

**Assessment Confidence in the Transition to Business  
and Management Studies in HE**

**by**

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## Abstract

This thesis presents an exploratory study into the concept of assessment confidence development, building upon previous studies in self-efficacy and academic confidence. In particular, this study concentrates on students transitioning from FE to their first year of HE studies in Business and Management and the associated assessment regime. The resultant substantive understandings of experience of this transition have been constructed with the assistance of 11 first year students, during 2 interviews across a year. The first of these interviews was undertaken in induction week and was followed by a second interview at the end of the first academic year of HE study.

An inductive approach has been taken to the production of data which has been analysed using thematic analysis and I-poem analysis in order to theorise around the influencing factors and aspects of assessment design linked to the development of assessment confidence. The subsequent findings have emerged through authentic representation of the student voice, confirmed during member checking exercises.

The main findings of this study suggest that students may be more widely influenced by their contextual experiences of FE assessment than have previously been recognised. In addition, student experiences of assessment regimes at this level are typified by familiarity, routine, repetition and modelling. In the transition to HE assessments, the students in this study experienced self-doubt, uncertainty and ambiguity leading to perceptions of risk and lack of control. Assessment design aspects of clarity, relevance and authenticity in addition to student choice and freedom are presented as key to understanding how HE educators can mitigate risk and loss of control during this transitional period.

This thesis contributes to the wider understanding of how students interact with assessment during transitional phases and in particular into unfamiliar subject areas with distinctly different assessment regimes. This substantive theorising presented builds upon the more domain specific notions of self-efficacy already associated with student 'confidence' in order to better design the assessment experience for students making that transition.

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## Chapter 1 – Background and Rationale for study

### Background to the study

This study began life as an action research intervention focussing on self-assessment of Retail Management students, undertaken as part of my Masters studies. The original purpose of that intervention was to determine whether self-assessment could assist in improving student engagement with assessment and more particularly, with assessment criteria. This study focuses on the main issues drawn from that original intervention on student engagement with assessment rather than the aspects related to self-assessment. Specific emphasis upon the insight into student barriers and emerging challenges around confidence in assessment capabilities from that study have been key in shaping the direction for this research.

Whilst it is common in current discourse to see assessment as an activity to determine achievement, its contribution to learning is increasingly prominent in literature (William and Thompson 2017, Joughin et al. 2017). It is useful to undertake research surrounding assessment, given the increasing acceptance of its importance in the learning process. Boud and Falchikov (2010:16) detail the stakes associated with assessment by highlighting how it directs attention, incentivises learning and affects what students do and how they do it. Assessment also communicates important messages to students on what they are able to succeed in and most importantly, it builds confidence in their knowledge, understanding and capability.

As professional educators, we are charged with creating a teaching, learning and assessment environment in which students are able to develop a capacity to engage with and respond to challenges of constructing knowledge (Hawe and Dixon 2017). Assessment for learning is at the heart of developing student concepts of quality, evaluative expertise and a range of strategies to respond to learning and improvement opportunities (Black 2015). The development of learner understanding of, and engagement with, a range of tasks and activities activates student ownership and responsibility for learning (William 2011). Carless (2015) states that learning orientated assessment stimulates learning and active involvement among students but that students with low confidence often prefer simplistic assessments. Despite this, the same students express a desire to enter University to engage with assessments which promote understanding and enable better quality of learning. However, it is clear to see how this shift from one assessment approach in FE to another in HE might be problematic where students lack the necessary confidence in the transferability of previous learning.

From my Masters study, assessment confidence was a recurring emergent theme, which I had a strong desire to understand and explain. I explored literature in the area of 'self-belief' and in general began to understand some of the underpinning aspects of 'self-confidence' as it existed around functional areas such as accessing research, taking notes etc. (Christie et al 2008). Nothing in the existing literature really helped to explain what students had articulated in the Masters study on the more specific aspect of how previous experience of assessment in one context (FE) might shape expectations and engagement with assessment in transition to another (HE) environment.

As I was completing my Masters study, I became aware of the work of Guy Claxton who, at the time was calling for better understanding of the confidence issues facing students entering Higher Education in the U.K. In Lucas et al (2013:12) Claxton stated that "We are quite aware of the number of students who are obviously very academically able but paradoxically lack confidence, with real concern about failing". This concurred with my own findings but he also highlighted that confidence is difficult to measure as a broad, subjective concept and requires more detailed insight as to what might influence its development through student transition.

There is strong evidence to suggest that confidence as a general concept, is closely linked to retention (Bean 1982). Lotkowski et al (2004) highlight that where there is a failure to develop academic confidence, even those that show good understanding of course content may be at risk of dropping out. Understanding of the role played by assessment confidence may allow teaching and learning practitioners to place more responsive assessment design at the heart of their engagement strategies with a view to improving retention, they suggest.

My Masters study had been designed to ask students to rate themselves on their level of confidence around a number of aspects of assessment such as understanding criteria, knowing which theory to use and how to offer critical insight. Following this rating, an intervention in which they designed their own assessment was undertaken followed by interviews to establish which aspects of this approach, if any, had improved their confidence from their initial ratings. It is important to note that the final interviews revealed that whilst I had been defining confidence in an objective way, the students' interpretation of what it meant to feel confident in any one area of rating was distinctly subjective. This meant that one student's rating of 8/10 could be 5/10 for another or vice versa. This made the rating scales less useful in terms of asking students to articulate confidence in aspects in a comparable way.

There is clear indication from the initial MEd study that students were utilising elements of self-efficacy in order to make judgements about their confidence ratings in relation to assessment specific activities. Some articulated that they had been unable to bring to bear any previous successes, often lamenting that they had not had enough practice yet to 'know what they were doing'. This, paired with the fact that they had yet to undertake assessments and receive feedback meant that key aspects of mastery and verbal persuasion (explored further in Chapter 2) were highlighted as impacting their confidence ratings.

However, for some students, their ratings were impacted not only by their previous experiences (or lack thereof) of the assessment, but also by interest in the topic, how important they perceived the task to be or whether they had delayed interaction with the assessment itself. It became apparent that a more detailed look at the influencers and student perceptions of assessments was required, particularly in what is a very specific scenario within academic experiences through the transition process from FE to HE. It is this extension beyond traditional self-efficacy aspects which has prompted me to look further into what influences confidence development specific to the assessment task, beyond what is already known in self-efficacy terms.

### **The concept of Assessment Confidence within this study**

In order to establish the specific area of 'assessment confidence' upon which the research questions are based, it is necessary to understand the contributing theoretical areas. Self-efficacy aligns closely with the concept of confidence (the constituent parts of which are explored in more depth in chapter 2) and is generally associated with how competency is perceived (Martin et al 2017). Self-efficacy involves judgements of capability to organise and execute actions to attain performance and is self-referent in nature ie. How prepared or able someone perceives themselves to be (Drago et al 2018). However, it has been widely established that self-efficacy is domain specific and based upon affirmation of capability, both of which are problematic in this particular study. As transitioning students may not have studied in the subject area (domain) of Business and Management and may not be familiar with the assessment design, protocols and support systems used in the subject area, affirmation from previous experience cannot be assumed.

In addition, the gap in knowledge/understanding emerging from the masters study was not only limited to perceptions of capability, but also aspects of student engagement with assessment.

Self-efficacy alone cannot offer insight into this aspect of my study. Further research identified literature which attempted to bridge this gap by pairing self-efficacy frameworks with expectancy/value theories (Sanders and Sander 2007). Expectancy/Value theory attempts to establish student beliefs about how they are likely to do on a task and is similar to self-efficacy in that both are future orientated, cognitive judgements and are task specific (Green et al 2017). However, the value aspect of this theory establishes incentives or reasons for engaging in an activity and these values determine if the actions expected are likely to be performed (Wu and Fan 2017). The pairing of these 2 parent frameworks of self-efficacy and expectancy/value theory has led to the development of the concept of Academic Confidence, which is defined as 'a strong belief, firm trust or sure expectation of how students will respond to study' (Sander and Sanders 2009). This concept more specifically targets effective participation in an unfamiliar knowledge community (Northedge 2003).

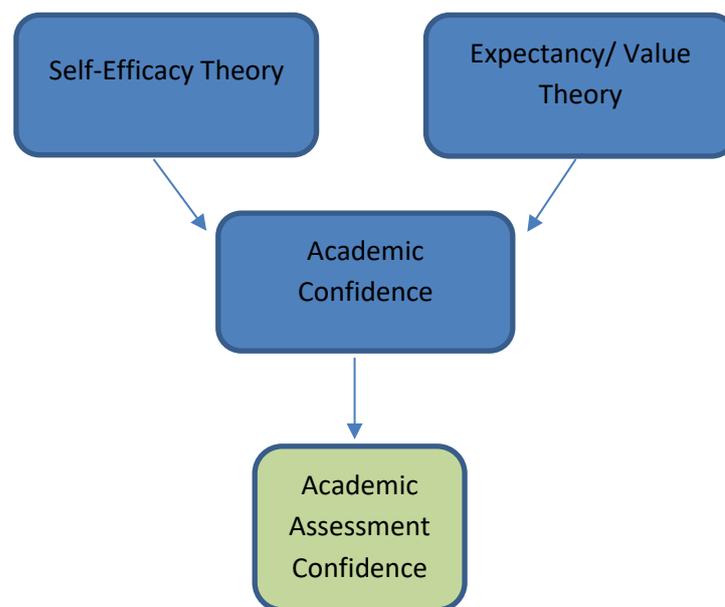


Figure 1

In addition, it is important to note that the inclusion of expectancy/value theory also introduces the potential role of 'Personal Agency' which differs from self-efficacy as it introduces the capability to 'control one's life events' (Schunk and Pajares 2006:40). This will help give insight into the aspects which students believe influence success (e.g. hard work or prior knowledge) or about actions which can be controlled in order to work towards success (e.g. engagement, persistence and investment of time and energy).

Despite this insightful literature, the central conceptual area for investigation in this study has been identified as similar to that of academic confidence but with a narrower scope to focus on assessment. In order to pursue my concerns around confidence as it might be applied within an assessment situation, I needed to understand whether or not academic assessment confidence may be theorised, even at substantive level, as having distinct influencers. It was also important to evaluate how this impacts student engagement with assessment of any type within the new domain of study. I have termed this 'academic assessment confidence' for the purpose of this research. Therefore, the aim of this thesis is to produce a more detailed examination of the conceptual construct of academic assessment confidence. The development of this knowledge is key, not only to my own practice on the Retail Management programme, but also in the wider HE context. The wider implications for the resulting knowledge are evaluated in Chapter 7.

In the first instance, research questions were formulated which sought to produce insight and knowledge around and within which 'academic assessment confidence' might be studied further. Within this, the need to address questions around the nature of the central concept, investigating how it is influenced and developed, was identified. Further to that, I was also interested in the subsequent influence of the concept in determining how students interact with assessment, both at FE and HE level in order to evaluate the impact of previous experience in transitioning from one assessment regime to another.

The thesis title of 'Assessment Confidence' relates directly to this conceptual underpinning. The use of the word academic is used to differentiate the concept from other instances in which people may experience confidence issues outside of the academic domain (e.g. workplace assessments or lifeskill assessments such as driving tests etc.). Within the context of the main title for this thesis, the context is captured within the FE and HE and Business and Management studies. Also key to this study is that the concept is investigated over a period of change for students and therefore the word 'transition' is key. Whilst more detailed overview could be given to various aspects of academic concept, as the first study in this specific area, the outcomes of the study are exploratory and numerous in relation to the central concept, making it difficult to give priority to any one aspect emerging within the study.

## Research Questions

- What are the influencing factors in the nature and development of academic assessment confidence in Business and Management students within their transition from FE (in particular 'A' level) to HE assessment regimes?

- Which aspects of assessment are key to the development of academic assessment confidence in Business and Management HE studies?

It should also be acknowledged that the research questions were shaped to investigate current practice in assessment in HE Business and Management studies with a view to improving assessment practice there. Business and Management studies attract students with a diverse background of FE study, meaning that students often have little experience of the subject or assessment types that predominate which may prove problematic in the transition period. Given the gap in the current literature to address this transition, these research questions are aimed at developing a better understanding of transitioning students' situations, experiences and meanings rather than testing something more specific. This has meant the need to develop broad and flexible research questions which allow the data to direct the emergent exploration of the topic.

Students in my MEd study articulated aspects of their experiences and expectations of the assessment process which remain unaccounted for in traditional self-efficacy literature. These included process and policy uncertainties, previous experiences of alternative assessment designs from which they struggled to access latent learning as well as interest levels, distractions from other priorities in the transition phase and a pervading perception that initial or formative pieces of work were of limited value in terms of their degree. With this in mind, I designed the research questions in order to produce a descriptive and interpretive analysis highlighting deeper understandings of assessment experiences across transitions suitable to drive future research.

As these findings from my MEd were somewhat of a by-product to a study which asked a specific question on assessment, I was keen to avoid this situation in order to expose yet more such findings which had potentially not been articulated in the more specific study. In doing so, I have adopted an inductive approach which aims to allow me and my participants the freedom to explore emerging themes within a broader remit. Whilst these research questions may be considered too broad or open for alternative quantitative strategies, the non-specific features of these research questions make them more explorative than explanative. This allows me to describe and understand student experiences of assessment during transition in depth without the restrictions of the self-imposed parameters afforded by more specific research questions.

## **My role in HE**

My current role is that of Senior Lecturer in Retail Management, based within Lancashire Business School. My area of study is multi-disciplinary in that it deals with all business functions related to a specific sector. This may appear obvious in its vocational nature, but is somewhat distinctive in that most Business and Management programmes are either specialised or generalised in quite a different way to Retail Management programmes. Those which specialise, tend to be based upon business function (e.g. Marketing, Accounting and Human Resources). Those which are generalised are structured around business principles rather than functions or sectors (e.g. Business Studies and Management). In comparison, the programmes which I am responsible for tend to encapsulate all specialised functions and general business principles applied to one specific sector. This means that it is likely that I will have taught and assessed most subjects in the Business School in the course of my experience in Retail Management education. This increases the relevance of findings from this study to the wider context of 'Business and Management' assessment practices and more importantly to my own practice.

I am aware that my own 'interests, competences, skills and sensibilities acquired during (professional) socialisation' (Mruck and May 2011:519) in my current academic context have shaped the research questions. This is clearly evident not only in my current role as programme leader involving work around transitions and assessment practice but also within my previous research projects within my Masters study which have focussed on attempts to understand the students' experience of various phenomena related to those issues. They are also shaped by my frustration at my own lack of understanding of the realities of the student experience and a failure to assuage this through the current literature base.

## **The structure of the thesis**

The choice to undertake an inductive study in order to answer my research questions has shaped the content, structure and literature use in this study. As the process of data collection was undertaken early in the study, the emergent findings have been central in the subsequent choice and use of literature throughout. As findings began to emerge, it became clear that there were some aspects which had not been considered in my initial conceptualisations of academic assessment confidence. In particular these lay in the expectations/value theories. For example, in addition to students' self-efficacy related experiences, they began to articulate considerations of the output value of the task, not only in their own eyes, but those of other stakeholders, i.e.

the value placed by others on the task results. As this was an area which was unfamiliar, subsequent readings were undertaken in order to give a background context as well as to explain the specific quotes from students.

These readings, driven by the emerging data, focus on wider concepts and background aspects and have been brought together to form a context within which the participants' wider stories can be situated. This contextual background literature is presented in Chapter 2 and is intended to provide insight on terminology, policy and practice and seminal works surrounding the main conceptual frameworks, rather than to evaluate the students' individual quotes.

Chapter 3, methodology, is designed to explain choices made throughout the design of the study. I chose to take an inductive approach using student insight of experiences of both 'A' level and HE assessment in transition to University as I wished to create an emerging picture of both student assessment experiences and my own experience as a practitioner (lecturer and assessor) in Business and Management studies. A reflexive stance is taken within this section, as this is key to understanding both the limitations and implications of my position and actions throughout the research. As my choices, assumptions and underpinning professional identity in this area have impacted the emerging knowledge, I felt it important to explore these as they unfolded. Chapter 3 also offers some analysis of my research journey and a discussion of the reflexive stance I have attempted to take at each point in my research. As my experience of the doctoral programme has led to development of my personal understanding and professional practice, the product of my research is not only this document, but the processes which have led me to its production.

Chapter 4, 'Data Collection and Analysis' articulates in more detail the more technical considerations and reflections on how the data were collected and subsequently how findings have emerged from the study. This includes an important discussion of my sample approach which reviews problematic areas around participant recruitment and underlying assumptions around participation in addition to a brief profile of the participant group. An identification and consideration of alternative options and areas where the study could have been improved in addition to the impact of my methodological choices upon the actual findings are also included here.

Chapter 5 'Thematic Findings' presents emerging findings, in particular to evaluate quotes and insights from participants themselves. This chapter is structured to reflect the logical progression of interviews from FE experiences of assessment, through transition phase and

subsequent experiences of HE assessments. The findings are analysed using a number of different pieces of literature which are more specific to the point being made by the students themselves. The use of literature in this chapter is varied and builds insight through the synthesis of a number of authors' works, intending to make meaning of the findings from interview quotes. This is in contrast to the literature used in Chapter 2, which I hope will already have established some clarity on the background context of the participant statements.

Chapter 6 - 'Individual Stories' presents an I-poem analysis of 3 of the participants in order to explore more fully the individual experience of assessment in a way which is potentially inaccessible through thematic analysis. The three stories presented are contrasting and aim to build upon and explore areas both between and outside of the themes presented in Chapter 5. This analysis goes beyond the findings presented through thematic analysis and to present a more holistic view of the concepts as experienced over time by the participants.

In Chapter 7, the findings and analysis undertaken in Chapters 5 and 6 are synthesised to give insight to the influence of previous experiences of, social processes around and engagement with assessment which may influence transition and retention. In particular, it highlights assessment practices in HE which could enhance student participation in assessment with some consideration of the individuality of the assessment experience. This chapter also presents a clearer multidimensional framework structure within which the main concept of academic assessment confidence might be understood and therefore proposes new insight into this field of study.

Chapter 8 – The research processes undertaken as part of this study have been transformative in the way I conceptualise a number of areas including my own professional identity, my approach to research and in particular the design and use of assessment for me as a practitioner. This chapter attempts to review the implications of this for my personal practice, my subject community of practice and wider learning for consideration around how this might affect transitions through one assessment regime to another.

## Chapter 2 – Literature Review

This chapter intends to present supporting background insight into the literature used for analysis of the emergent student stories. Given the inductive nature of the study, it is important to note that the implication of this is that the content of this chapter is structured around emerging themes from the data and follows the order of data analysis. During the production of themes, literature has been utilised in two ways, contextually and for direct quote analysis. This chapter presents the contextual literature, intended to provide a background. This background context and the resultant use of literature varies across the emergent topics.

The first of these themes, 'The student experience of 'A' level assessment' is contextualised in this chapter with a historic overview of the 'A' level systems, with particular reference to the Government policy of 'Curriculum 2000'. Curriculum 2000 has shaped the predominant assessment regime nationally at 'A' level and is the most commonly experienced within the Business School being studied and within the student sample. From the initial student interviews, it became apparent that my reading was severely lacking in anything which would help me understand how their 'A' level assessments had been designed, the purpose of them and the systems within which they were administered and evaluated. I had assumed that as I understood these aspects in HE, that this would automatically become my point of reference. This is a common assumption in HE, that understanding the experience being transitioned to outweighs the experience being transitioned from. The literature around the 'A' level system is key to understanding the meaning students placed on teaching, learning and assessment activities as well as their perceptions of the general purpose of education. As a result, the literature used to present that context in this chapter spans the inception of the policy in the late 1990s to reviews of the policy outcomes in the 2010s. More recent examination of subsequent changes to policy, despite these not impacting participant stories of their experiences within the system, have also been touched upon.

The following theme of 'Understanding Confidence' is contextualised in this chapter in order to capture seminal readings in the area of Self-efficacy and Academic confidence. Whilst more recent literature has continued to explore self-efficacy in specific domains (Morris et al 2017, Farmer and Tierney 2017, Falk et al 2017) this does not offer any new insight for this study beyond the seminal readings. Therefore the concentration in this section is upon establishing useful overview concepts surrounding self-efficacy which allow for the further exploration of Academic confidence. As Academic Confidence is a relatively new approach to evaluating student 'confidence', the literature presented in this chapter contextualises student experiences

by presenting insight from key authors on this specific concept between 2003 and 2009. As a result, this section of literature focuses firstly on the more generic aspects of expectancy and self-efficacy and narrows to the more specific concept of Academic Confidence, the main conceptual area surrounding Academic Assessment Confidence.

For the HE themes induced from student interviews at the end of their first year, this literature contextualises the design and support of assessments for new students entering business and management HE studies from FE assessment regimes. This is particularly useful in understanding the differences in assessment culture and the skills and capability expectations which may shape the way in which assessments are designed and the purpose of the assessment regime as a contrast to that of FE. In particular, this section of literature gives background insight into areas of non-standard assessment, more closely linked to those within the Business and Management subject area.

A summary literature review map which illustrates the relationship between emergent themes and readings is provided in Appendix 1.

## **The 'A' level system**

Given the focus of this research into student experiences of transition from one assessment regime to another, understanding the emphasis and messages given to students entering and experiencing the 'A' level curriculum is important. Whilst the individual student experience will be subjective, it is often within the context of the educational policy at the time of study. More than this, it is often within the social framework created by the policy. In seeking to understand the sociological aspects of this, I began to explore frameworks which highlight how policymakers construct the conceptualisation of the value of education and how this affects the learner.

Theorists point to the policy idea of 'target populations' and how these are manipulated in building a political base, known as 'Social Construction' in which populations are constructed through their educational development to meet the wider needs of society (Ingram, Schneider and DeLeon 2007). This seems a fitting approach to the evaluation of 16-18 education system, given the desire of successive governments to shape the educated population of the UK. In the case of social construction, it is argued that there are benefits to be gained from being more competitive globally and that the burden of that responsibility of delivering such benefits lies

with the educated and skilled population which would subsequently enhance workplace productivity (Hodgson and Spours 1999).

The theory of social construction is particularly interesting in its application to the impact upon student experience. The surrounding study context and approach taken by the educators influence student identity and participation aspects. This approach is often dictated by policy implementation and subsequent policy changes that impact the student experience. Literature highlights that along with this comes the notion of 'consumption' of education and the increasing commodification of knowledge as a product to be traded within a marketplace. Trowler (2001:188) discusses how knowledge has taken on a 'thing-like character ... possessed, stored, accumulated'. Historically this has led to the introduction of policies based upon modular syllabi and increased levels of coursework through small incremental changes to the curriculum. However, soon it became increasingly intertwined with performance and productivity judgements made about the FE sector, leading to the need for students to perform better in grade outputs with a view to more students progressing to HE. Understanding that student performance equates to FE provider performance through league tables, assists me in understanding the emphasis placed upon grades by all within the system.

Historically, the implementation of 'curriculum 2000' has shaped the approach to curriculum experienced by the students being interviewed in my study and therefore requires some insight, despite the more recent changes discussed further on page 22. Curriculum 2000 has become known for its 'climate of cramming' and 'didactic teaching' which were highlighted by Hargreaves (2001:3). It was interesting and insightful to read reports which suggested that students were suffering from stress and anxiety, with many withdrawing from their studies (Hodgson et al 2001) as these concerns undoubtedly impact the student experience. Some schools even reported that students began to drop courses, with some going down to 2 'A' levels, evidence to suggest that rather than broadening the curriculum, some students have had to become more specialised under Curriculum 2000 than had ever previously been the case (Priestley 2003). The implications of the policy for student choice also impact experience of and engagement with assessment in that scenario. The literature provided me with a background against which I could consider the student stories emerging during the interviews.

### **Teaching, Learning and Assessment in the 'A' level system**

There has been an increasing emphasis in all UK compulsory education on assessment processes which support learning and underpin student 'achievement, progress and confidence ... through

assessment for learning rather than assessment of learning' (Torrance 2007:281). This has led to an increasing focus on formative assessment in which improvement feedback is fundamental to student development. However, some authors (James et al 2006, Black et al 2006) have pointed out the narrow interpretation of this to the point where these have become techniques to assure success, which in fact create more reliance upon the teachers rather than fostering independence of learning. This focus on increasing support has taken the form of increasing clarity in process, procedures and criteria for success which has been situated within a backdrop of coaching, draft reading and constant practice.

This has led to what some (Torrance 2007:283) describe as 'instrumentalism' moving the situation from one of 'assessment for learning' to 'assessment of learning' and learning is superseded by compliance to criteria. Students become focussed on improving their submitted work by conforming to the feedback of the person who will eventually mark the work to ensure success. The cost of this is that students become more reliant upon the guidance and feedback of assessors. This subsequently means that they no longer focus upon their own judgement of development as learners and ability to self-regulate their learning and understand where they can improve themselves through self-review. This is compounded by the competence-based assessments and in particular, the attainment-focussed culture developing in the FE sector (Black et al 2006).

### **Student choice within the 'A' level system**

It is clear from the literature that assessment regimes at 'A' level reflect the desired knowledge developed through the curriculum to shape the desired population target skill set. However, Young (1998) highlights four problematic aspects of curriculum design in post 16 education which are key to how students experience the curriculum. Despite the changes to curriculum 2000 and more recent updates, these four tenets of student choice (influences and options of what and whether to study), externalisation (the extent to which measurements and judgements are made at a local level), modularity (configuration of the curriculum) and outcome/purpose (rationale for and meaning of study) remain consistent in the experiences of students (Morrison 2014). Student choice underwent some nominal change with the introduction of AS levels, beginning at 4 in the first year of study of AS levels and narrowing to 3 in year 2 for A2 level study. However, this recommendation to begin with a wider selection of subjects was not compulsory and as a result, student choice has remained free and relatively narrow from the beginning of 'A' level study. The A Level system has subsequently been reformed which has led to the 'decoupling' of AS and A levels, meaning that AS levels no longer

count towards 'A' levels and that assessment has been formalised as mainly by examination (Ofqual 2017).

The Russell Group warned students in 2011 that anything other than the traditional narrower 'A' levels risked being rejected as insufficiently rigorous (Hodgson and Spours 2011b) and this has compounded the idea of the 'A' level as the gold standard of FE qualifications. This has led to more 'middle attainers' engaging in 'A' level studies to which they were not ideally suited, shaping their experiences of the assessment systems and shaping their expectations of future assessments in HE. Consideration of the experience of 'A' levels, both in terms of curriculum and assessment, by 'middle attainers', frequently results in them making the decision to leave education early (Hodgson and Spours 2014:467). This subsequently leads to increases in what has become referred to as NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training) and it is thought that this in turn has led to better 14-19 participation rates. As middle and low attainers fear that they may be unable to access the labour market or apprenticeships, they turn to 'A' level study as their only option, despite them wishing to leave education early, fearing that the experience of FE exams may be negative. Hodgson and Spours (2014:477) refer to this as the 'line of least resistance' which had been aided and abetted by the AS system in which learners would receive an interim idea of their performance which in turn would raise aspirations and incentivise continued study. Following the Wolf Review of 14-19 education (2011) the situation for students has not improved. The review led to the removal of AS modular levels and removed opportunities for resitting with more emphasis on stretching specifications and external assessment (Ofqual 2012).

### **Externalisation of 'A' level curriculum and testing**

Young (1998) addresses the impact of such externalisation of the curriculum and testing introduced with Curriculum 2000 and now built upon in more recent reviews, which have centred on actual subject curricula directives from Government departments. Young claims that this, accompanied by terminal examinations, marked by a select group of external examiners, informed by the agenda of a select group of University advisors, remains the predominant model. This raises a number of different questions in terms of the understanding of student experiences of such a system, which places increasing emphasis on the written word under time-constrained conditions. End examination structures within the 'A' level system have been discussed in some depth, with debate mostly focussing around the linearity and modularisation of syllabi i.e. what is studied and when in the process of learning and particularly assessment. The work of Vidal Rodeiro (2012) and Hayward and McNicholl (2007) evaluate whether cross-

subject assessment relationships should be built at 'A' level giving a more rounded view of the subjects. The linear system existing pre-Curriculum2000 was modularised by the introduction of the AS level, taking the emphasis off terminal examination as the only point of assessment.

Young (1998:131) argues that the early 'A' level curricula lacked continuous assessment and integrated modularity, which might encourage the merging of the academic and the vocational through 'connective specialisation' which would encourage more participation and better knowledge and skill development for all. The current focus is one of a 'track based' system (Hodgson and Spours 2014), rather than a linked curriculum, in which the prevailing assessment model is one which emphasises end examination, even where some coursework elements are present. This could be particularly problematic where studies in Business and Management aim to bring together the academic and vocational through applied commercial insight. The 'track' based system means that students may feel inexperienced in aspects where others, from the different track, may have insight, leading them to be overwhelmed with University studies. This is also problematic in terms of teaching approaches during transition when Universities aim to integrate experiences of students from a number of different FE subject areas into a new HE subject area.

### **Modularity in the 'A' level system**

Between the years of 2000 and 2014, the 'A' level system has been modular rather than linear in structure. This means that subjects are broken down into smaller chunks with more assessment points than those traditionally taken in linear structures which are reliant upon end exam only. It is clear that this works differently in different subject areas (Vidal-Rodeiro and Nadas 2009) but most, if not all in different ways, benefit from the advantages of modularity. These advantages are plentiful and include curriculum flexibility, shared ownership of learning, improved student-teacher relationships, varied diets of assessment and short-term assessment goals. Through a more balanced workload and regular feedback with the opportunity to re-sit, this also benefits increasing extrinsic motivation for students and rising HE aspiration.

However, some (Hayward and McNicholl 2007) argue that although the assessment diet is spread over the 2 years of study in a modular system, this punishes those who may be less academically mature in the initial stages of that assessment. In addition, they argued that teacher time could be better spent with more detailed learning and preparation of students throughout the year rather than continuously marking and re-marking assessments. The biggest criticism levelled at the modular system was that it was fragmented to the point where it lacked

depth and conceptual understanding due to such small 'chunks' of learning leading to a surface, reproductive approach being taken by students. When combined with the culture of constant resit and the resulting rises in grades, this was sufficient to develop mistrust in the real value of the 'A' level as an academic marker (Vidal-Rodeiro and Nadas 2009). It is this latter point which took precedence in Ofqual research (2012) into and consultation on the perceptions of 'A' levels, resulting in the removal of modular examination points and resit opportunities and eventually the 'decoupling' of AS levels from 'A' levels themselves. In 2013 it was announced that linear structures would return, with the reduction of non-exam assessments and all exams to take place only once, in the summer.

There has been much confusion for students and staff in the process of introducing this new linear structure and some Universities have been forced to design their own entrance examination to replace the measurements usually given during AS examinations as predictions of final grades (Morrison 2014). However, it is important to note that these changes will not have impacted the students in the current study as they completed 'A' level assessments in 2013/14 and therefore commenced their FE studies within the existing curriculum 2000 framework in 2011.

### **The outcome and value placed on 'A' level assessments**

Experience in my professional practice suggests that examinations tend not to reflect ability in the broader skillsets required in vocational Higher Education, which is confirmed by Richardson (2015). Students experienced and successful in examination scenarios often struggle to deliver the more analytical, pragmatic responsiveness required in vocational tasks as the assessment approach developed during 'A' level teaching is narrowly focussed. Consideration of how this might impact transitions to HE led me to explore literature which would shed light on the central arguments around the use of examination as the predominant measure for entry into University. In particular, I was interested in how these HE entry expectations are experienced by students in terms of shaping their approach to assessments and their expectations of assessment within HE education which might affect their levels of confidence during transition.

Terminal, externally marked examinations have become popular over the years as they have allowed for the production of achievement 'signals' which enable comparisons of expected knowledge or skillsets to external standards and can be linked to funding (Bishop 1997:3). Some authors (Kang, 1985, Bishop 2000) claim that such terminal exams which allow performance to be achieved and represented through a distinguishing grade, offer incentive for engagement of

learners and are highly personalised in representing ability or knowledge as they are produced in the isolation of exam settings.

The nature of possible outcomes was adjusted considerably under the Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition government (Hodgson and Spours 2011a). Following election, the coalition scrapping of all Diplomas which were intended as a more applied approach to learning, and placing more emphasis on raising the age of participation in traditional qualifications until at least 18 by 2015 (DfE 2010), put higher education as the major goal.

## **What do we mean by confidence?**

At the heart of my study is the desire to better understand which conceptual ideas support and influence instigation, direction, effort, interest in and persistence with assessments in Higher Education Business and Management students. This involves drawing together theoretical traditions around personal expectancy: the interplay between people's expectations of obtaining a certain output and the importance of that output. More importantly it gives insight into how personal expectancy influences student experiences of assessment in a way which might be described as confidence (Schunk, 1991). In order to evaluate the concept of 'assessment confidence' it is necessary to explore the surrounding terminology. In particular, this requires a review of the ideas of confidence and competence, in addition to the more established constructs of Academic self-concept and self-efficacy, often used synonymously with the word confidence in academic circles. Although related, confidence, self-efficacy, competence, academic self-confidence are subtly different concepts.

## **Confidence and self-efficacy**

Studies around aspects of confidence, self-esteem and self-efficacy date back as far as the 1960s when educational psychology began to turn away from behaviouristic principles to a more humanistic approach which considered the affective aspects of self (McLeod 2015). Studies relating these principles to academic achievement began to appear in the 1970s, culminating in the studies by Hansford and Hattie (1982) which established that the link between self-esteem and academic achievement was negative. This study also reviewed other facets of self-concept and their relationships to achievement, finding that subject specific 'academic self concept' (1982:138) had the strongest correlation to achievement. This led to researchers turning away

from study of the 'self' to a more subject orientated 'information processing' approach, in which the emphasis was upon cognitive tasks such as encoding and decoding human thinking, memory processes and problem solving.

This focus upon information processing contrasted to the increasing body of work by Bandura, who, in the 1970s offered an alternative to the information processing work by investigating how individuals develop beliefs about their own capabilities and the resultant behaviour, referred to as 'self-efficacy' (1977). In 1986, Bandura rejected the underlying indifference to self by arguing that it enabled a measure of control over the processing aspects and therefore warranted further investigation. Bandura (1986:391) defined self- efficacy as 'people's judgements of their capabilities to organise and execute courses of action required to attain ... performance'. In 1993, further work by Bandura identified that self-efficacy beliefs affected 'human agency' through 4 basic processes: cognitive, motivational, affective and selective.

Human agency within self-efficacy has a potentially interesting role to play in this study as it centres on the notion that a person's belief about their capabilities to control a situation are 'self-aiding or self-hindering' (Bandura 1989:1175). In a cognitive sense, this shapes how students may set goals for themselves and determine their levels of commitment through evaluating ambiguities and uncertainties in the educational transition. In a motivational sense, this can also determine how much effort, endeavour and perseverance students will exert in order to overcome uncertainty. The affective aspect of human agency relates to whether the lack of ability to exercise control leads to stress and depression, or in general a lack of a sense of being able to 'cope' with what faces them (Roe Clark 2005:313). All of this affects the selective elements of human agency, which influence the extent to which individuals will select activities they will willingly engage with and those they will not. The interaction between these elements is shaped by the context of the environment and can be insightful during the transition to University life. Roe Clark (2005:310) found that students acted on forethought in their initial University months, imagining or foreseeing future events. They subsequently translated these into the present in order to bring about behaviours necessary to realise the future success and build a strategy for how they may overcome the perceived risks.

It is clear from this insight into human agency, that self-efficacy, as developed by Bandura (1986) focuses on future-orientated, cognitive judgements of risk, control and competence. More importantly, self-efficacy has been found to have a strong influence on academic persistence (Lent et al 1984). This is key to the current study as it offers some insight into how students persevere in engagement with assessment tasks and raises questions about what might

influence such perseverance of engagement. Pajares (1996) furthered the body of work on self-efficacy and determined that most of the difficulties experienced by students were not down to their actual capabilities, but the beliefs they held about their capability. Often, it was reported in Pajares (254) work this was as basic as the self-belief that the student could not 'read, write or handle numbers'.

Bandura (1997) determined that confidence, as a term, differs from self-efficacy in that self-efficacy not only describes the strength of belief (as confidence does), but is based on an affirmation of capability. Bandura goes on to describe the term 'confidence' as a 'catchword rather than a construct embedded in a theoretical system' (1997:382). However, later studies (Sander and Sanders 2003) argue that it is important to understand the confidence aspect as a specific concept because this may vary between situations and people. They argue that whilst a person may be confident in one situation, this may reduce drastically in a less familiar and more challenging environment. In higher education, the task at hand relates to achieving 'graduateness' (Glover et al 2002: 294). This refers to the development of skills and attitudes associated with having studied an undergraduate degree but does not lend itself well to the idea of 'affirmation of capability' highlighted by Bandura. As a result, Glover et al (2002:4) propose that 'academic confidence' is indeed a 'construct distinct from its parent concept, self-efficacy'.

In addition, Seifert (2004:144) raises some concerns about the relationships built in self-efficacy theory between capability beliefs and motivation. Where this traditional theorisation implies that someone who sees themselves as capable will be motivated, there is other evidence to suggest that some capable students may not be engaged by the learning and therefore will struggle to motivate themselves. This in itself can eventually lead to poor confidence in the wider engagement with the academic institution rather than their own capability to complete any particular assessment. In addition, students are sometimes unaware of their own capabilities but this does not prevent them from being motivated to engage with a new task and in doing so, create a confidence based upon stimulated engagement with learning.

Given the background of students entering Business and Management studies, where the assessment type and requirements are largely unfamiliar and challenging in nature and level, this clarification between the two concepts is an interesting distinction for this study. This study builds largely upon the idea that academic confidence as highlighted by Sander and Sanders might be focussed down to the specific task of assessment in determining the place of 'academic assessment confidence' in the current literature base. One thing that is agreed by authors is that both constructs (confidence and self-efficacy) are likely to stem from Bandura's (1977) 'four

sources: mastery experience (previous performance), vicarious experience (social comparison), verbal persuasion (comments made by others) and physiological states (anxiety and mood states)' (adapted from Sander and Sanders 2006:35).

### *Sources of self-efficacy*

The first concept of mastery is argued as the most 'robust, influential and authentic' of the sources of self-efficacy (Fong and Krause 2014:251) as it focuses on past experiences of success or failure. It is thought that this is related closely to self-evaluation of competence and there is evidence that learners with a high degree of perceived mastery will have improved confidence to persevere when faced with setbacks, adversity or high risk tasks (Usher and Pajares 2008). In addition, those with a high 'mastery orientation' often regard learning as a valid goal in itself and believe that self-improvement is an important success marker (Hsieh et al 2007:457). According to Major et al (2006) these students often also have other positive associated outcomes such as proactive learning, innovative problem solving and varied strategies for learning. However, a study by Geertshuis et al (2014) also highlighted the need for caution when assuming the relationship between mastery and confidence. Results from their study with students entering higher education suggested that confidence did not always develop with mastery, as the challenges facing students in assessment evolve over their degrees progressing to more demanding and less familiar scenarios. As it is not always possible to fully associate previous successes to new challenges, this weakens the strength of the mastery concept in considering confidence aspects (Geertshuis 2014:164).

In the context of this study, where students may not have a background in the subject area or even be familiar with the assessment methods, it is important to understand how this mastery might manifest itself in the experiences of Business and Management students at our institution. A study by Hutchison et al (2006) pointed to a number of ways in which mastery can be developed outside of the summative assessment 'succeed or fail' scenarios. Firstly, the learning/understanding taken from course materials can be classed as mastery, with students in their study expressing a feeling of being 'out of their depth' when failing to understand the class materials. Students who felt they had mastered the materials expressed feelings of enjoyment, interest and confidence. Equally, familiarity with software and standard IT packages could also be classed as mastery, particularly where specialist packages may be used as standard in HE which are potentially unfamiliar to FE studies. In addition, mastering the ability to identify when it is necessary to seek help can also contribute to the overall feelings of being 'capable' of being successful in an assessment (Hutchison et al 2006: 44).

The second source of self-efficacy, vicarious experience is based on the observation of experiences of others and is thought to be of lesser influence. Fong and Krause (2014) highlight that this works in two ways, the first of which is via social comparison, whereby the observation of others allows for individuals to appraise their own capabilities. This is done by seeking out individuals deemed to be at the same level, to enable the learner to reflect their own capabilities for success from the successes of someone similar. Some students may encounter this when 'teaming' techniques are used to encourage close working where ability levels vary, and previous studies have shown this to be the case (Zeldin and Pajares 2000). The second aspect to this is that learners often seek out those that may be deemed to be more successful in the hope of developing their own capabilities to succeed from them. A study by Hutchison et al (2006:40) pointed to the fact that vicarious experiences do not only emerge from peer to peer examples but also from those that have undertaken similar tasks successfully. This implies that the wider circle of social influence may be at play with students seeking out family members who have become role models due to their previous successes and ability to advise or instruct.

Verbal persuasion includes formative and summative feedback, advice and guidance from peers, tutors or family members. These feedback messages may be so persuasive as to strengthen or weaken a learner's beliefs around their capabilities (Hattie and Timperley 2007). In order to be effective, such feedback must be perceived by the learner as realistic and authentic and from a credible, knowledgeable source. Whilst students may receive verbal feedback from peers during teaming, it is also possible for feedback to be gained from social comparisons with the feedback given to others during classes and discussions both with and without teachers present. However, there is significant evidence that the role of the tutor is key in providing a credible source for judgement. According to Hutchison et al (2006:45) it is possible for students to have their capability beliefs shaped during a number of interactions in class. Of particular importance is the verbal and non-verbal feedback given when contributing to class, asking questions and seeking further help.

The fourth and final source of self-efficacy, physiological state, relates to the physical aspects of stress and anxiety to the learner's perceived emotional state, subsequently affecting efficacy beliefs. Anxiety is closely associated with 'a state of anticipatory apprehension over possible happenings' (Bandura 1988:77) which goes beyond fear to avoidant behaviours. This may include avoiding engagement with the assessment itself but is likely to also extend to avoiding interaction with peers and tutors as well as class sessions associated with the assessment. Many studies have subsequently investigated assessment stress in university students (Evans and

Fitzgibbon 1992, Abouserie 1991) in order to identify the sources. These studies concluded that there were two sources of stress for students, performance and social. Whilst the social stresses of spending time with family and friends are outside of the remit of my study, the other, performance, is of interest in the context of student experiences of assessment. It was found that self and others' expectations of their performance, coupled with workloads, exams and assignment deadlines were the main causes of student stress (Abouserie 1991:324).

According to original studies by Bandura (1986) the ability to exercise control over a scenario is central to anxiety arousal. Bandura (1988) furthered this research to investigate how this control manifests itself in a belief about ability to 'cope' with the demands or stressors. If a student is feeling anxious towards a particular assessment, this may highlight to them that there are aspects in which they may not be fully competent and as a result, they feel unable to cope with the demands (Usher and Pajares 2006). Where a student has the belief that they can cope, this is referred to as 'cognitive control' whilst others take action early to 'forestall' the negative aspects of the assessment such as seeking advice and guidance by deeper engagement, which is known as 'behavioural control' (Bandura 1988:79). It has become clearer throughout those studies that behavioural control more quickly develops competence and the feeling of being able to 'cope' with the performance aspects of assessment in HE.

### **Confidence, self-concept and competence**

In contrast to confidence, academic self-concept is formed through experiences with the environment which are influenced by environmental reinforcement and by significant others. This makes the aspect of social comparison particularly important, as has been shown in students around academic self-concept (Marsh 1987) but at the heart of this is self-esteem developed through 'reflected appraisal' from others who are deemed significant i.e. seeing themselves as others see them, more directly impacting confidence than perceived competence (Bong and Skaalvik 2003:3). This may take the form of family, friends and peers or those in a more authoritative position such as teachers. Marsh (2007) confirms that the difference between confidence and academic self-esteem lies in the focus on past-orientated judgements of competence related directly to esteem. However, both the concepts of confidence and academic self-esteem are related to competence based frameworks which are domain specific, ie subject related. This means that both concepts are dependent upon the subject being studied and perceived competence in that subject. In addition, both concepts relate to competence beliefs as a predictor of achievement outcomes and hence the intersection of the concepts lies within the link of competence development.

Stewart et al (2000) highlighted that there were similarities in the expression of confidence and competence in a positive scenario i.e. where confidence was reflected in clear competence. However, this was not always the case in a negative scenario i.e. those who lacked confidence were not always lacking in competence. The study by Stewart et al indicated that competence was a construct based more on experience whilst confidence was more likely to be associated with what was potentially possible, with help, in tasks where no prior experience was available. In addition, the study suggests that lack of confidence may well be based upon feelings of uncertainty or anxiety about what might result from an activity. This helps in my study by clarifying that confidence, whilst having domain specific aspects, may engender more of an emotional outcome in terms of expectations and engagement, than it does academic outcome. There is some evidence (Nicholson et al 2013) that this relates more to student effort, task persistence and motivation and that is of particular interest in my study.

The conceptual area of confidence is somewhat more generalised and discussions with colleagues in my practice area of business and management have highlighted that the term confidence tends to be used interchangeably with that of competence. Holroyd and Harlen (1996) conceptualised confidence as 'a feeling of self-assurance, a feeling that some tasks can probably be completed with the knowledge and skills one possesses and without having to call on others for rescue' (326). However, this is rather generalised, and for some authors, confidence in University settings relates more to study-related behaviours and competences (independent study, asking questions in class and attending lectures) rather than relating specifically to engagement with assessment (Sander 2004, Sander and Sanders 2009). Hennessey et al (2001) agree with this, classifying development of knowledge and opportunity to practice in a supportive environment as key to the development of confidence.

### **Academic Confidence**

Despite general agreement (Bandura 1986, Sanders and Sander 2007) that mastery experience is a significant determinant, there is little focus in any study on mastery of assessment as a specific academic activity across differing contexts. However, there is some literature, albeit conflicting, around the role of confidence, particularly in terms of student achievement and performance. Pajares and Johnson (1994) found clear relationships between self-confidence in writing and improved writing performance. However, studies done by Morgan and Cleave-Hogg (2002) and Barnsley et al (2004) found no link between student confidence in their skills and performance in related assessments. Whilst the relationship between confidence and

performance is of interest, these studies help to confirm that my own research seeks to focus more on the intervening variable of student engagement with assessment rather than the achievement outcomes from it. This has directed my readings less towards those around achievement and more towards those which give insight into the interactions between student, context and assessment in the initial stages of FE/HE transition.

In an attempt to address some aspects of this gap in assessment specific knowledge, the Academic Confidence Scale was developed in 2003 (Sander and Sanders) but was renamed as the ABC (Academic Behavioural Confidence) scale in 2006 as it focused on confidence in actions and plans related to academic study on entry to HE. However, even within this adjusted scale, there is little reference to assessment beyond the general aspects of 'attain good grades', 'pass assessments at the first attempt' and 'produce your best work in coursework assignments': these are more general aspects and predominantly outcome driven. My research proposes to give insight to the influence of previous experiences of, social processes around and engagement with assessment, which may influence transition.

Such insight around student interaction with assessment is discussed by Hutchinson and Gul (1997) indicating that comfort and confidence with a type of assessment task may result from personality traits such as introversion/extroversion. They recommended that personality influencers on student work should be determined before activities designed and set to be as inclusive of personality types reflected in the group. Robson et al (2004) agrees, linking this to communicative style and adds that gender and disciplinary differences (hard v soft, pure v applied) in terms of perceived difficulty, may well also account for varying levels of confidence. The reality for most tutors in the area of Business and Management is that no such qualitative information regarding student personality and background is available at the point of assessment design. The gap left by the lack of such information can be frustrating for tutors who, as a result, will often 'pitch' assessment design at the 'middle ground'. This in itself, potentially risks the confidence potential for students outside of this grouping.

## Assessment design in HE

In order to contextualise the assessment regime which students enter in HE, it is first important to recognise that assessment itself is significant for its impact on 'what, how and how much students study' (Gibbs and Simpson 2004:3). Whilst assessment is well accepted as a way of directing teaching, learning and curriculum, there is still much debate surrounding how the 'dominant discourse and underlying culture of assessment' shape the learner experience and development (Medland 2016:82). Although Biggs' model of constructive alignment (1996, 2011) is widely acknowledged for its clarity on the interdependence between learning outcomes, teaching and assessment, in practice these are often not treated as equal partners.

Price et al (2011) point out that in current HE practice, teaching methods are 'habitually privileged' (480) over the assessment of learning outcomes and increasingly there is emphasis on a fourth area of 'defining content'. Price et al (2011) go on to argue that this new fourth area encourages extremities of clarity, explicitness and transparency, all of which undermine the role of assessment as an intellectually stimulating challenge to the learner, who attempts merely to conform to requirements. This is confirmed by Newstead (2002) who states that current assessment practices in HE fail to promote conceptual, deep approaches to learning, instead encouraging the adoption of a mechanical, strategic approach to studies.

This mechanical approach has led to some authors referring to assessment as the 'Achilles' heel of quality' (Knight 2002) in terms of effectiveness and sense making for students. According to Boud (2007:21) assessment is intended to frame student activity, making judgments about those elements of knowledge considered a priority and as a result, should have the most powerful effect on teaching and learning activities. However, it is clear that this has not been the case, as growth in student numbers has promoted an economy of scale in teaching terms, but the same economy in assessments terms has been hard to deliver (Price et al 2011). These increased numbers, emphasis on efficiency, complex quality bureaucracies and inconsistent staff development have led to less innovation and development of assessment methods. Where innovation and development does occur, there is sometimes little opportunity for students to practice the variety of assessments and hence success rates are not as desired. As a result, more traditional methods of assessment have been more commonly adhered to, coupled only by developments in technological assistants such as multiple choice exams and online tick box feedback (Gibbs and Coffey 2004).

The Burgess Group (Universities UK 2007) identified four factors surrounding assessment which need further consideration. The first of these is the student experience and perspective expressed through the student voice. This area has become contentious, with students now having the opportunity to influence national league tables, with their views relating to experiences of assessment. HEFCE (2016) reports that assessment has the lowest of the ratings across all areas of University experience judgements at 73%, although this is improving over time, by 1% between 2014 – 2015. In the subject (JACS code) of Business and Administration, the average rating for the use of assessment criteria and assessment arrangements were 79% and 77% respectively, indicating that there remains some significant work to do in this area (HEFCE 2016). This is compounded by evidence collected with a wider stakeholder group suggesting that, even beyond student satisfaction surveys, ‘assessment is not successfully meeting the needs of students, employers, politicians or the public in general’ (Higher Education Academy 2012:7)

### **Student support for assessment**

The focus on student ratings has sparked a more extensive debate into the marketization of education and in particular whether students are consumers of education and hence assessment type and design become part of the consideration both pre and post-consumption (Ramsden 2008). This is compounded by the UK governments push to develop a more ‘real world view’ of Higher Education, focusing on transferable skills and practical and professional competence (Lomas 2007) above knowledge and understanding. Furedi (2011:4) challenges how this might be counterproductive in terms of the desired intellectual pressure expected within quality HE assessment processes, pointing out that pressure ‘does not always promote satisfaction’. There are worries (Ashley 2009) that this concentration on producing happy consumers may have impacted the design of assessment and led to grade inflation. There are also concerns that there are more expectations placed upon the teaching staff in FE to make it easier for students to achieve higher grades and that this subsequently impacts expectations of how assessment will be assisted in the HE sector rather than the ‘collective inquiry’ expected between student and tutor (Haggis 2006:8)

Some authors believe that the key reason for assessment failing to support learning is ineffective feedback (Price et al 2008, Price et al 2011, Juwah et al 2004). Studies illustrate that problems with content, interpretation, tone and timing (McCune 2004, Hyland 2000 and Juwah et al 2004)

lead to students disengaging from the assessment process. Beaumont et al (2011) investigated the expectations of the feedback process as a specific part of assessment in the transition from FE to HE. It was found that increased emphasis had been placed upon ensuring extensive guidance throughout all phases of assessment within the FE sector. Guidance was given by teachers at 3 points: Preparatory guidance, before the task commenced, was often offered in the form of model answers and exemplars, which was then followed by in-task guidance in the form of draft readings and tips as well as the traditional feedback following summative submission. Whilst this might result in league table improvements for the colleges and schools, it results in many students being unprepared for the independent approaches typical of HE assessment regimes (Leese 2010)

As Beaumont et al (2016) point out, the dominant discourse within HE during transition to HE assessment points to students being unable to cope with the lack of scaffolding, finding it disconcerting and a source of major anxiety. Where previously they have experienced a system which models desired behaviours, verifies understanding and offers constant clarification, many experience the transition without any 'scaffolding' to support their transition to independent learning. As HE does not focus on the 'incremental mastery of a concept' in the same guided way, this is problematic for students, particularly those without subject background (Beaumont et al 2016:332).

This understanding of the previous FE experience of students and how it shapes their expectations of the experience in HE is key to my study. Stuyven et al (2005) point out that these expectations influence student approaches to learning and studying which means that they often lack confidence where they cannot find indications of the aforementioned 'scaffolding'. Beaumont et al (2011) argue that this is due to a more tacit approach taken by University education which expects students to discover and develop their own response to the demands of assessment. Of course, there is drive for change in the form of policy changes responding to the student voice, but institutional practice within HE has been slowed by the continued dominant discourse which measures learning rather than promotes it (Boud 2007:17).

This general failure to move from a 'test culture' to an 'assessment culture' on a large scale has encouraged student preoccupations with learning to pass rather than learning to learn (Medland 2016). Where previously in 'A' level studies, assessment may have been more focussed on reproduction, students may be able to more easily equate their efforts to memorise with success levels, building an idea of the effort to grade 'returns'. This appears to be fair and transparent to students as a process. However, in HE, where assessment is based upon knowledge which

is likely to be highly contested, complex and less absolute (Price et al 2012), the link between effort and grades may become less straightforward. Where students equate effort to success levels, this may lead them to believe that they are not capable of success. Their response to this may be to see marking as unfair, to believe that the teaching has been bad or that they are incapable of success in this assessment system. As a result, the focus of HE institutions has been largely to concentrate on the 'tutor designed mechanics' of assessment in order to deliver reliability and validity, leading to overuse of more conventional assessment practices (13). There is some acceptance that conventional assessment practices, whilst not being inappropriate, are no longer a 'one-size-fits-all' approach to enhancing and evaluating student achievement (Deneen and Boud 2014) and that a more diverse, dynamic approach to learning events is expected (Mazur 2009). Boud and Associates (2010:3) state that despite the call for more varied assessment for learning, the dominant paradigm in HE has been around the production of 'low value, fragmented assessments' which only serve to promote a superficial and limited attitude to learning.

Where changes have taken place in assessment, these have tended to focus upon 'assessment innovation' with a view to improving the student experience (Bevitt 2015:104). These methods have focused in on 'constructive alignment of assessment, learning opportunities and learning outcomes' (Biggs and Tang 2011:95) in an attempt to shift to deeper learning, but this varies between disciplines in terms of timing, content, choice and balance across the assessment regime. Gibbs and Simpson (2004:21) highlight that students are influenced by past experiences but may also be confused by contradictions around 'tacit' or hidden aspects of assessment and therefore may not be able to determine what would constitute a 'good' attempt at it. Where this is the case, and in particular this can occur with new, unfamiliar types of assessment, Kalyuga (2011:3) argues that increased cognitive load can lead to students focussing on irrelevant assessment activities which lead to lower achievement. This is due to the assessment type differing so much from previous experience that students are unable even to apply latent learning from earlier assessment tasks. This is particularly interesting for this study, where students often come from traditional FE assessment regimes of essay/examination and enter one in which innovative assessment design is promoted. In my own subject area, innovative assessments may include creative portfolios, mood boards, interactive presentations, magazine development and professional dialogues alongside assessments based largely upon problem based learning principles.

Innovative HE assessments have, also, to respond to the demand for graduates to survive in the real world (Clegg and Bryan 2006) with the development of authentic meaningful assessments

within a 'realistic context' (Bevitt 2015:105). This has been promoted openly within the context of an employability agenda nationally (HEA 2012). Zell (2001) claims that this sometimes leads to students choosing to study because of interests focused around the career and pay attached to business subjects rather than engaging in the learning itself. In addition, students may often be less than receptive towards such innovations in assessment that differ largely from their previous experiences. Gibbs (2006:20) points out that students are 'instinctively wary of approaches with which they are not familiar or that might be more demanding' due to lack of predictable outcome. This lack of predictability also extends to the assessment workload itself, which has been shown to have an effect on student mood and motivation (Coutts, Gilleard and Baglin 2011). This may impact the way they perceive their own ability to self-manage and in particular their assessment confidence.

There is also some evidence to suggest that ambiguity or academic pressures presented by workloads may also make students vulnerable and create competition between students, which prevents them working together effectively (Pekrun and Linnenbrink-Garcia 2012). Bevitt (2015:107) points out that very little work has been done on how previous study experience affects all of this and that more must be done to understand the impact of new assessment types on students transitioning from FE to HE. Previous studies (Sambell and McDowell 1998, Maclellan 2001) have shown that student interpretations of assessment vary and this means that how they act on messages, make choices and behave towards assessment can differ greatly.

Many studies have established a link between learning approach and its impact upon assessment interpretation and preferences i.e. assessments which students feel more at home and comfortable with (Heikkila and Lonka 2006, Clarke et al 2005). These studies have linked deep approaches to assessments such as essays which allow for extended insight and thinking and surface learning with short, task based or multi-choice assessments. However, Gijbels and Dochy (2006) are critical of how useful this might be in the context of students transitioning from one assessment regime to another. In particular, they raise questions about whether or not such approaches are fixed and whether some students may have experienced and be familiar with, one type of assessment but ultimately have preferences for others. Equally, students often shift between surface and deep approaches dependent upon the assessment facing them, meaning that transition from FE to HE can create a state of flux in assessment terms on a number of levels.

There is also some evidence that students often have preferences for assessment types or formats which they perceive as easy with less risk of failure or which are statistically more

favourable (where marks are guaranteed for basic elements of the task (Clarke et al 2005). Studies by Kingston and Forland (2004) found that assessments such as portfolios, although initially perceived negatively by students uncertain of the format, often go on to be appreciated by the same students for their perceived authenticity and active student involvement in the competence evidencing. This is important in the current study in understanding the evaluative process for students moving to such unfamiliar types of assessment.

Seminal research by Astin (1984) highlighted that whatever the assessment type, the key predictor of success is the extent to which student/student and student/tutor interactions foster involvement. More recent studies (Gibbs 2007) corroborated this and clarified that student involvement in discussions about the nature of learning and assessment and related processes help shape understanding and expectations of as well as engagement with assessment activities. Price et al (2011) argues that this has been overlooked due to assumptions that students are already 'assessment literate' from their previous experiences with assessment in FE.

In an overview on assessment literacy, Price et al (2012) highlight the need for students to appreciate the relationship between assessment and learning as well as the need for them to understand the conceptual principles of assessment practice. This may differ across contexts and a change in this may challenge student familiarity with the skills, techniques, methods and purpose of the new assessment approach (Price et al 2012: 10). This, in turn, may lead them to doubt that they possess the intellectual ability and skills to select and apply their existing techniques to the tasks.

## **Concluding thoughts on the literature**

In providing background insight to support emergent themes, this literature highlights the wider context of assessment experiences beyond the actual delivery of the assessment itself and the role that this may play in increasing 'confidence'. In particular, this includes the political influences at play in the FE environment and the social interplay at work between students, staff and the examining 'bodies'. The literature also presents the context of Curriculum 2000 as undoubtedly influential in the experiences students have of 'A' level assessment. The political emphasis placed upon 'terminal' end assessment and the benefits to all stakeholders of the associated measurable outcomes is also clear. This sheds light on the decisions made by students during their FE experience, in terms of what to study, how much to study and the approach taken to assessment which may shape their approach to HE assessment. It is also clear from this literature that there are many stressors within the assessment processes, both in FE

and HE and that these can lead to disengagement unless the student is able to exercise some aspect of control.

In addition, the literature also offers some clarification on the terminology surrounding the concept of confidence and related constructs, and identified concepts around which confidence may be explored in this study. There are some important distinctions to note between those concepts which are based upon previous experience and confirmation and those that are based upon what is possible for the future, given assistance. However, the identification of sources of self-efficacy relating to previous experiences are useful in this study in offering insight to support interpretation of previous student experiences of the assessment process, as students will be discussing their FE experiences during the HE induction period.

There is also useful insight here into the support structures surrounding assessment in the FE environment and how this shapes student expectation of how learning will take place in HE. In addition, this insight highlights the potential mismatch between the FE system and the more independent or 'tacit' approach to learning taken in HE. This leads students into unfamiliar decision making territory, which in itself, can be a source of stress. Despite this useful insight, the literature also raises cautionary notes about assuming that student success in a previous environment might automatically lead to success in new, evolving, more challenging ones. It also highlights that an over emphasis on removing all stress for new students in HE might in fact be counterproductive to developing the higher order skill set required to reach the higher levels of study required in HE.

## Chapter 3 - Methodology

This chapter offers some insight into the choices surrounding how the research in this study has been designed to best address the central research questions. In particular, this chapter explains aspects of epistemology and ontology associated with the qualitative approaches taken and the validity debates within this. This chapter is intended to be reflexive and acknowledges the challenges facing me as a researcher attempting to transition to alternative approaches to research. This is of particular interest in terms of the original choice to undertake grounded theory in this study. However, this chapter also details the debates and desire to avoid hubris which may be associated with making claims around the viability of grounded theory in this study. In the spirit of such reflexivity, there is recognition that a more pluralistic approach to research than originally planned in the study has been necessary due to challenges in the data and as such this chapter is intended to work hand-in-hand with chapter 4, where data collection and analysis is discussed. Finally, this chapter presents the alternative pluralistic approach of combining Grounded Theory approaches with those of phenomenology.

### Epistemological and Ontological choices

My experiences from my own education, my retail industry background and as an academic practitioner have combined with insights gained through my programme of doctoral studies. These have been integral to the choices and decisions I have made about this study, from its design through to implementation and analysis. Moreover, they have transformed my knowledge and my identity as a practitioner researcher. Hall (1996) offers a definition of reflexive research in which the researcher is self-conscious of how they undertake the research, taking opportunity to monitor and reflect on methods used and their own influence on this. This reflexive approach has been important in exposing my assumptions, beliefs and subsequent actions which will have had significant impact upon the direction of the research and resultant findings and interpretation.

It is important to establish how I understand the scope, methods and validity of the knowledge to be produced by this study. Epistemologically, this study takes a subjectivist orientation and this in itself has challenged me to face my initial lack of understanding and acceptance of my role in construction of any resulting knowledge. Traditionally, research in Retail Management is located within a positivistic domain, where evidence in acceptable research is formed by statistical and quantitative analysis. This means that my historical approach to research is

located in a paradigm where independence of researcher is important to research in order to prevent influence on the outcomes. My initial desire was to create a research study which posed no threat to traditional measures of validity and to select methods which reduced or eliminated any threats to that (Zahra and Ryan 2005). Whilst my underlying desire is to evaluate how the 'human nature (and behaviour in turn)' of students is a function of the reality of the situation or environment, the research findings began to clarify that each student response was different and hence the 'reality' of that cannot be known by taking a positivistic stance.

Instead, this research takes an interpretative stance which accepts that reality comes from the mind and may take the form of 'multiple subjective constructions' (Zahra and Ryan 2005:7). This includes my bringing to bear my own experiences, beliefs, assumptions and knowledge to the interpretation of participant narratives throughout the data collection process through to the emergence of findings. This means that ontologically I must accept that the reality of what is 'knowable' in this research is a product of my own consciousness rather than being 'external' to me, or the individuals participating (Burrell and Morgan 2005). This is something that previously I had little experience of and has formed the greatest challenge throughout the study. In my own discipline, the value of studies undertaken subjectively is low with respect to credibility and publishing potential. However, within my emerging, increasingly confident identity as a researcher, I became more aware of the importance and potential value of the research approach as having more 'impact' in the daily contribution that it makes to educational practice in my subject.

Ontologically, I originally sought to locate the study within the constructivist paradigm in that I intended to work with my participants to agree a picture of interpretation for their experiences. It is fully understood that this approach is unlikely to produce a 'true state of affairs' (Annells 1996: 385). However, the knowledge that is likely to emerge will develop more from personal constructs at a localised level with potential to create relative truths by construction within wider groups collectively. Using such consensual constructs will help to create knowledge which helps to reconstruct what is understood, rather than known, about students and their confidence in engaging with assessment processes.

As one of the biggest challenges to me has been that of abandoning my accepted understanding of validity and reliability it was necessary for me to review the implications of this approach. In taking a constructed ontological approach that privileged subjective over objective, I began to review the means by which I might establish a set of criteria for my research that parallels those of my traditional quantitative background. Creswell and Miller (2000:125) point to the need to

establish the 'lens' through which the researcher negotiates the validity of the study i.e. through whose eyes the research is seen as 'reality', whether it be the researcher, the participants of the study or those seeking to judge credibility externally by readers, reviewers or publishers. The lens most commonly taken within the constructivist approach is more pluralistic than this suggests, with consideration for key aspects of 'trustworthiness' (credibility and confirmability) and 'authenticity' (fairness) in the eyes of both the researcher and the participants (Creswell and Miller 2000:126) which is reflected in this study.

### **Choosing Grounded Theory**

This change in ontological approach led me to consider various emergent approaches to constructing reality around the central concept of assessment confidence. Grounded theory offered 'one distinct methodology for generating theories that offers the prospect of reflecting some of the complexity and richness of the environment' (Parker and Roffey 1997:212). It originated through the work of Glaser and Strauss and was presented comprehensively in a focussed article in 1967, which highlighted a systematic set of methods aimed at generating inductive theory through the analysis of data. In this construction of theory there is the underpinning assumption that the relationship between the data collection, its analysis and the resultant theory is reciprocal. This focusses upon making sense of data collected around a particular area of study and giving it structure, meaning and significance to all involved in the research.

In identifying a framework with an emphasis on causality, I am now aware of the emphasis I placed on the need for structure. My chosen research 'output' emerged from my own approach to learning and teaching which is driven predominantly by a need for order, based within my individual learning preference and style. In my own tendencies to value logic and 'system', I am aware that my research was motivated by my need to produce hard 'answers'. This is also typical of the community of practice within which I work on a daily basis, where positivistic approaches are deemed superior and more 'valid' than those of practitioner research. At the core of this lie questions around what I consider as 'legitimate' knowledge and whether this is considered similarly by all of my communities of practice (Denzin and Lincoln 2000:17).

In progressing through my doctoral studies, the contrast between the approaches used in my varying communities of practice has become starker. Those within my doctoral community have encouraged me to consider my positionality and to hear the voices within the research. Those in my subject area have focussed upon publication of quantitative outputs which neglect the

variety of voices and the richness of understanding which can emerge from hearing those rather than simply answering a research question. The richness provided by the participant student voice is debated and explored throughout my research. The research questions of my study focus upon the exposure, explanation and significance of influencing factors on student confidence within the context of FE and HE assessment. Given my desire to explore the complexity and inter-dependence of the influencing factors upon student behaviours with regard to assessment, the grounded theory approach seemed appropriate. It is important for me to acknowledge here that my attraction to the approach was an emergent one whilst still offering a structured set of 'rules'. These rules enabled me to occupy a 'middle ground' of a legitimate knowledge acceptable to my subject context whilst listening to the student voices in a way which developed me as a professional educator.

Initially, Grounded Theory was developed as a way to redirect the efforts of researchers overly concerned with the positivist emphasis on reliability and validity and this was an enormous attraction for me in recognising myself as one of those researchers. This placed emphasis instead on the data analysis and pointed to the recourse to data and 'grounded' aspects to deliver the same orthodoxy of positivistic reliability and validity. In some respects, I now recognise that this attempted to mimic those positivist orthodoxies by rendering the processes and procedures more transparent and replicable (Bryant and Charmaz 2007) in offering more systematic theorising and conceptualisation. As Grounded Theory applies positivist characteristics of form and order to a fundamentally perceptive and subjective study, this was clearly the attraction for me. This is because of my recognisable preference for positivistic research, developed within my subject community of practice.

This is also clearly evident from my first proposals for the study which focussed upon the 'abductive' possibilities of Grounded Theory (Reichertz 2007). This allowed me the possibility to take what I considered to be the induced, 'woollier', more uncertain outcomes of qualitative data and bring more certainty through using a more deductive instrument, hence bringing more 'legitimate validity' (Smith 2008:235) to the research. This meant that whilst being acceptable to my new community of practice in Education studies, it offered structure and a potential sense of objectivity which was also acceptable to my subject community, a way I now acknowledge, of compromising between the two. In addition, Grounded Theory enabled justifications for the study based on valid, systematic and empirical approaches to the 'gate keepers' of general acceptance and publication (Bryant and Charmaz 2007:49).

Despite this, I felt that a Grounded Theory (GT) approach would aid me in researching the social interactions between students and tutors, students and the assessment task and amongst students themselves during the assessment processes they have experienced. Glaser (1998:107) discusses how GT uses interviews for 'conceptualisation or for generation of concepts and hypotheses' and so lends itself to this type of research. In addition, it formed a useful approach for exploring and conceptualising the process dimensions underpinning how students make meaning of those interactions. As GT offers an established framework of principles for data collection and analysis, it also seemed useful in potentially shaping the development of an abstract theoretical framework that explained the studied process of academic assessment confidence and fulfilled my own needs for something more 'concrete' as an outcome to my research (Charmaz 2006).

It has become evident throughout the research that the nature of the central concept of this study could be classified as socio-psychological (Hall and Callery 2001). This involves investigating how individuals make sense and meaning from, in this case, the particular social experience of assessment and how this influences the psychological element of confidence around their further future experiences. In seeking some insight into what this may mean for the study, Cohen et al in my view confirm that for the interpretivist, the 'science' lies less in hard fact and more in finding out how the reality going on in one time and place for one individual can be compared to the other times and places, in order to create meanings which might give insight into behaviours (2011:18). This is known as substantive theorising, induced from the actual experiences of individuals which act as a 'working theory' (Glaser 2007:97). This is what I hope to produce from my research, as this will allow for the theory to be transferable rather than generalizable. This means that my theorising in this context can be transferred to other contexts with similar characteristics in order to create formal theory (101).

Within this socio-psychological study, an interpretive stance needed to be taken, which recognises that I will be entering the subjective world of human experience and therefore, potential to create substantive theory is strong. In becoming aware of this fact, I began to accept that I am less likely to be testing existing theory, or indeed producing new 'formal theory' (Kearney 2007) which will produce absolute truths. Rather, I now understand that my research has led to the production of exploratory substantive theory rather than clear-cut answers. I have come to accept that it is likely that multiple realities exist rather than one and that data reflects the researcher's and participants' mutual construction. Also I recognise that I will enter the participant's world (Bowers 1988 as cited in Jacelon and O'Dell 2005) meaning this is an interpretive portrayal of the situation, not an exact picture of it. I began therefore to better

understand that when investigating a student's experience of assessment, I would be creating a subjective view of the social world as personal and humanly created, by using student accounts and personal constructs which indicate how they have created their social meaning of the experience. This would enable me to understand the way in which they have created, modified and interpreted their worlds, but in doing so, I needed to accept that this would be subjective and personal rather than an absolute or external reality (Opie 2004).

## **Positioning myself in the research**

Glaser's later work (2001) claims that the systematic theorising and conceptualisation of social processes elevates the knowledge of the researcher and this again, perhaps, contributed to my choice of Grounded Theory as being closer to my subject discipline paradigm. However, the submission of an ethics approval application had a significant impact on how I now view participants in research. In my subject research, I had tended to consider participants as 'subjects' in a way which predominantly saw them as sources of necessary information. The doctoral programme has given me insight into power and positioned me within the study. This has meant that I have taken care to afford the necessary respect and care needed in dealing with research participants.

Even beyond this, as I have begun to consider concepts of knowledge development, I never before considered that participants might be co-constructors of the knowledge which is produced by bringing my own and their knowledge together in a meaningful way. Hall and Callery (2001:266) discuss the concept of 'relationality' to recognise the 'connectedness between researcher and participant' and recommends a feminist approach to engaging participants in the production of final theories. Because of this, it was important for me to share emerging conceptual frameworks with participants in the second stage of the research. Such 'member checking' can give 'power, voice, and engagement to the participant throughout the research process' (Carlson 2010:1105). As a result, member checking was used with all participants and assisted in the construction of findings and analysis therein.

In considering my position within the research, I investigated writings on insider/outsider research and positionality as general concepts within which to identify my relationship with participants and how this might impact on the outcome of the research. Maher and Tetreault (1994:22) define positionality as the 'knower's specific position in any context as defined by race, gender, class and other socially significant dimensions' which may include social roles such as tutor, researcher or student. As I am investigating the concept of academic confidence by

discussing experiences of it with students of varying race, gender and class, this is not a definition that I wholly accept. I cannot guarantee that these, as bases for my relationship with those students will exist consistently, if at all. Equally, models of 'margin and centre' proposed by hooks (1984) do not seem adequately to describe the relationship, as, if anything, students are central to the development of knowledge in my study around how people engage with assessment, rather than being the apparent marginalised figure presented by hooks. Member checking processes used within this study have ensured that the participants are central to confirming the resultant theorising therein.

In seeking further insight, work by Merton (1972) seemed to offer me more flexibility in establishing what my relationship with participants might be like. Whilst highlighting a dichotomous distinction between members (insiders) and non-members (outsiders) his work also suggests that 'individuals have not a single status, but a status set' (ibid:22). This implies that a status as an insider or outsider can change as situations change and this would seem more fitting to the potentially more diverse sample of participants in my study. This could allow me to find a common, shared relationship with participants on bases other than predominantly demographic ones. Mercer (2007:4) argues that this allows us to create 'temporary insider(ness)', where our predominant identity for the relationship with participants is dependent on whichever aspect is shared with them. As I am a member of staff, I share an office with other course leaders so for some of the students who had visited those course leaders, it was obvious that I was not a student. However, during interviews, I emphasised that I was a research student who had to write assessments as part of my own programme.

Despite Bulmers (1982:243) contention that 'all field research involves ... mild deceit to some extent', I remain unhappy about creating the illusion of being an 'insider', albeit temporarily. Loxely and Seery (2008:18) question whether we need ever really consider ourselves as outsiders in research terms. They instead propose that the researcher and participant are joined together by their shared desire to produce new knowledge around something of importance to both parties and that this in itself is a more productive way to consider the nature of what it means to be 'insiders' in the production of knowledge. This seems in turn more relevant to my approach to participants: that there is a shared understanding of the nature and type of assessment, the socio-psychological impact is a shared construct as well as the received importance of it in academic life. A desire to uncover more about influences, determiners and consequences of how academic assessment is experienced was where I hoped to 'co-habit' (ibid) and build an insider relationship. This more collaborative stance meant that I was more comfortable with Mercer's ideas as the study progressed.

Rubin and Rubin (2005) refer to interviewers selecting aspects of themselves which make sense in the world of the interviewees in order to evaluate where that intersection might take place. It was important to understand that 'intersection' in terms of whether the students would view me as a tutor, a researcher or a fellow student. This is likely to have a real implication in terms of how the students relate to me during my interviews with them. In understanding that my research participants would define and situate me within the context of their own social world (Best 2003) this requires renegotiation of my position as a researcher within the co-constructive relationship with participants that occurred during the interviews. (Gordon et al 2005).

Initially in the research process it became clear that students viewed me as an authoritative figure as my first contact came as part of their induction sessions as sanctioned by and in the presence of their course leaders. In addition, the participants sometimes asked questions about modules or tutors in deference to what they perceived as my tutor status. According to Rubin and Rubin (2005) this is not always problematic as tutors are associated with questioning and hence this will not come as a surprise to participants. However, they also argue that tutors are accepted by students as having an assessor role which can intimidate. This, and other sources of potential 'power' are discussed in the next chapter which explores the researcher/participant relationship at play during interviews in this study.

However, I began to renegotiate this position throughout the 2 interviews by discussing aspects of 'being a student' associated to my taught modular programme. I did not deliberately 'self-disclose' or 'self-reveal' (Rubin and Rubin 2005:80) with a view to becoming an insider to their student world, but this naturally emerged as I compared my own experiences of assessment during the doctoral process with them both before and during interviews. Whilst I do not feel that I gained true status as a fellow student, I feel that the participants began to see me less as an outsider than was initially the case. This was particularly true during member checking activities where students seemed surprised that I had captured their true, if sometimes somewhat critical, view of their assessment experiences. Following one final interview a participant noted that it had been good to discuss assessments with someone who understood but who was not one of their tutors. This was, in this study, the full extent of 'insiderness' I could have hoped for and the resulting implications of this are explored in the next chapter.

## Is this really a Grounded Theory study?

My methodological choices have aimed to identify the 'behaviour with meaning' which explains previous actions and future orientations of those actions (Verma and Mallick 1999). In the first instance, it seemed that Grounded theory offered me an approach which would allow me to study student experiences of assessment without forcing it into an existing framework. In the initial stages of my study, I was also happy that it would result in the development of 'middle range' theorising at a substantive level enabling a move beyond description to theorisation (Glaser 2007).

Wuest (2011) identifies that grounded theory is underpinned by assumptions of symbolic interactionism, in which peoples' actions are based upon meaning, which in turn stems from interaction with others and situations and modification through their own interpretations. My understanding of such meaning making from interaction with others and their social world, and in particular the culture of assessment experienced through their 16-18 study is key to responding to my research questions. My research requires identification of contexts, relationships or structures within FE assessment experiences which support routinized meaning and how that shapes students' expectations of HE assessment experiences.

In addition, Grounded Theory offered me a pragmatic approach to research, emphasising the practical usefulness via constant evaluation, where 'truth is modified in light of new discoveries' (Wuest 2011:229). In order to do this, data is analysed concurrently with data collection and constant comparison takes place in order to shape theorisation as new data is collected. This continues until no further theorising emerges from additional data, which is referred to as theoretical saturation (Holton 2007:281). The act of constant comparison within GT also allows the researcher to generate theory as data collection proceeds. This directs the researcher on what data to collect next and where to find them in order to develop emerging theory, which is referred to as theoretical sampling (Morse 2007).

Initially I was happy that my research would be able to sustain these underpinning features of GT and began to collect data using these principles. As I began to review my data, I became aware that my particular study may be typical of those which lead to GT studies being considered with some scepticism. My further reading began to highlight some areas of grounded theory which are problematic and some of the criticisms of it as an approach which were relevant to my specific data collection challenges i.e. Reflexivity, data categorisation issues and sample sizes.

Firstly, I became aware that whilst my desire was to allow theory to emerge from my research, this was not always at one with my desire to take a reflexive stance within a Grounded Theory approach. In some respects, I had expected the focus on symbolic interactionism within GT to give freedom to embrace the interaction between researcher and research participants. However, in traditional GT, the emergence of theory without force to existing frameworks also incorporates those frameworks of assumptions, feelings and experiences of the researcher. Indeed, Glaser (2001:33) rejects reflexivity as 'paralyzing and self-destructive' for its attempts to 'force' the researcher's ideas upon the emerging knowledge, instead, relegating the researcher impact as another extraneous variable. The next concern surrounds the fact that Grounded Theory concerns itself predominantly with addressing the social processes (Clarke 2007). This is in contrast to my desire to explore power, structure and policy shaping the student experience. Layder (1998) believes that grounded theory also fails to address some of these macro level questions with its concentration on the micro level process analysis. As my research data began to uncover findings on policy, power and structural influences on the student experience, this created an incompatibility between grounded theory and my own study.

In addition, my initial data collection and subsequent analysis seemingly produced 'trite categories (Silverman 2001:118) which is not uncommon as a criticism of grounded theory. As grounded theory analysis and its focus upon categories led to fractures in the individual stories, these seemed to increasingly produce an analysis which was divorced from each participant's story. Whilst my intention was not necessarily to tell the story of the individual, but to explore how individuals experience the phenomena of assessment, I was also unhappy about the idea of merging all stories into categories to reduce their experience. Some authors (Reissman 1993) claim that the purity of narrative and individual voices offers more depth to the resulting analysis and this has been considered in the presentation of I-poems in Chapter 6.

My final concern for the use of grounded theory in this study centres upon the sample size collected during the research. Grounded theory studies require large data sets and much critique has been levelled at studies which attempt 'questionable' justification of small samples with an attempt to over-theorise from a small data set. Sampling within grounded theory is less concerned with attempts to represent a population and more with attempts to represent the theoretical concerns which have arisen as a result of provisional analysis of data. This is known as theoretical sampling (Krassen Covan 2007). In this approach, subsequent participants might be chosen on the basis that they have specific knowledge of the themes emerging from initial

data collection and this has the potential to make the research responsive, and therefore more grounded, in the data as it emerges.

In theoretical sampling, as data emerges, the data becomes controllable for exploration in more depth during later parts of the research. It is the combination of control (keeping the researcher grounded by only focusing on the data which produces theory rather than pre-existing assumptions) and flexibility in being able to respond and probe the participant reality as it emerges. This increases the analytical possibilities and hence the resultant reliability. Subsequent data collection can then focus upon exploring themes in more depth or closing conceptual 'gaps' which help generate theoretical frameworks. As my data set contains only 11 students in total and my intention is to produce only substantive theorising, it is unlikely that I will be able to fulfil this central aspect of grounded theory. Charmaz (2011) points out that researchers often mistake sampling intended to address initial research questions with the idea of theoretical sampling. Charmaz (2014) builds upon this mistaken conception by pointing out that researchers often do not establish the categories on which theoretical sampling may be based until they have already done considerable research with initial respondents.

In addition, Charmaz (2014:210) also points out that as researchers cannot know categories which dictate theoretical sampling at the beginning of their studies, there may not be the opportunity to continue to select alternative 'cases' after initial data collection. She also points out that access to such new cases may be limited and therefore theoretical sampling is often a truly problematic aspect of GT. This describes the situation facing this study, where there has been a time sensitivity in recruiting students during induction periods and before they have completed assessments as part of their HE programme. This time frame had passed before initial interviews produced theoretical categories which would be suitable to sample. Combined with the difficulties in attracting respondents to the study in subsequent data collection rounds, theoretical sampling has not been achieved within this study.

Associated with this is the recognition that I would subsequently be unable to deliver the requirements of theoretical saturation, necessary for grounded theory studies. There is some debate as to what constitutes theoretical saturation or indeed how this is decided (Saunders et al 2018) but it is generally established as the point at which 'no new themes, concepts or problems are evident in the data' (Francis et al. 2010: 1230). Glaser and Strauss (1967:61) offer a more generalised idea that saturation exists where 'no additional data further develops the properties of the category'. The important aspect of this quote is that it is based upon justification to terminate analysis rather than decisions relating to the collection of further data

(Urquhart 2013). Although the sample for this study is limited it can be argued that the categories and themes identified within the findings have indeed reached this stage if saturation is a justification to cease the search for new incidents. In this study, the 'new' aspects to data likely to emerge surround student individual stories which fall between such categories as presented in the thematic analysis.

This view concurs with other authors (Francis et al 2010) that data saturation is of equal importance, and that if interviews have been effective in establishing participants' experience or views on an established topic, that the construct has probably been adequately saturated. This is of particular relevance when parts of the emerging data can be attributed to already existing frameworks or concepts as is the case for my own data. The data resulting from my interviews draws upon existing theories in order to synthesise new understanding of the experiences.

It is also argued (Middlemiss et al 2015 and Jackson et al. 2015) that saturation may occur from an individually-orientated perspective rather than on the level of the dataset as a whole. This implies that saturation may occur in relation to the data emerging from the individual participant i.e. a full understanding of the participant perspective. Whilst controversial and contrasting with traditional definitions of saturation, I am able to identify that such saturation has occurred in this study.

Due to sample size in this study, I am aware that each later interview contained new insight into other aspects of the reality of student experiences of assessment through personal story. I have little doubt that further interviews would have continued to build upon the individual story aspects rather than the categorisation of the main themes within the findings. This means that subsequent theorising could have taken a number of iterations of limited sample to build the conclusive modelling typical of Formal Grounded Theory. However, for the purposes of substantive theorising, as is presented in this study, the issue of theoretical saturation is not wholly problematic.

## **Moving on – Constructivist Grounded Theory, Phenomenology and a pluralist approach to methodology**

As it has become apparent during the data collection phase of this study, I will be unable to truly claim that Grounded Theory is being utilised. I am uncomfortable with claiming that it has been used whilst aware that I am unable to satisfy a number of the key aspects of GT, particularly independence of researcher, theoretical sampling, truly constant comparisons and theoretical saturation. In response, I have begun to explore other methodological approaches which would more effectively represent the type of study this has become. In considering these issues, I first began to review alternative qualitative approaches, considering other methodologies in constructivist grounded theory, critical incidence and phenomenology alongside traditional grounded theory.

Constructivist grounded theory proved interesting in terms of challenging what and how I was intending to produce my research. Previously, the focus upon grounded theory had embedded the idea that theory would be 'discovered' by my study. However, my further reading highlighted that discovery assumes the uncovering of something which is already 'there' (Charmaz 2008:77) rather than the production of new knowledge. In addition, traditional grounded theory advocates the idea of 'emergence' which assumes an independence of the data. By contrast, constructivist approaches to research acknowledge the role of the researcher in interacting with, organising and presenting the data which leads to the construction of a theory (Charmaz 2011). This co-construction of social realities of assessment is key to my chosen ontological and epistemological stance within the research. However, the principles of theoretical sampling, comparison and saturation remain at the heart of even a constructionist approach to grounded theory, but this encouraged me to seek out other approaches which might correspond to the philosophies behind theory production in constructivist grounded theory.

With this in mind, I began to research the idea of research pluralism which challenged my own assumptions that philosophical consistency would be taken as a virtue of my research. Further reading has helped to clarify that freely drawing from seemingly contradictory philosophies can be enriching and creative to research studies (Giorgio 2011). Whilst my desire is to have a research methodology which is neat and simple, it has clearly been an oversimplification in terms of attempting to meet the needs of a strict protocol surrounding one methodology.

I had already acknowledged my leaning towards critical incident methodologies in the development of my initial interview structures. However, I had not considered how this might fit into the bigger picture of my methodological choices, or indeed that this might be complemented by others within a pluralist approach. Phenomenology has rarely been considered a comfortable bedfellow to traditional grounded theory in its philosophical orientation, as grounded theory assumes that meaning must be constructed and modelled whilst phenomenology requires only reflection leading to 'descriptive understanding and faithful conceptualisation' (Wertz 2011:281). However, despite this, there is evidence that both require the researcher to be critically reflexive and both draw upon how the world is experienced. It is also argued that many studies undertaken in the same area using these varying methodological stances have led to the same output in terms of interpretation, the only difference separating them being the individual influence of the researcher i.e. The fact that both were done reflexively (Wertz et al 2011:6).

This led me to explore the suitability of phenomenology to occupy a pluralist space alongside my existing grounded theory approach. Holloway (1997:117) reviews the work of Husserl and in particular the aspect of the 'lived experiences of the people' to phenomenological research. This begins with the idea that certainty for people emerges from what presents to their consciousness and that this is where reality is formed. These realities are treated as 'phenomena' and are used as the starting point for theorisation (Groenewald 2004:4). This is combined with the key belief that researchers cannot be removed from their own assumptions, values and beliefs about the phenomenon under study (Hammersley 2000). In this respect, I feel that phenomenology captures the essence of my research as I am attempting to look at what constitutes student perception of the lived experience and hence the reality for students transitioning from one assessment regime to another. It also captures the increasing recognition of my role in the research, and the parallels in the development of reality in my world through understanding of the reality within the participants' world.

Whilst accepting that the fundamental history of Grounded Theory lies in sociology, and that of Phenomenology lies in European philosophy, the boundaries between them become increasingly porous at certain points in the research process. Where Grounded Theory seeks to investigate the social processes involved in negotiating meaning, phenomenology seeks to 'capture meaning and common features, or essences of ... experiences' (Starks and Trinidad 2007:1374). This means that data from just a few participants with detailed accounts can offer insight on core elements. Whilst the sample size required may be slightly different to that of grounded theory studies where the focus is upon theoretical sampling based upon emerging

themes, both seek the insight of participants who have experienced the phenomenon of interest and use similar interviewing strategies.

Phenomenology also takes a similar approach to interpretation of data as that used in grounded theory approaches in that it utilises an 'iterative process of de-contextualisation and re-contextualisation' (Ayres et al 2003: 873). This has been fundamental to my processes of analysis and has allowed me to break from the confines of grounded theory sampling in order to respond directly to the research questions initially set. With this in mind, a pluralist approach potentially offers the best summary of my methodological stance within this research and has shaped the subsequent chapters in terms of movement between the two philosophies.

In summary, this chapter has offered rationalisation of the approach used to answer the research questions. A clear subjective and interpretive stance has been taken to articulating the nature of the knowledge sought and my beliefs about what can be 'knowable' as a result of this study. A reflexive account of my journey through methodological choices for this study has also addressed the role of myself and participants as co-creators of that knowledge. Whilst it would be desirable to deliver on initial Grounded Theory plans for this study, a necessary compromise has been found which allows the data to be analysed in a way which maintains some of the Grounded Theory tradition, whilst recognising the usefulness of a phenomenological stance with limited data sets.

## Chapter 4 - Data Collection and Analysis

This chapter discusses various aspects relevant to the source, nature and processes surrounding the data in this study. In particular this chapter focuses upon recognition of my role and position in those processes and reflexive insight to the impact that my decision making may have had on the data and subsequent theory production. This is key to understanding problematic aspects of this research such as participant recruitment, data co-construction positioning and the approach used to produce theory from the data collected. Some insight is also given into the participants themselves and the relationships built with them during the research.

I began the study attempting to discover what might constitute the underpinning elements of the social and socio-psychological processes around assessment and an interview method was chosen to collect data. My justifications for this lay in the claim that Grounded Theorists would start with the problem and this could only be evaluated by hearing the participant 'story' (Glaser 1978). Subsequently, I see more clearly that my constructivist choices were underpinned by my underlying beliefs about the meaning and purpose of education. More particularly, this is based on my belief that education is a 'conversation' in which both sides develop a better understanding of what is studied by sharing ideas to 'add information breadth and relational awareness' (Arnett 1997:7) to the outcome which may not have been achievable without dialogue. This has also become apparent as an underpinning driver of my research approach, where I have been most comfortable in member checking aspects where the dialogue was more explicit in terms of my negotiating a more accurate representation of the initial interview dialogue.

In keeping with my desire to co-construct data, a semi-structured approach to interviewing was taken. This reflected my desire to move from the observational to the dialogical, with the intention to explore, illuminate and probe the participant descriptions of their 'lived experience' (Wimpenny and Gass 2000:1488). Initial interviews were planned with first year Business and Management students during induction week. Opening questions were designed to explore their experiences of 'A' level study and the social and political structures within which they had studied and which may have impacted their experience. A 'critical incident' (Kain 2004) approach was planned in which students would be asked to highlight and give detailed insight into particular assessment experiences which they found had left them feeling more or less confident for future assessments. In order to do this, the interview was designed to begin with preliminary questions to open up areas of study. From these, the next questions were intended

to be shaped as the interview progressed, following only the themes emerging in the initial data (Charmaz 2006).

In some respects, this was challenging, and it was necessary to consider my own view on how I would use pre-existing theory to shape my own theory generation. Whilst the approach chosen was inductive in nature, it would be impossible for me to claim neutrality to the subject under study, as this topic emerged from MEd studies and much background literature has been used to justify the very existence of this study. In terms of corresponding to my desire to keep the data free from pre-conceived theoretical ideas, Davidson (2000) explains how phenomenology uses a form of 'bracketing' to achieve this. Bracketing occurs when the researcher attempts to temporarily put aside their theoretical preconceptions about what they expect to find in order to enter the participants' world which they then use their experience to 'interpret'. Ultimately, Bentz and Shapiro (1998:96) detail this as the fundamental of phenomenology, where the description of the human experience is given by the person living that experience, allowing 'the essence to emerge' in a similar way to that of grounded theory.

It is equally possible to elicit a participant's story through interviewing in phenomenological studies as with grounded theory and this pluralist approach helped to shape the interviews on areas of particular interest, rather than pre-existing assumptions. These were drawn into prompts, intended for use when no further new topics emerged from initial general questions. For example, when asking students to identify a time in their assessments when they felt particularly confident, I used prompts around the role of others in that particular scenario in order to explore the social aspects of their emerging answers. This worked well as participants struggled to articulate the details of events around what they perceived as a more general impression of 'confidence'. This approach allowed me to use prompts to encourage them to articulate their thoughts, feelings and experiences surrounding that general impression.

## **Locating research participants**

The approach to sampling has been one of purposive nature which means that I have used my experience, judgement and understanding of the phenomena and population to define who would be the most appropriate people to approach to take part in the study. I have identified the main characteristics of interest as those students within the transition phase (entering year 1 from FE study) in the desired discipline area of business and management and used non-probability based recruitment. In some ways, it could be argued (Arthur et al 2012) that my approach has some characteristics of convenience sampling in that I have been limited to those

students who are available and accessible at the key point in the induction process. However, this is an oversimplification as this would imply that any student would qualify as part of the sample, which was clearly not the intention in this study. Purposive sampling has allowed me to access 'knowledgeable people', however it is also important for me to acknowledge that this will not be representative of the whole population and will limit generalisability beyond this sample (Cohen et al 2011:157).

In order to answer the research questions for this study, it has been important to find those 'knowledgeable' people. This has meant selecting a sample which has experience of the phenomenon under investigation, i.e., students who have recently experienced assessment in FE (Groenewald 2004). In order to reach the desired participants, it was necessary to make contact with relevant 'gatekeepers' (Neuman 2000:352) who might also have a vested interest in the findings of the study. In this case, the gatekeepers were the programme leaders across the Business and Management subject groups. Whilst these gatekeepers were not required to make recommendations, their permission was sought to approach students on their programme with a view to discussing their assessment experiences. 'Buy-in' from this group of tutors was key to my initial and subsequent attempts to solicit student interest in the study as external influence within the initial stages of a student's HE assessment journey could be interpreted by them as problematic. This allowed me time in-class during induction sessions with potential participants and access to course year 1 email lists in order to make contact.

Boyd (2001) recommends between 2- 10 participants in order to achieve saturation, whilst Creswell (2009) suggests interviews with 'up to 10 people' to establish a phenomenological study. It was not intended that the sampling technique would produce a statistically significant representation of the total population. This would not be appropriate for a study such as this, where the aim is to investigate student experience of previous assessment regimes from a broad range of subject disciplines and qualification types. Access to a full representation of that broad ranging population using a voluntary recruitment method would not have been possible in this instance.

Business and Management students were specifically selected as the sample for this study. As I work in Lancashire Business School, there is an intrinsic link between the assessment practices of the general business related subject areas and the retail sector specific area which is the focus of my own practice. The connection of the fields of study allows me better understanding of the student experience and in particular of the assessment design within the related degree areas. This also means that there is a common theme within the discipline with regard to the applied

nature of the assessment and the varied background of students entering study in this area. This was an important aspect to emerge from the MEd study as student confidence appeared to be related to academic literacy in terms of both the language of assessment and the vocational business needs incorporated into assignments. As my own practice incorporates similar applied and linguistic aspects typical of the business and commercial areas of study, these students were most likely to have experienced this. Unlike other areas such as science or literature, participants from my own subject discipline, i.e. those within the Business School, would be more insightful in terms of constructing something meaningful within my own practice.

Students from the wider pool of Business and Management studies were deliberately chosen for this research rather than my own students on the Retail Management programme. This decision is based on my desire to reduce the perceived power dynamic at play during interviews. Tan (2009) argues that power affects both students and tutors in the broader politics of institutions (362). Tan presents 3 main types of power which may exist in these academic scenarios as Sovereign, Epistemological and Disciplinary power. I am aware that my study attempts to reduce the power at play from epistemological sources in attempting to reduce the potential for interpersonal episodes and confrontation (e.g. where students on my programme would not want to reveal their thoughts on my own approach to assessment for fear of negative response). This was confirmed at the end of one of my interviews when a participant commented that they had been glad to have the chance to talk about their experiences of HE assessment as they would never dare say those things to their programme leader or tutors of the modules being discussed.

However, this may not have addressed the issues of sovereign power (Tan 2009), where I may have been perceived as holding 'authority' in my position both as a member of academic staff and a doctoral researcher. This is particularly the case considering that all participants would be new undergraduate students who could be intimidated by the perceived advanced status of a member of staff undertaking doctoral work. On reflection, this may have affected the response to my initial attempts to recruit a sample by the fact that I had been given access through the aforementioned 'gatekeeper' programme leaders who also held a position of authority in the students' initial experiences of HE. I am aware that in doing this, I have used my 'multiple professional identities to strategically and favourably position myself' (Valandra 2012:206) with those gatekeepers to gain access to potential participants.

Whilst being able to rationalise my choice of students within the Business and Management area, I am aware that I have exercised power by deciding whose voices were heard in my

research (Daley 2010). Whilst this is somewhat unavoidable in the process of sample selection, this began to raise questions about other things which I may want to 'come clean' about in my sample recruitment (Gilgun 2006:215). During the initial stages of participant recruitment, I was somewhat naïve in my expectations of both the process and number of participants expected. Initially 300 postcards advertising the study were left in rooms where Business and Management students would have their first induction sessions (Appendix 2). This did not lead to any responses and it became necessary to review the design of my recruitment literature and reflect on the impact that this may have had on attracting participants.

Practising reflexivity can sometimes assist researchers in responding to unexpected events with more thoughtful insights and adjustments than simply the sheer panic when things do not go to plan (Valandra 2012). It was with this in mind that I began to review the recruitment strategy. Where I had expected the 'endorsement' by the programme leader to have some influence, this could potentially have been counter-productive in perceived power terms. In addition, Seidman (2006:46) claims that 'third parties may have access to potential participants, but they can seldom do justice to the nature of someone else's project' and the fact that I was not present to explain my study may have influenced how it was communicated. A review of how I had communicated the study to potential participants and the emphasis, timing and language used was necessary.

In terms of emphasis, on reflection it may not have been useful to use such large graphics of the University logo. Whilst it was clearly a University study, this may have endorsed the power concerns of students who may not have wished to commit to any formal 'academic' activities in induction week without first having seen how their peer community responded. This is especially the case where the programme leader may have indicated support for the study. Alongside the logo as the most prominent features of the postcard was the title of my study. Whilst it is necessary that participants understand the study for which they are volunteering, the language in the title may have appeared complex and inaccessible to potential participants in understanding whether they could contribute (Valandra 2012) and from this they may have self-excluded. In addition, the students may not have been able to identify themselves as Business and Management students if they were studying some of the specialised areas of marketing, accounting or public relations as there is a degree titled 'BA (Hons) Business and Management' and the perception may have been that my study was limited to that degree title only.

I have also considered that there might have been a mismatch between my own interpretations of the benefits of the study and those desirable to encourage participation. The postcard suggests that the main benefit to students might be their attendance at a session in which they could prepare for year 2 assessment. Whilst as a member of staff I can see the benefit of this, students may not have shared my enthusiasm for their transition to year 2 on the first day of transitioning from FE to HE. In general, my placing recruitment materials at the point at which students first engage with the University, their programme and their peers overestimates the importance of my study at a key moment in their Higher Education experience. This may well have led to my study being overlooked completely or dismissed as irrelevant by members of the peer group.

This insight allowed me to accept that I may not have fully understood the participant motivation to take part or not in such studies during their induction week. From the initial postcards, students may have felt that they did not have anything to contribute to the study, or anything 'useful to add' (Head 2009:337) or indeed that this was not a priority for them. Monetary incentive may have given them more reason to engage. Some authors argue that payment can not only incentivise and motivate participation but on a deeper level, they act as a way to overcome power imbalances (Goodman et al 2004:820) as they make it clear to the participant that their time and opinion has some value to the researcher which brings about an equalisation. However, Goodman goes on to argue (822) that a careful line needs to be drawn between incentivising and 'compensating' participants and coercing and exploiting them and posing ethical challenges to the research itself. Whilst my research did not incorporate any questions to participants about their thoughts on receiving payment for their involvement, Russell et al (2000) undertook a follow up study to his own research which revealed that participants often regarded payments as the most inclusive approach for those who could not afford the time to participate if not otherwise offered.

Subsequently programme leaders were approached, to request permission to contact students directly by email with the offer of payment, via a gift card, for taking part in the study. McKeganey (2001) raised concerns that payment might impact upon participants falsely representing themselves as part of the desired sample group where they are not in practice, in order to receive payment. As the sample size in this study was small, counter-checking against email lists was done to ensure that participants were in fact first years studying within the specified area. Recruitment using an advertisement of the study with payment incentive led to 11 students responding, of which six agreed to interview. In greeting students before the interviews commenced, three expressed that they had been attracted to the study because it

had been endorsed by their programme leader. They also mentioned that they were influenced to join because they wanted to impress the programme leader by showing that they were serious students.

All students were clearly informed in early stages of the study that none of their data would be disclosed to any other member of staff and that all participants were guaranteed confidentiality and anonymity in that they would only be referred to by a participant number. Students were made aware that their programme leader would not be aware of their participation or resulting data and they were subsequently offered the choice to withdraw if this was a motivation to their volunteering.

The second year of participant recruitment used only email communication and offered the same incentive to participate. This second round of recruitment stimulated 13 responses, of which 5 led to interviews. In both years the conversion of interested participants to interview were relatively low. All interested students, once confirmed as eligible, were invited to interview with 13 of them over the 2 years failing to attend the agreed interview slot. These potential participants were followed up and second interview slots were arranged. However, this often did not result in them attending and at this stage some admitted that they would not be attending and others simply ignored email follow-ups. This is also an indication of the priority set for those participants during their first few weeks at University. I had assumed that their interest in my initial communications would mean that they felt motivated to participate, however the timing of such a voluntary activity at a key point in their FE to HE transition meant that possibly for these students, this was not an important commitment.

For those that chose to participate, an ethical approach was taken towards participant care. In understanding the need to avoid any form of coercion or deception (Cohen et al 2011), an informed consent agreement (Appendix 3) was sought from all participants after a full explanation of the study (Appendix 4). All participants were informed of the purpose of the research, how data would be collected and potential risks and benefits involved with participation in the study. Participants were also informed that they could withdraw from the study at any point and that all data and correspondence relating to their participation would subsequently be destroyed if they no longer wished it to be used for the study.

In terms of participant privacy, the students were assured that all data would be kept confidentially and that only rough 'profiles' with a number would be used to reference their participation. All email correspondence and transcriptions were held in encrypted areas. Orb

et al (2000) suggest that confidentiality is a key consideration where there is potential concern for prejudice as a result of them expressing their views. As my initial approach to students was via their programme leaders, this may have resulted in potential participants feeling that the study was aligned to the programmes and hence that they may not be able to speak freely as their views on assessments might be shared with 'co-researchers' on their programme. This may have affected recruitment, despite appropriate processes being in place to protect their confidentiality.

In addition, consideration was taken over the likelihood of the study causing emotional stress (Cohen et al 2011) potentially posed to students in discussing historical issues regarding assessments. In consideration that the questions asked about experiences of previous studies and in particular stressful exam situations might cause such emotional stress, measures were taken to protect the participants. Throughout the interview sessions, a trained counsellor from the University's central services was 'on call' for students to discuss their feelings. After each interview, students were given the telephone number of the counsellor and were advised of the support available. Feedback from the counsellor confirmed that no participant had chosen to access this support resource.

### **Interview data collection**

As the research questions of my study focus upon developing deeper understanding and explanations of social and social psychological processes, I decided that a constructivist approach to interviewing would be most appropriate. From this, the intention was to create an interpretive analysis of participant experience through qualitative interviewing in which the questions used would be able to define and explore student experiences. This would allow me to 'construct' understanding with help of student insight on their experiences. Charmaz (2006) offers advice on how constructivist theorists start with the 'problem' and focus on the participant story around this problem. In my study this problem is a lack of understanding of how students transition from one assessment regime to another. My interview questions attempt to locate their experiences within basic social processes – explaining 'What is happening here?' (Glaser 1978). My interview schedule also attempts to contextualise aspects of student 'views' by looking at the context of the participant's life, the study topic, the societal context and contemporary historical context.

In order to explore key events and the context and processes shaping those events I adopted a critical incident technique (CIT). Some authors (Woolsey 1986) claim that critical incident is at

its most useful in exploring a new concept in its early stages to generate theory or model building in same way as grounded theorizing. As my research questions involve the development of conceptual understanding on a relatively new phenomenon within the literature, this makes CIT a useful method to employ within the wider scope of the study. The narrative aspects of CIT are also useful in directing participants through the 'tell me about when ...' phrase to allow their own words to form the data whilst still focusing on the conceptual area studied (Kain 2004:78). This helped in giving a structure to the interview in which students were encouraged to 'narrate' experiences, allowing them to decide for themselves the key aspects of the process for them, in order to 'ground' the theory more thoroughly.

However, the data collection stage did not unfold in the way expected and in failing to do so, has formed an opportunity for learning which I had not expected, forcing me to address my reflexivity. Gibbons et al (1994) propose that the production of knowledge can be seen as a developing area in which there is a shift in how knowledge is shaped through four modes of knowledge. Of particular interest in evaluating my data collection phase is Mode 3, proposed by Scott (2004:27) in which knowledge is accepted for its lack of predictability and accepted for its localised context reflecting localised change. He claims that this mode should be characterised by the knowledge production involving 'continuous cycles of deliberation and action' (ibid:48) but also with a focus upon the individual and their practice. This process underpins my approach to data collection as I am able to review my practice when the process is not quite as predictable as I expect.

Mode 3 embraces the idea of researchers re-evaluating their perspectives on knowledge and examining, discarding or replacing their assumptions. When reading the work of Forbes (2008), the idea of being in such a state of flux in terms of understanding and knowledge throughout the doctoral programme was uncomfortable. The idea that I would perhaps have to challenge everything that I have so far perceived as my 'capital': knowledge, experience and understanding in order to reconstruct it, was daunting but exciting at the same time. This is particularly emphasised by the practitioner nature of my chosen research. For PhD research practitioners in the area of Business and Management, there is the ability to divorce the research topic (normally in subject) from everyday involvement with students and their learning, which is not possible in this instance, as my research is so intrinsically linked to my day to day life. It was important to me to reconfigure this challenge less as change and more as growth in order to positively engage with it as a less daunting proposition.

I feel that I have definitely experienced some of the flux suggested by Forbes (2008) as I have had to confront my own pretence of reflexivity, initially convincing myself that I was reflexive without truly having demonstrated this. This was evidenced in a number of critical 'storytelling' dialogues with others on the doctoral programme in which I was able to compare my experiences with theirs and in hearing their reflexive voice, I was able to interrogate my own assumptions underpinning similar incidents (Cunliffe 2002). My understanding was only challenged in practice at the point of data collection, for the first time, following the first interview. My initial approach to data collection, despite being fully informed about grounded theory, clung to values of reliability and validity from my more positivistic subject domain. This is not uncommon according to Herman (2010:283) who acknowledges that often research cultures are dominated by the idea of objectivity and some attempt to adhere to this by wearing a 'mask of objectivity ... to maintain social distance'. This approach resulted in an initial interview which I had failed to pitch satisfactorily as I was aware that I had attempted to not be drawn into giving my personal opinion and to hold back my own voice following advice from other researchers that transcripts should have large swathes of participant response and very little from the researcher.

This first interview made me extremely uncomfortable as I was aware that I had steered away from prompting, probing and stimulating (Carolan 2003) the student to discuss, share and ultimately to co-construct the reality with me. This started to raise questions about fundamental assumptions I had made around whether I had begun the process with expectations on what students would tell me as well as what I expected to have to be able to 'prove' from the resultant data. Pillow (2010) argues that there is often confusion around validity when really what the researcher needs is rigour, and acceptance that reflexivity in itself offers adequate validity providing that it is undertaken in a rigorous way. As the purpose of my study is to understand a facet of practice both at a personal level and within my community of practice, the increasing need for me to explore the role of reflexivity in delivering a more rigorous, original and valuable outcome was clear.

In my attempts to maintain a distance from the research, my lack of reflexivity became more apparent and required a fundamental change in approach to subsequent interviews. I admit to feeling as though I have had to learn 'the hard way', however, according to Hsiung (2008:212), reflexivity is often best learnt actively as 'reflexivity cannot be learnt passively'. Whilst this has been disconcerting, I am reassured by the fact that this has indeed made me grow as a practitioner researcher. Kleinsasser (2000:155) presents an interesting discussion on how

reflexivity often leads to 'unlearning', states that 'reflexivity is a ... process of learning about self as researcher ... illuminating deeper, richer meanings'.

It is clear now that my attempts to distance myself from the research during the interviews had been a result of a lack of true understanding of validity within qualitative inquiry. In all other previous studies, my approach has been governed by the expectation of traditional measures of validity such as content and research design. It became clear that I had failed to acknowledge the key concept of credibility within my research. This failure to acknowledge credibility emerged from my resistance to accepting that it is less focussed upon the method I use to establish validity, but more around the lens I choose to validate my study and my own paradigm assumptions (Creswell and Miller 2000). This is an indication of the development which was necessary for me to build the synergy between rigorous research and practitioner interpretation, rather than seeing them as opposites. Following my first interview it was important for me to acknowledge how I would use my researcher lens to evaluate how I interacted with the participant, the topic and sense-making process (125). My paradigm assumptions were also important to acknowledge in accepting my desire to hold onto post-positivistic assumptions rather than to embrace the critical paradigms. Developing an understanding of critical paradigms allowed me to be 'reflexive and disclose what (I) bring to a narrative' (126) and to situate myself in the study.

Once I began to embrace a reflexive approach to the research, I was forced to acknowledge my 'conceptual baggage' (Hsiung 2008:212). This included becoming more aware of the way in which I view the central constructs within my study, particularly those surrounding assessment itself. Acknowledging my constructivist beliefs about how people learn has meant analysing what I view as the central purposes and processes involved in it. It has become clearer that my view of assessments as 'building blocks' to learning has underpinned the basic design of my interview. The approach I had taken assumed that students would be able to identify individual assessments/activities or actors which would have been significant in their confidence development. In contrast, participants were unable to narrow it down to this extent as it became clear that their view of assessment, its purpose and process, were very different.

In addition, I had assumed that students would not have considered the wider political agenda in which their A level studies were framed. My assumptions were based upon the students being involved in the more operational aspects concentrating on learning and assessment rather than the 'workings' and politics of the system for setting curriculum and marking of A levels, in addition to an awareness of the position of their teachers within that. Within the first interview,

the participant made clear linkage between the policy and teaching of 'A' levels and the contrast with those existing in HE. Whilst I did not consider this privileged knowledge, understanding or experience, I had not expected it to be of concern or priority to the 'recipients' of the policy. In subsequent interviews, this was explored further as a relevant shared understanding and experience, pertinent to explaining how student interpretation of the assessment 'system' contributed to wider assessment confidence. This is pursued within the findings on contextualisation of the student experience.

The interview schedule itself was designed to ask participants to give an account of their experience of the phenomenon, in this case assessment confidence. However, as students are unlikely to be familiar with the term, it was important to establish the background within which their experiences may have been set with a view to prompting more specific incidents later in the interview. With this in mind the initial questions focused on the student description of their 'A' level or B/TEC experiences. The questions were deliberately open in order that students identify for themselves the key aspects of that experience and allowed for me to revisit points, issues or interesting insight later in the interview.

The initial questions could not be described as probing in this respect, but as they were also intended to establish familiar ground for the participants, they were useful in breaking the ice for further questions. As more probing questions around the specifics of their experiences began to unfold, participants were encouraged to elaborate on details to 'achieve clarity and stay close to the lived experiences' (Starks and Trinidad 2007:1375). It is these lived experiences which were the main focus of the data analysis, whilst also drawing on interesting contextual and personal insights offered throughout the interview discussions.

## Data Analysis

### Thematic Analysis

My approach to analysing the data has been largely unstructured i.e. immersing myself in a manual method, using the transcription process and subsequent 'theming' from my review of the resultant transcripts to interact with the data in keeping with the open coding approach (Wolcott 1994). This was time consuming but gave me a sense that I had engaged fully with the data and the listening and re-listening has given me a fuller picture of each story as a whole.

In grounded theory terms, this research does not differ enormously from traditional approaches to theoretical production except in the fact that all stages of coding have been layered onto the original transcript. As per the GT tradition, the data were analysed using an 'initial coding' approach which involves studying 'fragments of data – words, lines, segments and incidents' (Charmaz 2014:109). From this, I have been able to categorise data into 'clusters of meaning' which represent various aspects of the phenomenon under study. The example shown in Appendix 5 illustrates how initial coding produced themes which are highlighted in different colours directly linked to the words, phrases or incidents in the data themselves. These themes are initially numbered and then each theme has been broken down to subcategories in order to 'select, separate and sort the data' (Charmaz 2014:111).

The example in Appendix 5 shows how theme 1 (support) has been sub-categorised into support from tutors, family and also highlights the area of role modelling. This indicates how the themes not only address the source of the support but also the nature of the support relationship. Likewise, theme 5 ('A' level systems) is sub-categorised into aspects of the value/perceived inequalities of the system as well as external examiner and terminology codes. This allows for initial conceptualisation of the overall themes and how they are constructed from a variety of perspectives within the data.

This has allowed me to give descriptions of what was experienced and how it was experienced (Creswell 2009:276). Throughout the data analysis, I have been grouping answers around common questions in order to analyse the different perspectives on some of the central issues (Patton 2002). This means that as I have recorded and classified each observation of 'social phenomena' relevant to the study, I have simultaneously compared it with others. I have tried to make this a continuous process which has led to me refining the codes I have developed (Dye et al 2000).

The next stage in the process of analysing the data has been to undertake focussed coding, in which meaning is brought to bear upon initial codes (Charmaz 2014). This is where the initial codes are evaluated for strength of data grounding and comparisons across incidents of data. This part of the Grounded Theory analysis encourages the emergence of patterns and interconnections between data incidents and the coding itself. Appendix 6 illustrates how this was undertaken for the Theme 1 coded as 'support'. This illustrates how the patterns have been developed from the data in order to form the structure of each section within Chapter 5. These have subsequently been revisited within the original transcripts in order to draw supporting data evidence from the participants, as illustrated in Appendix 7.

I have actively used informal memoing to collect my thoughts throughout the interview process. Memoing is a form of field notes and a basic version of these built into the transcript has assisted me in collecting my reflections on what I have seen, heard, experienced and thought about the process and the emerging ideas. These have not been detailed separate documents in the way espoused by traditional GT fundamentalists (Charmaz 2014), however, they have been useful notes to inform my reflexive responses to the interviews in the constant comparison processes of data analysis. This has also allowed me to reflect on the coding I have brought to bear on the data itself and is reflected in appendix 7 which illustrates the basic memo process illustrating how meaning has been brought to bear on the supporting student evidence.

Categories are groupings of data content which share a commonality, they are mainly descriptive and for some authors these are often mutually exclusive and should have no overlap to other ones (Graneheim and Lundman 2004:107). However, this is not always possible given the complexity of human behaviours and particularly in this study, I am aware that overlaps exist in for example the category of support and in the development of aspects of student confidence, another category. This is fundamental for me to develop a model which explores the separate nature of these as well as the interrelationship and overlaps. Within categories, themes have been developed which link together meaning in categories which address 'inter and intra-category regularities' (Grandeheim and Lundman 2004:107). Some authors (Manen 1990, Starks and Trinidad 2007) believe that phenomenological analysis is a process of writing in which the researcher composes a story of the lived experience by capturing the important events, issues or elements through which the reader can understand the participant.

As the predominant nature of data in business related research is quantitative, the coding and creation of categories and themes were new to me and I struggled initially to accept my own interpretation of the data as appropriate to producing findings. The idea of 'colouring the data with my presence and values' (Carolan 2003:11) was problematic to me until I began to understand that this is the very source of the rich and insightful outcomes of my data analysis. A number of authors (Cutcliffe 2000, Ellis et al 1997) agree that qualitative research must involve interaction between the researcher and the data, but there is disagreement as to how that takes place. For some (Cutcliffe 2000) interaction with the data in a reflexive way implies acknowledgement of personal beliefs which underpin how the social reality is subsequently constructed. Others (Lipson 1991) focus on the researcher being part of the data itself and therefore within the social construction taking place in the interpretation of the findings. I have attempted to do this throughout my research by addressing questions of 'What do I know?' and

'How do I know it?' in order to evaluate where I have placed meaning on parts of the data in order to formulate findings (Carolan 2003:10) This provides a 'valid means of adding credibility' to my research in its transparency of process.

One of the techniques I have used in order to answer some of my question of 'how do I know that my account of the data and themes developed are credible?' was member checking. Member checking gives the participants a chance to approve the interpretation of the data to ensure that it is congruent with their experiences (Curtin and Fossey 2007). Creswell (2009) points out that it is better to present themes or patterns from the data rather than the actual transcripts as the detail of their own words can sometimes distract participants. For my research this provides me with a good way to find out if I am 'on the right track' and understanding as the participant meant it (Carlson 2010:1105). A presentation of initial categories, themes and metaphor use was incorporated into the second meeting with participants. This allowed me to take the data and interpretations back to the students in order to see if the categories and themes I had developed made sense to them and were reflective of their interpretation of reality around assessment experiences. Creswell and Miller (2000:186) suggest that this is a post-positivist approach to developing validity by seeing the resulting data through the lens of those who contributed to its construction.

However, in reviewing the 'themes' for presentation to participants during this member checking activity, I became more uncomfortable with my lack of ability to capture the contrasts within the data. Whilst participants were able to confirm that the themes identified *do* capture the influential issues in their confidence development, I was acutely aware that I had lost elements of their individual stories e.g. previous exclusions from education institutions, learning difficulties, unique family circumstances which had been integral to each of their individual stories. This poses a number of challenges in terms of the confidentiality and anonymity of participants as I am aware that a combination of data involving course choice and individual stories could easily lead to the identification of participants. It is these challenges which shape my use of alternative data analysis techniques and the careful use of identifying information in the production of student profiles and I-poem analysis (see Chapter 6).

The analytical categories, devoid of personalisation resulting from coding and theming is not an unusual situation for interpretive studies. Charmaz (2000:509) explains that it often involves 'analysing data to build middle-range theoretical frameworks to explain the data collected'. Oliver et al (2005:1278) argue that this is the 'denaturalised' approach, which has led me to better understand that I, as the researcher have set my own 'terms of reference' for

understanding the world as a generalised place, when those terms already exist in the understanding of the students involved in the study. Borland (1991:63) points out that such terms of reference are often not clearly articulated, maybe due to previous experiences of discussing them or editing for an audience of which the researcher is unaware and this can indeed lead to interpretive conflict.

I am unclear as to the extent to which students in my study will have self-edited because of the way in which they perceive me as a researcher. Whilst the fact that I am a student gives me an 'insider' position as shared ground with the students, the fact that I am a doctoral student and older may have led them to believe that I have little experience of their individual challenges and hence positioned me as an outsider in the research. This may have led them either to censor mention of other challenges they may have experienced or to downplay the ones they do mention. Without doubt, the thematic analysis has compounded this by failing to pursue mention of these aspects in the interviews themselves and subsequently by cross-case analysis rather than case specific analysis of their stories.

Beyond the need for anonymity, my other concern around including these individual stories within the final theorisation lies in whether I am able to extend analysis into generalizable theories, albeit only substantive ones. In examining this more closely, I am able to see that my particular concern is whether I have enough understanding of the individual circumstances and contexts to fully understand and make meaning of their individual realities. I am more comfortable applying the knowledge from my background and previous experience of assessment. This allows me to interpret the factors that shape the reality of participants' experience of exams and coursework. However, I have limited experience in interpreting family dynamics or school exclusion experiences. Jaffe and Walton (2000) point out that this is a legitimate concern, with misrepresentations of participants and their stories potentially jeopardising the rigour of the interpretations of their words. Even given this legitimacy, I am concerned at the potential in my own research for overriding the voice of the participant purely due to a caution about 'voicing the truth of another' (Gilligan 2003:158).

Gilligan, speaking in interview with Kiegalmann (2009) describes how participants often role play with their interviewees. This can occur because the interview is structured in such a way as to limit the interaction to question and answer. Instead, Gilligan suggests that the interviewer should allow their natural curiosity to shape the interview with a clear focus on the fact that the interviewer is attempting to learn from the participant. As I have experience in assessment from an evaluative viewpoint, I initially failed to acknowledge that my participants are also authorities

on their thoughts and their reality around assessment and this has undoubtedly had to change in order for me to see the student experience more clearly.

This understanding of myself as a key influence on the interviews, of course, depends on the reflexive stance I choose to take around the knowledge that I produce as a result of this research. Woolgar (1988) suggests a continuum of reflexivity in which I can acknowledge my preconceptions, experiences and biases as a filter for the representation of knowledge. However, Carter (1999) presents a more introspective reflexivity based on an intentional discovery of connections between my actions as a researcher and the consequences. The implications of this approach would be that I would need to be able to justify any connections I make between the individual stories and the analysis of the data. I-poems as an approach to reviewing the student voice, and its application to this study are reviewed in Chapter 6.

### **Analysing the data itself**

Understanding the best way to analyse data for the research questions I have asked has, in itself, been a challenge as I was relatively unfamiliar with qualitative data analysis techniques. In the run up to my initial set of interviews, I became aware of the need to undertake constant comparison within the grounded theory approach I had chosen for my research (Dey 2007). I understood that this meant that I would need to engage with my data from the outset of its generation and I looked for ways in which I could interact with the emerging data quickly. This was done following the approach suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006) for thematic analysis, in which data is examined by recording incidents of commonly occurring patterns of views, experiences and underpinning concepts. This allowed me to create codes by interpreting the data to identify important recurring themes that are of interest, and iteratively refining them for internal coherence and, as far as possible, mutual exclusivity.

Throughout my data analysis, it has been important to remember that I, as the researcher, am the main tool for analysis (Denzin and Lincoln 2005). I realise that the coherence of my argument lies in the credibility and trustworthiness which results from how I use the data to create a convincing explanation (Gee 2005). I found this challenging as, for example, coding areas of 'support' proved complex as this support comes in many different forms from many different sources and students often articulated this without using any common words. In order to deal with this, I have taken the approach of identifying the 'higher order themes' referred to as theme and the 'lower order themes' referred to as aspects. This has allowed me to articulate the main meaning attributed to each higher order theme whilst accepting that this may constitute several

other lower level ones. It has also allowed me to draw upon illustrative data extracts as well as representing memos reflecting my thoughts, assumptions or questions drawn from memos taken during and immediately after the interviews. The higher order themes identified include student experiences of FE assessment, confidence in the transition to HE assessment, experience of HE assessment. Underlying cross theme aspects include support and assessment design.

Whilst the focus of Chapter 5 is on presenting the resulting themes from the coding procedures, it is noted that these themes are presented as discreet, despite acknowledging the relationships between them. The process of producing these has relied upon traditional analytical tools to determine leitmotifs from segmentation of repeated understandings or experiences (Gray 2009) emerging from the whole sample. However, during analysis, I became aware that these themes were unable to capture aspects of student individual experiences which fell 'between' the designated coding parameters. In particular, this was the case for individual incidences of data, which were unable to form codes in their own right, but offered insight on how individual circumstances affected experiences of change and continuity of the phenomenon of assessment (Edwards and Weller 2012).

The thematic analysis has been useful in advance of the I-poem analysis as this has enabled me to see pictures of the main themes as they are experienced by the sample through reinforcing repetition. In addition, the metaphorical analysis has extended this to develop a more in-depth view of the interrelationships between the themes. Whilst this combined thematic analysis has been able to offer insight into the 'what and how' aspects of student interactions with assessment, the I-poems more distinctly evaluate subjective aspects of this. So, whilst acknowledging pertinent themes, the I-poems concentration in on the individual positioning within those themes and the different or multiple subjectivities arising from individual circumstances (e.g. learning difficulties or educational exclusion backgrounds) from outside of those themes. The combination of the two approaches to analysis allows us to identify that both are 'produced' by myself as the researcher but tell different stories about the experience of assessment or at the very least emphasise different aspects of the same story.

## Overview of participant sample

Throughout the data analysis, I have been able to use my recordings, transcripts and memos to remind me of the individuals whose stories have contributed to the construction of the knowledge within this research. I have become increasingly aware that when drawing together themes and categories, I have been able to see and hear my participants and their individual stories. An overview of the sample gives an idea of some of the specific aspects to their stories which may help to better understand some of the insight from the group.

Six of the 11 students were female and 5 male. This is in line with the overall gender split of the Business School within which they study. 10 of the 11 studied 'A' levels and one a BTEC Diploma. Of the 11, only 2 had previously studied Business. 'A' level subjects studied included Biology, Chemistry, Physics, History, English, Philosophy, Media, French, Sociology and PE. Six of the students are from within the Lancashire region. One student declared a disability throughout the interviews and another had experiences of exclusion from mainstream education. Only one student was classified as 'mature' according to the usual age classifications. An overview of potentially pertinent sample attributes is located in appendix 8.

It is accepted that this sample is in no way representative of the population of students within the Business School itself. Indeed, representativeness was not something which was sought within the sampling procedure, nor would have been realistic in terms of response patterns and limitations in attracting students to the study. However, this sample is appropriately insightful and varied in their experiences of transitioning between FE and HE assessment regimes.

This chapter illustrates some of the challenges facing the study but also indicates the level of reflexivity brought to bear on acknowledging or mitigating those challenges. It highlights the importance of the researcher role and positionality in the research and the debates which have led to my gaining some level of comfort with this. The overview of participants and evaluation of the relationship built with them during the study sets the scene for subsequent data and the approaches used to produce theories from this. This has also given insight into the processes and systematic analysis through which those interactions with students have led to the emerging, co-constructed data. This co-constructed picture, both in a general sample way and an individual participant way, is presented over the next 2 chapters.

## Chapter 5 – Thematic Findings

This chapter presents the main findings taken from analysis of the 22 transcripts of participant interviews. The themes are ordered to present analysis from macro to micro pictures of the participant stories across the transition phase, as pertinent to the main research questions. As a result, the themes begin with ‘A’ level experiences, progressing through the transition phase of entry to University and finally, with insights from students after their first year of University assessment experiences. Participant quotes are used where appropriate to illustrate the category and sub-categories of theme and are brought together with reference to specific readings which help to shed light on and make meaning of the themes as they emerged. Where relevant, the contextual readings from the literature review are utilised to add further insight. This chapter also presents meaning making in the form of a metaphor which assists in conceptualisation of the student experiences, in places transcending individual categories of themes to build a fuller picture of analysis.

### The student experience of ‘A’ level assessment

Following the initial ‘pilot’ interview, I became aware that I had made a number of assumptions about my own knowledge base and what I really understood about student experiences of the education system so far. The first participant was articulate about the structures and techniques employed during ‘A’ level assessment regimes. As I have a number of years’ experience of teaching at HE level, and particularly having taught first year students and undertaken induction week events for a number of years, I had been engaging in a discourse around ‘transition’ which has become prevalent in HE. This discourse focuses upon the need for the HE system to remediate the habits, experiences and abilities of students entering from ‘A’ level backgrounds. These assumptions are based upon the generalisation that ‘A’ level students are unprepared, knowledge and skills-wise, for assessment in HE (Thomas 2002).

Discussions with this first student highlighted the fact that I really did not know exactly what the students were transitioning from. Whilst accepting that subject areas may differ, I had little genuine understanding of the curriculum design and the systems and practices common in FE which shape the student experience. Within this was a deeper assumption that students would either be unaware themselves of this, or would be uninterested or untouched by these aspects, with an assumed focus on the subject and learning. In that first interview, the participant

referred consistently to what 'they' (the college) expected or advised around routes through the post 16 structures, module choices and getting into University. This, coupled with detail of how assessments were experienced by not only the participant, but also staff and other students, made me acutely aware that I was not the experienced or knowledgeable person in the discussion.

The aim of the first interview was to gain some insight into the experiences of assessment and to review my process and emerging data, in keeping with my inductive approach. However, it became clear that the emerging areas of experience were outside of my knowledge set and required further insight from literature. In subsequent interviews, this literature assisted me in understanding there was more to be considered around what students were told about those assessments and what I had to know about their studies as a whole in interpreting their stories.

In particular, this included the student perception of the purpose of their studies (outcome) and the choices they had made on how those outputs would be achieved. Within this, the assessment regime and student conceptualisation of their experiences of the assessment system were also key factors and hence led to specific readings in attempting to interpret their meaning. This allowed me to evaluate aspects of the student stories which shed light on the development of assessment confidence in this particular context.

## **Outcome and purpose of the 'A' level system**

### **Performance of students, tutors and institutions**

The initial interview had been particularly interesting in terms of the student emphasis on outputs; when asked to tell me something about 'A' level experiences, the answer focussed purely on grades. This puzzled me as I had expected students to begin by saying whether they had enjoyed them or found them difficult. This was mirrored in subsequent interviews as students often mentioned the grade outputs in their responses to my initial general explorations of their 'A' level studies:

*'I got a B in philosophy, B at Economics and a C in sociology' (participant 5)*

*I got an E at Biology AS and overall I got a C in Psychology, a C in French and B in History. Oh, I did General Studies as well and got a B (participant 6)*

This led me to explore the output focus further in an attempt to understand why this should be the primary descriptor for a student's experience of their studies. Nash (1994) refers to the fact that students became 'units of activity' following funding changes to FE, and the more of these units within an institution, the more funding received therein. It is claimed that this has resulted in students being recruited for courses for which they are ill-prepared and students being retained on programmes on which they would probably fail. Very little focus was placed upon the learning actually taking place and the value of that learning for the individual students, as this was in no way rewarded within the managerialist framework (Nash 1994). This managerialism soon cascaded to students, who became aware of the importance of grade at each point of measurement as a defined output of education rather than as an indication of the learning taking place. This focus is reflected in the student emphasis, even within the AS output point. Participant 3 in particular was proud of her accomplishments at AS level:

*'I got ABCB so then I have 5. Then I went to another 6<sup>th</sup> form to do 'A' levels and I did 5. I did very well and I got 4 As and 1 E (minus the E though) at AS'*  
(participant 3)

The measure of performance for this student was more output driven and less process driven. It is clear that this culture of output mentioned by Nash has become ingrained in the participant student experience as well as that of the tutors and the institutions. This also reflects Trowlers (2001:189) claims around the commodification of knowledge, with students simply seeing the 'accumulated possession' of grades rather than their learning.

### **Preparation for University**

Along with the question of outcomes from the 'A' level system was the issue of purpose, also raised throughout the interviews. For some students, the focus upon 'A' level choice as the entry ticket to HE took precedence over the choice to prepare for HE study needs in terms of learning. One student explained this emphasis in her decision to take 'A' level rather than B/TEC to ensure entry to University.

*'If I had to go back I would definitely do a BTEC because I've realised that it can get you the same places where your 'A' levels can. So I'd much rather do BTEC*

*especially because you know at Uni you have more assignments now. When I started College the School teachers were like ‘do your A levels, you’ll get into a better Uni, it’s easier’” (Participant 1)*

This student clearly laments her initial decision to focus purely upon ‘A’ level as an established entry point to University over other choices, which may have offered better preparation for her actual degree destination. In fact, this quote highlights the fundamental mismatch in the philosophy involved around assessment in FE and HE as it indicates considerations typical of what is known as the ‘measurement model’ of assessment (Taylor 1994). The measurement model focuses on the quantification of knowledge and scores produced, which can be used to separate high performance from low in a system where the outcomes are presented as universal currency. This model suggests that the performance judgement is developed from an objective precise assessment system, which is separated from the teaching aspects (Biggs and Tang 2011). For this student, these teaching and assessment aspects have more relevance to her destination now that she has entered HE.

However, participant 1 has subsequently become aware of two things: that other, more vocational qualifications might have held the same currency as ‘A’ levels and the alternative system at play in her University life, that of the standards model (Taylor 1994). The assumptions in this model are that standards of knowledge of the curriculum can be set using criteria to measure learning outcomes. In addition, it is expected that different approaches to achieving the learning outcomes can still meet the standards. Thus, this learning-led approach in HE is significantly different from the assessment-led approaches of FE qualification on which the student is reflecting.

### **Choice in the ‘A’ level system**

Within the context of ‘A’ level student choice, modularity and the desired outcome of access to HE highlighted from the literature and previous discussion, the implication is that students may end up studying very narrowly in order to ensure achievement. In addition, they may be encouraged to ignore the multi-disciplinary nature of a subject, aiming towards only investigating what is required by the curriculum itself rather than seeing the topic more broadly. As highlighted in the literature review, Morrison (2014) points to the fact that this leads to students making more strategic choices, either hoping to place more emphasis on narrow areas of study to achieve better grades or to alleviate pressure. This was confirmed within my own interviews:

*'my college emphasised on doing 4 more than 3. So you had more. 'Cause I did one in year 11 at my school, I only picked 3 which was a lot easier 'cause you had that free time to do your work or whatever'* (participant 1)

This student gives particular insight into the perceived expectations of the FE institution involved and is aware of having decided against their advice. There is also an element of risk reduction for participant 1, who indicates that more effort would equate to success but being unwilling to risk the pressure and stress that this might bring. Another student had clearly considered the amount of time taken up for study in each unit ('A' level subject) and was aware of the strategic implications of overloading this time, not only for their attainment in other subjects but for the emotional impact that this might have:

*'because I had so much pressure on me, with the other units, I just couldn't do it. If I chose to put the time in I could have done it'* (participant 10)

Both of these participants are indicating that a conscious rational choice had been made to reduce the number of subjects taken, even if this was contrary to what they felt others thought they should do. As highlighted in the literature review, for those who are deemed 'middle attainers', a group which makes up a large proportion of the upper secondary education cohort, the potential for stress caused by such pressure is daunting. This juxtaposition of pressure and achievement, highlighted by participant 10 is a good example of the choice issues facing students as outlined by Young (1998) in the literature review. In addition, further areas of Young's work are confirmed in terms of aspects of 'externalisation' where the control and power, and hence the source of pressure, is perceived as being held outside of the local system being experienced.

### **Externalisation in the 'A' level system – examinations**

Within the critique of 'A' level 14-19 educational policy, there is a pervasive emphasis on the curriculum becoming subservient to assessment, with assessment increasingly equating with qualifications. Wiliam (2009) laments the lack of promotion of assessment for learning within the 'A' level system. Whilst there have been changes to the 'A' level syllabus throughout the years, the nature of the examinations taken during them are recognisably similar to those in the 1980's in respect of their terminal, externally reviewed nature (Higham and Yeomans 2011).

As would be expected, terminal, externally reviewed exams were a large feature in the discussions of all participants who had experienced 'A' levels in FE. The nature of the learning associated with those exams was commonly discussed in a reductionist way with students simplifying either the nature of the processes involved, or the learning articulated during the exams:

*'I prefer exams. With exams, you either know it or you don't so it's right or wrong'* (participant 3)

*'I didn't mind exams. I would rather learn exams and answer questions, you know simple, like 'what is this?''* (participant 6)

These quotes indicate that these participants found some reassurance, preference for or consolation in exams as they had managed to simplify the outcomes by reducing the content to fixed knowledge (ie. Within the domain of knowledge accessible to them given their capabilities). It is also interesting that participant 6 refers to the simplicity of this being asked to memorise rather than deeper thinking around the topic. This oversimplification denies students the opportunity to develop self-regulating learning patterns which require forethought, performance and self-reflection i.e. cognitive monitoring (Zimmerman and Schunk 2012).

This may have contributed to students feeling more confident that they could master the simplistic aspects by learning what they had been told to, as basic facts. 'A' levels teaching approaches are often associated with what is commonly referred to as 'backwash', which Madeus (1991:8) describes as 'preparation for high stake tests which emphasises rote memorisation with drill and practice teaching methods without recourse to higher level cognitive activity'. In my study, one student appears acutely aware of the emphasis on the 'backwash' or 'spoon feeding' approaches being used by teachers, even citing one who openly admits that this is the approach being used and potentially the most effective way to success in examinations.

*'The exam in that wasn't too bad at all and very much, as referred to by my teacher as "parrot learning", unfortunately'* (participant 8)

More insightful is the student's acknowledgement that this is an unfortunate situation, which implies understanding of the fact that this may not have prepared students for the independent approaches to assessment used in HE. However, this simplification of the needs of and

approaches to exams belies the stress aspects associated with them. Whilst the reductionism appeared to contribute in some way to reassurance, the significance of the situation was evident for other students, with some emphasising the consequences of not being prepared, despite accepted 'backwash' techniques:

*'You can tell if someone isn't prepared for an exam. There have been cases where I've done last minute revision because obviously I've been worried about the exam'* (participant 5)

Others focussed on the stress attached to the exam setting itself and its interrelationship with the outcomes attached to their performance during the exams

*'It was a lot of pressure, a lot of pressure ... everything you've learnt for the past 2 years comes into that exam and it's make or break'* (participant 1)

This was reflected in insights from students during the interviews, where there was acceptance of a somewhat 'black or white' approach taken to the exam system and its ability to determine a judgement on their knowledge, but also the aspect of uncertainty, that if they did not have the right piece of knowledge, then the result would be negative, regardless of other knowledge sets:

*'You just don't have a good day in the exam and you just turn up and you do feel confident and you have all the right ideas but ... it didn't go your way'* (participant 2)

*'(in) an exam ... you either fail it or you don't fail'* (participant 4)

There are a number of control and power aspects to these quotes. Students were aware of their lack of control in not knowing whether they had studied the correct topics. Rotter (1966) as cited in Schunk (1991) introduced the 'locus of control' which highlighted that people's beliefs about possible outcomes are often shaped by intrinsic aspects of control. In this instance, participants believed that the outcomes of the exams would occur independently of their efforts to prepare and be influenced by luck, chance or the choice of others in terms of the questions and topics on the exam itself, which is referred to as external control.

In contrast, other people believe that outcomes are contingent upon their actions alone, referred to as internal control (Ajzen 2002). This means that individuals vary in the extent to

which they believe that performance is dependent on themselves. Weiner (1985) presented the mechanism of 'attribution theory' to explore how individuals explain why an event turned out a particular way. In the case of a number of participants across quotes used in this discussion, attribution theory is useful in understanding their justification for doing worse than expected, failing or losing confidence. Most of these outcomes have an emotional response, in this case negative, which drive individuals to 'attribute' a cause which is often based upon aspects such as effort, skills and knowledge, strategies, ability, the teacher or examiner's mood or even luck. These are based upon:

- i 'locus of causality' i.e. what is the source of the cause?
- ii 'stability' i.e. is this enduring or changing? and
- iii 'controllability' i.e. can the individual affect the cause? This relates back to the agency aspects highlighted by Ajzen in internal control.

Some participants understood the complex mix between internal control and self-efficacy beliefs i.e. that exams were not the ideal way to illustrate their capabilities and as a result, they preferred scenarios with more perceived control. A number of students raised the topic of coursework and their perceptions of how this reflected their real knowledge:

*'I could get involved (with coursework) a lot more than I could with exams. I could show far more of what I could do'* (participant 8)

*'In coursework I can refine it if I know I'm going wrong, so coursework is quite important. I like coursework because I know ... you get instant feedback, (it) shows what you're good and not good at'* (participant 4)

Participant 4 refers also to the in-task guidance given in the form of draft reading, or 'scaffolding' as mentioned in the work of Beaumont (2011), highlighted in the literature review, in a way which allows them to develop more closely towards the desired performance, which was seen as positive. Despite this positive view, the participant remains unaware that within this guidance system, there is also evidence of power at play as would be the case in exam scenarios.

Ball (2011:48) explores the element of power inherent in all assessments, whether viewed positively or negatively by the student, labelling the power in play as 'invisible' as the learner sees only the tasks and tests ahead. The 'A' level system, whether through coursework or examination, is aimed at producing performance judgements which benefit the teachers and

institutions through league table position and funding, as much as the individual learner. The focus of the learner becomes the movement through the system that will best allow them to the next fixed reference point of measurement, in this instance entrance to University. This increasingly strategic student thought process, both in subject choice, stress avoidance and focus on University entrance led me to consider the student experience in a more holistic way. It seemed as though students were articulating an experience in which they perceived there to be rules which controlled the actions of them and others, bringing to mind a 'game' scenario which I found useful in interpreting the student insight.

### Using Metaphor to understand the student experience: 'Playing the Game'

In order to understand more about the power and control exerted in the examination process, I began to think about the relationships which exist between student, teachers and examiners as these were highlighted in the student interviews. This was often articulated by the students using phrases and concepts normally associated with the playing of a game, which prompted the development of metaphor within the analysis:

*'I would just play the game'* (Participant 4)

*'I would say it's a different ball game'* (Participant 5)

*'This is a very different game we're playing'* (Participant 6)

The use of metaphor to compare the process of formalised assessment to a game allows us insight into a complex conceptual system. Metaphors are only possible where one idea is replaceable with another, reducing concepts into their shared characteristics (Coffey and Atkinson 1996). Metaphors can extend the meaning of words, grounding our explanations in a 'theory of substitution' (Carpenter 2008:274). More importantly, they are laden with values and devices which influence and reveal the way people 'think, act and feel – the way they construct their reality' (Leask 2006:184) and hence are interesting in terms of understanding the social construction of the student experience of assessment. The word 'game' has a complex meaning which goes much further than the dictionary definitions surrounding the recreational amusement or diversions normally associated. The word also refers to a test of skill, courage or endurance in a pursuit which often involves high stakes and risk and instead provides a union between thought and action (Covington 1992).

In order to evaluate this further, it is necessary to understand what is commonly associated with the 'game'. Nalebuff and Brandenburger (1997) identify one of the key points as the existence of 'players' and their perceptions i.e. what the players believe about the game, which may impact how their reality of 'A' level experience is constructed. Players are identified as those with something to potentially gain from the game. The 'A' level system contains many such players: the individual students and their families, student groups, FE providers and their representative teaching staff in addition to 'A' level awarding bodies and examiners and their corresponding Government agency. Alongside this, Perkins (2009) develops the notion that 'sides' exist when players join together for mutual benefit in the game or shared goals, which became apparent throughout the research:

*'It depends on whether the tutor plays the game'* (Participant 2)

*'They're marking my work so I don't want to get on the wrong side of these tutors ... The thing with exams is that they're like games'* (Participant 11)

A further identifier of 'game' is the concept of something to 'win' or lose'. The 'A' level assessment regime shares this characteristic in its production of perceived winners or losers. However, Nalebuff and Brandenburger (1997) confirm that this is sometimes misleading as it leads to imagining a childhood boardgame where in order for one to win, another must lose. In fact, in games it is possible for concurrent success with those that manage to 'play' well winning, and those that 'play' badly losing. This corresponded with the idea of the game having rules and more particularly, that these were imposed externally without any thought to how the 'players' game would be affected. In this instance, the winning and losing is seen as achievement and success for the individual students.

*'So that's why I don't like exams, because if you don't play the game by the rules, you're screwed'* (participant 4)

This quote particularly helped me to understand the next key identifier associated with game, in the existence of rules that structure the interaction between those players (Nalebuff and Brandenburger 1997). Perkins (2009:16) argues that whilst there are often no formalised rules to most post-compulsory education systems, there are guidelines, conventions and strategies which frame how people play the 'game'. These were also of interest in terms of identifying the perceived differences between FE and HE 'rules' of assessment. This appeared most around

student perception of the need to follow the unspoken restrictions and rules placed on the work by the examiner. Radford (2000) argues that it is not uncommon for games to have a fixed vocabulary, which allows individuals to identify themselves as serious players. However, participants appeared less concerned with being seen as serious players and more around the marking and points attached to use of a particular vocabulary. This was even reduced down to specific words or phrases that they felt would be attached to marks by an external referee:

*'Whatever you put on the paper, it had to be word by word what the examining body wanted. So you could describe it in your own way but if you didn't use a certain buzz word or a certain technical term for it, you would get marked out'* (Participant 4)

*'also saying in your exam what they want to hear, make their points clear'* (Participant 6)

The use of the phrase 'marked out' is of particular interest here, denoting that a failure to follow the rules resulted in the possibility of being 'out' of the game. There was also an attempt by almost all of the students to 'get into the mind' of the examiner in order to predict what might improve their performance, in an attempt to externalise the judgement rather than rely upon their own. In areas of curriculum and syllabus, students were aware that the syllabus was not only out of their control but also out of the control of tutors. This meant, for students, that they were often subject to changes which appeared arbitrary and took no account of the impact on individual students, with the rule setters often referred to as 'they' in an externalisation of the rule setting similar to those in sporting bodies :

*'but this year the marking schemes are much more stringent, they changed it'* (participant 4)

*'And then they changed the syllabus for 'A' level, so I had to start all over again'* (participant 3)

It became clear that students were aware of the external power and control forces at play in making seemingly arbitrary changes to the established 'rules'. Puttick (2015) confirms that this has become the norm, but clarifies that the power of the examiner, both in setting 'rules' and making such changes is rooted in accreditation rather than any individual authority. This authority is based upon the perception that they are 'the custodians of standards', impartial

judges and that their judgement legitimises the examination process (Sheehan 1994:948). Puttick (2015) adds that it is their active involvement in the evaluative rules of examination that underpins the power structure at play for both teachers and students. As they decide the relative importance of knowledge and how it must be articulated, this determines how teachers instruct student learning to perform within that power framework. However, this was not the only effect noted, as students also raised concerns about the impact that this had on the way in which they were taught and the approach taken by teachers:

*'they (teachers) felt they were out of control as they had this massive big exam board dictating to what they should teach' (participant 4)*

The student perception of the importance and centrality of the examiner in the process almost reifies their role with a distinct emphasis upon the requirement to satisfy them in order to achieve a positive outcome. This illustrates power and control in 'rule setting' in which the examining body decide what constitutes valuable knowledge. According to Thomas (2002) educational institutions often determine which language, values and knowledge are considered legitimate and ascribe success to these in order to award a qualification (433). Because of this, students become indoctrinated in understanding the futility of divergence or difference from this accepted knowledge set. Participant discussions around terminology highlighted this. Specific word use was identified by several as an explicit 'rule' emphasised by tutors that they were expected to follow in order to satisfy the external in order to gain marks:

*'A level sociology is a huge contrast. I didn't know the terminology whereas GCSE was just writing down your opinions and thoughts' (participant 3)*

*'but as soon as the paper came back it was wrong because I wasn't using the correct words or the terminology .... The only way was to learn religiously the definitions. If you don't know the definitions, you don't get the marks' (participant 4)*

*'even if you know you're right and you've got the right terminology and you understand it, if you don't have the specific key words that they want, you're not getting the mark. You can't ... how can you guess what word they want us to put in!' (participant 7)*

A common theme underlying the interviews was the fact that the prescribed knowledge and decisions around achievement were initiated from an outside body, relegating the role of the teacher to interpreter. This external control shaped the approach taken by the tutor in order to mitigate the impact of the restricted, unpredictable or simply the unknown:

*'Some teachers worked just on telling us what the examiners wanted to hear, when others taught us stuff. They would teach us how to get 40 marks in 40 minutes' (participant 6)*

*'they were saying that the examiners look more into the words and if they know you've got a good vocabulary ... we were trying to please them' (participant 10)*

The student 'players' associated the teachers as being on their 'side'. For some students, the teacher's role was to reduce ambiguity for them in directing their knowledge and practicing exam techniques which were likely to meet the requirements of the examining body; the opposing 'side'. All students agreed that a main concern for them during their FE study, was whether or not they, or indeed their tutors, had interpreted the examiners requirements correctly. Some students placed emphasis on the need for someone on their 'side' to interpret the rules in a way which would give them some strategic advantage in order to minimise the uncertainty and risk associated with losing.

*'Our teacher had been doing it for years and he knew what he was doing. He had quite close links with EdExcel as he knew someone from EdExcel, knew what would be coming up and how to do it' (participant 5)*

*'Some teachers worked just on telling us what the examiners wanted to hear, some did that better than others' (participant 6)*

Some participants focussed on the tutor ability to give preparatory guidance, which Beaumont (2011) highlights as model answers or exemplars. In the context of the externalisation of the examiners systems, this particularly took the form of identifying those 'star players' who had had contact with the 'referee' examiner process as being the most credible source for preparatory guidance:

*'people who'd previously worked for exam boards spoke to us and said .. giving us nudges and hints and tips because they obviously worked for exam boards so they know what is needed. They know what examiners look for'* (participant 8)

*'A lot of teachers go on these courses and a lot of them have been examiners. So they knew what they were looking for and they had, obviously, on the websites as well, they have marking schemes so "these are the criteria you've got to be hitting'* (participant 11)

In some ways, the focus upon success in terms of marks or 'score' for both students and tutors is not unusual, given the current perception that 'A' levels form the gateway to University education (Hodgson et al 2003). This confirms the measurement aspects to the current FE assessment systems as discussed earlier. The assessment-led focus was clear from the interviews as students confirmed their experiences of FE assessment as having been driven by examinations which dictated the learning experience. This led to students focusing only on knowledge that they would be assessed on. Evidence from interviews suggest that this is indeed the case:

*'My 'A' levels as a whole, the ones I did, were more about learning how to pass exams and not learning the knowledge* (participant 6)

*'I felt pigeonholed in a way. Shoehorned into ... "you have to do that and you have to do that". At the end of the day, the exam technique is very, you know, regimented. Even though you may have the knowledge, if you don't apply it the certain way they want you to, you can't pass'* (participant 4)

There are a number of key areas for examination in these quotes. Firstly, there is confirmation that exam preparation has indeed become a key feature of the current 'A' level system for these students. This confirms previous studies (Beaumont et al 2011) which found that the term 'spoon feeding' was commonly used in reference to 'A' levels, by staff and students alike. As there is very little opportunity to give in-task or performance support, the main emphasis is upon the preparatory guidance offered. In the case of 'A' levels, this constitutes mostly exam technique. However, also, for participant 3, there is the understanding of the need to focus only on those knowledge sets laid out specifically within the syllabus:

*'Because the syllabus is already there, laid out, you can't really talk about something else, coz it won't come up in the exam so you have to learn just what's in the exam'*  
(participant 3)

*'I would rather learn exams and answer questions, you know simple ... rather than applying stuff'* (participant 6)

In addition, these quotes highlight the limited learning associated with the restrictions of the exam system at FE level and the underlying emphasis on the outcome of passing the exam as the main outcome, rather than learning of a subject. In particular, participant 6 illustrates a preference for rote learning rather than application of new found knowledge and this is in contrast to other students who welcomed the opportunity to exhibit their skills beyond the rote learning. Within this, all of the students discussed their 'A' levels in terms of grades and 'points' with some particularly focussing on the continuous process of monitoring their running 'score':

*'In psychology I came out that exam thinking it was alright but I looked on ... the grades for each 4, adding up the points ... so before the last exam you know how many points you need to get the B or an A or whatever, that's horrible as well'*  
(participant 6)

In this instance, the score relates to 'winning' or success in the game of achieving points. However, whilst there is no indication in any of these quotes by the students that the score of one may affect another i.e. one may lose at the expense of another, there is distinct game-related competition amongst the students on grades achieved and the resulting University destination for those with better grades:

*'When it came to philosophy we did essays and got our results back, it was more like a competition with all of our friends, and we were like "Oh I got a B, you got an A"'* (participant 5)

*'You have to get an A, A, B to get into a better Uni, so you're constantly thinking about that'* (participant 1)

For one participant, interpretation of the 'rules' went beyond simply a route to accessing University, even appearing to shape expectations that a similar reified body might exist within the University system in an extension of the 'A' level examiner power:

*'There were some buzzwords that they said make sure you get in there ... at 'A' level, which might be the same as at University' (participant 11)*

This participant is looking for familiar rules surrounding the power and language applied to the 'game' which he might be able to take forward as a 'known' to the next point of assessment. Such buzzwords falsely allow students to develop beliefs around their self-efficacy in mastering the 'rules of the game' rather than developing self-efficacy in learning and self-development for assessments themselves.

## **Understanding confidence in this context**

### **Mastery and belief about competence**

It is argued in literature that the perceived level of ability determines the perception of possible success in further future endeavours, which in turn affects the extent to which an individual will challenge themselves within goal setting. Those that self-doubt, based upon a lack of familiarity with even basic subject terminology may visualise failure and the focus on this affects actual performance. Collins (1982) study illustrated that amongst students with the same ability, those who performed best in actual achievement were those with higher levels of self-belief. This indicates that even students with a similar skills base might not achieve equally if elements of self-doubt exist. It is here that issues of lack of confidence in assessment manifest themselves.

There is evidence from the students involved in my interviews that confidence within the 'A' level system is very commonly developed through practice strategies. This relies upon familiarity, routine and repeated experience of the assessment type, terminology and protocols, to reduce anxiety and develop a 'comfort level' in the context of summative end examinations:

*'By doing the same thing again and again. I definitely felt more confident ... we would constantly do practice papers and constantly be on top of revision when it came to doing the real one, everybody was fine .. we were so used to it and confident about it that we'd had so much practice, we knew what we were doing anyway' (participant 1)*

*'Preparation is key to how I've gotten confident, in fact it's nearly all of it'*  
(participant 5)

Gunderman (2003) highlights that some students may have become accustomed to success which leaves them feeling less capable when failure does occur. This may occur when a student assumes either a basic knowledge of the assessment type, terminology or protocols, or assumes transference of these from another successful scenario. This was indeed the case for one student who felt the pressure of previous success, and particularly how this had shaped the expectations of others for his performance:

*'I think it was a case of over confidence because I got an A\* and I thought this will be a doddle ... I thought I'd get through it with ease and then there was just a topic that I got completely stumped on and ... I was like 'I can't do this! It's the stigma of "he's good so he's definitely going to be good" and it definitely wasn't the case. It was difficult. I really wanted to repeat it, because I don't like failure and I really like to do well'* (participant 5)

When this happens, the quality of persistence and the ability to take a different approach is useful. However, Gunderman (2003) goes on to argue that this creative approach to learning can sometimes be hampered where students have been presented with assessment in which there is deemed only one way to achieve, through conformity of approach, leaving learners frustrated and believing that their capability is low.

According to Nicholls (1984) development of ability is also a key influencer in human self-belief. Some regard ability as a skill set which can be acquired as a mixture of knowledge and competence. Those that believe this seek opportunity to develop such a skill set and will often focus on trial and error in the generation of the desired skillset. For these, failure is not a negative focus but a trial and elimination of a skill, practice or strategy. These learners tend to be more resilient in personal improvement and this in turn, affects achievement.

However, others believe that their ability is innate and related to their intellectual capability. This means that failure is seen as an indication of their intellectual standing compared to others. These people often do not focus on their own skill development towards a goal but prefer to assert competence in tasks that they feel will allow others to see their proficiency. Gunderman (2003) agrees with how conception of ability can shape an individual's approach to learning.

This is particularly true if they perceive that some internal element is fixed or 'unchangeable'. Where this is the case, early disappointments may lead to a 'can't do attitude' (3) which leads to a lack of self-challenge and subsequent lack of propensity to change approach in future encounters with similar tasks. Whilst capabilities at various levels might be limited, this is often used prematurely as an explanation for the failure rather than to engage in skill development.

Some students in my study articulated that they felt that their lack of previous success or resulting lack of confidence was attributable to an innate lack of ability in a specific area:

*'because, obviously you're marked on the skill and technical ability and then some of the things I'm not able to do like other people are'* (participant 2)

*'I was just not good at it at all ... and I just couldn't do it, it was horrible until the end'* (participant 3)

*'After that topic, I was like 'Maths isn't my subject any more' there was just something about which was a mental block of "oh I can't do this" and then you go into a spiral. It was bad'* (participant 5)

Dweck (1986:1043) explains that perceptions of simply being unable to do something lie within the 'theory of intelligence'. Those that believe ability to be fixed (entity theory of intelligence) often focus on tasks as performance goals. In contrast, those that believe ability is malleable (incremental theory of intelligence) often focus on learning as the goal and this allows them to seek out and persist with challenges regardless of their confidence in present abilities. Middleton and Spanias (1999) observed that those with a focus upon learning as the goal often achieve mastery through seeking out more challenging tasks and persistence in the face of failure in order to achieve mastery. This increases confidence through a consistent belief in ability to develop the necessary capabilities for success.

### **Verbal Persuasion: Feedback, encouragement and support for assessment**

As my study is seeking to take a wider perspective on the experiences of students throughout their 'A' level assessments, transition and University assessments, I felt it important to understand the social and academic support systems. As my own experience and understanding of education is within social structures existing in families, peer groups and teaching

relationships, I felt it important to explore these with participants to gain insight into the likely impact of interactions with these groups upon student persistence and engagement with assessment. The students interviewed identified a number of areas in which they felt that social interactions had helped them feel more confident in assessment scenarios, in particular support from teachers, other students and family were highlighted as significant. Some students attributed aspects of their confidence to encouragement given by tutors and key family members throughout the process. Teacher and family faith in their abilities had a calming effect on them enabling them to see their own capabilities through the eyes of someone thought to be more knowledgeable about success in assessment:

*'My teachers made it a lot ... made you feel confident. Because when they tell you, you know, that you can do it and you do know it, you just need to calm down and I think that makes it a lot easier'* (participant 1)

*'I had my sister to help, my mum and dad were like you're going to do great, we know you're capable. It was the influence of everyone and my friends as well'* (participant 5)

Bandura (1997:101) identified that 'it is easier to sustain a sense of efficacy ... in times of difficulty, if others express faith in one's capabilities'. Whilst this may appear to focus on verbal aspects in order to bolster a positive mindset, this can also include guidance and supporting strategies which assist in convincing individuals that they can successfully complete the assessment and encouragement to develop rather than outcome driven strategies. Further studies (Wilcox et al 2005, Thomas 2002) identified social support as a significant theme in evaluating student withdrawal and allows us further insight into the nature and structure of support which may be significant influencers in the assessment process. This has led to the identification of varying types of social support in University experiences such as emotional (trust and love), instrumental (resources offered), informational (information and advice) and appraisive (feedback) support types (House 1981 as cited in Wilcox et al 2005). This framework of alternative support types has been used to evaluate the student experiences of support structures within their 'A' level experience.

Studies by Malecki and Demaray (2003) indicate that teachers are often perceived by students as being a significant source of emotional support in the form of trust and the resultant atmosphere created in the classroom. This creates positive social groupings with reliable

'alliances' to provide companionship and listening support. Despite this, emotional support was most commonly cited by participants in relation to friends and family:

*'They (family) were big encouragers, big motivators. It was both emotional and practical help' (participant 8)*

*'My friends were very important. They offered emotional support' (participant 7)*

These family and friend relationships also offered instrumental support in a number of ways, firstly in assisting with structuring of studies, but also with the provision of basic material resources required to develop a good study environment. Some students felt that the support of others, in this instance from their social peer networks had, in one way or another kept them on track to success:

*'all my friends were going to the library, do our reading and organise proper breaks because we know how important it is to work and they really, really kept me on point' (participant 5)*

However, in some instances, the family support system offered an additional dimension of the role modelling and experience necessary to support outside of the classroom. This sometimes bordered on replacement tutor role modelling. For participant 3, this meant that siblings had studied the same subjects and had extensive experience of sitting the final examinations, which was considered both a credible and reliable source of support:

*'my older brother helped me, sort of, a few days a week. So me and him would just go through past exam papers again and again ... and his notes and his help and I think, yeah, if I didn't have him I probably wouldn't have done as well' (participant 3)*

In some instances, this credible source of support, advice and guidance was not forthcoming as members of the family had no experience of either the subject or the assessment types being experienced. As a result the focus is upon their support networks as having provided the more tangible aspects of study aid resources:

*'they (family) couldn't have taught me any of this really. All they could tell me was 'bought you some books', or help me get a nice quiet space to study in'* (participant 4)

*'If I needed books or anything .. they got me a laptop so I could do my research and that sort of stuff. They tried to get me into a good position so I could do my best'* (participant 10)

However, alongside this emotional support offered by friends and family, instrumental support was also particularly key to the students participating in the study. In describing support offered by teachers during 'A' levels there was a distinct focus upon the 'scaffolding' of tasks described by Beaumont (2016):

*'I was confident because they gave me a safety net, I didn't rely on them. In Health and Social they would teach us a topic and then we'd have a coursework on that topic ... I found it really easy to just get on with it, because she had gone through everything'* (participant 9)

This was a clear indication of 'preparatory guidance' in which students felt more certain, familiar, using repetition in order to reduce ambiguity. In particular some students referred to activities which could constitute 'teaming' in which group exemplars were offered at the beginning of a task:

*'my teacher would give us case studies at the beginning but we would do it as a whole class, we would do it all together. So when she knew we could do it as a class, then she would give us an actual case study where we do individual work'* (participant 10)

These insights into support illustrate how the assistance offered manifested itself in the form of material or tangible aid, which the students see as key to modelling behaviours appropriate to the assessment task. This involved practicing the actual assessment task in the model of the final assessment itself in order to develop a sense of familiarity. Of particular interest here is the use of the term 'safety net' which implies that tutors were able to prevent failure by being available to give further guidance.

There was also a broader view of instrumental support. For some students the time and capabilities of another were also viewed as key resources offered during the informational support process, whether this be family member or teacher:

*'he put his own time in, his own personal time and he really made an effort so I think that made a big difference to everyone because then you go into an exam feeling confident'* (participant 1)

There is some indication here that poor 'teacher resource' would potentially be detrimental to the exam or future success. Where teachers were thought to be less interested or committed, able or knowledgeable, this was seen as impacting the outcomes for the students.

*'Unless you get blessed with a teacher who is really diligent and really explains things clearly, I would say your chances are slimmer of doing well'* (participant 8)

These quotes also hint that some teachers' motives for instrumental resource had been interpreted within the policy and context framework identified earlier, rather than with student success as the focus. Hounsell (2007:101) identifies that tutor approach can enhance learning in a number of ways 1) by accelerating learning 2) by optimising the quality of what is learned 3) by raising individual and collective attainment. It is this third one, which was focused on by participant 6, who points to the gains of the tutor and institution in preparing students well to answer only the examination requirements. These ulterior motives reduce the trust aspect in student perceptions of the emotional support offered i.e. whether the longer term learning of students were placed secondary to the teachers' own goals.

*'You can tell the teachers that wanted you to get good grades so that they would look good and then the teachers that generally wanted you to learn, not just how to pass the exam ... things that are going to help you in life, you know? Like, it's not just about pass it, forget it, get your A level'* (participant 6)

This is also evidence of informational support detailed by the participants as teachers provided guidance and advice aimed directly at the assessment task. This is a good example of 'in-task' guidance outlined by Beaumont et al (2016) in which tips and draft reading are used to scaffold familiarity and reduce risk. This is delivered by exposure to new and diverse pieces of

information which may improve success. In this case, techniques and know-how that students perceived to be associated with success had been identified as useful in the assessment task:

*'they would put bits on Moodle or email something they thought would particularly help ... go through things to help technique and structure and things'*  
(participant 2)

*'Before the exams we used to do mock exams, try and replicate the exam, what you were going to do, as much as possible, any topics you were struggling with .. again, because they were such small classes, if you said "I'm struggling with topic X" they'd cover topic X next week'* (participant 11)

These quotes indicate a more tailored approach to the support mechanism which responded directly with information lacking for individual students. Feedback which focuses on development of skills and progress over a number of assessments can better underpin perceptions of capability. Feedback which focuses on deficiencies will leave students without understanding of where progress has been made or is static and hence leads to confusion over capability. Jourden (1992) highlighted that a focus upon development and progress better allowed aspirations to flourish and drive to achieve more satisfaction through accomplishment. This is particularly echoed in the appraisal support detailed by the participants:

*'He (the teacher) would look at each piece and say I think this is like a 'C' and I think this is where you can improve. Our teacher had been doing it for years and he knew what he was doing'* (participant 5)

*'Doing a mock, and still getting positive feedback with only tiny little things to improve on to make it an A grade or whatever. Having done it in the same circumstances made it more familiar when I came to actually doing it. I could tell in the exam rooms which ones I'd had a mock in and which ones I hadn't'*  
(participant 6)

*'The teachers would say what you're struggling with, we'll cover. If you have any problems, come in ... So what I used to do was do a lot of past papers and they would happily mark them and give me feedback'* (participant 11)

These indicate support mechanisms based upon feedback of the students technical ability to undertake the task from practice activities. This allowed the tutors to evaluate current performance and identify expectations, which would allow the students to develop. As students were given direction on their task performance, this appeared to enhance their own sense of esteem and worth in the assessment process, particularly where the teacher is deemed to be a reliable source of feedback for success.

These elements of support also illustrate aspects highlighted in the literature review as they are important in terms of mitigating aspects of stress which might lead students to believe that they cannot 'cope'. This gives students more 'cognitive control' by raising feelings of competence through reducing risk and ambiguity in order to reduce anxiety.

### **Transitioning from FE to HE assessment**

When experiencing a transition to University assessment which intrinsically seeks to encourage deeper involvement by the learner, students are less likely to be rewarded simply for using buzzwords, instead being rewarded for meaningful goals around learning and mastery. In understanding this, the students will appreciate the change in the underlying 'rules of the game' (Covington 1992) in transitioning between one assessment experience and another.

Linking experiences of one assessment regime to expectations of subsequent educational levels is not unrealistic as students often have limited insight into exactly what the new experience may mean in reality. Aspirations for achievement might be shaped by a belief about the level of ability already existing (perceived mastery as highlighted in the literature review) gained from a previous experience. It is often the case in other subjects that there will be a prior history of study in the subject area which leads into the HE studies. As a result, this mastery perception is a particularly interesting area for my research as most students entering the study area of Business and Management are perhaps less likely to have any direct experience of the subject. According to Schunk and Pajares (2001) this is most likely to create doubt and uncertainty where key information for making judgements is not present. This would result in students linking mastery of aspects such as terminology to success in any assessment scenario. This is particularly true where key information on the task or scenario is unfamiliar, as is confirmed by one of the student participants:

*'I can tell that some people have done the subject at college cause they know all the terminology and I'm like "what's that?" and then they tell me so I feel like I'm behind some people because they've already done it. I didn't do the subjects that would have prepared me so I'm playing catch up' (participant 9)*

This has implications for this student in terms of subject specific language and terminology but also study in the area of business and management is likely to be unfamiliar in terms of the applied nature of assessments and the increased emphasis upon summative coursework rather than examinations.

Another aspect of insight from students within my study centred upon judgements they had made about their capabilities by comparing with others perceived to be of similar ability. In particular around how their comparisons to others helped them establish a level of confidence during the initial stages of HE transition. Festinger (1954) proposed that all people have an innate desire to evaluate their abilities but often do not have an objective standard against which this can be measured. As a result, the uncertainty around ability is reduced by the subjective reality of comparison to the abilities of others. According to Pepitone (1972) the educational environment generates enormous 'cognitive uncertainty' produced by changes in materials, routine, activities and other unfamiliar and ambiguous aspects which may appear as students progress through the learning years.

Chowdhury et al (2002:348) agree, claiming that people often observe the effort of others and the resulting success and from that make a judgement as to their own potential to succeed. As most of the participants had no previous experience studying in Business and Management, there is uncertainty around their own abilities in this context. Levine (1983) argues that to reduce this uncertainty, social comparison is undertaken in order for individuals to adapt to the new environment.

*'I want to work as hard as I can because it's an opportunity to find out how good you are amongst the rest of your peers. So if I work really hard and get a first then I know my capabilities. I know I'm one of the ones in the class that can get that first and do really well' (participant 5)*

Although some of the studies in this area (Festinger 1954, Pepitone 1972) focussed on such experiences in children, there is evidence from the later studies (Chowdhury et al 2002) and from

my own participants, that this is a pattern of behaviour continued through secondary and tertiary education. A number of participants articulated initial impressions of others and their own capabilities in the initial stages of their HE transition:

*'We compare between friends ... one did really well, one did badly and I was in the middle'* (participant 9)

*'You can spot the clever people in the room and the mediocre and the thick. You can spot that and you can judge where you are in the room. Once you see a thick person struggling then you know you're doing better than them. I have found where I am, yeah'* (participant 4)

*'I think "that person's pretty much averaging thirds, that person is pretty on it this year". I know who is on my level. I prefer to find who has got the top marks and see how they are going to do it, it's the most effective way as they're obviously doing something right'* (participant 5)

Whilst these illustrate some evidence of the 'effort to success' observations highlighted by Chowdhury et al (2002), there are more interesting insights here around the perceived hierarchy of abilities. External pressures and expectations around academic performance make students more aware of the comparative 'rewards' of achievement. Early models of social comparison (Festinger 1954) emphasised the upward mobility of evaluations, and the aspirational approach illustrated by the final quote from participant 5. In exploring this further, a study by Larrick et al (2007) illustrated that easy tasks resulted in more students rating themselves as 'better than average'. This study proposed that tasks could be designed to influence perceptions of performance more than actual performance and that this was useful where 'domain-specific' uncertainties and hence underestimates were likely to be taking place.

In the 1980's and 90's other frameworks for social comparison analysis began to appear in which 'downward comparisons' (Taylor et al 1993) where individuals identified areas of superiority to others were developed. Fundamental to these writings was the 'Better than average' (BTA) effect in which the performance of others is used as a benchmark against which personal self-judgements of capability can be established. Taylor (1993) argues that this can be used as a mechanism for the individual to bring reassurance and control to unfamiliar situations where ability may be unknown. Among my participants, it is clear that they have attempted to find the 'average' and place themselves within the hierarchy of ability. Whilst for the majority of these

students, the outcome of this social comparison is perception of themselves as 'better than the average', it was also clear that for some this was not the case. In one case, the seemingly effortless abilities of others was clearly problematic in the students' attempts to establish a 'similar other'

*'when we get (work) back, we are thinking 'Oh No! So and so has got this and you do think that the average is the average don't you? If the average in your class is what you should be getting but that's not always how it works.*  
(participant 6)

This student was focusing on the need to find an 'average' as a benchmark against which she could judge her own potential. The student clearly found this intimidating as it placed her lower than the others in the group, resulting in a repeated 'oh no' as it is implied that this reduced her confidence. In another instance, one participant perceived herself as lower than others in the hierarchy and attempted to distance herself from the high performers as not being within her comparator group. The student attempts to dismiss the comparative success of others by highlighting differences in effort expended as an explanation of the success factors

*'I always ask my friends what did they get coz they're also doing the same course so they're in all my modules. They always get really high 60s and 70s and I'm like 'oh no', but then I feel worse because they always get higher but I know that they revise a lot and if I put that effort in then I could get high marks'* (participant 9)

For another, the perceived additional effort of others was used to perhaps justify lower achievement in comparison, by dismissing their efforts as socially undesirable, as indicated by the derogatory use of the term 'nerd':

*'One of the nerds (told) me his schedule – at the weekends he said he wakes up at 9 to do his coursework. I'm not that type of person so that way he has no social life as he is into his studies. I have the social life. Anyone can get good grades if they put that work. That's why I wasn't so jealous'* (participant 10)

Taylor's work (1993) gives some explanation that this offers individuals the belief of control through offering some explanation that allows for optimism. Where students believe they have

chosen to sacrifice success by not working as hard as others, they withdraw themselves from the hierarchy in order to regain control.

## Student experience of Higher Education assessment

### Student support and guidance in University

With the FE support analysis in mind, the second series of interviews offered some interesting insights into how students perceived their experiences of the assessment support mechanism within University. Given the fact that students were likely to have studied 'A' levels whilst living at home with family and being located with a familiar set of friends, the support network is potentially more stable for students during those assessments than during transition to University. For some students of course, this situation continues as they commute from home to a local University, however, for others, they are away from such support networks and experience University life differently. For one student in particular, this was a hard transition to make in terms of support. In doing so there has evidently been a transference of relationship from the family to the academic staff. In addition, this is coupled with the fact that students are aware that the judgements previously made by examiners, may now be being made by the tutor responsible for marking:

*'You lose a big support network from your life. It's a lot tougher than you think. Because I don't have that family network any more, I want them (the tutors) to think 'He can do well', I don't want them to be like oh he's just gonna scrape by ... I want them to be proud of me. If they think I will do well, it will influence my grades coz that means that if I have someone who has pride in me then I work, I have someone to work hard for'* (participant 5)

Beaumont et al (2011) describes this need for validation by family as part of the lived experience of students living at home and conditioned to guaranteed high level of interactions with both their family and teachers. When this is removed, during transition to University life, students move from a position of dependency to a culture of autonomy, where more emphasis is placed upon understanding and evaluation than the technique for communicating this. Despite the differing support profiles across the participants, the relationship with the tutor and the development of trust and tutor 'faith' was a theme raised by a number of the students:

*'it shows if you do well this year, it shows to the tutors that you mean business and you want to be here and work ... then they will be able to back you up in future. I want **them** to be confident in me'* (participant 2)

In this instance, the concern from this student is that the relationship becomes a mutually credible one, in which the student-tutor interactions illustrate the student desire to be considered worthy of 'graduateness', both now and an unspecified future point.

*'if she thought I was a bad student or you know, I don't study or don't participate in class, things like that, then she won't give so much of her time to me, and if I need to ask her for help, she won't sort of be there ... It's important that she has confidence in me, I hope she does!'* (participant 3)

For participant 3, this relationship with the tutor was also seen as future investment but with the emphasis on the uncertain possibility of the tutor withdrawing support and guidance if needed. This was also the case for participant 5

*'It's important that they know I'm serious and there's a safety net there'* (participant 5)

The importance of the student-tutor relationship is evident in these quotes, but the nature of this appears to differ from the support relationship existing in the 'A' level experiences. The focus, for these students appears to be in the development of tutor respect in order to mitigate the effects of potential problems or lack of assessment success in the future. This is also worth considering within the context of student/marker proximity. Where previously teachers had become interpreters of an external examiners curriculum, assessment design and marking, the students were now in a more direct relationship with the person responsible for these activities.

McKie (2001) reviewed the nature of support structures within student withdrawal contexts and proposed 'direct effect' and 'buffering' hypotheses (265) in relation to how students perceive support structures. The direct effect is one in which others in networks are seen to provide help in stressful situations which allow individuals to feel more control over a situation. The buffering effect is where individuals or social networks intervene between a person and the stress-causing situation in order to lessen the negative outcome. These quotes indicate a perception of buffer support which is somewhat different to the student relationship with teachers throughout the

'A' level process, where the focus was more upon the direct guidance on how to reduce stress in the end examinations.

Tutor trust and respect also appeared to underpin the extent to which students will seek clarification or guidance within the assessment process. Thomas (2002) discusses how students who feel respected by teaching staff are often more likely to discuss problems with those staff and hence more likely to get a satisfactory solution. Although some students did not always perceive that a respectful relationship was at play as tutors were not always perceived as approachable:

*'there are some tutors that you think 'oh ... should I or should I not? Should I just do it by myself?'. Those are the modules and assessments that I'm not doing so well in. So the tutors make a big difference ... all the difference ... you can see it from my marks what a difference it makes' (participant 1)*

*'I didn't understand something so I asked him and he turned round and just said like a sarcastic comment and made me feel stupid ... I didn't bother asking him for help after that' (participant 9)*

*'It's a bit different from college where everyone is asking you how you're doing. They kind of knew how we were doing, at my college whereas in here you're more of a number' (participant 11)*

Given the extent to which teachers were the key source of informational and instrumental guidance throughout the 'A' level process, this is clearly a challenge to some of the participants. There appears to be a distinct change in the relationship from FE to HE and these quotes reflect a level of isolation in the process which in some instances reflects a less collegiate relationship in which the student is felt to feel inferior, uncertain or even uncared for. There were, however, other indications of a more direct support structure at play in terms of guidance given around assessment, although the picture is more varied in terms of the quality of the guidance being given. For those who perceived the support as good, there is indication that the tutor has given clarity in terms of the requirements for assessment:

*'if you get a good tutor, who tells you ... explains what they are looking for, which is pretty much like exam technique. If you know that technique, you are going to get a good grade' (participant 1)*

This is a clear example of the need for clarity and explicitness and the emphasis placed upon this within the assessment culture, highlighted by Price (2011) in the literature review. In this particular instance the student even likens the assessment process, to that of a learned process, similar to exam scenarios. Again, this confirms the work of Newstead (2002) who claims that students enter Higher Education with expectations of assessment reduced to a mechanical, strategic approach.

*'we always had a devoted lecture or seminar to explain anything which wasn't clear or going through the actual terminology or the actual assessment brief... It was the best part of the coursework, that it was made clear. If you missed that session, I wouldn't say it would be bad, you CAN learn it but I think you'd be at a disadvantage'* (participant 5)

*'We've just had a lecture and he has talked us through it. He is quite helpful, he is quick at replying at to emails and he will put a lot of stuff on blackboard and the seminar tutor is helpful too. This is a seen question, we know already what we'll be asked, it's all clear'* (participant 10)

This is also interesting as the informational support is perceived as risk reducing by the students, to the extent that a failure to attend sessions where the assessment is clarified might be deemed detrimental to the student opportunity to achieve. Given that students had relied heavily upon teachers to interpret the examiners requirements at 'A' level, there seemed to be indication that those tutors who continued to explicitly say what the assessment should contain were viewed positively in support terms. However, some students were clearly feeling the difference in the approach in terms of the instrumental support offered through teaching and learning approaches. Some tutors were not only deemed as providing less informational support, but also less instrumental support in terms of modelling behaviours. Students who have become familiar with the interpretive and modelling approaches taken during 'A' level appeared to be struggling with a less transparent approach to assessment which failed to reduce risk:

*'We need more examples of the formula in practice – having someone do one in the actual class would have been useful'* (participant 4)

*'I wish there was more discussion about what the question is asking for'*  
(participant 2)

These quotes are good examples of students struggling to pick up the more nuanced 'cues' in assessment preparation at HE level. Price et al (2012) discuss how these cues vary dependent upon the student approach to the development of assessment literacy. Those who actively requested clarification on what constituted 'good' assessment work, including modelling practice tended to perform better than those who simply listened for cues, tips and nuances in class. In turn, these students also performed better than those who could be considered 'cue deaf' in being unable to recognise any guidance given on tutor expectations (17). One student felt that the full responsibility for learning had been solely placed with them:

*They wanted us to teach ourselves. There was a class every week but all we ever did was follow the book' (participant 9)*

In this instance, the student equates 'teaching ourselves' as following the book chapters designated by the tutor, rather than using these chapters to identify key points for further research which might provide more in-depth answers to assessments. It is unclear from this the extent to which this directive to read was accompanied by other cues intended to extend the reading in order to develop self-regulated learning. However, studies around assessment literacy (Smith et al 2013, O'Donovan et al 2004) suggest that developing student capabilities in self-regulated learning involves students understanding of the purpose of assessment tasks in monitoring learning, ability to work to the guidelines set within that and to produce work of a predictable standard within the 'rules' (46). For assessment literacy to develop appropriately, students must be offered opportunity to practice judging their own responses to assessment in order for them to identify what is good and what could be improved.

There is some tension in HE practice around how new first year students develop and practice their own judgement around assessments, with increasing emphasis upon clarity and transparency to the extent where some are overtly telling students what should be included in the assessment response. Ivanic et al (2009) point out that on some occasions 'intermediate' guidance is given to bridge the understanding gap between the actual assessment brief and student interpretation of it. This was evident from comments made during interviews with my participants:

*'they go into the detail of what you need to put in and what they are looking for' (participant 1)*

*‘Sometimes they ask us what we think might be part of the assessment, but that just usually leads to them writing a load of stuff down on the board and we all end up just trying to write as much of it down as quickly as possible. So they end up just telling us what to put in it’ (participant 2)*

*‘It’s literally just hearing what they are saying and usually they are quite clear cut in saying that in this piece of work you need to do this’ (participant 5)*

O’Donovan et al (2004) explored how students are offered the opportunity to practice using their own judgement and came to the conclusion that relying on increasing explicitness of assessment criteria cannot adequately assist students in developing this judgement. As learners need to be able to construct knowledge relevant to assessment responses which are both tacit and explicit, such a directive approach to student assessment is unhelpful in the longer term. Of course, students receive feedback after the submission of the assessment in order to evaluate how well they responded to the requirements. However, this is more usefully self-reviewed during the production period in which the student is developing their response to the assessment where assessment literacy is present.

### **Higher Education Assessment Design - choice, freedom and relevance**

Whilst the main aims of this study are to gain insight into the conceptual influences around assessment confidence, the outcomes of this study have far-reaching implications in terms of my every day practice as a teaching professional. Given my approach to assessment for learning rather than assessment of learning (Boud and Falchikov 2006) the design of assessment is a key point of learning in this study. Taras (2002:503) describes how ‘assessment and feedback are not only central to learning but also to the student experience’ but the exact nature of the impact of assessment method preference and experience is less well researched (Bartram and Bailey 2010). Student satisfaction with assessment remains a key bone of contention according to HEA studies (2012) and therefore improvements in this area are likely to have large impact (Price et al 2011). It is clear from such studies that the purpose of assessment is now intrinsically linked, not only to student expectations, but to those of employers, politicians and the general public (HEA 2012).

According to Race (1999:65) innovations in assessment might reflect ‘changes in the timing, content and choice of assessments’ but have more recently been focussed on employability skills

and attributes more closely associated with the workplace. Clegg and Bryan (2006) acknowledge that this has associated closely with a drive to produce assessments which are more 'meaningful' for the workplace and satisfy the diverse needs of the many stakeholders in HE. Debate on this has been wide reaching in a political and social arena, and this has shaped public expenditure 'returns' in addition to those of students now paying fees for their studies. Zell (2001) highlights that some students have a heightened awareness of their careers and possible pay structures attached to enhanced qualifications and this may be their focus throughout study. Given the vocational nature of business and management degrees, this is intrinsic to studies in my area and certainly to expectations of students. It is hardly surprising then that assessment which does not align with the perceived vocational nature of the programme studied, would be problematic (Drew 2001).

### *Assessment relevance and authenticity*

Participants in the study highlighted a number of instances where they felt that the assessment design was inconsistent with the subject area being studied. Ivanic et al (2009) point to issues with some literacy practices for assessment and their neglect of aspects of learning in addition to a disjunction between the assessment tasks and the literacy required for an intended workplace. This leads to assessments which focus purely on the product of writing rather than the product of useful learning related to subject. There was evidence of this in the interviews, with several students commenting on examples of such disjunction:

*'we have to write about transfats or something silly like that. We thought 'why are we doing that? This is nothing to do with our course'. We're not doing chemistry or biology, this is marketing' (participant 5)*

*'There was another module where I didn't know why we were doing it ... the assignments that were set were nothing to do with that subject ... it wasn't anything to do with the topics in the lectures so it was a bit pointless, he could have done something more business research .. make it more ... interesting ... relevant. I kept putting it off until the last minute' (participant 9)*

*'Well I just didn't think it was relevant. This wasn't something that I thought would really help me out or something that I am interested in. I didn't feel the*

*knowledge would help me anywhere on my degree or in my career'*  
(participant 11)

There is a feeling here that students have been unable to pinpoint the usefulness of the assessment and hence the perception that they may be taking part in a futile learning activity. Ivanic et al (2009) highlight that this isolates some activities purely to the setting of academia rather than within an external context, which can be particularly problematic and challenging to students in vocational study areas. They go on to detail that in such vocational programmes, often there is a 'double literacy' (83) required to serve both the needs of the academic and workplace contexts. A perceived failure to develop either is reflected in student interest levels and of particular relevance is the impact this appears to have in terms of their engagement and perseverance with the task. Some students related it to motivation to engage in the task from the outset, and more specifically to procrastination, which could potentially lead to stressful experiences and impact on other assessments later down the line. The nature of the 'usefulness' of the task requires further interrogation as for some the matter of purpose appeared linked to immediate subject relevance in job recruitment or further into their chosen destination careers:

*'It seems like they're creating an assignment for creating an assignment sake. That reflects in how it has been written. It's almost like they are scraping the barrel on what to achieve here. They've just created it because apparently employers wanted it so they have to tick the box. You can't see the output or the point, I don't even think the teachers can see the point. Purpose is a big thing' (Participant 4)*

This quote is particularly interesting in terms of the student weighing up the thought processes behind the design of the actual assessment. There is a weighing up of the judgements being made around assessment and the weight of influence from outside stakeholders, prioritising the knowledge considered to be important, beyond the pedagogic judgement of the tutor. In contrast, others felt that the knowledge set prioritised by the tutor had no influence from outside stakeholders whatsoever:

*'I think "well what has that got to do with business???" If I'm in a business and I'm the boss, a customer is not going to come and ask me about a theory ... what did Karl Marx teach back in the 1900s? They're going to ask me about my product and how much it is, some numbers maybe but not a theory or what happened back in 1900. It's not helping me in anything so if I go to an*

*interview and start speaking about stuff like that, they will nicely nod but say nice knowledge you have there but it's not relevant at all' (participant 10)*

There is a concern within this quote that other external stakeholders cannot see the relevance of the activity, potentially adding to the perception of futility experienced. This doubt is compounded by the tutors failure to explain fully the relevance which is projected to the possible lack of relevance to others beyond the academic world. These quotes indicate that if the student fails to see the relevance of the activity, they would also be less able to explain the relevance to other stakeholders. This may be indicative of the instrumental approach to education, which has been fostered at 'A' level in that students are failing to embrace the wider concept of education beyond simply the employment aspects.

However, these insights require some clarification. Whilst some participants use the word relevance in the context of a discussion about future careers, others use the word relevance more generally. This reflects the fact that some assessments within the area of business will be aimed at building academic skills in writing, evaluation of arguments and critical thinking rather than relating to employability skills or professional knowledge, known as authentic assessment. Ashford-Rowe et al (2014:206) argue that changes in the labour markets demand closer alignment of assessment 'with diverse and rich contexts of performance in the real world' through the development of more authentically relevant assessments. Some authors (Herrington and Herrington 1998) have defined authenticity as the realistic value of the task and the context, whilst others (Reeves and Okey 1996) point to the 'fidelity' of the task to the normal tasks and conditions of professional life.

In order to establish what this aspect of relevance means, a number of authors (Ashford-Rowe et al 2014, Gulikers et al 2004) have developed frameworks containing critical elements for such authentic assessments. There is broad agreement that the task must challenge the students in terms of connecting real-world experiences and academic-based ideas, followed closely by the production of outputs, meaning or knowledge recognisable to real-world contexts. Tanner (2001) proposes that authentic assessments should involve the transfer of assessment knowledge to the real-world application for which the learner is being prepared. This helps to illustrate that the learner is prepared for success beyond the original assessment setting. Within the framework for authentic assessment, there is also emphasis on the student understanding of the journey towards the output through improved metacognition and ability to judge the purpose of the process aspects in determining success of the output. In addition, the frameworks advocate social aspects of discussion and collaborative approaches, which give

students the opportunity to learn different things but share these collaboratively, contributing to the learning of others, common in successful performance in modern work environments.

One such example arose within the interviews, when a student was particularly enthusiastic about an assessment which had been set. In particular there seems to be enthusiasm for the fact that each group could produce a different answer, and that there may not be one model answer to the problem. In particular, this was associated to the relevance to the world of work and potential future careers:

*'We were told we were management consultants who needed to help out a firm, so obviously differed in our recommendations and other groups recommended other things. I could really see the relevance of it, it was good'*  
(participant 11)

However, authenticity remains a complex conceptual area and there are some issues with the design of authentic assessment. Tanner (2001:28) argues that the language used for such real-world scenarios may vary greatly from standard language, requiring the acquisition of this as a pre-requisite to students being able to engage with authentic assessment. In addition, Pegtraglia (1998) argues that the subjectivity of authenticity is a cause for concern. The main difficulty is determining for whom it is authentic and whose interpretation of authenticity is paramount in the assessment design and judgement of outputs. This is dependent upon frame of reference, extent and currency of experience of 'real-life' scenarios and resulting perceptions of both learners and tutors, all of which must be examined before developing authentic assessments.

This is a key cause for caution in the design of authentic learning assessments in practice. It is necessary to consider the varied student population within our Business School in terms of study background and a disparate understanding of what might be expected of the subjects and career domains. First year students may have preconceived ideas of what it means to study a business-related degree or indeed what might be useful in any particular job function or career sector. In addition, students may not realise that the 'purpose' of assessment goes beyond the knowledge base to the development of more complex cognitive skills which support higher level thinking. There are some interesting examples from the interviews of how students, over time, had come to understand better the purpose of some of their earlier assessments, which they may not have appreciated at the time

*'We had an entire assessment based on structure of writing essays and referencing. At the beginning I thought 'why are we doing this, surely this is something we should pick up on our own throughout the year and we could be learning something else while were doing this?' But then after I thought that this has been very, very useful' (participant 5)*

*'It felt like there was so much of it but now, at the end I think it was really helpful. I can see the use now' (participant 9)*

This is problematic in terms of assessing what students deem as relevant at the point of engagement with an assessment and how tutors might express the relevance of metacognition in the wider learning environment. Students may not fully understand the need for cognitive building blocks and hence may attach lower relevance to the tasks designed to develop it. Assessment has become an area of great debate which has focused on the need to develop methods which evaluate various learning processes whilst considering student learning preferences and styles as well as producing the desired enhanced metacognition (Race 2006).

Given the acceptance that previous experience of assessment can affect conceptions of and approaches to learning (Scouller 1998, Entwistle and Entwistle 1997), there is a drive to use assessment to strategically change how students learn in HE. Cook (2001) proposes that student engagement with assessment can range from 'unwillingness, to passive compliance to active personal commitment', depending on the type and source of motivation they are experiencing. Motivation was a specific area mentioned by the participants in relation to the perceived relevance of the task:

*'because I don't feel that it was .. I don't know what the right word is ... contextualised? It wasn't put into context of what this module is about. So what is it setting us up for? What is the objective? And how does it relate to marketing? I couldn't see the relevance, it affected how I did the assessments. All my motivation seeped out of me' (participant 8)*

*'That might be personal to me, but I have to see the purpose of doing something to give me the motivation' (participant 4)*

This may explain why students engage in what is known as 'work-avoidance'. In this instance, the students lack motivation because they cannot find a reason for doing the work, as the

challenge, stimulation, satisfaction or meaning is lacking, they may only do enough work to fulfil the basic assessment requirements (Seifert and O'Keefe 2001). Students who exhibit these behaviours are more likely to make external attributions towards the work which place the blame for failure elsewhere. This can often lead to resentment or hostility towards the tutor, the assessment system or even the degree or University at a wider level (Jarvis and Seifert 2002) which can lead to a lack of confidence in their 'fit' to the HE environment.

### *Assessment choice and freedom*

It is also possible for extrinsic motivation in assessment to emerge from fear of failure, particularly where study is viewed as a means to an end (Gibbs 1992). However, intrinsic motivation which encourages effective learning can be developed through what Biggs (1996) refers to as 'active selection' where students make choices and take responsibility for their self-determined actions and mistakes. This involves offering a variety of experiences within assessment. This aspect of choice may be an interesting intervening variable in order to develop interest, motivation and engagement where the task might be perceived as less relevant or perhaps less authentic.

Bevitt (2014) argues that choice is necessary in assessment to create a perception of control in allowing students to shape them to their individual aims and objectives (14). Biggs (2003) surmises that choice is possible when the 2 options offer parity, coherent linkages or 'alignments' between learning outcomes, assessment criteria, marking procedures and feedback mechanisms. Francis (2008) proposes that choices in assessment may occur on a number of different levels. Firstly choice may occur within the method of assessment where students may have a preference for oral presentations, examinations or coursework depending upon familiarity from experience. Secondly, choice may appear within the assessment subject where students may be presented with options for questions and pursue their preferred topic. Thirdly, choice of assessment criteria might be offered in which students are allowed to decide on a justified selection for the marker to concentrate on. Lastly, choice may come in the form of a negotiated assessment result in which the student is allowed to make a case for their grade.

However, the first and broadest of those options best captures the aspect of 'freedom' described by the students in terms of creatively producing their own topic, format of assessment or answer to the learning outcomes of the module. Despite Francis's (2008) categorisation, students did not always see freedom as the same thing as choice. Their definition appeared to

categorise choice as the situation in which they are presented with alternatives, whilst freedom appeared to address the situation in which they could create their own assessment outcome without a predetermined list:

*'There wasn't any choice but there was freedom, I mean with choice you can pick out from a list whereas this one let you go off and decide'* (participant 10)

Craddock and Mathias (2009:131) argues that this returns the student to the centre of the learning as they take responsibility for the learning choices and opportunities taken. They point out that this fosters an active participation, particularly where the activities reflect real-life and require the use of existing knowledge and skills. This was affirmed during the interviews, with participants discussing the role of choice in the development of their interest and subsequent engagement with the assessment tasks:

*'Some assessments give you choice, where you pick a topic. I quite like that! Some people are good at some subjects and some people are good at others, so if you've got a choice, you can pick your strongest. I think that's fairer, when you have a choice. I'm more interested then because you can pick a topic that you enjoy. Some topics are more difficult than others. So far, every time I've had a choice, I've enjoyed it'* (participant 1)

*'I prefer the choice as I can play around with it and put what I'm interested in'* (participant 8)

*'The choice made it easier and I suppose a little bit more interesting than if she had just given us the article and then there is the second article'* (participant 11)

Jackson (1997) claims that allowing students to make choices promotes learning as the students experience variety and consequences to those choices and indicates that the learning from students regretting choices is often as valuable as the successes. More importantly, students can decide where they would prefer to concentrate their efforts and become more active 'agents' in their learning which Boud and Falchikov (2007) refer to as becoming an active learner. This involves making, justifying and evaluating choices in their identities as learners in order to become empowered to make choices. Allowing students choice allows them to position

themselves in relation to autonomy, self-direction, critical reflection and transformation. This was evident for a few students who described areas of autonomy and confidence developed through choice aspects of particular assessments:

*'Making some of the decisions myself was really good. I took ownership of it and it was like my baby when I presented it, I was really passionate about it and the grade reflected it, 75%! ... there was an element of freedom as you could personalise your work, the work you submit is all online in your own online space'* (participant 8)

Deci et al (1992) point out that when students experience autonomy, their intrinsic motivation improved, resulting in improved perception of competence, control and academic coping. In addition, there is evidence (Skinner and Belmont 1993) that engagement, conceptual understanding and achievement are also related to these experiences, as evidenced by participant 8. Ushioda (2011) argues that involving students in making choices is key to engendering willingness to internalise curriculum goals and raise self-efficacy and perception of competence in assessments. This is evidenced by participant 10, whose ownership of the choice made has led to greater engagement, interest and self-direction, resulting in a feeling of confidence towards the assessment outcome:

*'I liked the choice as I felt like I was marketing my own product so I was quite happy about it, and when I was presenting a powerpoint on it I was very confident in it and proud that this is my product ... coz I was so confident that it was going to work, I put more input into it'* (participant 10)

However, Leach et al. (2001:298) warn that learners may vary in their desire and confidence to make such choices. In addition, traditional power relationships between tutor and student may be a hard habit to break, with some students simply preferring to be directed (303). This manifested itself during interviews in students' perception that choice was not always intended to deliver freedom in any real and meaningful way. Indeed for some students, the choice aspects brought their own challenges around uncertainty and power:

*'I don't like too much choice, just a few choices so I'm not just stuck with one but not loads of choices so that I can clearly think. I would constantly be asking if I'd made the right choice and that brings back the ambiguity. I need*

*enough choice to motivate me but not so much that it becomes completely ambiguous' (participant 4)*

*'I'm usually happy to do whatever assessment is given to me but if I'm given a choice, as long as I haven't got too much choice, I'm very, very happy' (participant 5)*

This is often referred to as 'choice overload' where too many options decrease motivation as the risk associated with the choice increases. This may differ between students dependent on familiarity and preference (Scheibehenne et al 2010:409). Therefore students who have experience of a wide selection of assessment types might welcome the chance to choose the one in which they perceive higher mastery. Others who have less varied experiences and are therefore less familiar with the options on offer, may experience anxiety at the potential impact the wrong choice may have in producing successful grade outcomes. This potentially leads to the anxiety caused by ambiguity articulated by participant 4.

#### Assessment clarity

Participants in the study also raised a number of issues with regard to the design of assessment tasks themselves, some of which were consistent with and some contradictory to their expectations. Bevitt (2014:3) argues that prior experiences influence student perceptions and interpretations of the assessment task at hand. However, this is not to say that the participants expected 'more of the same' from their FE and particularly 'A' level assessments. For some in the study, their expectations and indeed hopes for HE assessment were shaped on the assumption that they would differ extensively to those experienced in FE. One key aspect was that of perceptions around the design of the task itself.

*'There are some where you'll just be given a question ... not a question ... a task, but you don't know whether you have to go about it as a question, because of the way it's written or whether you have to write it from a particular view, you know, as if you're in industry or something' (participant 2)*

How the task at hand is interpreted may depend on the level of synergy or contradiction between instructions across modules or in comparison to previous study. In this instance, Gibbs and Simpson (2004:21) describe how students attempt to 'make sense of what kind of task they have been set' or try to evaluate what would constitute a 'good attempt at it'. Some students

highlighted that this was problematic in terms of their confidence development, where they felt unable to interpret the task set as there was little clarity as to what was required of them:

*'the brief is really vague on what we're being told ... There was one assignment which wasn't clear at all, it made me mindboggled!'* (participant 1)

*'the way they wrote it wasn't actually too clear. It was just all implied meaning. But you have to write the question in a clear way to understand it. Pretty much all the students I speak to say that the brief is ambiguous 'what do they want from me?''* (participant 4)

*'The assignments are ambiguous, I sort of sat down and thought oh my I've got this ... I've got some books ... I've got a question ... oh ok'* (participant 6)

Where the task is unclear, this may lead students to focus on comprehending the meaning whilst dedicating less time to the actual learning material, what Gibbs and Simpson (15) refer to as a 'mis-orientation of student effort'. Bevitt (2014:3) argues that new tasks with little personal point of reference make it difficult for students to apply latent learning from previous assessed work which may have given these students a point of reference. It is acknowledged by Van de Watering et al (2008) that students often show preferences for assessments which reduce anxiety and stress, which is closely associated with lack of clarity. The student participants discussed the anxiety and stress associated with misinterpreting such unclear tasks, both from their own and others previous experiences. In particular, there was a focus upon whether the tutor had a specific task outcome in mind which differed from their own or others' interpretation of the task outcome:

*'I think he was looking for just the one, but the brief, especially economics, was massive, anyone could have interpreted it differently and there were lots of different ones. So it was whoever got it right, got it right and whoever didn't, didn't. That's how I felt it was'* (participant 1)

*'when you read the brief, it isn't actually clear on what they want you to do so when you read it, it's very much open ended. So the way that I interpret things might be completely different to someone else'* (participant 4)

In this instance, participants 1 and 4 are focussed upon the task highlighted in the assessment brief, rather than their understanding of the 'quality characteristics' that the tutor in question was looking for. This failure to have crossed the assessment literacy threshold meant that the students lacked confidence in their own ability to build into their work the requisite qualities required by the tutor in constituting 'good assessment' work (Price et al 2012). This lack of confidence, led some of the students to be concerned about the consequences of failing to interpret the assessment accurately:

*'I think that there's one way of answering the answer. In the past where I've misinterpreted the question I've got it wrong. I completely misinterpreted it'*  
(participant 4)

*'There was one coursework where someone wrote something else and it was not completely wrong, but they got a significantly lower mark so it caused them to fail the module'* (participant 5)

This raises questions about the role of interpretation in assessment activity, who does this and how. There is a distinct contrast here with the 'A' level system in which students rely heavily upon teachers, examiner briefing sessions and online guidelines around past and forecasted assessment questions. This suggests that within FE assessment, the interpretation responsibility is borne by others rather than the students themselves. This may lead students to be unfamiliar with the process and skill set needed to perform this necessary function within the assessment process. Bevitt (2014) argues that stress and anxiety around assessment may be linked to such issues of lack of familiarity which, dependent on previous experiences, may influence assessment preferences. Price et al (2012) argue that where a lack of familiarity exists, it is important that students understand the rationale for assessment design.

## Summary of Findings

Overall, these findings emphasise the importance of prior context and individual student aspects of experience within that context. In particular, the focus on results and progression pressures, imposed by the context, drive student perceptions of assessment experiences and expectations of future assessments. The metaphorical conceptualisation of assessment regimes as 'games' has been useful in identifying student perceptions of players and teams, rules and scores and winners in this context. This has allowed for the development of a contextual backdrop within

which elements of self-efficacy and support structures have been identified as central to the development of assessment confidence for this group of students.

The findings also suggest that transition from FE to HE reduces the usefulness of previous self-efficacy judgements and support structures. Student transition from an FE assessment 'safety net' of familiarity, routine, repetition and modelling to one of ambiguity and uncertainty is central to this discussion. The students in this study articulated perceptions of risk based upon lack of familiarity with assessment type, terminology and protocols and as a result, felt a loss of control in the assessment regime. The extent of the risk for these students varied dependent upon the student approach to learning and their understanding of how capability is developed.

The findings also clearly illustrate the strategies students pursue in an attempt to regain control of the assessment experience in HE, including attempts to build connections and relationships with key tutors at an early stage (induction). In some cases, however, this was thwarted by aspects of the assessment design itself leading to the perception of further loss of control. Some students found that assessment tasks lacked clarity, consistency and relevance, leaving the students with feelings of self-doubt and uncertainty as to their purpose and interest. In some instances, this was mitigated by supportive peers and tutors, but this was not consistently the case.

Where students experienced relevant, clear assessments which allowed them to make choices or exercise some aspect of freedom, there was a distinct difference in their engagement with the task, as they perceived more control and ownership of the situation and more positive feeling of being able to cope with and achieve within the assessment.

This chapter has presented the middle-range theorising representative of thematic analysis. This has presented clear patterns and relationships within the data and is representative of the overall sample experiences. This has been possible not only through thematic analysis but also through the use of metaphor which has been insightful in conceptualising some aspects of patterns identified by the themes. However, variations in these patterns have highlighted that more consideration must be given to the individual story where there is a significant influencer/attribute outside of the overall sample. These are explored in the next chapter which highlights three such variations of individual circumstance or approach.

## Chapter 6 - Individual Stories. I-poem analysis

This chapter presents alternative analysis utilising a technique pertinent to gaining additional understanding of the individual stories of 3 specific students. The thematic analysis process highlighted the existence of other factors which may influence how students experience assessment in all aspects of the transition phase but were outside of any existing theme. Whilst it is possible to develop thematic groupings around 'individual experiences', these experiences were suitably diverse and non-comparable as to warrant an alternative analysis method in order to do justice to them. The I-poem allows for a more in-depth analysis of how students self-reference these experiences and helps to develop better understanding of the different influences potentially resulting. The I-poems also offer an approach which is suitably reductive in nature to accommodate my inexperience with the topics in the individual stories. This chapter gives an overview of the technique followed by the I-poem analysis of one student with a background of exclusion, one with severe learning difficulties and a final one with a strongly developed sense of human agency. The stories are intended to give three different pictures across the transition from FE assessment, through transition phases to experiences of University assessment.

### I-poems

In order to develop sufficient understanding of how to construct meaning from the individual student experience, I have used a method known as I-poems to see if I can better discover the participant voice. The 'I-poem' was originally developed by Debold (1990) and built upon by Gilligan et al (2003) as a way in which researchers could hear the participant's first person voice and the way in which they speak about themselves. It emerged from the assumption that human development is interconnected with the relationships with others and a sense of self cannot be extricated from those relationships and hence is situated with the 'relational psychologies' (Gilligan 1982). Guides to using I-poems (Gilligan et al 2003) emerged as a result of work throughout the 1980's to find alternative analysis techniques to overcome issues with standard coding which did not allow for 'multiple coding of the same text' (158). This technique allows me to use the same interview data with analysis from a perspective outside of the normal coding procedures associated with grounded theory studies. The I-poem itself is proposed as part of a multi-step process known as 'The Listening Guide Method' (Gilligan et al 2003:159).

I am aware that so far, in data analysis, I have sought to reduce the complexity in the data by classifying 'clusters' which more readily lend themselves towards giving direction and robustness to the research outcomes. However, in contrast to these denaturalised 'middle range' clusters of theories I have developed so far from using coding, the voice centred relational approach focuses on the unique subjectivity of each participant. It also builds me, the researcher into the process as the listener, creating a two-way relationship, understanding that what they tell me will be in the context of self-editing for me as the listening audience. This will allow me to tune into the multiple layers of voice in order to better understand the story, its relationships and the social and cultural frameworks within which they are based (Brown and Gilligan 1991:44). Central to the approach is the assumption that voices are 'co-occurring' and may change throughout and in order for me to hear these voices, I need to undertake multiple listenings in order to seek out the different voices.

The first listening is aimed at identifying the 'plot' (Gilligan et al 2003:160). This requires me to identify the story being told, situations, contexts and people involved in order to look for metaphors, dominant themes, contradictions and omissions. The second listening aims to capture the participant's first-person voice. This is done through highlighting the I pronoun and any related verbs with just a few other words. The focus is upon attending to shifts in the participant's use of I, to contrast and seek out variations in the voice.

There are some concerns around the use of I-poems at practical and epistemological levels. Edwards and Weller (2012) found the approach to be extremely time consuming, especially when using with large samples, however, this is unlikely to be an issue in my own research. In addition, the 'recreation' of listening after the event, may make the interpretation limited due to the lack of subsequent insight if issues were not pursued during the interview itself. By their own admission, Gilligan et al (2003:161) note that I-poems work better in wider 'interpretive communities' where there are multiple listeners to draw together connections and interpretations. Whilst my research is not undertaken within such a community and does attempt to recreate the listening after the fact, I do not see this as problematic, given the evidence of loss of voice resulting from my thematic approach. This insight can only offer a richness and better understanding of how the participants speak of themselves as to enlighten theories resulting from the more general coding approaches being used.

Other criticisms of Gilligan's work, suggest that I-poems are little more than 'parlour tricks' which are reductive in nature (Nussbaum 2003) and therefore lack validity in the wider interpretation. As these were the main data analysis methods used in some of Gilligan's work,

this is easy to understand, as in producing my own I-poems I am aware that other contextual, non- I statements have been omitted in order to remain true to the technique. As this is not intended as my sole data analysis approach, I have found it useful in bringing perspective to the thematic approach used.

However, one other word of caution offered from previous studies (Edwards and Weller 2012) is that not all research is concerned with the participant's sense of self in the way suggested by Gilligan et al (2003). The third listening in the voice-centred relational method intends to listen for 'contrapuntal voices' in which the layers of voice are brought back into relationship with the research aims and this prompts me to revisit my central research questions. As I am focusing on the influencing factors in the development of assessment confidence, this analysis method has been insightful for the individual picture of how it is experienced.

Using the principles of I-poem, I have developed stanzas in order to reflect the natural change in theme, which might identify the variation in voices. The stories have been chosen in particular due to them reflecting the journey of students with varied backgrounds which may not have been captured within the thematic analysis. As each of the stories is extensive, I-poem analysis has been used to evaluate sections and various themes of particular interest to the central concept of assessment confidence.

### Participant 3

The first I-poem reflects the voice of an excluded student (participant 3) who has struggled to engage with academic life from an early age:

#### Experience of the 'A' level system

(1) *I did [subject]  
I found it boring  
I found it very boring  
I'm not really interested  
I just did it because I thought it's a bit different  
I felt .. she wasn't engaging*

Not surprisingly for a student with this background, participant 3 focuses upon the support structures within the classroom as a driver of engagement. In stanza (1) the participant voice is one of bored student, whose teacher cannot inspire interest. In keeping with the thematic

analysis insight (Siefert and O’Keefe 2001), in stanza (1), the student has externalised the attribution of blame to the teacher’s inability to engage her and this resulted in a lack of motivation. This allows me to see how the student focussed on lack of interest and how that appeared to be driven by what is potentially perceived exclusion from engagement by a poor teacher, who was unable to stimulate the level of interest required for engagement.

However, in the next stanza (2) the student directly contrasts this to another subject area where a more positive relationship with the tutor existed, which seemed to engage the student better:

(2) *I really did enjoy [subject]  
I got on with my teacher  
I think there was a transition  
I need to do a lot of the work myself  
I averaged out at an A  
I was really happy*

Stanza (2) offers a contrast to this as the voice changes to one of motivated student. There is also an element of self-development in stanza (2) where the participant feels unable to attribute blame to a teacher with whom she has established a connection. This builds upon the thematic analysis in identifying a transition in her own way of working, establishing self-responsibility for learning, after which, there is more success. There is also reference to seeing her needs and preferences as being different, referred to a number of times in her overall story around her history of exclusion.

There is also a clear shift in her approach to the different disciplines and work identified, but couched in the context of support offered by the relationship with the tutor. This concurs with the thematic analysis (Malecki and Demaray 2003) that emotional support as part of the scaffolding offered by teachers is key to the development for some students. However, this individual story does give additional insight that this relationship may also be key to specifically developing a responsibility for own development in the absence of a locus for external blame, rather than simply a better atmosphere in the classroom.

Subsequent questions in the interview reveal the further importance of reliable and credible role models for this student with a history of exclusion:

(3) *I do (think my brother was key)*

*I admire him a lot  
I have a lot of respect for him  
I've seen him do it all*

(4) *I wouldn't have done so well  
I had the book  
I just did it  
I got it from my teacher and brother  
I used their notes*

The discussion on support systems in stanza (2) extends to the introduction of a family member support system in stanza (3). The voice in this stanza is one of awestruck sibling who begins to focus on the role modelling offered by a successful older brother. Whilst role modelling was identified in the thematic analysis (Hutchison et al 2006), the next stanza (4) offers insight into how this relationship might be key in further self-development. The voice in stanza (4) is more empowered and action driven and seems to suggest that the role modelling offered by her sibling and her teacher inspired action which had more positive outcomes as a result of the participants own actions. This is notably missing in her wider narrative of exclusion in which she felt that she was not part of a constructive, credible learning environment, where her capabilities were compared unfavourably to others:

(5) *I did (feel comparisons)  
I had a higgledy piggledy sort of education  
I'm ok now  
I think they're happy  
I could have achieved what they have  
I could have achieved  
I'm slightly older  
I could have graduated by now*

In stanza (5) the voice is more reflective of what could have been, had the participant experienced a more straightforward education, without exclusions. The relationship with brother and family, through their perceptions and judgements of her previous exclusions, begins to be explored. The use of language to reduce the exclusions which were, no doubt, concerning

for the family at the time, to a series of minor ups and downs through the use of the words 'higgledy piggedly' perhaps denotes an attempt to lessen their seriousness.

Throughout this there is an attempt to maintain the impression of her own capability. This is in keeping with the literature identified on 'vicarious experience' as this student is clearly observing the educational progress of others in an attempt to appraise her own capabilities (Fong and Krause 2014). I note in my initial memos on the transcript that perhaps in places, the student prefers that others see her as lacking in interest rather than as not being capable of success. This is no doubt related to her history of exclusion where she was led to believe that she was not capable as she has failed to develop a strong academic self-concept (Marsh 1987). This again concurs with the thematic analysis which explores the likelihood that students will attempt to regain control through justifying their withdrawal from comparisons by claiming a lack of interest or effort (Taylor 1994):

(6)     *I did feel confident*  
          *If I do put the work in*  
          *I will be confident*  
          *I remember*  
          *I thought*  
          *I worked hard*  
          *I achieved a B*  
          *I was really happy*  
          *I thought 'oh, ok, so I CAN do it'*  
          *I got more faith*  
          *I was going in the right direction*

There is also a distinct temporal feel to the final stanza (6), not unsurprising given the historical leaning of the questions. However, memories from the past seem to reveal a strong desire to achieve in the future with more definite statements about 'putting in work' and being confident. This is followed by a memory of a time when her efforts did result in success and built confidence, perhaps an attempt to reassure herself that her certainty of future success is based upon the example of previous success. More importantly the voice is a more active and definite one in which 'I did' and 'I will' are closely associated with more confidence and 'faith' in self.

This I-poem is of particular interest in offering a picture of the development of student confidence. This allows us to more clearly see the relationship between some of the key areas

of the thematic analysis, from historical social comparisons creating a negative learning experience, to the importance of support systems in developing the student desire to take responsibility for their own learning. From this, emerges a stronger picture of academic self-concept and the confidence to move forward in Higher Education assessment.

## Participant 4

The second I-poem reflects the experience of a student with dyslexia, who struggles with translating his knowledge through the end examination process of 'A' level and how this manifests into a lack of confidence in University assessment.

### The 'A' level system and end examinations

- (1) *I may be intelligent verbally*  
*I can't get it across*  
*I like coursework*  
*I don't like exams*  
*I got B's and as soon as it came out – I had lower grades*  
*I wasn't playing the game as well*  
*I didn't get the logic*  
*I didn't understand why*  
*I felt pigeonholed*

This gives us some insight into how the student feels about his dyslexia within the context of the assessment system. In particular, this emphasises how the assessment design in particular feels restrictive to the student's ability to express their knowledge and understanding. However, the student is also clearly aware that this is not the main intention of the end examination system as a measurement tool, in reference to the 'game' within the 'A' level system. There is also an element of frustration on a number of levels in this stanza. The first of these lies within the apparent failure to replicate previous mock exam success in the final exams. The second appears to be the lack of explanation for this, resulting from the lack of feedback inherent in the 'A' level end examination assessment system. Whilst the thematic analysis does pinpoint the importance of feedback in the assessment process (Price et al 2008, Price et al 2011, Juwah et al 2004), it fails to capture the challenges and frustrations presented to students with dyslexia. Finally, the frustration appears to be turned inwards with the overall statement about the perceived lack of ability to self-represent in the assessment system overall. This manifests itself in the student

feeling that this might result in people viewing him as less capable and subsequently being 'pigeonholed'.

- (3) *I wasn't very confident going forward*  
*I was right*  
*I failed*  
*I tried to apply myself and learn the definitions word by word*  
*I tried playing the game and couldn't*

The impact of this is illustrated in stanza (3) by what appears to be a wariness to the assessment system and a lack of self-efficacy beliefs. The student continues to be frustrated, but now more particularly by the perceived need to articulate himself according to the expectations of the marker. This echoes the thematic analysis in referring to the need for specific words and definitions within the 'A' level marking schemes. However, this also highlights how much more challenging that assessment protocol is to the students with learning difficulties and how that challenge in itself may present the opportunity for loss of confidence in capability which eventually becomes self-fulfilling. This also impacts on the student confidence moving into new assessment environments.

#### University assessments

- (4) *I find with the assessments*  
*I interpret things might be completely different to someone else*  
*I read it and I interpreted it completely differently*  
*I was tearing my hair out*  
*'what am I doing here?', and that impacts your confidence*
- (5) *I've misinterpreted the question*  
*I've got it wrong*  
*I worry all the time*  
*I worry about getting the right one*  
*I'm more familiar with the clear set stuff*  
*The ones which aren't ambiguous, I'm confident in*

Another problematic aspect of a loss of confidence for participant 4, was the lack of clarity on capability moving into the Higher Education environment. The lack of feedback and low

confidence from the 'A' level experience has left him uncertain of his ability to understand the assessment and in particular, interpreting requirements when faced with ambiguity in assessments. Where previously the 'A' levels had concentrated on a teacher interpretation of the requirements of the external examiner, the University assessments require more student ability to interpret the question i.e. development of assessment literacy. Stanzas (4) and (5) reinforce the thematic analysis in terms of the relationship between the development of confidence and assessment literacy (Smith et al 2013). This is true for this student who fails to be able to make self-regulating judgements around the assessment and in particular, to work to the set guidelines.

- 6)        *I have to see the purpose of doing something to give me the motivation*  
              *I don't see an end goal*  
              *I don't work so hard*  
              *I'm always thinking why?*  
              *I'm very driven towards it if I can see the point*

Stanza (6) highlights further the importance of purpose, as outlined by O'Donovan et al 2004). This contributes to the lack of clarity for the student. Not only does he face the challenge of not understanding the real desired output from the assessment, but he also cannot see the usefulness of the activity in its wider sense. This means that motivation to engage in 'behavioural control' ie, seeking out advice to clarify the requirements (Bandura 1988), is low. This appears to compound the feeling of lack of purpose in engaging with the assessment.

However, this I-poem does offer insight beyond the thematic analysis, in terms of the additional frustrations and anxiety potentially posed to students with learning difficulties. The combination of difficulty in development of assessment literacy and ambiguous assessment design appears to exacerbate the physiological response leading to a belief that they cannot 'cope' which seems to be exhibited by this student. When this is further compounded with an overall assessment design which lacks immediate purpose, the result is one of low motivation towards the assessment.

In a wider sense, this I-poem gives insight into possible causalities between previous experiences and the restrictions these might pose to the development of assessment confidence in future scenarios as students move up the educational system.

## Participant 7

The final I-poem centres on one student who stood out from the participants due to her positive and self-reflective approach to assessment. I found her approach refreshing and potentially 'threshold' in terms of my understanding of how assessment confidence might be developed.

### Perception of University assessments in induction

- (1) *I've got the technique*  
*I need to do a lot more preparation*  
*I've got more improvements to do*  
*I'm fairly confident, even if it's not perfect the first time*  
*I can realise the mistakes and how to improve*  
*I learn about how to improve which is important*
- (2) *I think that's going to help me*  
*I can cope with stress*  
*I have time management skills*  
*I am confident in my knowledge*  
*I know that there's a lot more to come*  
*I know this is about developing*

Stanzas (1) and (2) are indicative of this student's overall human agency within the assessment system. She clearly believes that her capability to control the situation is one which is 'self-aiding' (Bandura 1989). This is illustrated by an awareness of the need to exert effort, endeavour and perseverance in order to overcome the uncertainties associated with undertaking an assessment for the first time. This student is exercising what is known as 'internal control' in which she clearly views the outcomes as being dependent upon her actions alone (Ajzen 2002).

In addition, these stanzas are future orientated, indicating a forethought about behaviours necessary to achieve future success (Roe Clark 2005). In taking such an approach, the student is able to exercise control, overcome perceived risks and as a result, develop a coping strategy which reduces stress. This is in keeping with the current research around 'cognitive control' resulting from a coping mechanism (Usher and Pajares 2006).

More importantly, there is an interesting focus away from the 'end product' of the assessment success in terms of results, which she highlights does not have to be achieved the first time. Instead, there is a focus upon the opportunity to develop knowledge and practice in order to improve. Again, this is in keeping with the literature by Hennessey et al (2001) but was not included in the thematic analysis as this was an approach specific to this student and not an approach taken more widely by other participants. However, this level of attention to 'learning to learn' rather than 'learning to pass' (Medland 2016) may be key to the development of assessment confidence.

This approach continues into classroom preparation for assessments by this student, when asked about comparisons to other students:

- (3) *I put up my hand and told him*  
*I didn't give the full answer*  
*I thought 'that's cool, I know that now'*  
*I didn't compare negatively*  
*I thought "I know what they know about that now"*

In stanza (3) the student has contributed to a class discussion but is only able to provide a partial answer to the tutor. This is swiftly followed by another student answering with a more complete answer. Rather than judging herself as inferior to the other student in a knowledge 'hierarchy' (Larrick et al 2007), the student responds positively that through this collaborative sharing, she now has access to more a more complete knowledge set than she had before contributing. Again, this was distinctly different to the thematic analysis in which students tended to rate themselves negatively if they felt their knowledge set was lacking in comparison to that illustrated by others. This is a more developmental approach in which the opportunity for a student to develop negative self-concept is reduced.

#### End of year interview

- (5) *I plan well for each week*  
*I should be ok*  
*I need to develop my planning skills*  
*I feel pretty confident*  
*I try my best so I put my all into it*  
*If I put my all into something and I don't get 100% then I can look at it to try to see why didn't I get 100% and what am I doing wrong*

(6) *I wasn't 100% confident*  
*I put my all in it*  
*I wasn't sure it would be enough to get me a pass*  
*I got 63% in it*  
*I was quite happy*  
*It built my confidence for the next one*  
*I can do this*  
*I try harder for the next one*  
*even when I don't do so well it's still alright*

In Stanzas (5) and (6) the student discusses the emergence of confidence over the first year of HE studies and preparation for the next challenge of year 2 assessment. Whilst there is a clear indication of the student returning to regimes familiar in 'A' level study i.e. planning and practice, this is underlined by the development of a mastery approach in which the student is constructing increased confidence with each assessment experience. However, the more insightful aspect of these stanzas is the illustration of the student development as an 'active learner' (Boud and Falchikov 2007). This is evidenced by the concentration on self-improvement and adjustments to effort in order to become more autonomous, self-directive and transformative in learning. This appears to allow the student to tackle any assessment challenge at any level without the stress and anxiety associated with unfamiliarity. This is also potentially key to the development of assessment confidence.

Undertaking the I-poem analysis has been enlightening and allowed me to move between analytical angles which would allow me to explore more of the social realities of my participants and my own ontological stance. Whilst I have initial thoughts as notes on the transcripts, this has allowed me to review my emotional and intellectual response to the student story. In addition, it has allowed me to uncover how my response affects what I understand about the story and myself as a researcher listening to and interpreting that story. Edwards and Weller (2012:203) argue that 'constructing various ontologies of self in relation to other' is both valuable and illuminating, which I have indeed found this to be.

This chapter has presented individual stories which have contributed insight on how the impact of non-standard academic backgrounds or approaches give us pause for thought on making overall assumptions from 'middle range theorising' resulting from thematic analysis. For example, it can be seen that for student 3, exclusionary backgrounds may lead to students

requiring a different approach to support from tutors, where there has been deemed a breakdown in previous experiences. This is in contrast to participant 4, whose dyslexic challenges have led to a focus on the need for clarity in the design of assessment activities. However, the approach of participant 7 allows us to see the bigger impact of individual human agency at work. All of these stories highlight the need for caution in presenting conclusions which indicate causality or clear relationship on the influencers in this study. Indeed, these stories present the need to draw together conclusions which represent an agenda for further research around the impact of individual experiences.

## Chapter 7 - Conclusions

This chapter draws together the thematic and individual story analyses presented in Chapters 5 and 6 to present a more holistic view of the findings pertinent to the research questions. This allows for substantive theories to be drawn together in a way which presents clarity on the areas for pursuance in future research. This substantive theorising is structured in direct response to the research questions, culminating in an overview which draws findings pertaining to both in order to give a more complete picture. This allows us to more clearly see the overall substantive theory in a way which makes meaning of the student experience over the stages of FE assessment, transition and HE assessment.

In addressing the first research question driving this study, it is possible to draw some insight into the influencing factors in the nature and development of academic assessment confidence. However, the findings of this study have highlighted the need to review how these factors influence various points in the student transition from FE (in particular 'A' level) to HE assessment regimes. With this in mind, the conclusions are shaped to give insight into these points.

In addition, the later stages in this process of transition are concluded in further detail at the point at which the findings give insight into student experiences of year 1 HE Business and Management assessments. This allows conclusions to be drawn upon the second research question in proposing aspects of assessment which may be key to the development of academic assessment confidence in Business and Management HE studies.

### **Influences on the development of Assessment Confidence**

It is clear from the findings that previous experience of assessment is a significant shaper for student expectations of assessments in the HE environment. The findings help to offer some insight into those previous experiences from two perspectives, those of context and individual experience.

Within the wider realm of student experience, the context of policy and practice within the Further Education Assessment system and more particularly in the 'A' level system, has been a strong feature of the student story for my participants. Students have highlighted aspects of

the system which they feel are outside of not only their own control, but potentially that of the teaching and learning teams responsible for their assessments. This is summarised in Figure 1.

In particular there appear to be aspects of context which lead students to view success at 'A' level only from the perspective of grade outcomes which form the gateway to Higher Education study. Any activities which promote the improved chance of these outcomes, have been articulated as giving confidence to students during the assessment period leading to the measurement of these outcomes. The increased stress that this outcome focus places upon students may be mitigated through students making strategic choices in order to retain control over the situation and therefore boost assessment confidence. The subtle use of attribution theory allows us to see where students are able to self-reassure that the outcomes are not always attributable to their own capabilities. This allows them to externalise the causes for possible failure in order to refocus the locus of control. In addition to this, student choices in narrowing of subjects and reductionist conceptualisation of the assessments themselves add further to the development of assessment confidence in this context.

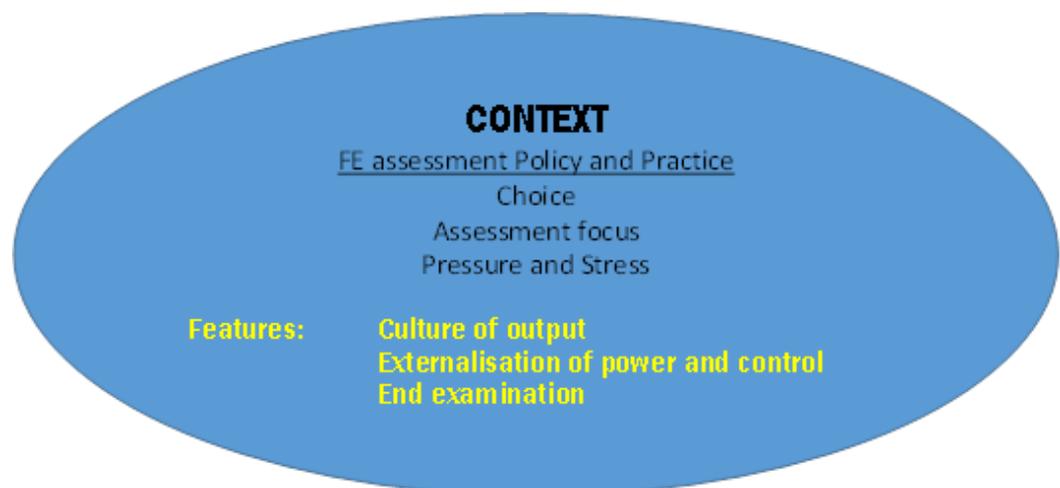


Figure 1. The perceived contextual influences in FE assessment.

Whilst appreciating the reductionist problems surrounding metaphors, the metaphor of game developed as part of the analysis of the student story allows us some shared meaning to the student perception of this. It has been helpful in highlighting these key aspects of power and control in which students are clearly aware of perceived rules and scores. In particular, this metaphor allows me to see more clearly the externalisation occurring within the system, with the students articulating feelings of distance between themselves and the person setting and marking the assessments. This has been particularly important in understanding how the context has led to assessment regimes being perceived by students with uncertainty and risk.

More interesting, however, is that 'players' identified by the metaphor are seen as developing strategies through which the control could be mitigated in order to reduce the emerging uncertainty and risk. This in turn gives us insight into the 'coping' approaches intended to improve assessment confidence. In particular, the metaphor allows more clear thinking around the interpretation of 'the rules' and requirements as decided by the external figure of the examiner. Through the 'A' level process, this activity is undertaken by other key players (teachers) as part of the instrumental support mechanism and integral to the advice aspect. The more experience or 'insider' knowledge held by the teacher, the better the interpretation of success requirements is deemed to be.

The aspect of externalisation of control extends also to the valued/legitimate knowledge set. Students clearly saw terminology as an important driver of successful outcomes in terminal examination assessments. Strategies employed by teachers to provide exam technique preparation, model answers and exemplars focus on building familiarity and routine and practice with and within the contextual protocols. These are undoubtedly central to the reduction of ambiguity and risk, without which students are able to develop stronger assessment confidence.

However, this is not the only support type offered by the teacher role. At 'A' level, there was clear indication of the emotional support offered as calming and reassuring within an environment of trust and alliance. The provision of a 'safety net', or 'scaffolding' in the face of an externalised system is supportive in developing assessment confidence. Whilst these emotional aspects of support have a role in tutor support they appeared to be set within a wider teacher support model emphasising the expertise and reliability of the teacher, both as a source of knowledge and as a source of feedback and appraisal. This enabled students to see themselves and their capabilities through the eyes of an experienced expert. This lends credence to the message of ability and aspiration to develop. This expertise and reliability could manifest itself in the basic provision of knowledge and materials but appears to extend to aspects of study structures i.e. keeping students on track. It also extends to modelling of knowledge and the design of learning activities which develop a sense of familiarity through guidance aimed specifically at the assessment task.

Although it has been possible to identify aspects of the context which influence the student experiences of assessment within the 'A' level system, it is also important to acknowledge that each student may experience this differently (Figure 2). This became evident within the I-poems, which highlighted the developmental aspects of previous experience and the influence that this

may have upon future ability to develop assessment confidence. In particular, students who experience difficult educational histories or learning difficulties may feel that their assessment capabilities are innate and therefore require more control over uncertainty and ambiguity in order to develop assessment confidence. In contrast, those with a development focus, who believe that their capabilities are fluid may deal more easily with a lack of familiarity and routine, instead adapting more quickly to a changing landscape of assessment.

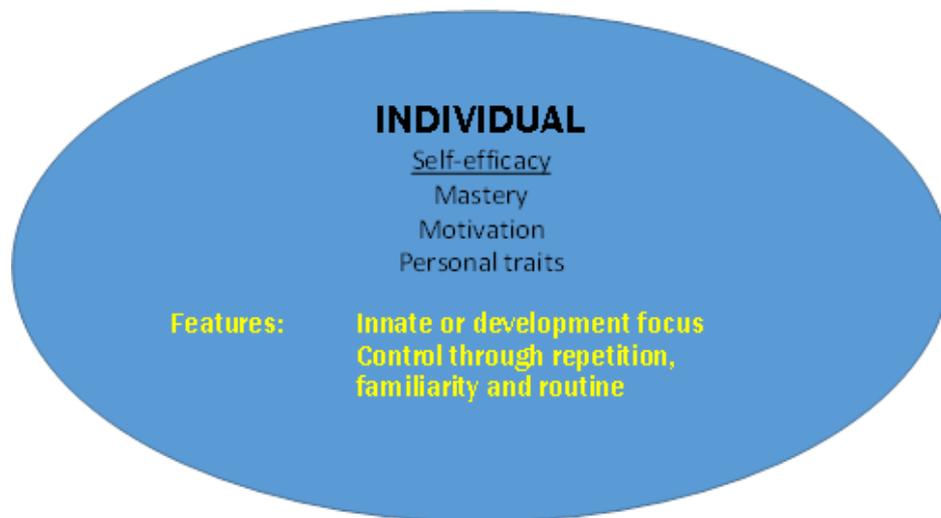


Figure 2. The perceived individual influences in FE assessment

In addition, when focussing upon the individual experience, the literature on self-efficacy has continued to offer insight into the participants shared stories, however it has been unable to offer a complete picture, given this specific ‘A’ level context. In particular, traditional self-efficacy framework aspects of social persuasion have failed to offer significant enough recognition of the complex support networks, which surround student experiences of assessment at ‘A’ level. Whilst many of these frameworks have focussed on the idea of encouragement, this neglects the impact of teaching, learning and assessment policy and strategy upon the individual student’s ability to judge their own capabilities. Despite this, it is accepted that aspects of self-efficacy such as mastery and social comparisons highlighted by such frameworks have featured within the student narratives strongly.

The relationship between the two areas of context and the individual experience of that are by no means separate entities, however, for the purpose of modelling considerations for future research, the framework proposed presents these as separate but overlapping (Figure 3.). This separation is purely intended to identify the individual micro picture from the larger macro contextual picture. In addition, there is no extent or primacy placed upon any one influence in

either the individual or contextual influences. This is due to the clear picture from these participants that each story has its own unique interrelationships eg. where strong mastery is experienced, students may perceive the risk within the policy and practice as lower and hence the adoption of coping mechanisms as less important. The combined picture can be conceptualised as the previous assessment experiences influencing transition across assessments.

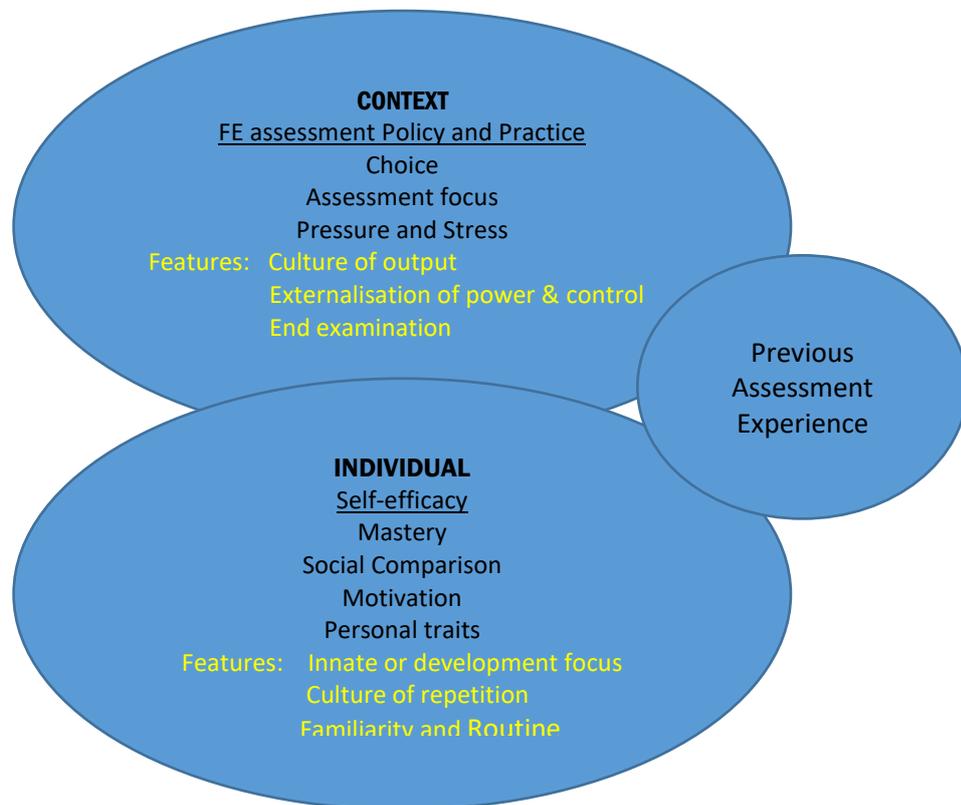


Figure 3. The combination of perceived influences in FE assessment.

### Influences during transition

Through transition from 'A' levels to degree these expectations of assessment are increasingly shaped by a move from one context to another, creating uncertainty and risk on a variety of levels. This uncertainty lies mostly in the fact that very few of the participants in this research had previous study experience of the degree subject they had chosen in Business and Management. This means that uncertainty potentially exists on a number of levels for some students around terminology and assessment type and hence expectations therein.

This challenges the basic principles of self-efficacy, where the students' lack of experience leads to judging themselves as unable to determine how their work should be organised and how to execute courses of action required to attain. Given the accepted lack of experience and the need to imagine or foresee the future assessment, more emphasis is placed upon mastery of course materials, software and help seeking. From the individual stories, it is clear that when students adopt a mastery orientation in which they believe learning and development in itself to be a main goal, proactive learning and persistence assist in the development of academic assessment confidence. More importantly, this becomes a longer term 'coping' strategy, which will serve the diminishing assessment mastery returns as the nature and challenge of assessments evolve over the course of a HE programme. When paired with aspects of resilience built from the development focus, students are able to develop an assessment confidence which allows them to face any challenge in order to develop such mastery.

In particular, this challenge to the mastery influences in their first experiences of University subjects and assessments shifts the emphasis onto the vicarious experience aspects of self-efficacy. In the absence of any obvious assessment mastery, students appear to rely more upon social comparison indicators to increase confidence. The emphasis for students becomes the development of strategies to reduce uncertainty, mitigate risk or regain the feeling of control over the unfamiliar. These manifest themselves in self-initiated 'teaming', or social comparison groups in order to gain some confidence around their own capabilities.

In a more general sense, the relationship between the transitioning student need for transparency of assessment and the intellectual function of HE work is somewhat challenging for HEIs. There is a clear tension between the desire to promote conceptual, deep approaches to learning and the desire to 'satisfy' an increasingly consumption orientated, marketized student body. Students may experience the risk, uncertainty and ambiguity as they find themselves far from familiar assessment ground during transition. A premature move to the deep approaches desired by HE in the initial transition from the 'A' level system to HE presents the main source of this risk, uncertainty and ambiguity and hence the reduced confidence. This reduced confidence may lead students to be sceptical either of their own capabilities, those of tutors or indeed the assessment system itself. Whilst the need for scaffolding is evident in this transition phase, the removal of familiar support systems in a bid to draw students closer to the intellectual challenges of Higher Education needs to be considered carefully.

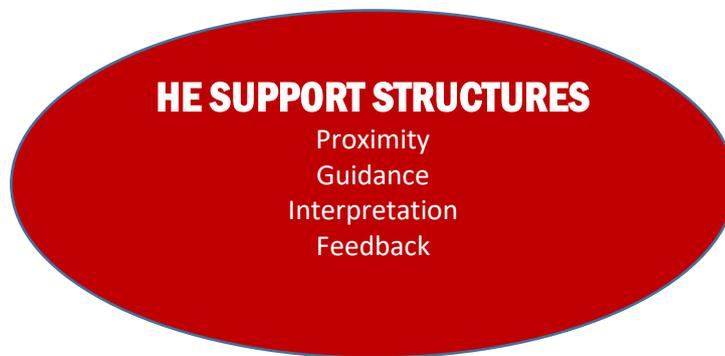


Figure 4. The perceived support influences in HE assessment

The relationship between tutor and student within the transition is also key to the development of assessment confidence in HE. Although there is an increased proximity to the person shaping the curriculum, assessment and marking, for some students this proximity is juxtaposed with a less team-orientated approach to teaching and learning. Where teachers and other students were previously seen as part of the team in the game against the external examiners at 'A' level, some students experience isolation and may struggle to achieve the necessary trust and respect desired from the proximity.

The type and level of support offered by tutors also changes in the move between assessment regimes, creating uncertainty for students. Where previously students may have been offered materials and guidance, this is not consistently offered by all tutors at University. Indeed there is some challenge as to whether this is, in itself a desirable solution to the transition needs. Confidence in assessment appears to diminish where students receive less structuring of learning towards the assessments and less modelling which illustrates approaches to, or strategies for, the assessment. This can be conceptualised as the move from a 'direct effect' support system at 'A' level, to a 'buffering' one in HE. Whilst HE institutions consider this the development of independent learning, the student may not yet be prepared for the loss of the direct support.

The extent of risk and uncertainty for students around assessment also appears to be reduced where better 'interpretation' of the requirements for the assessment has been undertaken by the tutor. As this model is a familiar one at 'A' level, there is some expectation that this will continue. Where interpretation is not undertaken by the tutor, the development of a peer group to assist with interpretation appears to be key. However, despite the development of a peer 'interpretation' group, the sharing of ideas and support remains problematic for some students. Attempts to reduce plagiarism with strong messages about 'collusion' appear to be problematic for the development of appropriate 'interpretation' groups failing to lead to the desired sharing.

This is also challenging where the wider group has conflicting interpretations, therefore reducing the affiliation to a 'team' in the wider game metaphor. This in itself can lead to isolation in terms of assessment literacy and self-doubt where little reassurance and confirmation can be gained.

### **Aspects of HE assessment design key to Assessment Confidence**

In addressing the second research aim, this study has given some insight into aspects of assessment design that may compromise the development of assessment confidence. The findings indicate that students' confidence development may be hindered by being unable to make sense of the meaning and requirements of HE assessments in addition to being unable to evaluate what would constitute a 'good attempt' at them. Given this lack of assessment literacy specific to assessment confidence in Business and Management studies, the way in which tutors design the task, success factors and expectations surrounding an assessment is key. In particular, the purpose of the assessment itself appears influential in understanding the relationship that students have with the work that they are producing.

Where the task is seen as having a purpose related directly to either learning or the world of work, students can more clearly understand the need to engage with the task and the 'reward' for doing so. However, a word of caution is required in terms of distinguishing the terms *usefulness* and *purpose* from the terms *relevance* and *authenticity*, of particular interest in the vocational area of Business and Management. Whilst the former terms allow students to understand how they might utilise the knowledge or learning in a wider sense, the latter allows students to feel that they are being prepared for a future workplace. Despite this, both are key features of assessment design associated to the development of assessment confidence. However, the relationship between these aspects of assessment design and the development of assessment confidence appear to be dependent upon other intermediate variables associated with motivation. It appears that relevance of assessment, particularly when the product of this is academic skill orientated eg. learning about plagiarism, essay writing or referencing, is mitigated by the topic itself being of interest. Where interest levels are raised, there appears to be more engagement with the task and this helps raise assessment confidence.

In comparison, assessment tasks which are related directly to the world of work or are deemed more authentic by students seem to be motivational in their own right. This is due to the association to choice of degree subject, with students being able to confirm that the content of their learning is indeed reflective of their career choices. Conversely, where this exists, even if interest is low, the relevance and authenticity in the design of the assessment is sufficient to

drive motivation. However, complications appear to arise when there is a disjoint between the tutor interpretation of relevance and authenticity differs from that of students.



Figure 5. The perceived assessment design influences in HE assessment.

In addition to relevance and authenticity, choice and freedom appear to be key in assisting the levels of interest and as a result, engagement with the assessment task. There is a key difference between the two concepts in that choice may exist between options presented by the tutor, either in terms of assessment type or subjects/topics covered. However, freedom exists where students are able to introduce their own variations on these aspects. This proves important in the development of assessment confidence as it allows students to become active ‘agents’ in their own learning. Again, however, there is a need for caution in the initial stages of transition, as student interpretation of choice and freedom may vary. Whilst some students perceive choice and freedom as offering the best way to develop interest through ownership of their choice, others perceive this as further ambiguity with risk attached to their choice of the wrong ‘option’.

Ambiguity, uncertainty and risk appear to be main barriers to the development of assessment confidence in HE. This may begin before assessments are directly introduced. Students begin to evaluate their own self-efficacy early in the HE experience, comparing against others and determining which elements of the experience are familiar. This can be a difficult transition where students are entering Business and Management studies for the first time, with a new vocabulary and set of terminology. Given the ‘A’ level association of terminology to success, this initial period can be challenging in the development of confidence when facing assessments utilising this language.

It is not only the terminology which may change drastically, but also the tasks themselves. This is evident from the student need for clarity in assessment design. Central to this is how the students interpret the task and the strategies employed to gain clarity. As students transition and become aware that the tutor interpretation and direction is no longer structured in the

same way, new coping strategies emerge to draw in peer groups. However, protocols around ‘collusion’ in plagiarism may make this a higher risk strategy to provide the required clarity. It is clear that a lack of clarity and ability to interpret the needs of the task prevent students from understanding the direction and purpose of the assessment and as a result, this may impact interest and willingness to engage.

Where students fear that they may have made the wrong choice or incorrectly interpreted the requirements of the assessment, anxiety may follow. This in turn leads to lower motivation, task avoidance or procrastination and low engagement with the assessment itself. This leads students to believe that their chances of success are lower and assessment confidence fails to develop (Figure 6.). Conversely, where the assessment design is clear and offers appropriate purpose and choice in a supported environment, engagement with the assessment is likely to flourish, making students confident in their ability to tackle future tasks.

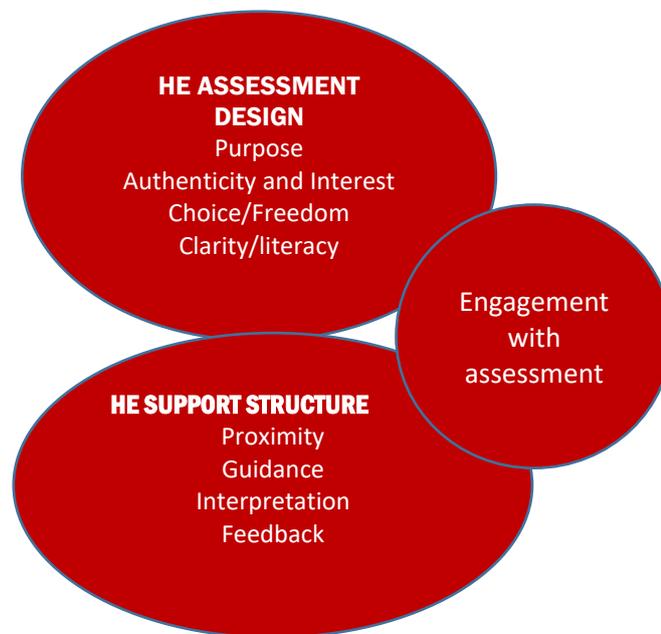


Figure 6. The combination of perceived influences in HE assessment

## The development of Assessment Confidence

It is clear when we begin to conceptualise the overall picture on assessment confidence that it is important to consider the students’ previous experiences of assessment. This is presented in Figure 7.

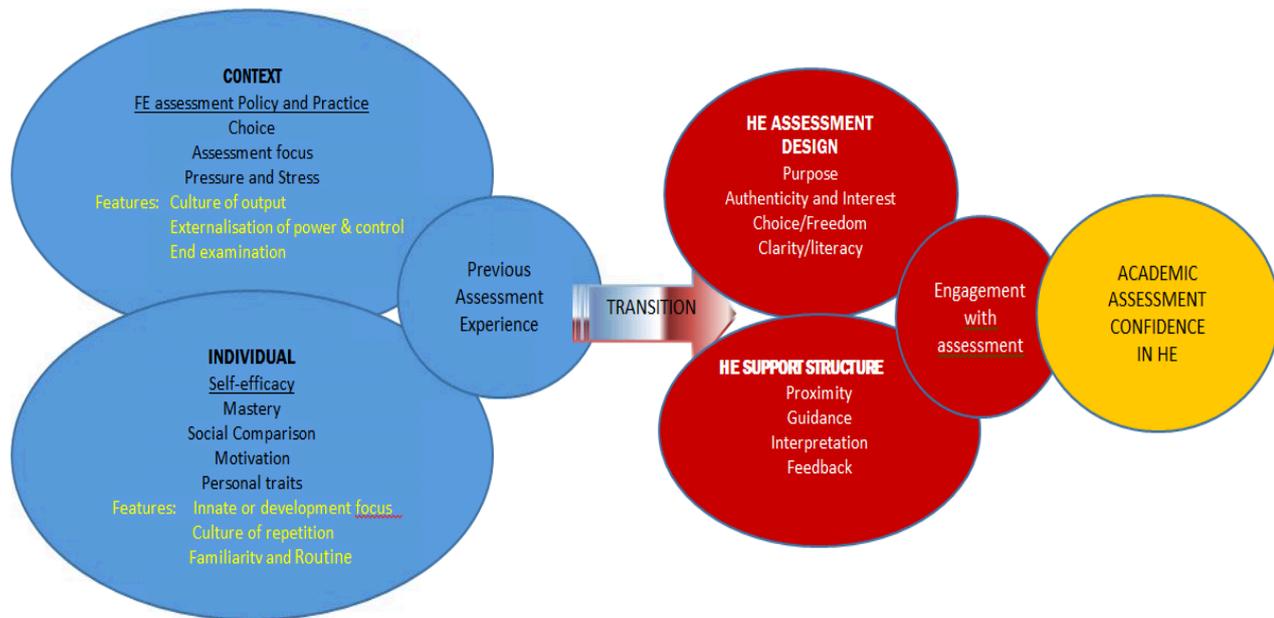


Figure 7. An overview of perceived transition influences impacting the development of assessment confidence.

The 'A' level system is one which develops assessment culture in a specific way, resulting from the contextual policy and practice which sends a message to students about the value and type of success resulting from assessment. The focus upon a particular type of assessment, end examination, develops a culture of stress and anxiety in which choices and learning are restricted and this in turn develops a perception of assessment within this context. The individual experience of this is one of pressured repetition, designed specifically to build familiarity with routine exposure. How students respond to this is based upon support structures, self-efficacy and a personal view of their own learning capability.

In transitioning to University, a number of aspects of the student experience are challenged, in particular, the locus of control and expectations around independent learning are unfamiliar. The transition to an assessment environment which lacks familiarity, poses uncertainty and risk in the initial stages of year 1. This can be compounded by assessment tasks which lack clarity and purpose and a support system which does not attempt to assist in the development of assessment literacy. Where these barriers are broken down with some understanding of previous experience utilised to create more familiarity, it is possible to develop assessment confidence as a result of engaging, interesting assessment experiences.

## Contribution to knowledge

The conceptualisation of confidence in this study is specific to the assessment scenario, which differs from existing work around self-efficacy exploring more generalised scenarios intended to be applied to a variety of aspects of academic life. In literature and in some areas of practice in Business and Management studies, the term confidence is often used interchangeably with self-efficacy in which feelings of capability are developed from evaluation of previous experiences and feedback. However, this study is able to contribute new insight into how assessment confidence may require more specific understanding whereby a number of existing models, including those more general, might be drawn together in order to evaluate this as a distinct area.

This study illustrates how policy and context of FE studies, and in particular those of 'A' level examinations, vary greatly from those in HE Business and Management studies in the lived experience of students. It is possible to see from this conceptualisation, that experience and feedback from 'A' level assessment is less relevant for students transitioning to a new, unfamiliar assessment regime. Previous self-efficacy and general confidence studies do not account specifically for this difference in scenario and longitudinal view of the changes in approach and experience taking place across the transition. The 'rebuilding' of assessment confidence across scenarios is particularly significant conceptually as this study seeks to contribute insight into how HE Business and Management educators might better understand the transitional phase and adjust approaches to practice in order to enhance student experience.

Whilst this study is limited to the production of substantive theorising, there is scope for this specific, longitudinal conceptualisation to be applied to other periods of assessment transitions with a view to more formal theorising in a variety of contexts and levels of assessment. The thesis therefore offers further potential for post-doctoral contribution to knowledge from this study both within Business and Management and in other subject areas.

This chapter draws together the substantive theorising emergent from thematic and individual story analysis to produce an agenda for future research. The conceptualisation of these findings into conclusions around influences and management of assessment across the transitional period from FE to HE responds directly to the research questions of this study. This conceptualisation offers new insight drawn from extensions of existing frameworks for study of confidence and establishes areas where this study could be extended beyond the original

research questions into more specific student backgrounds and, in doing so, paves the way for more formalised theorising in future research.

## **Chapter 8 Developments in Assessment Practice, Personal identity and further research**

This chapter presents the emerging developments from this study, which have been wide and on many levels. In order to offer some clarity on this, this chapter is structured into three particular areas. The first of these evaluates the potential changes that may emerge from the study for practices surrounding new student transitions and assessment design in the area of Business and Management studies. The second investigates the personal growth that has taken place during the research process and reflects upon my assumptions, decisions and actions throughout the study and the implications of these for my research approach. The final section proposes further research areas in building upon the research findings in order to progress this area of investigation in future studies.

### **Business and Management Assessment Practice development**

The data emerging from the student interviews was a stark contrast to my own ideas of how students perceived HE systems of assessment, which were embedded in values clearly pertaining to the standards model. During the second round of interviews, the students were asked to reflect on their experiences of assessment during the first year of HE studies, and described an assessment approach which included vague assessment briefs and ambiguous criteria, one model answer and prescriptive 'teaching to the test' similar to those used in FE assessments. In particular, the focus of the student message was one of emerging uncertainty and risk in a number of areas.

### **Transition support/guidance and philosophy**

One of the most important aspects of this study lies in the assumptions made about student assessment literacy levels on transition from FE to HE. One of the widespread assumptions within HE is that all students who have taken 'A' levels, will have had similar preparation for University life, regardless of the subject, institution or assessments taken. In contrast, those who recognise that students may have had varied experiences often choose to standardise their own approaches to assessment in order to make up for this. Both assumptions neglect the fact that students arrive at University with varying experiences, levels of resilience, expectations and more importantly in this research, assessment literacies.

Development of a diagnostic approach to assessment literacy suitable for transitioning students would be appropriate to assisting academics in their efforts to recognise the barriers that this presents to the development of assessment confidence. This should include enquiry around transitioning students’:

- 1) understanding of the local/subject specific protocols and performance standards
- 2) Awareness of the purpose and processes of assessment in HE
- 3) Understanding of their own capacity to submit responses to tasks which meet academic requirements
- 4) Judgements of the quality of their own response against criteria and standards as well as the capacity for development

Adapted from Smith et al (2013:48)

In addition, this may be combined with insight into the student experiences of assessment and preferences for assessment type/design. This may also include seeking resilience based information in order to establish learning philosophies, motivations and preferred support structures. This information will allow tutors to better evaluate the design of their initial assessments and how these might meet the individual needs of the students.

The way in which we introduce the basics of our subject to non-experts could be central to the development of assessment confidence. Debowski et al (2001) investigated situations in which non-experts were introduced to effective learning strategies where task-generated feedback was limited. In particular, they explored and tested strategies for the development of competencies where people may feel overwhelmed or undermined by the lack of familiarity. They identified the need for a cyclical, exploratory approach to learning in the initial stages. Where students are left to ‘enactive’ exploration based upon trial and error, there is less chance that new successful strategies will grow confidence. However, where guided exploration and mastery are used, students are encouraged to expect mistakes and learn from them rather than fear them or view them as evidence of incapability. This focuses upon sequencing of assessment activities and responses to problems associated with them, using progressive achievement to shape the responses of the students. In particular this allows for demonstrations of responses to problems but also explores the thought processes around dealing with the problems. Early transition tasks which influence student perception of performance whilst offering reassurance

and elements of control could help reduce the uncertainty and risk attached to the lack of familiarity.

In particular, this approach to the basics could be applied to the way in which students are introduced to assessments, the criteria used for assessing success in an assessment and necessary terminology/writing styles. It is necessary to take such a guided exploration approach in order to achieve higher levels of satisfaction with assessment strategy and lower levels of wasted or delayed effort. In addition, this approach leads to heightened interest, persistence and performance as well as self-regulated improvements on future efforts (Debowski et al 2001). This is intended to be subtly different from scaffolding approaches taken during 'A' levels such as answer modelling, which some authors (Edwards and Westgate 1994 and Dawes 2004) believe limits possibility for variation, inhibits the 'working out' process and treats students as subordinate in the answering process of assessments. In this way, guided exploration offers a focus upon development rather than output.

### **Assessment design**

On reflection, it is important for me to note that the pervasive approach to assessment may be more widely focussed on measurements than on standards than I have previously acknowledged within our assessment practice. The described focus on narrowed answer options and lack of clarity in the setting of criteria indicates less attention to the real student experience of assessment. Where previously the FE systems and indeed students as 'products' of that system had been assumed as the root cause of assessment transition 'issues' this has led me to question the extent to which change is required in the day to day practice of HE Business and Management assessment.

In particular, it has raised the need to understand where the practices of assessment design and the norms surrounding practitioner dialogue about the resulting assessment stem from, in order to evaluate the extent, approach and possible effectiveness of any proposed change. From my own experiences, I am aware that such problems of assessment design and language often result from the wider community expectations and norms established in 'verification and moderation' protocols. In my own experience, tutors feel that they are expected to conform to an academic 'norm' in question setting and answer expectations and more particularly in the language used to articulate this to students. It is important to develop a better understanding of whether such moderation protocols and underpinning cultures disempower tutors in acceptance of 'model

answer' rather than different ways in which students might meet the learning outcomes, which they may fear to be unacceptable to their community of practice.

Harvey and Knight (1996:70) point to the fact that Universities are 'nothing more than a community of scholars' but indicate that it is the philosophy implicit in this which is referred to as 'collegialism'. This indicates a process of shared decision-making on academic matters, support in upholding academic integrity and maintenance of specialised knowledge and practice. In traditional views of academic autonomy and freedom, sometimes referred to as 'cloisterism', the skills developed in students are often implicit and obscure and what is expected is often 'deliberately opaque and shrouded in mystifying discourse'(Harvey and Knight 1996:71) which may appear vague and ambiguous to students. Newer models of collegialism prefer explicitness to obscurity, with a focus on knowledge production, referred to as the development of 'explicit professionalism' (Elton 1993).

Whilst there are some questions surrounding the extent to which explicitness is leading to an 'assessment AS learning' approach rather than 'assessment FOR learning' approach (Ivanic et al 2009) this is still preferable to the game like quality of implicit mystification of the assessment process and factors for success. However, over time it is important to build assessment literacy to prevent the need for such an approach altogether. This could be through re-establishing the objectives of assessment design as the focus above the overall purpose of assessment.

The objective of assessment design moving forward is to focus on the enhancement of student participation in assessments in a way which reflects the individuality of assessment experience. Whilst variety stimulates interest levels, it can pose familiarity issues and make assessment skills less transferable for students. In order to overcome this, choice and freedom in assessments allows students to tailor any new task to an area more familiar to them, or with which they wish to develop more familiarity, perhaps for the potential of future career goals. This can also be of use in diverse student groups as such choice allows international students and those with learning difficulties to find some element of comfort. This has the added bonus of allowing students to bring to bear mastery of topics they already understand in terms of language and relevance to the world of work/desired careers. This can reduce the elements of risk associated with complete lack of familiarity and build some extent of control through which students can develop their assessment confidence.

## Personal and Professional Development

One of the particular aspects of interest to emerge from the Masters study I undertook before joining the doctoral programme, was the exposure of my assumption that I 'knew' my students. The group under study was a relatively small one of 20 and I had had the pleasure of spending a lot of time with the group in a fairly relaxed setting for teaching and learning. However, the study revealed that I had mistaken personal confidence, in their openness and assertiveness with me, for assessment confidence. For the first time, the students had communicated with me anonymously about themselves and their concerns about their abilities using an online questionnaire. This revealed a voice which I had not heard before and formed the motivation for this research.

It was disappointing initially to acknowledge that my previous and continuing practice-based research had not reflected the real needs of the students, and this is what Guba and Lincoln (2005:209) refer to as a 'crisis of representation' in which no voice has truly been given or heard. Whilst this is not unusual, the source of my disappointment clearly lay in embedded feelings based at the very core of my beliefs about education. As the first and subsequently the only member of my family to undertake undergraduate and masters degrees, education has brought about both geographical and social mobility. As education had allowed me to leave what can only be described as a depressed background for one which is more rewarding and varied, I have a strong view on its emancipatory nature. Mazzei and Jackson (2009:1) refer to the fact that when we begin to acknowledge our own voice, we often see 'the mirror of the soul, the essence of the self' which I had not explored before. This brought about the realisation of a clear gap in my understanding of the nature of confidence, both for the students in their assessments and myself as an academic professional practitioner.

Part of this identified gap includes my need to develop a far deeper grasp of the necessary language of research as well as alternative methods suitable for a variety of purposes. In particular, my knowledge around grounded theory has become more informed. In itself this has obvious uses as this was my planned approach. However, the less tacit development is that I now feel able to contrast this with other approaches and more clearly see the relationship between this as a chosen approach and the philosophical framework within which I intended to set the study.

As grounded theory takes an interpretive approach to understanding meanings and actions and is aimed predominantly at theory generation rather than testing (Strauss 2008), it has been important to get to grips with these aspects. As a result of discussions with my supervisors, research module tutors and other students, I feel more confident with the idea of interpreting 'meaning derived from social interaction' (Blumer 1969:12). Grounded theory seeks to explain and attribute meaning through interpretation and the generation of an 'approximation of the truth' with an emergent reality being constructed by everyone involved (Giola 1990). This has required me to take a constructivist stance which I had not been familiar with before .

This development in methodological understanding has not always been through my own study, but sharing, reviewing and simply listening to other researchers discuss their studies. This has been apparent in one particular instance in which I volunteered as a 'critical friend' for an MEd student who had chosen a methodology with which I have become familiar as part of my EdD studies: appreciative inquiry. Schuck and Segal (96) highlight that a critical friend relationship is one in which one knowledgeable person questions the work of another through critical enquiry. They point out that there is equal opportunity for the critical friend to learn from their interactions and discussion and to reframe either their own knowledge or their own experiences as a result of being a critical friend. I found the discussion with and contribution to the study development stimulating and developmental for myself as a means to consider how any knowledge I might have could be challenged, accepted, useful and productive to someone else. This is something I would like to continue to do as I become more knowledgeable about research in education at this level. This gives me more confidence in my ability as a potential research supervisor in this area in order for me to extend my engagement with the wider educational research community.

On joining the EdD programme, I attributed my motivations for undertaking the doctorate to job security and future career progression and genuinely considered it to be purely of personal interest that would focus on my teaching practice. These motivational factors have come under severe scrutiny throughout the doctorate as the amount of time, intellectual focus and impact on wider aspects of my professional (and personal) life has increased, prompting me to look more closely at what I was really seeking from the professional doctoral programme. Roberts (2007:ix) points out that rather than the written thesis, 'the product of ... (doctoral study) is the development of themselves'. This has become clear throughout my doctoral studies and more particularly through my methodological journey which has seen my confidence as a researcher improve beyond recognition. Lee (2009:31) argues that although the final product of the doctorate is the 'destination', ie, the original contribution I make to professional knowledge, the

ability to evaluate the route plan is far more powerful as an outcome that will serve beyond the end thesis.

My personal development has been significant and transcends different levels creating layers of learning. When synthesised, these have resulted in me becoming a more self-aware, confident practitioner researcher which has transformed my professional identity. Lee (2009:27) points out that doctoral level education requires a review of identity through 'critical reflection and analysis of practice and how it is internalised'. This was a daunting prospect however having now experienced it, it has revealed a rewarding outcome. Day (2012) confirms that the 'doing' of qualitative methodology often involves problematizing personal self-constructs and can lead to the reconstruction of identity.

The doctorate programme has raised tensions and relationships between the various locations, reference groups and experiences I have had so far in my career and will continue to have in my research. This has particularly been the case around my professional identity. Pilkington (2009:156) proposes that professional doctorate students will engage with at least 3 communities, other educational practitioners, other researchers within supervision teams and other doctoral students and that these collectively will help debate and define aspects of practitioner research which shapes the 'skills and social capital ... concerning research' (157).

In my case, the first group is an interesting one as the norm within my field of study is for other practitioners to be research active using more positivistic approaches and who are often dismissive of practitioner research as an alternative. Validation and affirmation from such diverse groups has been more important to me in the process of undertaking the doctorate than I had expected it to be. Where perhaps I would not have engaged with this community for fear that my lack of research knowledge would expose me, I find myself more willing to challenge them and their assumptions and in doing so have set about forming a different professional identity as a researcher, which I hope are clearly evident in my conclusions.

Outside of my subject area, the community of practice as an educational researcher has become increasingly important in the construction of this new identity. As well as with supervisors and colleagues, it has also become important for me to share my analysis, progress and general thoughts and ideas with other students on the doctoral programme. Sweitzer (2009:27) argues that these 'developmental networks' are important in terms of support but, more importantly, the 'fit' of the researcher to the community within which the identity is developed is fundamental to the growth of the individual. Discussions around the production of my

Statement of Intent (SoI) allowed me to get new insight and perspective from a supportive network which allowed me to make adaptations on the basis of their feedback. In a more general sense, this meant wider discussion to help clarification as well as mutual questioning which allowed the exchange of ideas. Lee (2009:39) points out that it is the shared purpose, aims and practice needs that allow such communities of practice to flourish and 'advance learning and facilitate support for personal development'. This has had an influence on my development as a practitioner researcher throughout the doctoral programme and at each stage in the development of this study.

In some ways, my identity within the educational research community of practice has been easier to develop than within my own subject area. Best (2003) highlights that identity as a co-construction is a process that often does not run smoothly as identities can be misread or challenged. I was aware that there were few 'passive' recipients of my identity, meaning that each aspect of my identity would be co-constructed with a number of different groups. As a result, at times I moved between multiple identities as a researcher, a colleague, a subject professional, notwithstanding my identities as a mother and wife dependent upon the context. Whilst initially this created some anxiety, it has been reassuring that my doctoral community does not require that identity to be a 'finished product' (Day 2012:72) and has supported me whilst I explored a less unitary identity which does not give priority to any one identity in my writing (Khan 2005). This has allowed my identity as a confident and possibly somewhat evangelical practitioner researcher to emerge and change over time.

As a result of becoming more aware of the communities I was fitting into, I began to question how I would feel validated and by whom within the doctoral process. This meant reviewing how I see myself in relation to and reflected in others and how that would alter my place within the learning community I have been a part of for so many years. The doctorate has been particularly central to my 'professional socialisation' as highlighted in the work of Mead (1964) emphasising the idea of the 'self' as socially constructed. I am also aware that my practitioner research challenges the dominant ideology of knowledge production prevalent in my domain of study. Previously, I have remained silent in discussions around research in my own subject area in an attempt not to challenge the 'prevailing academic norms' (Drake and Heath 2011:19) where now I feel that I have enough confidence in my own research approach and understanding, to offer comment and gain respect as a result. The doctorate has clearly afforded me a means by which I might argue my credibility in order to reinforce this new identity and this has led to invitations to give seminars to doctoral students within the Business and Management area. These have been successful and have provided an alternative way for those doctoral students in the subject

to consider their own research and particularly qualitative research as a viable, credible alternative through my sharing of experience and knowledge.

Stryker and Burke (2000) propose that whilst expectation of the roles we undertake may be set externally, identity is internally defined by whether we accept or reject those expectations as part of our 'self'. Initially, I internalised the expectations of my subject group within the area of Business and Management research. This is particularly the case with those colleagues who are experienced researchers with long track records in quantitative studies with very fixed views on reliability and validity in judgement of credibility of studies. However, over time, I have found the confidence to reject and challenge some of the more basic aspects of these. In contrast, Forbes (2008) argues that identity is socially constructed and that multiple identities are formed as the basic idea of 'self' is subverted and redeveloped and our acceptance or rejection of ideas evolves. Whilst I have not been conscious of subversion, I am more aware of how the subject community of practice which I am more confidently joining, have shaped the choices I have made for my methodology.

For the first time in my research career, during my doctoral studies, I became aware of debates around the role of the researcher. In my subject area, there is rarely debate on whose interpretation of the reality is most important, participant or researcher, with an assumption that the researched is purely the source of information (Becker 1996). Shope (2006) refers to this as the objectification of the research participants, and until this study, I had never considered the relationship between myself and the interviewees. In the 1960s social researchers (Garfinkel 1967, Berger and Luckman 1966) placed participants equally at the heart of research, claiming that neither researchers nor participants had a better claim to knowledge i.e. I am researching, students are studying and taking assessments – am I better placed than they to construct the reality around their experience? Undertaking the doctorate has given me more confidence that whilst I may not be better placed than the students themselves, I have developed skills which will enable me to represent their stories more effectively as co-constructors of knowledge.

## **Further Research**

It is acknowledged that the generalisability of findings in this study is limited due to small sample size. Whilst this has allowed for theorising on detailed aspects of the sample's experiences, there is acceptance that this may only present a substantive theory (Glaser and Strauss 1965) which would benefit from grounding in further data in order to facilitate the production of a

formal theory. In particular, the majority of students participating in this study had experience of the 'A' level system rather than alternatives. This has not allowed for pursuance of specific lines of emergent enquiry around vocational 14-19 assessment experiences. Indeed, this has also been limiting in terms of theoretical sampling towards deeper understanding of the impact of learning difficulties, international learning cultures or other student backgrounds, which may impact on ability to develop assessment confidence in the transition from FE to HE. Future research would benefit from exploring some of these aspects as specifics to the furthering of understanding of assessment confidence as a concept.

Further research could also be undertaken to broaden the applicability of this substantive theory to wider contexts, exploring the concept of assessment confidence in other subject areas. In addition this could be extended to cross a number of transition points including undergraduate to postgraduate studies, professional programmes and international students and widening participation students transition to UK assessment practices. In doing so, the model could be further refined to investigate the context and individual scenarios affecting the development of assessment confidence more widely.

The theory of assessment confidence also provides scope for wider ranging quantitative research in order to abduct and assess the strength of the theory as a more formal hypothesis. The aim of this would be to provide evidence for broader changes in assessment design and support strategies across subjects in order to bring about wider change. In a specific way, the relationship between assessment choice, freedom and relevance is worthy of further research in the realm of assessment confidence research in order to better understand the relationship between these and the potentially intermediate variables of interest and engagement.

Lastly, future research may also be able to utilise the metaphorical considerations around student engagement with assessment practices. The aim of this would be to reconsider how assessment design, delivery and support may undergo a more fundamental ideological change in order to allow students a greater chance for success. Sambell et al (2013) call for similar changes to the lens through which assessment is viewed 'assessment for student experience' which could be furthered with better understanding of how students view the players, teams, rules and tactics of playing the assessment 'game'.

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1 – Literature Review Map



## Appendix 2 – Recruitment postcard



Understanding the nature and development of academic assessment confidence in Business and Management students

### Would you like to take part in research study on student assessment?

**What do I have to do?** Undertake 2 x 1 hour interviews:

Sept/Oct interview - to discuss your assessments at college/school  
April/May interview - to discuss your assessments at University

**What will I get from taking part?**

You can attend a session at the end of the interviews to help you prepare and plan for assessments in year 2

*If you are interested in taking part, please email Cheryl Gordon [cgordon@uclan.ac.uk](mailto:cgordon@uclan.ac.uk)  
Alternatively, you can fill in your details on the rear of this postcard and leave it with staff on reception in Greenbank building*

I am interested in hearing more information about this but understand that this does not commit me to the study

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Degree: \_\_\_\_\_

My email address is \_\_\_\_\_

Please leave this card with staff on reception in Greenbank building



PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

**Understanding the nature and development of academic assessment confidence in Business and Management students**

I, [insert name] hereby agree to be a participant in this study to be undertaken by Cheryl Gordon

I understand that the purpose of the research is to interview me as a participant to discuss my experiences of assessment in my education so far. This will enable the researcher to explore which aspects in the assessment process may have shaped the level of self-confidence when I have done or am doing assessments in my education

I understand that:

1. the aims, methods and anticipated benefits and possible risk/hazards of the research study have been explained to me and I have had the opportunity to ask questions. In the event that such risks/hazards arise, I am aware of the support offered to me through the University support networks
2. I voluntarily and freely give my consent to my participation in such research study
3. I will be recorded during interviews and that results and quotes will be used for research purposes and may be reported in academic journals. However, any information which might potentially identify me will not be published
4. individual results will not be released to any person except at my request and my authorisation

5. I am free to withdraw my consent at any time during the study, in which event my participation in the research study will immediately cease and any information obtained from me will not be used. I understand that this will not prejudice me in any way

Signature

Date

The contact details of the researcher are: Cheryl Gordon 01772 894772  
cgordon@uclan.ac.uk



### **Understanding the nature and development of academic assessment confidence in Business and Management students**

You are being invited to take part in a research study. Before you decide, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and 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.

Thank you for reading this.

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

*The focus of this study is upon investigating student confidence with a view to determining whether or not academic assessment confidence exists and what it means for students undertaking assessment at University*

#### *Research Questions*

- 1) What are the influencing factors in the nature and development of academic assessment confidence?*
- 2) What is the role played by academic assessment confidence in determining how students interact with assessment in the HE environment?*
- 3) Does academic assessment confidence within pre-university experience differ from that of HE experience?*

- **Why have I been chosen?**

You have been invited to participate in the project because you are a new student to UCLan and you have expressed a desire to participate in a discussion on your previous experience of assessment.

- **Do I have to take part?**

If you do not wish to take part, you may simply cease reading

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

You will also be invited to attend an interview, which will take approximately 50 minutes and will be recorded. Your comments will be transcribed and analysed by Cheryl Gordon. You will receive a summary, which you can comment on, to tell me whether you think I have accurately represented our discussion.

You will then be asked to undertake a second interview at the end of the year to discuss your assessments so far in University. Finally, after those interviews are written up, you will have the opportunity to discuss any concerns you might have around assessment at University and get advice on how to progress into year 2. You will also receive your reward vouchers at this point

If you are happy to take part, please complete the attached permission form, which covers the interview.

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

We do not consider that there are significant risks to taking part. If, however, any part of the conversation is intrusive, you may decide not to answer the question and that's ok! If at any point the discussion makes you uncomfortable or is having a negative impact, you will be offered additional support in dealing with this

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

A benefit of taking part will be that you will be able to discuss your concerns about assessment and identify how these have developed and how they might be dealt with. This may allow you to better prepare for or understand these concerns and this will help you in your further assessments in years 2 and 3

- **What if something goes wrong?**

If something goes wrong or you become concerned, you should contact Cheryl Gordon or Andrea Lee to discuss this. You may withdraw at any time without prejudice to yourself and all interview and other data will be immediately removed and deleted

- **Will my taking part in the study be kept confidential?**

Yes. Transcriptions and interview transcriptions will be dealt with in strictest confidentiality and anonymised. In any quotes from interviews, you will be referred to as participant (numbered) and not by any name. Any email communication will be kept in a password secured email folder

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

As part of the research we are intending to analyse recordings of your interview so that influencers and confidence developing incidents can be identified. This will help us design better support for assessment for future students

The findings of the project will be reported in conference papers and articles in order to inform the development of UK practice in assessments. This will lead to extensive discussion of how assessment practice can be advanced to develop more self-confidence in future students

- **Who may I contact for further information?**

Cheryl Gordon ([cgordon@uclan.ac.uk](mailto:cgordon@uclan.ac.uk) 01772 894772) or your Personal Advisor

Thank you for your interest in this research

## Appendix 5 - Transcription, initial coding and memo example

47		obviously transport links to Richmond.
48		<b>You said you prefer exams. Why?</b>
49	THEME 2 – assessment type	Because with exams, you either know it or you don't so it's right or wrong sort of thing. And of course you're going to have to spend a lot of time and effort. When I did Media studies, I found it very boring to do the coursework and to me it's just a complete joke you know, you had to create a DVD cover and you had to write a script as though you're producing a film and it's not real and depending on anyone...
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53	THEME 5 – A level inequality	for example if I was going to make a film on like, Television, in a room, if I just took a picture, like this particular room, I thought ok, you know, this DVD is great you know, cover. But then the examiner might not think it is and then you need to go on Google images and get your classification, like 15 or 18 and then you just used loads of jargon of how they have it at the back and a synopsis and you have to ... it could only be 200 words, you had to make sure it was very concise and to the point and depending on what genre it is, you need to follow the connotations
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57	THEME 5 – system examiner needs	
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62		<b>Do you think there were some valuable skills developed there?</b>
63		Not really, I found it very boring
64		<b>Why was it boring?</b>
65	THEME 2 – interest in assessment	Because media and film to me, it's not my forte and I'm not really interested. I just did it because I thought it's a bit different but there's lots of terminology you need to use and my media teacher wasn't good, I felt ... she wasn't very engaging
66		
67	THEME 5 – system terminology THEME 1 – Tutor support	
68		<b>What roles did other people play in your assessments? Who was significant and why?</b>
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70	THEME 1 – tutor support	I really did enjoy economics, I did economics. One, I got on with my teacher, his name is XXXX and also in this particular 6 <sup>th</sup> form was very small. So, he didn't really teach us a lot but I think because there was a transition from going from GCSE to A level so ok, I need to do a lot of work myself, but my older brother helped me, sort of, a few days a week. So me and him would just go through past exam papers again and again so I did my 3 unit papers in January and I did really well, I only had to retake one. Overall I averaged out at an A. So I was really happy with that. And obviously having my brother, who did economics influenced me as well.
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74	THEME 1 – Family support	
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78		<b>Do you think your brother was key?</b>
79	THEME 1 – Family role model and support	Yes, I do, he is VERY clever and I do admire him a lot and I have a lot of respect for him and he's probably one of the cleverest people I know and I've seen him do it all and his notes and his help and I think, yeah, if I didn't have him I probably wouldn't have done as well. He also helped me with geography.
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81		
82		
83		<b>What about other students, did you work with them?</b>
84		Not particularly coz with that particular 6 <sup>th</sup> form was quite varied. I felt, because it was very small, it was literally 2 houses together and that formed a school and the
85		

 **Cheryl Gordon**  
There is a distinct 'nobbery' here around the type of A level being done and the perceived requirements for its completion – is the media studies A level seen as easier because the task is a creative one

 **Cheryl Gordon**  
Does this indicate possible doubts around interpretation of output in terms of creativity. There seems to be the implication that the output of this assessment is down to opinion without any real criteria being applied. Perhaps this indicates a lack of understanding of the idea of criteria in the A level system?

 **Cheryl Gordon**  
This makes it sound like a set of rules

 **Cheryl Gordon**  
The student is equating strength of capability with level of interest

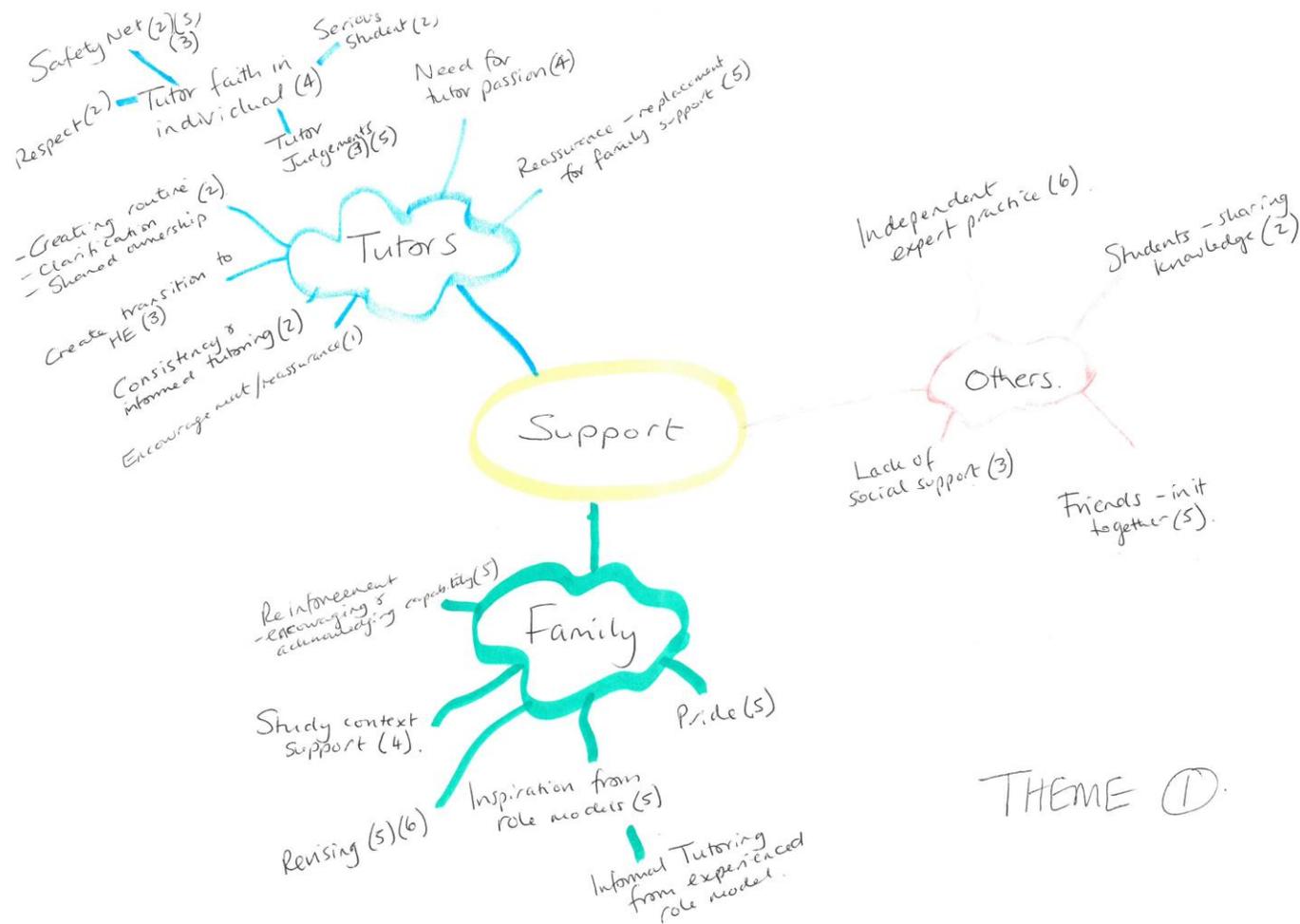
 **Cheryl Gordon**  
There are a lot of issues raised at once here around whether the assessment was not engaging because of capability, interest level, terminology or tutor issues. This perhaps indicates some of the interrelatedness of these issues in the minds of the students??

Mark

 **Cheryl Gordon**  
Informal study support perhaps seen as without any consequence in comparison to more formal practice sessions? Does the family role model become the 'knowing' person in the assessment development rather than tutors?

 **Cheryl Gordon**  
There are a lot of superlatives being used here which indicate a strong aspirational admiration for family role model

## Appendix 6 - Example of focussed coding patterns



## Appendix 7 – Example of evidence sets to support coding with memo insights

Theme	Description of theme	Aspect	Evidence	info	Memo
Assessment design	Aspects of assessment design which influence engagement with it	Assessment choice	'Some assessments give you choice, where you pick a topic. I quite like that! Some people are good at some subjects and some people are good at others, so if you've got a choice, you can pick your strongest. I think that's fairer, when you have a choice. I'm more interested then because you can pick a topic that you enjoy. Some topics are more difficult than others. So far, every time I've had a choice, I've enjoyed it'	1, 83-89	In my experience students take more ownership when they have chosen something for themselves. There could be more of this either in content or application contexts for the content. This way there is perhaps less idea that there is only one answer
			'in a way ... there's like a fake choice on the assessment brief that doesn't actually exist'	2, 15-16	
			'I don't like too much choice, just a few choices so I'm not just stuck with one but not loads of choices so that I can clearly think. I would constantly be asking if I'd made the right choice and that brings back the ambiguity. I need enough choice to motivate me but not so much that it becomes completely ambiguous'	4, 98-101	Does choice create uncertainty? If so, can this be avoided and indeed would we WANT to avoid this?
			'The ones I can't do still have the ambiguity with no choice, they don't tick my boxes. They are either giving too much or no choice at all, in that case the choice becomes all about how do I answer the question and if they just give you a few avenues on how to get to know the question'	4, 106-109	This builds a complex relationship between choices presented in what to answer and whether or not this deflects from the choice of which way to interpret
			'this is good, I can choose the area I like. I want to do Costa because I like coffee and I'm familiar with coffee shops and it's that limited choice which gives you the freedom but with some limits. I'm usually happy to do whatever assessment is given to me but if I'm given a choice, as long as I haven't got too much choice, I'm very, very happy'	5, 155-260	
			'I prefer the choice as I can play around with it and put what I'm interested in'	8, 37	
			'There wasn't any choice but there was freedom, I mean with choice you can pick out from a list whereas this one let you go off and decide. Making some of the decisions myself was really good. I took ownership of it and it was like my baby when I presented it, I was really passionate about it and the grade reflected it, 75%! I also did Digital essentials which was really good. Again there was an element of freedom as you could personalise your work, the work you submit is all online in your own online space'	8, 74-77, 81-83	This freedom was clearly a motivator, the change in language, tone and enthusiasm is evident. More particularly, motivation, engagement and commitment has soared here

## Appendix 8 – Participant sample overview

Participant	Gender	Age band	Origin	FE study	FE subjects
1	F	Standard	Local	'A' Level	Biology, Chemistry and Psychics
2	M	Standard	National	'A' Level	Media and History
3	F	Mature	National	'A' Level	Law, Biology and Geography
4	M	Standard	National	'A' Level	IT, English and Psychology
5	M	Standard	Local	'A' Level	Maths, IT and Philosophy
6	F	Standard	Local	'A' Level	French, History, Psychology and General Studies
7	F	Standard	Local	'A' Level	Biology, Chemistry and Business
8	F	Standard	Local	'A' Level	Graphics and Sociology
9	F	Standard	National	'A' Level	English, Health and Social
10	M	Standard	Local	B/TEC	Business
11	M	Standard	National	'A' Level	Economics and P.E.