2009; Skatova and Ferguson, 2014; Taylor and House, 2010); however, perhaps there ought to be an increased focus on the individual's decision to participate, their success and how that has impacted on

them. WP or NT students should not be viewed as being deficient in cultural capital because they have not engaged with the field of HE immediately following post-compulsory education or that their habitus is such that they have chosen to study at a local HE in FE establishment rather than an elite institution; they should be celebrated for achieving what they have achieved against all the odds.

## Chapter ten

### Impacts from my Research already on my Practice

During the course of this doctoral research my deeper understanding of the policy context and practice in HE has, in turn, provided the impetus to reflect on and question my practice in order to potentially improve the HE experience of my students. Pillow (2003) discusses the way in which

*'Listening and writing with reflexivity are often described as tools to help oneself situate oneself and be more cognizant of the ways your personal history can influence the research process and thus yield more 'accurate', more 'valid' research' (p.179)*

This quote resonates, as during my fieldwork, I became gradually aware of the impact of this doctoral research on my practice. Reflecting on this, I believe that my fieldwork provided me with 'real' insight into the lived experience of the students, rather than the theoretical or policy insights I had been absorbing through the literature I had read. Everything became real and I was dealing with the experiences of real people, for whom I could create the type of educational journey where they could thrive should they desire to. Initially, I recall how during the recent re-validation of the FD I considered the academic support needs of the students. As a cohesive team (which had occurred following the appointment of a new course leader who had a definite vision for the course) we held a student forum inviting past, present and future students to provide their input regarding academic support they felt should be included within the degree structure.

The results of the student forum were reported to the full teaching team, followed by a meeting to discuss further. It was here that the evolution of my practice was demonstrable, as I discussed the results of the forum, underpinning this with the knowledge from my fieldwork and reading around the subject. I had, to my surprise, transformed into a more knowledgeable voice in my field as this had become my research area. I feel that my 'professional voice' had been developing, but during the process of the validation, what happened was that although it was still developing, it

was now being heard. I discovered that due to my newly acquired knowledge of educational literature, the critical reflection I had undertaken regarding my practice and also my personal experiences of education, I could now articulate with underpinning theory how the course should be developed. Brookfield (1995) suggests that the 'discovery of one's authentic voice is at the heart of the critically reflective process' (p.47) and that once you have discovered your voice you can then acknowledge your own power. This power is a personal power; an inner confidence that you can contribute in a professional context grounded in your own 'examined experiences' (p.47). This is one example of how I realised my empathy with the research participants was beginning to impact on my practice and, in turn, the students.

A further impact of my fieldwork has been on the direction of my teaching practice. My increased understanding of the needs and prior educational experiences of the students has resulted in greater empathy and congruence. In terms of teaching, my main area of activity is now teaching research methods, both on the CAM programmes and also in the newer field to me of educational research, which is a direct result of my involvement in the EdD. My greater awareness of the academic input required and the educational journeys of the students at the college coupled with my personal educational experiences, not only during the doctorate but also from school age, have provided insights into how I resonate with the students. Brookfield (1995) suggests that 'the insights and meanings for teaching that we draw from these deep experiences (that is our own education) are likely to have a profound and long-lasting influence' (p.31), which seems very pertinent considering the educational journey I have undergone and am still going through. I have reflected on the 'autobiography of my education' (Brookfield, 1995: p.29), and have become increasingly aware of how it impacts on my teaching and also how I have become more confident in dealing with the students at the college, and the types of encouragement and support they often require.

I have also become very aware that my educational experiences, whilst in some ways similar to the participants of this research, are actually also very different to their experiences. Similarities include how they have not engaged with HE directly following

compulsory education, but all of their other educational experiences are individual to them and their own situations and contexts have had a bearing on their engagement or not.

However, having acknowledged the similarities and differences between my educational experiences and those of the students, the impacts of undertaking this research are tangible during my professional practice. Previously I used to go into the classroom and teach, delivering the material without providing any information about myself, my educational background or how I became a lecturer. This has changed, and on reflection, I believe that this is due to the nature of the research I have been conducting. Being transparent and displaying more of my real self, rather than the 'lecturer' I have become, has transformed the ways in which the students view me. I have unintentionally become one of them, and although I am disinclined to use the label, I am a 'non-traditional' student, someone who the students may potentially resonate with. However, I am also vividly aware that whilst the students enrol on the course with educational success in mind, they have to overcome many obstacles in order to succeed (Bowl, 2001). These may be related to factors such as family problems, lack of support, employment issues or health problems (Swain, 2011). What also must be considered is the lack of dominant capital that the students may possess when attempting to access HE. As previously discussed in this thesis, those who possess the dominant cultural capital are often more knowledgeable regarding access to educational opportunities, whilst those students and their families who do not possess the dominant capital may feel a sense of inadequacy when attempting to engage with HE (Reay, 2004). However, those LSE students who do engage with HE and are successful potentially demonstrate that they have learned to navigate the different fields that they have encountered demonstrating the permeability of their habitus and the multiple layers from which it is formed (Reay, 2004). The students' individual histories may impact on their ability to navigate the different fields but their habitus is continually re-structured by their encounters with many fields (Di Maggio, 1979).

I have also gained a deep appreciation of the competing priorities that the students face on a day-to-day basis; this is to an extent determined by their own stories which

have been revealed, but also, once more, because I have undergone similar experiences when undertaking undergraduate study as a mature student.

My new more approachable 'lecturer persona' has afforded further issues to reflect upon with regards to the impact of this doctoral study. Initially I was unconsciously becoming less of a remote lecturer, but when I realised that I was interacting with the students in a somewhat different way than previously, I became anxious of having disclosed more than I should and this left me feeling somewhat vulnerable. When reading this, it may seem that I was disclosing very personal issues, but this is not at all true. Disclosure came in the form of why I had started at university at 31, how many children I have and their ages, which town I come from, how I came to lecture and perhaps more along the same lines. These were not sinister and very personal divulgements, but things I had not disclosed to students previously, yet they still made me feel vulnerable. When I reflect upon this, it becomes apparent that my lack of disclosure was two-fold. During my training as a homeopath I was taught that I should not disclose any personal details, as this is the patient's time and the homeopath must listen and become the 'unprejudiced observer' (Hahnemann, 1999: p.94), and therefore I had transferred this into my professional life as a lecturer. I listened to students, perhaps identified with their circumstances, and then laid my thoughts to one side to concentrate on their difficulties, which I believed was good boundary control (Armitage et al., 2004).

The other reason for my lack of disclosure was based on the feeling that I had little time available to engage in discussions with students, since I had a very tight schedule within which to convey what they needed to know, and I always had to present information in a number of ways to ensure that 'deep learning' took place (Prosser and Trigwell, 1999). Something has changed, and I can only attribute this to the EdD in a positive way as, by undertaking this research, something has loosened inside me. I have acquired a depth of understanding of people's very personal perspectives, the reasons that they have chosen to undertake study at this point in their life, why they are studying at the establishment where I am employed and an appreciation of their life experience and how this can impact on their studies. Lindeman (1926: p.33) simplifies what I have experienced, suggesting that adult education 'begins not with

the subject matter but with the situation and experiences which mould adult life'; whilst Knowles (1992) indicates that by not acknowledging an adult learner's experience, the educator may be rejecting them as people. Interestingly, whilst resonating with both Knowles and Lindeman's points of view, Horton and Freire (1990) also provided another view point to consider, which is that the educator should try to help the student take their life experience more seriously, as this may provide resources to help them deal with educational problems they may encounter. Encouraging critical analysis of experience is what turns experience into adult education (Knowles, 1992).

Initially disclosure of personal information, whilst empowering in one respect, also felt mildly uncomfortable, as if I was not being quite as 'professional' or as 'expert' as I should be. Turning to the literature on adult education, however, has provided reassurance. Both Lindeman (1926) and Horton and Freire (1990) shared joint concerns regarding students' trust in who they perceive as 'experts', whilst Brookfield (1995) identifies that teachers often fall into the trap of having to portray themselves as the expert, highlighting the hierarchical structures which have developed in HE where the lecturer is deemed of a superior status by the students. Jordan et al. (2008) suggest that once a critically reflexive educator becomes aware of the power differentiation between them and the students, according to the principles of andragogy, they should try to 'diminish the power distance between themselves and their students' (p.137). This may be achieved by self-disclosure as this demonstrates that the lecturer trusts the students enough to divulge a personal element (Earwaker, 1992). Kreisberg (1992) cited in Brookfield (1995) suggests that only then can the educator begin 'to explore how power over learners can become power with learners' (p.9). Thus, instead of feeling disquiet over self-disclosure, it seems that I am presenting a more approachable persona to the students with an additional benefit of breaking down the power imbalance, thus embracing one of the elements of andragogy (Knowles, 1992).

It seems that the experience of the EdD has provided me with 'transformative learning' (Mezirow, 1991). I have engaged in critical reflection of my research and practice, which has allowed me, as suggested by Jordan et al. (2008) to achieve a

deeper understanding of my personal assumptions and experiences. I have discovered new personal perspectives regarding my education and practice, which has encouraged me to reframe my standpoints and implement changes. Synchronicity with my experience of transformation is provided by the data collected from students who discuss how they have changed during their undergraduate education, and the difference in their confidence levels from before to following the degree. This data seems to suggest that some of the students undergo transformative experiences whilst studying for their degree.

Van de Ven and Poole (1995) discuss that change and developmental processes may occur at many organisational levels. As an establishment, major concerns are the college reputation in terms of good statistics, satisfaction and support of the stakeholders; but as an individual team, statistics are a peripheral concern, which have to be acknowledged but do not essentially impact on a daily basis. Our emphasis is on the needs of the students, both academically and pastorally. Historically the students recruited onto the course have an educational background in holistic therapies, beauty therapy, or health and social care, and whilst the FE courses they have undertaken provide excellent practical skills, academic writing is often neglected. As previously suggested, the organisation does not and cannot account for every individual's academic needs, and therefore the responsibility for this is placed at the individual team's door.

In response to the students' needs, and as a result of my data collection, measures have been introduced, which are intended to support at an individual level. These include a dedicated first year module that aims to support the development of academic writing, researching and thought. Scott et al. (2004) discuss how the outcomes of doctoral research may impact upon teaching practice. At the point when the academic skills module was introduced, the data analysis had not been undertaken, and therefore it is impossible to quantify that there was an impact on practice due to the outcomes of the research. What is evident, however, is that the process of a growing understanding through a developing awareness from the literature read regarding the pastoral and academic needs of WP students resulted in the module being introduced. Therefore, whilst I acknowledge that I dislike the

labelling of students, the labels attached to them can enable a level of support and a greater understanding which otherwise may not have been available. Indeed, the reflection undertaken during the process of reading the literature permitted a greater understanding of the needs of the students which Timperley (2008) suggests demonstrates that the lecturer is taking a 'greater responsibility for the learning of all students (since) they do not dismiss learning difficulties as an inevitable consequence of the home or community environment' (p.9).

Finally, Kincheloe (2005) suggests that in order for research to be undertaken appropriately in the bricolage approach, the researcher should reflexively question if their research will contribute to the social good, influence the lives of the researcher, the community and the world, and whether their research is of value. I cannot honestly provide the answers to these in terms of this research, but when I consider the value of the research in terms of my students and myself, there has been a significant impact on my developing understanding of my students' educational journey. This, in turn, has caused me, as I have demonstrated, to reflect on my personal educational journey and how this has impacted on my choice of doctoral research area.

## Chapter eleven

### Conclusion, Recommendations and Final Reflections

This chapter presents the conclusions and recommendations following discussion and analysis of the data, including suggestions for future research. It culminates with a final reflection discussing my doctoral journey, my personal I-poem developed from my reflective journal entries during the past four years, and a word cloud generated to represent significant words from this poem. Within Chapter five (Methodology) I discussed how this doctoral research was not trying to solve a problem, prove a hypothesis, provide answers or generalisations, but sought to appreciate the 'uniqueness of human experience' (Van Manen, 1997: p.22). Although not intentional, the participants recruited covered all the categories of 'non-traditional' students as defined by HEFCE (2000), with a strong representation of mature students. However, as all the student participants were female, the findings are not truly generalisable to the wider population of NT students. The questions developed for this doctoral research have been answered in the findings with two further questions emerging from the data. These were: -

- What factors have meant that the WP student is now willing to participate in HE study?
- What are the academic or personal impacts, if any, for WP students studying at HE level?

The analysis of the data provides a faithful representation of the educational experiences of the students and offers detailed pictures of the individuals, allowing the illustration of their own experience to be centre-stage. I hope that this doctoral research will be thought provoking for educationalists, policy makers and educational establishments.

Although it could be suggested that the findings of this research may not be generalisable to the wider HE arena, or even to other courses at the HE in FE college where I am employed, aspects of it may be transferable in a modified form. At times, due to the nature and individuality of HE establishments, it is difficult to transfer the

results from one college or university to another. However, Bassey (1999) has identified 'fuzzy generalisations' (p.12) which means that an aspect of the research may be transferable to other institutions that are experiencing similar situations. Therefore, with this in mind, I leave judgements about transferability with those who read this research.

## Conclusions

The primary findings of this doctoral research are that according to students labelled as 'non-traditional' who had engaged with HE, it emerged that: -

- Students' decisions not to progress to HE are multi-factorial
- Decisions not to engage with HE are based on personal circumstances at the time
- Students' decisions not to engage with HE are not necessarily an indication of 'low aspirations'

Further findings of this doctoral research are:-

- Students' decisions to re-engage with post-compulsory education are also multi-factorial
- There can be a lack of support and guidance provided by schools and FE colleges to advise students of potential career pathways should they not wish to progress to HE
- Students may exhibit a lack of confidence in their academic abilities, and therefore fail to progress to HE due to previous educational experiences
- Students enrolled on the courses under scrutiny during this research often require greater supportive academic input from the teaching team
- HE teaching provision needs to adapt to support students who lack some of the necessary academic skills to achieve success at HE level
- Providing HE courses at local FE colleges may encourage students, who ordinarily would not have participated in HE, to enrol for further study
- Impacts of HE academic study can be wide-reaching in terms of personal development, raised self-confidence and self-esteem

Both the primary findings and the seven further findings of this doctoral research are supported by the analysis presented in Chapter eight. Within that chapter, phenomenological analysis, I-Poems and Word Clouds present the analysis of the student participant experience, thematic analysis portrays the experiences of staff participants and qualitative content analysis demonstrates the college documentary analysis. To support these assertions further, the discussion and analysis chapter (Chapter nine) has explored the findings in further detail, examining the current discourse surrounding NT students engaging in HE in comparison to the findings of this research and discussing elements in relation to Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, field and cultural capital.

This doctoral research proposes that the predominant discourse is one that suggests students from LSE groups who do not engage with HE at 18 years of age are 'drop-outs' (Dorn, 1996), 'non-participants' (Gorard et al., 2006), 'deficient' (Baxter et al., 2007) or are 'low aspirational' (Gorard et al., 2006; Gorard et al., 2012). This discourse needs challenging as it risks unfairly labelling such non-engaging students. The student participants in this doctoral research demonstrated that they had no concept of how they are portrayed; this seems to be a construction by those who possess the dominant cultural capital and consider that engaging in HE is a natural progression following compulsory education (Yosso, 2005), as discussed in Chapter nine (Discussion and Analysis). Whilst policy contexts have constructed engaging with HE as a route for addressing social mobility and consider that financial support is important to encourage engagement, this research demonstrates that there should be greater consideration for students from LSE groups who may have personal, educational or other barriers to engaging in HE at age 18 years.

Furthermore, when the student participants decided to re-engage with education, the analysis demonstrated that factors such as, for example, personal circumstances, educational support, and the offer of HE courses at a local college encouraged enrolment in HE. Student participants within this sample did not suggest that they were aware of the policy discourse that surrounded their engagement but suggested reasons for engagement with HE at this stage in their lives was a natural part of their

life progression. Therefore, this research contends that personal circumstances, which may be influential in non-engagement, should be considered. As suggested by Watts and Bridges (2006), rather than having low aspirations, this study's student participants had different aspirations, which were dictated by their personal circumstances. This doctoral research, therefore, provides a valuable contribution to an understanding of the educational journey of mainly mature, female students labelled as 'non-traditional' and suggests that education is a very personal journey. Their engagement with a new and unknown field, that of HE demonstrates that whilst they may not possess the dominant cultural capital, the cultural capital they do possess has revealed determination to achieve a degree level qualification at a time in their lives, which feels personally appropriate. Policy makers should, therefore, take a less linear approach to engagement with post-compulsory education and not assume that non-engagement at age 18 years means a person has low aspirations. There should be an avoidance of language that negatively portrays those people who the government are actually attempting to persuade into HE.

This research contributes to further the understanding of factors that may encourage 'non-traditional' HE students. This is confirmed from a student perspective rather than only from a policy or establishment perspective. Analysis of college documents demonstrated the establishment view of student requirements to engage with study, focussing on both financial and academic support. It was established that the language of these documents was generic and did not offer information on the specifics of individual support needs. These documents are produced in line with educational policy directives, and even though there is a lot of financial or academic support provided to encourage students to engage with HE, at times potential students cannot or will not engage directly following post-compulsory education due to personal circumstances.

The analysis highlighted that, for many of the student participants, support and advice on potential career pathways had been lacking during their compulsory education. Whilst this finding may not seem to be widely generalisable, those participants who suggested that there was a lack of career advice in schools and colleges had experience from many different educational establishments. However, since this research has

been completed, policy has been introduced which will hopefully enhance and individualise information provided to students who wish to pursue other careers which may not involve engaging with HE (Long and Hubble, 2017).

This investigation also identified the significance of academic and pastoral support for the student participants in this doctoral research. Both academic and pastoral support have enabled the achievement of their ambition in succeeding in their study at this level. However, it is proposed that whilst supportive measures at the HEI have aided with studying, the timing for them to engage in study, and therefore access the HE field had to be right for the individual. At the point where the student participants could have engaged with HE following compulsory education, either their individual or collective habitus constrained them. Whilst supportive measures may still have benefited the participants if they had engaged at 18 years old, the participants' stories identified that they were either unable or unwilling to participate in a new field at this point in their life.

The data analysis (Chapter eight) demonstrates that whilst personal circumstances often played a part in preventing engagement, previous educational experiences and lack of confidence in their own academic abilities may also have contributed to the belief that a degree-level qualification was unachievable. The suggestion is, once more, that engagement in HE is undertaken when personal circumstances allow and that the aspiration to gain a degree-level qualification may be present, but unattainable in the timeframe dictated by policy makers. Policy measures engagement with HE in a linear way, which therefore ensures that those who do not engage at 18 years old are labelled. It does not take into consideration the multiple factors preventing engagement, and this should be addressed.

The analysis of college documents demonstrated the levels of support offered by the college. However, the details of exhibited collective ideals of support are omitted. Staff participant data, on the other hand, detailed their experiences of the different levels of support that were felt to be required by students individually on the courses under scrutiny. The conclusion drawn from this research is that support levels should be individualised. However, this may be difficult at college level, where extensive

homogenous support mechanisms have to be implemented structurally. The staff and to some extent the student data analysis demonstrated that support was individualised at 'street-level' (Lipsky, 1980: p.xii) and teaching provision was adapted to provide further support for varying student needs. To ensure equality, all students should be offered equal levels of support, individualised to meet personal requirements. This is a difficult concept to maintain as students as individuals have different support needs. Some students need significant academic and pastoral support, whereas others demand little support and are happy to be independent learners. However, implications for the college, if individual support packages were implemented, would be the potential cost of staff training to provide consistent levels of support for all students.

An unexpected finding of this doctoral research was the transformative potential of engaging in HE. The impacts of the whole experience have been identified as reaching further than attaining a degree-level qualification and this is documented in Chapter nine (Discussion and Analysis). This demonstrates how the habitus can potentially be adaptable creating the impetus for a person to become active in a different field (Bourdieu, 1980). Student participants acknowledged these impacts in terms of developing self-confidence and self-esteem in personal and professional situations, demonstrating that the students had adapted practices and acquired capital inherent in the new field. These findings may be transferable and applicable to other WP students, and indeed the wider student population.

Finally, the findings of this research represent a challenge to the evidence base when considering the support offered to 'non-traditional' students engaging with HE. Whilst, as the analysis suggests, both academic and pastoral support are widely appreciated, it cannot be effective if the student chooses employment over HE. The evidence, both in this research and in the wider subject area, demonstrates that high levels of support are offered to encourage students from LSE groups into engaging with HE. However, it could be contended that this is not looking at the whole range of reasons why certain students are unwilling or cannot participate. Rhetoric should, therefore, veer away from presenting students who do not engage with HE at 18 years

old as 'low aspirational' or 'deficit' as this is not borne out by the evidence presented in this research.

## Recommendations

Key recommendations following this research are highlighted below.

### ***For Policy Makers and Education Providers***

#### **Regarding Labelling**

The primary findings of this research propose that the reasons for students from LSE groups who cannot or are unwilling to engage with HE at age 18 years are multi-faceted. Policy discourse and rhetoric surrounding these groups of students present this a problem with terms such as 'low aspirational' or 'deficient' being used to describe these potential students. The primary recommendation of this research is, therefore, that careful consideration should be given to the language and rhetoric surrounding non-participation of students from LSE groups in order that the students who choose not to participate are not labelled as 'deficient' and 'low aspirational'; the multiple factors which may prevent engagement with post-compulsory education should also be given consideration when examining non-participation of LSE students in HE. Therefore, further research should be undertaken which would investigate, on a much wider scale, the multiple factors, which prevent some WP students from engaging in HE. This may, in turn, shift the focus for current policy to a more significant understanding of WP students, which would, in turn, prove beneficial for students, HEIs and policy makers alike.

#### **Regarding Support**

Policy discourse emphasises the financial support perceived to be required by LSE students to engage in HE and whilst college documentation also addresses this aspect, it also discusses the generic pastoral and academic support that is assumed to be required by potential students. However, this research presents an evidence-based challenge to the assumption that these are the only measures that are required to engage students in HE. The policy is not addressing fundamental issues of an individual nature, which prevent some students from attending HE. Whilst the ideal would be that every potential student is provided with exactly what they need to engage, this

would be impossible. However, policy discourse should move away from the belief that students only require a form of support to engage with HE whilst not addressing other aspects preventing engagement. There should be an acknowledgement of the individuality of human experience, which may prevent or make a person unwilling to engage with HE at 18 years old. Furthermore, a recommendation of this research is that the present linearity of educational experiences should be abandoned in favour of a more fluid model that fully embraces the idea that education can be a lifelong journey, and is not bound by policy-makers' definitions of norms.

### **Regarding Provision of HE in FE**

The findings of this research highlight the significance of HE in FE provision at local colleges. As was previously demonstrated in Chapters two and nine, this type of provision is often regarded as 'low status' in terms of the hierarchy of the HE field. It could be contested that increased value should be placed on college-based HE facilities if WP is to continue to expand. It was highlighted within this research that one of the reasons for participation in HE was the provision of HE courses at a local college.

### **Regarding Educational or Career Advice**

One of the findings of this research suggested that there was a lack of career or educational advice provided by schools and colleges. A recommendation of this research is, therefore, that there should be an urgent examination of how generic advice may not be enough to engage students from under-represented groups. Advice should be tailored to individual students, and include advice not only on HE pathways, but also potential employment pathways. Whilst new policy has been implemented during 2017, it could still be suggested that further research be undertaken to investigate the types and amount of information and advice provided to students prior to leaving compulsory education or FE. Advice provided should enable students to make informed decisions as to which pathway would be best for them to follow.

### **Regarding the Benefits of a Degree-level Qualification**

The analysis of this research supported the benefits of attaining a degree-level qualification. Student participants who were about to complete, or who had completed their studies extolled the value of studying, not only in terms of a higher

level of education and therefore hopes of an improved career, but also recognised the impact on their self-development. There was an element of transformative learning and evidence of an adaptable habitus and development of capital that had allowed engagement in a new field. Educational policy often markets the benefits of HE in terms of achieving a higher level of employment, earning more money or effecting a change in career, which are all extrinsic motivations. A recommendation of this research is, therefore, to also focus on intrinsic motivations for engaging in HE study as this will provide the full picture of the potential effects of HE study. As only 'non-traditional' students participated in this study, there is the potential for investigation whether the effects of HE study are the same for every kind of student.

### ***For the College Under Scrutiny in this Research***

The further findings of this research demonstrated the key importance of academic and pastoral support for students. A recommendation of this research is, therefore, that levels of support should continue. However, support should be reviewed to individualise further at both college and course level, to account for the learning and pastoral requirements for each student; this would have cost implications for the college. Therefore, further research is required which would investigate whether academic and pastoral needs of students are similar across the whole provision at the college. This could then inform the structure of courses in terms of providing supportive academic writing and analysis modules. Further to this, it would be interesting and useful to investigate how teaching provision may be adapted on different courses to accommodate students' academic learning needs. This information could be collated to define 'best practice' in this area.

However, another recommendation would be that there has to be a very fine line between over-supporting the students and allowing them to evolve into fully self-directed, confident, independent learners. The support policy of the college and the individualised support provided at course level could potentially hinder students and therefore may need to be reviewed as a whole, in order to support the students to become independent learners (Jordan et al., 2008).

As this doctoral research has provided a very in-depth subjective viewpoint of student experience of support at the college, and a less in-depth one of the staff perspective of their role, one of the recommendations would be to undertake a wider study of the college perspective and further analysis of relevant college documents. Research including the analysis of these documents could include how the students and staff perceive these documents and whether they believe that there is significant impact on their study or their job role.

Finally, once again, it is interesting to note the demographics of the student participants in this study. The majority of them were mature students, all were female which is consistent with the general recruitment to the courses and as demonstrated in the matrix of participants, all can be placed within more than one category of non-traditional student as defined by HEFCE (2000) and the subsequent additional categories introduced in 2013 (Moore et al., 2013). This demographic is typical of the courses under scrutiny within this doctoral study, and whilst analysis and recommendations are based on the data collected, further research could be undertaken which would investigate whether these types of cohorts, and in turn, the support requirements of the students, are generalisable across other courses at the college. Further investigation of this nature may subsequently inform college policy at course level, providing staff with the ability to develop 'best practice' in terms of student support.

## ***Future Research Directions***

### **At Policy Level**

- Further research is required which would investigate, on a much wider scale, the multiple factors which prevent WP students from engaging in HE. This may, in turn, shift the focus from a low aspirational approach to a more significant understanding of WP students.
- Further research could be undertaken to investigate the types and amount of information and advice provided to students prior to leaving compulsory education or FE, and whether this is individualised enough to be valuable to each student.
- A future direction for research is to investigate the wide-reaching impacts of HE study. This could investigate the experience of all students rather than those specifically from LSE groups, in order to determine whether all students undergo transformational learning.

### **At College Level**

- Further research into the academic and pastoral needs of students across the whole provision at the college.
- It would be interesting to investigate the experiences of staff in supporting students on an individual level and the impact of this on their teaching role
- Further research could be undertaken which would investigate whether cohorts comprising of mainly WP students have similar support requirements across other courses at the college. Further investigation of this nature may subsequently inform college policy at course level, providing staff with the ability to develop 'best practice' in terms of student support.

## Final Reflections – ‘Finding my Voice’

As I finish writing this thesis, I realise that this is a significant point, and although not the end of the process, offers the chance to reflect on my progression so far. The doctoral process is often referred to as a ‘journey’ in the literature (Aitchison and Mowbray, 2013; Fenge, 2009; Fenge, 2010; Lester, 2004), and I definitely feel that this has been the case with my experience. However, I also believe it has been much more than that, in terms of personal growth, raised self-confidence, and professional development, mirroring the experiences of some of the student participants in this research. However, there have been moments of despair during my studies, especially in the beginning. The feeling of not being intelligent enough to undertake doctoral study was a huge factor, but one of my life mottos is ‘feel the fear and do it anyway’. This philosophy has endured throughout my adult life and, throwing caution to the wind, I decided that it was best to try to achieve my ambition rather than worry about not achieving the final award.

Undertaking doctoral study has provided, as previously stated, much in terms of raised self-confidence. I remember at the beginning of the process how I was scared to present in front of colleagues and other professionals. This seems ridiculous as my professional life involves me standing in front of students on a daily basis presenting to groups, but the anxiety of being judged by other professionals drove my fear. However, the difference in me now is tangible. I apply and present at conferences (Appendix 3). I have tried to explore what has happened that I feel able to undertake a role that I would not have considered three or four years ago, and I can only relate this to the knowledge and therefore confidence in my abilities that have increased during my doctoral studies. I have developed the ability to defend my professional knowledge and discuss all manner of subjects, which I would previously have shied away from.

A further development, which I have observed during my engagement with the EdD, is that I am prepared to put forward my views in meetings. I had always lacked self-confidence when present in meetings with other professionals, and similarly to my previous admission of disliking presenting at conferences, I always thought my opinion was not valid or that I might say something, which sounded silly in front of others.

However, this has also changed, and whilst I may not be the most vociferous in the group discussion, or the most forceful, I am considered in my contribution. I listen to other people's opinions before making my own observations. This is something I have always practised as a homeopath as I have to listen to a patient's story before offering observations; therefore, this is a natural way of participating in discussions for me. It seems, therefore, that I have discovered how I can contribute confidently to group discussions. Previously I would feel as if I wanted to contribute but did not have the confidence to do so, and would leave the discussion feeling as if my voice had not been heard. I quite simply did not have the confidence to vocalise my considered point of view.

This development has also been tangible when dealing with partner universities (as the courses at the college are validated elsewhere) where the personal impacts from this doctoral research are visibly demonstrated. Previously I would not have discussed my point of view regarding the types of students we recruit, their potential support needs, and what they require from a degree programme. Now the impact of the data analysis on my understanding of the students and their academic and pastoral needs provides the potential to defend their position and suggests to professionals at partner universities that I am an experienced professional who really knows and understands the students engaged on the courses upon which I teach. I am also a keen advocate of the wider impacts of degree study, not only having experienced them myself, but also having recorded this in the student data analysis.

Taking part in a cohort-based EdD where the group met once a month has also enriched the doctoral process. The group is very supportive and there is no competitiveness between us. We generally meet once a month for lunch or dinner, where we discuss anything and everything. However, the discussion has always returned to our analysis and writing. The closeness, support and friendship that I have found within this group has been brilliant during this process, and so much so that, with the support of our EdD course leader, we have co-written and published a journal article (Appendix 3), which details our experiences and the supportive cohort practices we have engaged with (namely our secret Facebook group).

One of the reasons I chose to undertake a Professional Doctorate in Education rather than a doctorate or PhD in my subject area was to effect a change in direction in my career, as discussed in Chapter one. I felt that the CAM profession that I was a part of was becoming increasingly marginalised in HE, and had also become increasingly despondent when defending it against people who believed it was 'quackery' (Winnick, 2005: p.38). In fact, I was consciously distancing myself from my homeopathic roots by telling anyone who asked that I taught Social Science Research Methods (which are actually the modules that I do teach in the main) rather than explaining that I was a CAM professional. However, with my increased self-confidence, this has changed. I now am proud of the profession I trained in, and am extremely proud of my hard work and the achievement of BSc (Hons) Homeopathic Medicine and MSc Homeopathy. I am keen to encourage people to look beyond the title of these degrees, to understand the depth and breadth of knowledge learned and the variety of experience I had when undertaking these degrees.

Finally, during this process I have constantly written my reflective diaries, recording my thoughts and feelings. These have been a constant in my life, and have allowed the development of my thought processes regarding certain aspects of the doctoral process. As previously stated, one of the main objectives of the data analysis was to allow the students' voices regarding their own personal educational experiences to be heard, and it is with this in mind, that the final part of this thesis is my personal I-Poem which allows my doctoral experience to be heard. This I-Poem has been developed using quotes from my personal reflective diaries.

## Jacqueline's I-Poem

I was a 'non-traditional' student

I had been discouraged at school

People labelled me without understanding who I was and what I wanted

I was labelled 'deviant'

I don't like labels in any form

I didn't go into HE

I suddenly found I could do it

I enjoyed my subject

I am looking at WP and the non-traditional student

What am I trying to get out of this?

I want to understand their individual experience rather than their collective experience

I've chosen phenomenography

Impressive, when I begin to understand things more clearly!

Was I getting the information I needed?

Interesting this, I'm using the phenomenographic approach, but am unsure

I keep swaying from one thing to another

I think this is how I should be feeling about the process at the moment

I can use other approaches as I see fit – makes sense really!

I am finding I do not agree with some of phenomenography's basic tenets –OMG!

How can I keep myself out of this research?

Should I not embrace the fact that I am involved?

Hierarchical structure – how can I possibly determine the most important factors?

I have some good data

I am embroiled in it and it brings out a very fierce side of me

I realise that my identity is shifting

Research has become integral to my professional status

I now describe myself as a lecturer in research

I am recognised as a researcher at work

I am asked to contribute to research groups

I hope my enthusiasm for the subject transfers to the students

How did I become this?



## Appendices

### Appendix One – Documentation

#### Letter of ethical Approval



8<sup>th</sup> October 2013

Paul Doherty and Jacqueline Dodding  
School of Education & Social Science  
University of Central Lancashire

Dear Paul & Jacqueline

**Re: BAHSS Ethics Committee Application**  
**Unique Reference Number: BAHSS 141**

The BAHSS ethics committee has granted approval of your proposal application 'Looking beyond the label': What are the experiences of the student labelled as 'non-traditional?'.  
Please note that approval is granted up to the end of project date or for 5 years, whichever is the longer. This is on the assumption that the project does not significantly change, in which case, you should check whether further ethical clearance is required

We shall e-mail you a copy of the end-of-project report form to complete within a month of the anticipated date of project completion you specified on your application form. This should be completed, within 3 months, to complete the ethics governance procedures or, alternatively, an amended end-of-project date forwarded to [roffice@uclan.ac.uk](mailto:roffice@uclan.ac.uk) quoting your unique reference number.

Yours sincerely

Colin Murrell  
Deputy Vice Chair  
**BAHSS Ethics Committee**

*NB - Ethical approval is contingent on any health and safety checklists having been completed, and necessary approvals as a result of gained.*



**Looking beyond the 'label': What are the experiences of the student labelled as 'non-traditional'?**

You are being invited to take part in a research study but your participation is completely voluntary. Before you decide, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take some time to read the following information carefully and feel free to discuss it with others if you wish. Please ask if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part.

**What is the purpose of the study?**

The focus of the research is to examine students' experience of higher education provided within a college of further education, and the support offered to these students by both the college and individual lecturers.

**Why have I been chosen?**

You have been invited to participate in the project because you are a student studying in the higher education division of this college. I am asking about 15 students like yourself to help me by talking about their experiences.

**Do I have to take part?**

No, although your participation would be greatly appreciated, you don't have to agree, I only want you to contribute if you feel comfortable doing this.

**What will happen to me if I take part?**

If you do agree you will be invited to take part in a short (30 minute) interview with me about your experiences here. The interview would be recorded and I'd use this to answer my research questions. It would be anonymous (I wouldn't name you or the college for example) and confidential, I would only report things in a way that protected you.

If you would like to help me, please complete the tear off form on the end of this document and return it to me in the envelope provided.

**What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?**

There are no significant risks to taking part; even if you are on my course the research would take place when it had ended.

**What are the possible benefits of taking part?**

One benefit would be the opportunity of sharing your experience of learning at this college and this could inform college policy and the way we support students, which may help support successive students in their academic journey.

**What if I change my mind?**

If you decide at any time that you no longer want to take part you may withdraw and all the information you might have provided will be deleted.

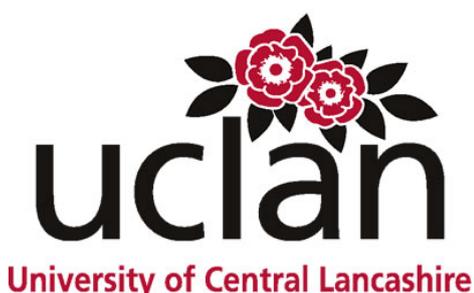
**What will happen to the results of the research?**

The findings of the project will be reported in my dissertation and might also be used in conference papers and articles in order to inform the development of our understanding of the experience of students in higher education.

**Who can I contact for further information?**

If you wish to find out more about the project itself, you may contact me (Jacqueline Dodding) by email at: [j.dodding@blackburn.ac.uk](mailto:j.dodding@blackburn.ac.uk) or if you would like to contact my supervisor (Paul Doherty) you can email him at: [pwdoherty@uclan.ac.uk](mailto:pwdoherty@uclan.ac.uk). We'd both be happy to answer any questions you might have.

Thank you for reading this information, if you would like to take part in this research please complete and return the information requested below.



**Looking beyond the 'label': What are the experiences of the student labelled as 'non-traditional'?**

You are being invited to take part in a research study but your participation is completely voluntary. Before you decide, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take some time to read the following information carefully and feel free to discuss it with others if you wish. Please ask if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part.

**What is the purpose of the study?**

The focus of the research is to examine students' experience of higher education provided within a college of further education, and the support offered to these students by both the college and individual lecturers.

**Why have I been chosen?**

You have been invited to participate in the project because you are a member of staff working in the higher education division of this college. I am asking about 15 staff like yourself to help me by talking about their experiences.

**Do I have to take part?**

No, although your participation would be greatly appreciated, you don't have to agree, I only want you to contribute if you feel comfortable doing this.

**What will happen to me if I take part?**

If you do agree you will be invited to take part in a short (30 minute) focus group with me about your experiences here. The focus group would be recorded and I would use this to answer my research questions. It would be anonymous and confidential.

If you would like to help me, please complete the tear off form on the end of this document and return it to me in the envelope provided.

**What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?**

There are no significant risks to taking part as all participants will remain anonymous when reporting the outcomes.

**What are the possible benefits of taking part?**

One benefit would be the opportunity of sharing your experience of teaching at this college and this could inform college policy and the way we support students, which may help support successive students in their academic journey.

**What if I change my mind?**

If you decide at any time that you no longer want to take part you may withdraw and all the information you might have provided will be deleted.

**What will happen to the results of the research?**

The findings of the project will be reported in my thesis and might also be used in conference papers and articles in order to inform the development of our understanding of the experience of students in higher education.

**Who can I contact for further information?**

If you wish to find out more about the project itself, you may contact me (Jacqueline Dodding) by email at: [j.dodding@blackburn.ac.uk](mailto:j.dodding@blackburn.ac.uk) or if you would like to contact my supervisor (Paul Doherty) you can email him at: [pwdoherty@uclan.ac.uk](mailto:pwdoherty@uclan.ac.uk). We'd both be happy to answer any questions you might have.

Thank you for reading this information, if you would like to take part in this research please complete and return the information requested below.

## Consent form

**Title of Project:** 'Looking beyond the 'label': What are the experiences of the student labelled as 'non-traditional'?

**Name of Researchers:**

Please initial box

1. I confirm that I have read and understood the participant information sheet for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions.
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason and without my professional work or legal rights being affected.
3. I give permission for my dialogue and views about my experience of working at this institution to be recorded and to be used in publications from the research study, and I understand that they will not be used for any other purposes.
4. I understand that any transcriptions or recordings will be securely and anonymously stored according to the requirements of the Data Protection Act.
5. I agree to take part in the above study.

Name of Participant                      Date                      Signature

\_\_\_\_\_

Name of Researcher                      Date                      Signature

\_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix Two – Instrumentation

### Student Participation Interview Schedule

#### Semi-structured Interview Schedule

##### **Preamble:**

Thank you for agreeing to take part in this research. I really appreciate the time you are willing to contribute to share your experiences with me.

The interview is based on more open-ended questions looking at your experiences and plans for the future. I know you've seen the research information sheet, but do you have any questions about my research before we begin?

I would like to record the interview using audio recording and possibly making some hand-written notes in order to capture some of your more detailed responses, but please bear in mind that the information you provide is confidential, you will not be identified in my work, and I will use pseudonyms when reporting my research.

##### **Section One: about you**

Could you just tell me a little about yourself, how you chose to study on this course, and how you came to study here?

- What were your qualifications prior to beginning this Higher Education (HE) course?
- What factors made you decide not to enter HE following the end of your FE course/ at age 18?

##### **Section Two: the support provided**

- When you chose not to study at HE level, what support did you experience when choosing a job/career?
- Who supported you?
- What support, if any, did you receive when making the decision to study at HE level?

##### **Section Three: moving forward**

- Why have you decided that now is the right time to study at HE level?
- What are your reasons for studying at HE level?

##### **Section Four: application**

- What was your experience of the application process for HE?
- Were you offered any academic support at the beginning of your HE studies? If yes, what form did this take? If no, did you try to access any academic support you thought you may need?
- How easy/ difficult was it to access support?
- Was there anything else that could have been offered which would have further enhanced your college experience?

**Section Five: Progression (Optional questions depending on which stage the participant is in his/her study)**

- What has been your experience of support, if any, during your transition from Year one to Year two of the course?
- What are the reasons for you deciding not to progress onto Year three of the top up degree?
- Have you encountered support, academic or otherwise, during your transition from Year two to Year three of the course? If you have, what is your experience of this?

## **Staff Participants – Semi-structured Interview Schedule**

### **Preamble:**

This semi-structured interview is intended to gather your perceptions of the academic needs of the 'non-traditional' student. I'm seeking to understand the essence of the students' experience and this interview could be useful in allowing me this insight.

Your participation is voluntary and I need to check that you have read the research information sheet and signed the consent form. I know you've seen the research information sheet, but do you have any questions about my research before we begin?

I would like to record the interview using audio recording and possibly making some hand-written notes in order to capture some of your more detailed responses, but please bear in mind that the information you provide is confidential, you will not be identified in my work, and I will use pseudonyms when reporting my research.

I'd like to begin by just asking you to share your views on a number of issues: -

1. Could you, first of all, describe the journey to your current post?

### **1a Probe: Can you describe your personal experience of the higher education process?**

2. What strengths did your journey provide you with in terms of teaching and learning,
3. What strengths did your journey provide you with in terms of providing academic support for students?
4. Do you think that your personal experience of education has had an impact on how you teach/ support students here at Blackburn?
5. Has your personal journey informed your practice in terms of dealing with/ supporting the students at this establishment?
6. Would you consider that any particular factors encourage the 'non-traditional' student to engage in Higher Education?
7. Do you think that the college and/or individual staff members have a role to play in encouraging 'non-traditional' students to consider entering HE?

### **5a Probe: If yes, what is that role in your opinion?**

8. In your experience, what are the perceived academic requirements of 'non-traditional' students? Are they different in any way from more traditional entrants?

**6a Probe: Do non-traditional entrants need greater or different input?**

**6b Probe: If they need greater or different input, what does this mean in terms of teaching and learning methods?**

9. Do you think that any supportive measures have been or could be introduced for 'non-traditional' students (e.g. Summer schools, diagnostic testing, extra support, Year 0 foundation level courses prior to enrolling on the foundation degree/ honours degree) which would encourage the students academically?
  
10. What do you feel has been the impact, if any, at college/ course/ individual level of these measures?

## Appendix Three – Publications

### Abstract and Presentation – ‘Facilitating Peer Support through Social Media: Reflection on finding a way through the doctoral maze’

UCLan Teaching and Learning Conference 2014

**Facilitating Peer Support through Social Media: Reflections on finding a way through the doctoral maze**

Jacqueline Dodding  
Hazel Partington  
Susan Ramsdale

**Support Triumphs and Disasters**  
**Exchanging Resources**  
**Checking details**  
**Banter**  
**Identity building**

References: Fenge, L. (2010) Sense and sensibility: making sense of a Professional Doctorate. *Reflective Practice*, 11(5) pp. 645-656. Lupton, D. (2014) *Feeling Better Connected: Academics' Use of Social Media*, University of Canberra. Mason, R. & Rennie, F. (2008) *E-Learning and Social Networking Handbook: Resources for Higher Education*, New York, Routledge.

## Abstract

### ‘Facilitating peer support through social media: Reflections on finding a way through the doctoral maze’

Jacqueline Dodding, Hazel Partington, Susan Ramsdale

Socialisation, peer support and the building of communities of practice are accepted as having positive effects on students’ experiences of study. (Mason and Rennie, 2008) A group of doctoral candidates studying for a Doctorate in Education (EdD ) at the University of Central Lancashire (UCLan) set up a Facebook group to facilitate peer support within their cohort. This presentation will offer their reflections on their use and perceived benefits of the Facebook group as they navigate their way through the doctoral maze, and of the impact on their individual and communal developing identities as doctoral candidates and researchers (Fenge, 2010).

To co-construct this presentation, 3 members of the group have each reflected on their own use and perceptions of the Facebook group, and have examined postings on the page to code interactions. This project has been undertaken with the permission of the whole group.

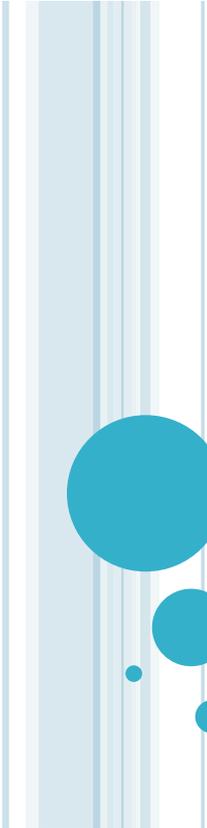
Themes emerging from member's reflections and from posting and interactions within the group, which include: seeking and giving support, sharing triumphs and disasters, exchanging resources, checking details, exchanging banter, building a cohort identity, and developing individual scholarly identity.

#### References:

Fenge, L., 2010. Sense and sensibility: making sense of a Professional Doctorate. *Reflective Practice*, **11**(5), pp. 645--656.

Mason, R. & Rennie, F. (2008) *E-learning and Social Networking Handbook: Resources for Higher Education*, New York: Routledge

University of Cumbria Teaching and Learning Conference 2015



**‘WORKING AT THE COALFACE’: SUPPORTING  
VOCATIONAL STUDENTS IN ACHIEVING  
ACADEMIC SUCCESS**

Jacqueline Dodding  
Joanne Halliwell  
Gill Myers

Abstract

**Title: ‘Working at the Coalface’: Supporting vocational students in achieving academic success**

**Jacqueline Dodding, Joanne Halliwell, Gill Myers**

The Widening Participation and Lifelong learning agenda in Higher Education (HE) has encouraged an increasingly diverse student population with differing academic needs. This is evident in our north west HE in Further Education (FE) establishment, situated in the 17<sup>th</sup> most deprived borough of the United Kingdom (blackburn.gov.uk, 2014). 63% of the students in the HE sector of the establishment are recruited from widening participation postcodes and more than double the national average of students declare a disability on entry (Blackburn College, 2014). In response to the need to

enhance curriculum, provide academic support along with responding to the pressures of retaining students and ensuring their achievement, a number of supportive strategies were included during the development of the new FdSc in Complementary Therapies in partnership with University of Cumbria. This presentation will detail these developments and reflect upon the implementation of strategies with our first cohort of students.

UKCGE Conference 2015, Glasgow

## Our breadcrumb trail through the woods: reflections on the use of a secret Facebook group as a strategy to survive and thrive on the doctoral journey



Jacqueline Dodding – Snr. Lecturer, Blackburn College University Centre  
Hazel Partington – Snr. Lecturer, University of Central Lancashire  
Susan Ramsdale – Snr. Lecturer, University of Central Lancashire

### Abstract

‘Facilitating peer support through social media: Reflections on finding a way through the doctoral maze’

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Socialisation, peer support and the building of communities of practice are accepted as having positive effects on students’ experiences of study. (Mason and Rennie, 2008)) A group of doctoral candidates studying for a Doctorate in Education (EdD) at the University of Central Lancashire (UCLan) set up a Facebook group to facilitate peer support within their cohort. This presentation will offer their reflections on their use and perceived benefits of the Facebook group as they navigate their way through the doctoral maze, and of the impact on their individual and communal developing identities as doctoral candidates and researchers (Fenge, 2010).

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Volume 10, 2015

## 'Our Breadcrumb Trail through the Woods': Reflections on the Use of a Secret Facebook Group as a Strategy for Surviving and Thriving on the Doctoral Journey

Candice Satchwell, Hazel Partington, Lynne Barnes,

Ridwanah Gurjee and Susan Ramsdale

University of Central Lancashire, Preston, UK

[csatchwell@uclan.ac.uk](mailto:csatchwell@uclan.ac.uk) [HPartington@uclan.ac.uk](mailto:HPartington@uclan.ac.uk) [lbarnes@uclan.ac.uk](mailto:lbarnes@uclan.ac.uk)

[RGurjee@uclan.ac.uk](mailto:RGurjee@uclan.ac.uk) [SLRamsdale@uclan.ac.uk](mailto:SLRamsdale@uclan.ac.uk)

Jacqueline Dodding

University Centre Blackburn College, Blackburn, UK

[j.dodding@blackburn.ac.uk](mailto:j.dodding@blackburn.ac.uk)

Kathryn Drury

Edge Hill University, Ormskirk, UK

[Kathryn.Drury@edgehill.ac.uk](mailto:Kathryn.Drury@edgehill.ac.uk)

### Abstract

This article explores the value of attending to the emotional side of the doctoral journey by focusing on the use of a 'secret' Facebook group amongst a cohort of EdD (Professional Doctorate in Education) students at one English university. Presented as a piece of action research in which the participants created an intervention to address a perceived problem and then reflected on its effectiveness, it is co-authored by the cohort of six students and their tutor. The stresses and loneliness of the doctoral journey have been well documented and constitute the 'problem' addressed by this cohort of students. Their inception and use of a Facebook group was a response to challenges experienced in their studies, with the expectation of facilitating peer support. As will be shown this aim was successfully met with enhancements in academic, social, and emotional support. However, unexpected benefits arose from the interactions within the group including a normalization of the challenges of the doctoral quest and the advantage of being able to follow the 'breadcrumb trail' found in the group postings as group journal and aid to reflection. Further, both tutors and students have noted the development of a strong sense of 'cohortness' and inclination to work collaboratively. Through a process of individual and group reflection on experiences of the intervention, combined with analysis of the content of the postings, this article examines the characteristics of the Facebook intervention and considers some ethical implications. We suggest that key characteristics that have contributed to its success include the student ownership, the protection of the secret format, and the combination of emotionally supportive, academic, and

irreverent exchanges between group members. It is hoped that these insights may be useful to future doctoral candidates and their tutors as they negotiate their own way through the doctoral woods.

**Keywords:** Reflection, cohort, emotion, social, Facebook, support, secret

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## Introduction and Review of the Literature

This article explores the value of attending to the emotional side of the doctoral journey by focusing on the use of a 'secret' Facebook group (Khare, 2011) amongst a full year cohort of six EdD students at one university in the North-West of England. The Doctorate in Education (EdD) at this university is a taught programme, using a closed-cohort model (Bista & Cox, 2014). There are currently around 40 students enrolled on the programme, with an intake of approximately eight students per year. The participants in each year's cohort come into the university once a month, with occasional additional weekend meetings or workshops and some opportunities for cross-cohort interaction at joint workshops and conferences. The students study taught modules alongside reflective participant-led modules facilitated by tutors, at the same time as working on individual research and developing the final thesis with support from a supervisory team. This means that each group comes together relatively infrequently, and the opportunity for peer support is therefore also relatively infrequent, and the loneliness of the long-distance researcher (Gannon-Leary, Fontainha, & Bent, 2011) can be inescapable.

This article is co-authored by one complete cohort of six students who have instigated the Facebook group and their tutor in an attempt at performing the collaborative nature of the topic we discuss. The students and tutor in this instance are all female, and although half the teaching team is male, there is a predominance of female students on the programme as a whole. While we do not address the factor of gender at length here, it is likely to have had an impact. Indeed, in keeping with this paper, there is 'a growing literature on female students' experiences of doctoral study which portrays emotion as an integral part of the process' (Aitchison & Mowbray, 2013, p. 860). All authors have agreed to the use of first names and are aware that they are clearly identifiable as simultaneously authors of this article, EdD students, professionals, and contributors to a Facebook page. One member classified herself as predominantly an 'Observer' rather than a 'Sharer', but her reflection in the section on 'cohortness' makes clear that she is firmly established and fully accepted as a group member.

This absence of anonymity may appear ironic in the face of our assertion that the 'secret' nature of the group is paramount. However, this secrecy relates to the fact that the Facebook 'group' is closed and only members of it can contribute or view posts. Indeed, the tutor amongst the present authors has still not accessed the Facebook postings and feels that this would be a significant breach of the boundaries that have been especially constructed. This issue of 'identifiability' or 'anonymity' is also highly relevant to the topic of this article, in that the authors are all lecturers and aspiring academics as well as doctoral candidates. They, therefore, have conflicting identities as both students and professionals, and each of these identities has different needs and expectations. While research participants and students are entitled to confidentiality, academics have an increasing need to exhibit a public profile and to be named on publications. Exploring a way of fulfilling the requirements for both personal safety and academic endeavour is largely the subject of this article.

Isolation of post-graduate students is commonly commented on (Ali & Kohun, 2006; Pauley, 2004; Trujillo, 2007), although there is limited literature available examining the experiences of doctoral students. However, that which is available suggests that doctoral students frequently assume that they will become a part of a vibrant, supportive research scene, when in fact they are often disappointed in this

belief and may even feel isolated in their studies (Janta, Lugosi, Brown & Ladkin, 2012). A review of the literature also shows an acknowledgement that different kinds of support are required for doctoral education. For example Brooks and Fyffe (2004) examine the use of online resources, Dabbagh and Kitsantas (2011) focus on the use of 'personal learning environments' to blend social and academic elements of the course, and Gannon-Leary et al. (2011) consider the benefits of a 'Community of Writers' in the context of lonely researchers engaged in academic writing. While these interventions touch on the social and emotional side of learning, they tend to be provided by institutions rather than led by students. Hadjioannou, Shelton, Rankie, and Danling (2007), however, describe how student-led doctoral groups can create a dynamic supportive community, which provides its members with essential emotional sustenance (cited in Janta et al., 2012). The use and benefit of social networking sites to provide such learning spaces is also acknowledged (see for example Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007; Gray, Annabell, & Kennedy, 2010; Selwyn, 2009). Derks, Fischer, and Bos (2007) reviewed studies of the communication of emotion in computer-mediated communication and concluded that 'social sharing' (p.5) can be just as successful on-line as face-to-face. The importance of socialisation in building on-line learning communities or 'communities of inquiry' is reinforced by Garrison (2011) and Preece (2000) who suggest that socialisation of learners can be a significant factor in both student retention and ultimately successful outcomes of their studies. All of this supports the present authors' own experiences; however, here we explore the creation of a 'secret' space instigated by the students themselves *outside* of the institution, which seems to give the intervention its special identity. We consider the importance of the various strands of support that can be provided – and that seem to be needed by part-time doctoral students in particular. Within the course, as exemplified by the learning outcomes, relationships between personal, academic, and practitioner aspects of self are frequently referred to as part of the EdD journey. The journey metaphor is well-worn (see for example, Batchelor & Di Napoli, 2006; Fenge, 2012; Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2011). Its pertinence is partly because, for those who have completed a doctorate, there is a significant difference between the start and end-points with numerous obstacles to be negotiated along the way. This difference is not just in terms of qualification or status; it is also a deeply personal and emotional change. The experience of sharing with others these changes and this growth is in itself an expression of change and growth. This article will contribute to understanding how the social side of doctoral study can improve the quality of that journey in terms of personal, practitioner, and academic development. Recognising the different facets of ourselves and our various needs can help us to meet those needs. Recognising them in others can be reassuring and liberating in that we feel less alone, more connected, and therefore more able to continue on the journey.

### Methodology

The literature and our own reflections have covered notions of individual and group identity, including student, academic, and practitioner identities. We have also addressed different kinds of support and uses of technology. A discussion about how to nominalise the topic of our paper highlighted methodological considerations. Are we most interested in the participants, the technology, or the function? While all of these aspects are relevant, we find the notion of an 'intervention' the most useful, carrying as it does an intimation of a methodology of action research. The students – who as it happens are all also lecturers – identified

a problem (feelings of isolation on their doctoral course) and then devised an innovation to help them overcome the problem (a secret Facebook group) and to reach their goal (achieving a doctorate). The students then both individually and collectively reflected on the effectiveness of the innovation, which in turn both revealed and inspired further reflection in and on their postings on Facebook. As Newby (2014) explains, action research is particularly popular with educators because, “Action research embeds reflective practice in its processes. Reflective practice raises the question for action research to answer and may even determine the nature of the action” (p.630). Further, action research “is designed to improve outcomes and/or processes while, at the same time, enabling personal and professional development” (Newby, 2014, p.631). The EdD course is clearly designed to do just these things, and both the intervention and the writing of this article have contributed further to improving outcomes of the students’ own educational development. While the authors have addressed a problem identified by themselves as students, the fact that these students are also lecturers, and the inclusion of their own tutor in the writing of this article, means that the ‘usefulness’ of the research is that it has implications for curriculum development both for the authors in their various contexts and for the readers of the article. An initial group analysis of written and spoken reflections on the value of the intervention provided the themes of Support, Humour, Affection, Reflection, and Emotion, which conveniently made up the acronym SHARE. Further analysis of and reflections on the postings subsequently produced the headings presented here. A collaborative (sharing) process of re-writing, editing, and revision was then undertaken to such an extent that different reflective headings emerged, and the article became fully ‘co-authored’. Our article is mainly reflective, synthesising perspectives from each writer, but using the framework of action research we first present ‘the problem’ and ‘the intervention’.

### **The Problem**

The production of a doctoral thesis is often referred to as a lonely affair (e.g. Janta, Lugosi, & Brown, 2014). It requires concentration, focus, representation of one’s self as a trustworthy researcher and academic, and also – when it is for a professional doctorate – practitioner. It means extensive periods of time grappling with concepts, complex texts, collecting data from the field, writing, and re-writing. By definition, most of these activities are done by oneself. For the students in this study, the research is usually carried out alongside holding down a full-time job in Higher Education.

This cohort of six began studying together on the EdD course in January 2013. Originally there were seven, but the one male member of the cohort moved to a professional doctorate programme within his own discipline. In some respects this event was a catalyst for the remaining students experiencing feelings of unease. Although they remained (and still remain) in contact with this member, the loss of one of the group appeared to both expose insecurities and encourage bonds to form. Several months into the doctorate, the group began to experience difficult times: some were still in the process of refining research proposals or applying for ethical approval, others had tentatively begun their research fieldwork, and all were working to complete assignments and trying to balance the demands of doctoral studies with work and personal lives. Classes were once a month and, whilst the cohort apparently worked well together and were beginning to get to

know one another, it seemed that it was easy to lose touch in between sessions, leading to feelings of isolation and struggle.

Doctoral study is intense by its very nature and the doctoral candidate often runs the whole gamut of emotions during the process due to the personal investment in the research (Burgess, Siemenski, & Arthur, 2006). During the professional doctorate this is further intensified as professionals are investigating their own professional practice, ensuring that feedback from the course team on submitted work is sometimes met with an inordinate amount of dismay (Aitchison & Mowbray, 2013). Doctoral candidates often feel that feedback is a very personal criticism of their abilities, and this, once more, can create feelings of isolation and questioning of knowledge and skill (Cox, Carr, & Hall, 2014)

The group members have professional identities; between them they hold senior or principal lecturing positions, teach undergraduate and postgraduate students, support and guide students through dissertation and Master's level study, give conference papers, and undertake national and international consultancy work. It is therefore not easy to admit to feelings of inadequacy, of an inability to write or to understand, of frustration at course materials and assignment briefs, or of marking criteria and deadlines, especially where the doctoral supervisors are university colleagues. The group felt the need for a safe space in which to offset the emotions that could not comfortably be displayed in class; somewhere for the students to feel comfortable and confident enough to share their lack of confidence.

#### The Intervention: Evolution of the Facebook Group

As a senior lecturer who worked with e-learning students, one of the group had previously looked into the use of social media as an aid to socialisation and knew of the potential advantages of a Facebook group, including the familiarity and ease of use for many students, the scope for creativity, and the ability to foster a sense of belonging and exploration of identity (Mason & Rennie, 2008).

She felt that a Facebook group might offer the students a way to enhance their social processes and to facilitate and strengthen peer support (Brooks & Fyffe, 2004). There were also potential drawbacks, however, for example with issues of boundaries and confidentiality and the realization that not everybody might be keen to join such a group (Beninger et al., 2014; Lupton, 2014; Mason & Rennie 2008). As professional people it felt essential to set the group up as secret; nobody but members could see the group's existence or any of the postings. The initial implicit agreement of confidentiality within the group enabled a sense of trust and security to develop, but the secret nature of the group was also a significant factor in the way the students regarded it as a safe space, ensuring that its members knew where they could turn to for support in any circumstance.

The original purpose was to offer a space in which to "vent, sympathise, and share our triumphs and disasters" (Hazel on 25.10.13). However none of the group at the outset foresaw the additional benefits that it would afford the cohort as use of the group evolved over time. As Hazel reflected later:

"Scrolling through the posts provides a group journal – it reminds us of the triumphs and disasters, the story of our journey – it's like our breadcrumb trail through the woods. I didn't expect that messing around on Facebook would provide an aid to reflexivity, I didn't see that one coming!"

The importance of reflection and professional learning is examined in the next section, followed by the group's reflections collected together under four broad headings.

### **Academic Reflection and Professional Learning**

For all members of the group, reflection is a vital and purposeful activity, giving momentum to their learning and their continuing evolution as educators and doctoral candidates (K. Williams, Wooliams, & Spiro, 2012). Brookfield (1995), writing of the importance of critical reflection for educators, identifies four interconnected lenses which may facilitate or trigger reflective processes: the autobiographical lens, the lens of students' perspectives, the lens of colleagues' perspectives, and the lens provided by perspectives drawn from the literature.

According to King (2011), "An individual's use of social media as professional learning spans understanding, networking, professional identity development and transformative learning" (p.40). While each individual might use social media for different ends, both as professionals and in their personal lives, one of the unpredicted benefits of the secret EdD Facebook group was that it could function as an aid to reflection on the collective and individual doctoral experiences. Further, when reviewing the postings, each person engages with both collective and individual autobiographical lenses. The various and seemingly random musings, cries for help, jokes, requests for information, and expressions of triumph not only provide a breadcrumb trail through the woods, but also provide an opportunity to reflect on that journey.

The facility for reflection within the group appears to work on two main levels: on-the-spot, surface reflection, often taking form as ironic, self-affirming, or self-deprecating declarations (or sometimes a combination thereof); and the deeper more considered reflections arising from reviewing and revisiting the trail of postings which engages with the autobiographical lens (Brookfield, 1995).

Shades of the ironic may be found in Susan's posts referring to reflection, where she plays with the concept of reflection and in doing so reflects on her own reflective processes and the resulting impact on her evolving and multiple identities:

*"On reflection, I have lost the will to live"* (Susan, 12.1.14)

or

*"I have done so much reflecting on professional, academic and personal self, I no longer know who I am!"* (Susan, 11.3.14)

A further example combining irony and self-deprecation can be found in Hazel's 'rant' prior to preparing for a critical discussion to be presented in class, in which she expresses frustration with the difficulties of balancing assignments and fieldwork, and reveals feelings of inadequacy when assessing progress so far.

*"So I started looking at what we have to do for the critical discourse on 25th and it seems that my talk will be very short and will consist of 'I have hardly done any research because I am busy doing assignments. I don't have a clue about impact, significant contributions to practitioner knowledge or change theory because I am too busy doing assignments. I don't know what the foundations and rationale behind my research are anymore because I have been too busy doing assignments and have forgotten what I said in the first place.' Can you base some good questions on that Lynne?*

*It's a good job we didn't do this in June; I'd have had even less to say then!"* (Hazel, 31.8.14)

However, being able to address feelings of inadequacy in a safe space and receiving 'mirroring' comments from peers allowed Hazel both to reflect on her achievements to date and also to realize that she could address feelings about the assignment load within her presentation.

Lynne's post a few days later about the same critical discussion assignment also demonstrates self-deprecation: by describing her draft discussion as 'Jackanory' (a children's television storytelling programme) she is reflecting on her sense of not having anything important to say at this stage in her journey.

*"I've started the critical discussion - but am at a loss. Is anyone using theory here and how? In 7 minutes?"*

*I am trying to answer the Learning Outcomes but my discussion is looking like Jackanory ... i.e. just a story of where I am up to - and the fact that I don't have anything significant yet to say. Any advice?"* (Lynne, 17.9.14)

The response from the group here showed a resonance for many: the term 'Jackanory' provided a commonly agreed metaphor for the discussion scripts, but also, engaging with the lens of colleagues' perceptions, helped the group members to see that their position in the research process was appropriate and acceptable.

Self-affirming postings within the group are often simple declarations of achievement, as in "I've got data" or "I've submitted my assignment", not necessarily including reflection; however, on occasions a reflective tone can be detected as in Susan's post about her first forays into thematic analysis where her postscript expresses her enjoyment of the process and her surprise at that enjoyment:

*"Wow just applied a little thematic analysis (I think) to first interview in readiness for next assignment! Would have been nice just to be able to do more analysis rather than consider the essay. However, the weekend calls so everything shelved. There's always next week. Have a good week end x PS actually enjoyed it but don't tell anyone!"* (Susan, 15.8.14)

As can be seen, within these postings reflection has been with a light touch. However when three of the group decided to collaborate on a poster presentation about the benefits of the Facebook intervention in facilitating peer support, they discovered that sifting back through the posts in order to code them became a reflective and reflexive process in which they were able to see their identities as doctoral candidates and researchers evolving and growing. For example, Hazel was surprised to realise that when she wrote:

*"Tying myself up in Foucauldian knots - why do I keep going deeper and deeper when I was nearly finished?"* (Hazel, 22.2.14),

although using a joking tone she was also establishing her scholarly identity. The sub-text was "I am a scholar and a researcher who is trying to engage with difficult concepts." Looking back at another post reveals uncertainty about the significance and value of individual research:

*"Anyone else suffer from project envy? I was talking to two people today who are doing doctorates, one was doing the temporal perceptions of online students, and the other was looking at the assessment of competences in social workers. They both sounded much more important and interesting than mine."* (Hazel, 10.12.13)

Yet, a year on from this, it is clear that progress has been made with fieldwork, and Hazel is feeling more confident of her own contribution.

As the concepts of personal and professional identity feature strongly in professional doctoral research, the facility to review postings within this group and to compare them to entries in reflective journals has provided the students

with an invaluable – and unpredicted - tool with which to monitor and track their own multiple and evolving identities as educators, doctoral candidates and researchers (Fenge, 2010). An important aspect of the reflective and reflexive process for practitioner researchers is to understand one's professional self in relation to one's personal self (Costley, Elliot, & Gibbs, 2010); collectively examining the postings in the Facebook group has given the group a further tool for understanding themselves and each other and for forging a strong group identity. This, in turn, strengthens all of their individual identities as doctoral candidates and researchers.

### **Reflection 1: Bonding of the Group – The Value of ‘Cohortness’**

Although many prospective doctoral students look forward to engaging with a supportive academic community, this group appeared to have few such expectations. As Susan wrote:

“When I began my doctoral journey, I really didn’t see a breadcrumb trail through the woods. It seemed to me more like being parachuted into a jungle with only a penknife to cut through the tangle of vegetation. I saw a dark and lonely path ahead, filled with obstacles and setbacks; a perception fuelled by doctoral folklore and backed up by colleagues undergoing or recently ending their own doctoral journeys”.

Therefore the group’s experience has been ‘surprising’, an epithet each member has applied in their reflection on the success of the group. Jacqueline, for example, states:

“It was a surprise, therefore, from the outset, how the cohort became a cohesive, supportive whole, and the introduction of the Facebook group, during a difficult time for the students, only cemented this and allowed our group to become ever more supportive of each other”;

and Susan concludes:

“So how is it that two years into this cold and lonely journey I am actually really enjoying it and have completely banished these dark images and replaced them with scenes of pleasure and laughter? The obstacles are still there but I view them as challenges that I will overcome, not as a single combatant, but as part of an eager band bound by commitment, a sense of community and not least through laughter.”

Their experience concurs with Fenge (2012) and Bista and Cox (2014) that ‘cohortness’ is key to a successful professional doctorate journey. We suggest that the support offered among the doctoral colleagues in this Facebook group has enhanced the cohort identity (Fenge, 2012): each knows what is happening in others’ lives external to the doctoral process, and such knowledge allows the group to be caring on both an academic and a personal level. Whatever one of the members is undergoing, the others are party to it if they post on Facebook and therefore can be supportive in many ways, whether it is a good or bad experience. This type of behaviour is typically described as ‘mutually empowering’ (Fletcher, 1995), where members of the group are “keen to demonstrate genuine care for others and proactively avoid conflict” (Devenish et al., 2009).

It is significant that the relative non-user of the group also considers herself to have benefited from the group membership. Her own perspective on Facebook generally is that it is unwieldy and overwhelming, and her limited experience fuels her lack of engagement. Regarding herself as an ‘Observer’ (with some ‘Sharer’ characteristics) (as defined by Benninger et al., 2014), Ridwanah (known as Riz)

has made only seven posts, mainly to demonstrate support or to share information, for example:

*"Just catching up on all your comments, ha ha, u guys r ace!x"* (6.12.13)

*"I am teaching [...] 2moz and I will miss the session. Will c u all afta 4pm"*  
(22.1.14)

However, Riz describes an experience in a face-to-face meeting, which demonstrates the far-reaching beneficial effect of the Facebook group:

*"I feel that my lack of engagement with the site has not made me feel isolated from my peers in any way. We are a very close-knit team with the shared experience of completing a doctorate and there are many times when I have received advice and felt extremely supported by my colleagues; for example, a recent revision of a data analysis paper was completed through the support and encouragement of my doctoral peers. They picked up on my low levels of enthusiasm and kindly stayed behind past 6pm after a long day's workshop to give me direction on how best to make improvements and boosted my motivational levels. I was very much overlooking the positive feedback that I had received and my peers were central in helping me recognise the many good comments on my work. This would not have been possible if we did not have this sharing and caring ethos cultivated by the Facebook group."*

Benninger et al.'s (2014) finding that social media helps facilitate rather than replace in-person contact appears to be borne out by this experience. The bonding that has occurred through the use of Facebook is reflected both within facilitated workshops and in social interactions outside of the academic environment.

## **Reflection 2: The Benefits of Peer Support**

If we accept the definition of support as "to bear all or part of the weight of; to hold up" ("Support," 2015), we can see by reflecting on the posts in the Facebook group that members have employed different means of "holding each other up" and preventing each other from falling – frequently through humour and by showing affection. Support has been provided for different ends: to support academic endeavour or emotional unease, to provide practical assistance, or to empathise as a peer. Although the initial intention may have been to provide emotional, practical, academic, or peer support, the posts usually transformed into humorous expressions of encouragement and empathy, signalling that the problem could be overcome:

Jacqueline: *Well here goes... One day to write my presentation... Done the reading now just need to sort it out in my head – Could get messy!*

Hazel: *You can do it Jacqueline! May the force be with you.*

Susan: *Go Jacqueline You'll ace it!*

Hazel: *[X] will be missing such a treat listening to our ramblings, sorry erudite discourse in policy.*

[Later]

Jacqueline: *We are all exhausted –post traumatic presentation disorder!*

Lynne: *That's what I'm feeling ... Post traumatic presentation disorder! Like it... Will wine remove the symptoms?*

(April 2014)

Within this example can be seen something of the difference between the support offered from the course team and that from peers. The students, in this safe

Facebook environment, are able to express emotions which they know will be shared by their peers. Jacqueline explains:

“Personally, it was a relief for me to know that other people were experiencing difficulties with ethical procedures, assignments, time limitations, data collection, and more, but I believe we *all* were relieved when we began to understand that we were all undergoing a collective experience and could empathise and support one another throughout.”

The Facebook group offered and continues to offer a safe, informal, non-competitive space. This stands in contrast to other alternatives, such as formal discussion boards available on the university’s virtual learning environment where students often feel there is a sense of rivalry among their cohort as they endeavour to intelligently answer posed questions and comment in a competitive way since they are in the public domain (Aitchison & Mowbray, 2013).

The Facebook intervention has had the effect of diluting negative feelings for this cohort, as they are able to vent feelings, thoughts, and worries to the group, without fear of reprisal or sarcasm. In fact, the opposite is true: although members may feel upset or angry at times with the doctoral process, the other group members’ supportive insistence that “we are all in this together and will all pull each other through” is both impressive and very reassuring. No one will sink, because the other members will be there to prevent it. As Devenish et al. (2009) explain, a study group encourages its members to “keep going, to reinforce that the studies are worthwhile and that completion is an attainable goal” (p.61). One of the ways this group has kept such encouragement going is through emotional support, with a specific emphasis on humour.

### **Reflection 3: The Value of Emotional Support and the Importance of Humour**

Whilst there are multitudinous theories of emotion (see, for example, Denzin, 2009; Strongman, 2003), the concept most relevant to the emotional journey we describe is that of emotional labour. This was first defined by Hochschild in 1983 in relation to service workers who need to maintain emotional responses appropriate to the service users with whom they are interacting and is later encapsulated by Aitchison and Mowbray (2013) in their research into emotional management amongst female doctoral students. Emotional labour can be defined as when one disguises and suppresses one’s true feelings and puts on a ‘public face’ that all is well. In reflecting upon this female cohort journey through the doctorate via social media, it is possible to see that the Facebook site is frequently used to express emotions that remain hidden during taught – or even facilitated – classes.

The emotional themes coming from the posts can be classified in many ways, but largely they fall into the following categories:

- *frustration* at things not going right, at an inability to write, to understand, to get on with it
- *fear* that others are doing better, collecting more data, beginning transcription; of being left behind
- *guilt* at not spending enough time studying, undertaking fieldwork and writing juxtaposed with the ever-present conflict with work pressure, the changing, unsettling HE climate and general family life of birthdays, births, deaths, and holidays
- *anger* at tutor feedback, a perceived lack of direction, a lack of clarity
- *confusion* at not knowing what was supposed to be done, by when, and how

- joy and (a shared) celebration at getting the work completed, the data collected, the transcription finished, the essay passed
- affection; a sharing of 'likes', smiley emoticons, photographs, and metaphorical pats on the back.

Lynne readily admits to using the Facebook group as “a huge emotional crutch”. A typical comment from Lynne reflects a number of the above themes: a fear of being left behind, that others know what they are doing, a plea for moral and literal support:

*‘Ok guys, now I’m panicking! No idea what I am meant to be doing or for when :-( Seriously behind on all things EdD. Can we meet up?’ (Lynne, 7.1.14)*

On reflection Lynne realises that many of her comments reveal similar doubts: despair at not being able to submit work on time, inability to engage with an assessment, needing reassurance. In return came encouragement, motivation, and a vindication of her ability to complete the task. This resonates well with research undertaken by Selwyn (2009) with 909 students using Facebook for educational use. He discusses supplication and the seeking of moral support as being a major theme:

“Students would often present themselves as rendered helpless in the face of their university work in the expectation that their peers would offer them support and comfort.” (p.167)

Whether or not this was the subconscious strategy, it appears to have worked, for Lynne and for the rest of the cohort. Clearly, they share emotions as a means of motivation. This might be all the more meaningful and significant because they see each other only once a month and need not only encouragement to keep them on track, but congratulations and a recognition that they have managed to do doctoral study in the midst of competing demands:

*“Well done Hazel! Just going to shout this, NOT STARTED YET!! .. Enjoy your feeling of satisfaction, I will take inspiration from you” (Susan, 17.7.14).*

The development of the Facebook group enabled the cohort to communicate with each other and engage in banter “as though we were actually talking to each other” (Susan). This is an interesting perception as a positive characteristic, as often online forums are seen as beneficial for some students precisely because they avoid face-to-face contact (e.g., Cox et al, 2004) and provide an ‘anonymous’ space for students to contribute to a discussion.

When considering academic views on building resilience it is evident that humour is seen as a key component. Humour is defined as a general positive attribute and is one of the character strengths that contribute most strongly to life satisfaction (Peterson, Ruch, Beermann, Park, & Seligman, 2007). Looking at a small selection of the group’s posts we can see how, by the use of what Kuiper (2012) describes as affiliative humour, a warm, witty but respectful banter, the use of Facebook has enhanced this group’s cohesiveness and morale and has itself developed into a positive presence within the group. A typical post would involve cries of panic about feeling unable to grasp the learning outcomes for an assignment or even feeling unable to begin to write. This is an excerpt from a post concerning the writing of a literature review:

Susan: *“Hi Gang, finally made a start on lit review! 375 words – not that I am counting – and already, on reflection, have lost the will to live! It’s going to be a long day x”*

Lynne: *“Just realised that in order to write a literature review, you should first have read something? Oh God!!! xxx”*

Hazel: *"You gonna reflect on that Lynne? How is the literature affecting you? It's making me read...I think that would go down well don't you?" (05.07.14)*

What at first seems like just a few words of banter can in fact be seen to be a very supportive discussion; the humour in 'not that I am counting' and 'lost the will to live' acknowledge the stress of trying to even begin an essay and imply a request for sympathy. The supportive response, with the comforting implication, "You are not alone", and the joke about reflection bring everything into perspective – it is an essay, not the end of the world.

As the group began to prepare their assignments relating to methodology, Hazel posted a semi-serious question:

*"When discussing methodological choices is it acceptable to say I decided not to do this because it looks too hard?"*

Kathryn: *"I think that would be OK as long as you made it sound reflective lol."*

Jacqueline: *"I'd definitely say yes ☺"*

Susan: *"Yes. Definitely! I'm thinking along the same lines! X"*

Hazel: *"Not that I'm writing you understand, just thinking about it ☺ (05.07.14)"*

Again the posts begin with a request for help, and again the responses work in a light-hearted fashion to normalise the situation, i.e., all the group are in the same position and therefore it is 'OK'. Reference is made to general feelings of inadequacy and hesitancy in embarking on assignments, and again encouraging responses appear that help to put this into perspective. The use of humour within the group's postings clearly confirms Kuiper's (2012) findings that affiliative humour supports the development of group cohesion and support. As Windle (2011) suggests, a sense of humour is one of the most important facets of personal resiliency that an individual can draw on when confronted with stress.

So, reflecting on the use of humour within the Facebook group it is clear that it has played a major part in sustaining and developing the cohort. It has enabled the creation of a distinct and vibrant identity within the doctoral programme, a group that is now renowned to be enthusiastic and happy and who will laugh and work together to find a solution rather than cry and withdraw in isolation.

*"It has seen us through some quite dark times but more than that, it has banished those dark times to a distant memory and for me, the forest is now full of opportunity and good natured company." (Susan)*

#### **Reflection 4: Academic Endeavour and Social Support**

##### **A Balance**

A need for support is most clearly evident in the Facebook group when individuals have received feedback on assignments and presentations. Academic feedback is not always perceived as positive, and the Facebook group is seen as a place to vent frustration and receive emotional support. While a positive supportive response is evident in the interactions, there is also a realistic engagement with the feedback received and its potential to assist development. Rather than a universal rejection of the feedback, there is encouragement to engage with it and offers of help from other members of the group who have fared better. Kathryn reflects:

*"I have found this particularly useful, as confirmation of my initial negative feelings would only have limited my engagement with the feedback and further prevented me from valuing comments aimed at my development. The responses from the group recognise the effect of the feedback and the*

resulting expression of emotion but avoid the establishment of a reversal of the 'halo effect' where individuals receive only confirmation of their own frustrations."

The affectionate yet challenging support that is evident in the Facebook group is what distinguishes the use of social media to support academic study from the use of social media in general and, also, from a more conventional academic online forum. A typical comment, which incorporates encouragement, advice and offer of further support, is:

Susan: *"Of course you can do it but I think there is some good advice on the earlier comments. Try to look at it in bite size chunks and do a bit at a time. Want to meet up soon?"*

There is a need in academic study for analysis and reflection that results in interactions that engage emotions differently from within purely social interaction. When expressing disappointment within a social environment there is the expectation that other participants will concur and confirm individual experiences; whereas within an academic support group there will be critique and analysis. The key to continued engagement in this Facebook group appears to be that useful critique is given but within an affectionate, supportive framework. Yet the participants also appreciate the 'mirroring' comments they receive which have the function of reassurance.

A highly positive aspect of the Facebook group is being able to celebrate academic success, where, especially following disappointment, an emotional response is warranted:

Kathryn: *"Passed my resubmitted lit review Yayyyy. So back on track. Now need to get my head around what I am supposed to do next!!!"*

Hazel: *"Hooray!"*

Jacqueline: *"Well done! X"*

Lynne: *"Well done. Not done mine yet ..."*

Lynne's admission of inadequacy in this context both contributes to the group cohesion and offers up a request for confirmation that she too might need emotional support.

It is this realistic, grounded, 'we are all in this together' approach that has cemented the group together and kept each individual using it as they have pulled and pushed each other along the doctoral pathway.

## **Discussion**

As we have said, a great deal of the literature detailing doctoral education uses the metaphor of a journey. In re-reading the Facebook posts from 2013, in a linear and chronological sequence, it is very much evident that this is indeed a journey. It is easy to chart the emotional experience of the doctoral process along a series of outpourings largely related to anxieties surrounding assignments and confusion compounded by academic discourses and unfamiliar literature. In reviewing the past eighteen months via a frozen capture of questions, expressions of despair, congratulations on a job well-done, pleas for help and the ever-present 'thumbs up' emoticon, it is apparent how emotional the journey has been so far, and how the social media space has become a sanctuary for emotional expression and, perhaps more importantly, emotional support.

In this piece of action research the students have addressed "a felt need ... to initiate change" (Elliott, 1991, p.53) by creating a space in which to communicate with one another on a regular basis in a different context and space from the

academic/work-based setting. It is a collaborative space, rather than an individual writing space, and it allows conversation on a variety of themes. While the individuals are brought together by their academic ambition, the virtual space enables a combination of academic, social, and personal issues to be discussed, shared, offloaded, and explored. The eclectic nature of the posts highlights the multiple identities of the participants – as academics, teachers, nurses, practitioners, students, etc. – but also as parents, friends, and individuals with their own complex lives. We suggest that this specific ‘secret society’ use of Facebook allows these aspects of self to intermingle and inform one another, but in a different way from more usual uses of Facebook. The social space enables communication on different levels, while also contributing to the original purpose of the group, i.e., completing their doctorate.

We have identified several characteristics of this intervention that contribute to its success. One of these is the ‘secret group’ setting. While some (e.g., Barnes, 2006) have identified a fear of intrusion into one’s private life due to the public nature of social media platforms and the potential risk of sharing online content, some professionals are using social networking in educational contexts and consider it to be important for student development (Davis, 2010). The choice to make the EdD group secret obviates these risks but also differentiates the group from other uses of Facebook, either academic or social.

The spontaneity of the group’s development as such suggests that it is a true requirement of the students and one that they have defined themselves. We suggest that the student-initiation element is crucial to its success, in that it is truly ‘student-centred’ and exclusive. As the participants have pointed out, there is no competitive element to the posts; there is also no surveillance from tutors. Attempts have been made at institutional level to introduce VLE spaces to encourage social interaction on this course as well as many others. However, the scenario of the unpopulated discussion forum is familiar to many tutors, and the forum provided by tutors for students on this EdD programme is little different. B. Williams (2013) explains that “digital media, by themselves, do not make the contemporary university a more participatory and creative educational space” and further makes the point that, conversely, VLE systems actually work “to reinforce traditional conceptions of the university as hierarchical, controlling, print-based, and obsessed with assessment” (p.182). The characteristics of the Facebook intervention are the opposite of these; and unlike a formal academic forum, continued use and engagement in this group is dependent on the usefulness it has for them as individuals.

We are also given insight into the impact of Facebook interactions on face-to-face relationships. It is clear that the group works as an extension of a face-to-face group; it is doubtful that it could be effective as the only means of communication, but it is rather a supplementary resource. These part-time professional doctoral candidates might be considered to have a particular need for this supplement, in that they are not full-time students located in departments or faculties with other PhD students with access to research groups and their facilities. However, it also seems that this use of social media has impacted positively on how they interact as a group, to the extent that the relative ‘non-user’ of the group also benefits from the inclusivity it engenders. Terms that are repeated in these students’ descriptions of the Facebook group include safety, empathy, and familiarity, along with the original headings of Support, Humour, Affection, Reflection, and Emotion. Ultimately the acronym SHARE sums up the value both in terms of its constituent elements and the notion of ‘sharing’ in its own right. It seems to be the egalitarian,

non-judgmental, giving, and receiving in equal measure that contributes to the success of the group. The use of 'we' in some of the posts, such as "We are all exhausted" and "We are a great group" is truly inclusive, rather than the pseudo-inclusive 'we' as often employed by teachers. The tutors for these students can never genuinely include themselves in synchronous reflection on the experience of the doctoral journey. The inclusivity and equality that arise from using this medium to share the lived experience of the group is what lends the Facebook group its effectiveness as an emotional tool. The sharing can only really be undertaken by members of the group who are experiencing the same journey at the same time, with comparable reactions to the demands and challenges of that journey.

## **Conclusion**

The Facebook intervention introduced in order to address the problems of isolation, loneliness, and academic challenges has been successful in overcoming these negative phenomena. All six of the students are currently writing up their theses and comprise the first cohort to have completed all assignments without recourse to extensions on deadlines. They continue to communicate as a group using their Facebook intervention for support during the potentially isolating phase of individual writing-up.

As a piece of action research the project has had the benefit of providing insight for the participants that, as practitioners in education, it is crucial to pay attention to the emotional aspects of learning. To celebrate the success of the intervention, the EdD programme provides the opportunity for existing candidates to inform new recruits of strategies that have helped them. This has inspired other groups to design and implement their own interventions, the outcomes of which are yet to be seen.

Perhaps the significance of this Facebook intervention is most relevant for other students on similar programmes, i.e., part-time, professional doctorates. All the same, there are implications here for the value of student-led networking, and some indications of what might make it successful. One of our conclusions must be that the group ought not to be tutor-led, nor even tutor-influenced. Its secret, irreverent nature, which excludes outsiders, itself gives rise to the inclusivity within the group that has been so productive. While the posts quoted here might appear trivial and inconsequential, the writers have been surprised by the value of the group, surprised by its usefulness as a reflective tool, and surprised by how much they have enjoyed being a part of it and how this has been reflected in their academic engagement. The relevance of irreverence should not be underrated. As one participant said, "The doctorate is really serious. This isn't", and yet the humour and affection expressed has had an effect of normalisation, providing a safe place of hidden depths. The knowledge that there is recourse to this safe space has been enabling in that no-one has given up or fallen down: they have all supported one another over and around the obstacles, laying down for one another the breadcrumb trail that will eventually lead them out of the woods. The production of this article has been an extension and manifestation of the characteristics of the group, albeit with the concession of allowing a tutor to collaborate.

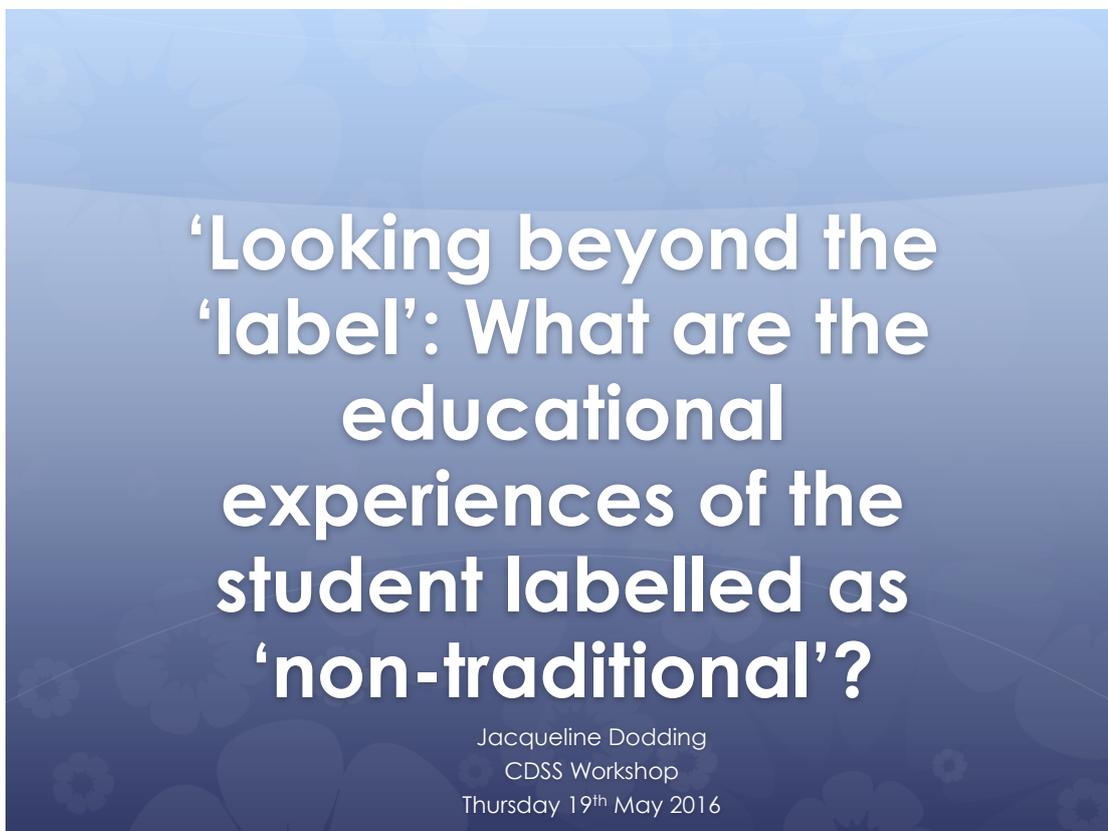
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Abstract and Presentation Title Page– ‘Looking beyond the ‘label’: What are the educational experiences of the student labelled as ‘non-traditional’?

CDSS Conference – Blackburn



***Abstract***

***‘Looking beyond the ‘label’: What are the educational experiences of the student labelled as ‘non-traditional’?***

This paper will explore the educational experiences of students who are labelled as ‘non-traditional’ in a college-based higher education establishment in the 13<sup>th</sup> most deprived borough of the United Kingdom. This research has been undertaken as part of a Professional Doctorate in Education (EdD) and the presenter will provide an insight into her findings suggesting that whilst governments insist on labels being assigned to various groups of students, impacting on levels of funding and support given; this is not recognised by the student on a personal level at this establishment, who presents a very different view of what their higher education experience has provided them with.

UKCGE Conference - Liverpool

The slide features a dark blue background with a light blue circle on the right side. The title is centered at the top in white text. Below the title, there are three images: a hand holding a black sleeve with a red heart, a 3D rendering of a red and white robot with a heart on its chest, and a small image of a hand holding a black sleeve with a red heart. Logos for the University of Bolton and the University Centre at Blackburn College are on the left. A list of authors is on the right.

## Wear Your Heart On Your Sleeve: How to support and survive the doctoral journey

University of Bolton  
Teaching Intensive Research Informed

University Centre at  
Blackburn  
College

- ▶ Jacqueline Dodding University Centre Blackburn College
- ▶ Susan Ramsdale University of Bolton

### Abstract

#### *'Wear your heart on your sleeve: How to support and survive the doctoral journey'*

This paper examines the experiences of a small cohort of doctoral students enrolled on a doctorate of education programme. The seven students, six females and one male, developed an unusual cohort model to support them through what is generally described as lonely process (Gannon-Leary et al., 2011). It is acknowledged within the literature that doctoral students are often disappointed with the lack of warmth and vibrancy within the process of study (Janta et al., 2012) resulting in feelings of isolation and often leading to attrition (Burnett, 1999).

The programme in question followed an accepted cohort model; a small group meeting once a month to discuss progress and support each other by providing a platform for critical discussion. Views on the beneficial effect of cohort working vary. Brookfield (2003) suggests that a sense of group conformity evolves and this in turn limits the individual's ability to be self-reflective and impedes the ability to critically reflect on the group processes. However Witte & James' (1998), conversely, adopt the approach that the opportunity to resolve internal conflicts encourages the students to extend their ways of thinking and challenge

the authority of the teaching team and Dom and Papalewis (1997) noted that collegiality led to conceptual thinking and student persistence .

In the face of conflict within the programme this particular cohort abandoned traditional avenues of university led student support and turned to itself to remedy a failing situation and reignite the passion for the doctoral process. The members of the cohort had until this time been professionally polite with each other but in the face of adversity the layers were stripped away and the real people in the cohort emerged. The hopes and fears of each individual served to bolster a frail network and transformed it into a dynamic fireball of enthusiasm, support and energy. The ensuing impact was obvious to all around. The cohort had bonded.

This paper challenges the idea that a cohort approach alone will solve the problem of attrition and doctoral loneliness and champions the need for a cohort to develop an emotional, humorous and slightly irreverent approach to doctoral study.

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