IDENTITY FORMATION AMONG PART-TIME HIGHER EDUCATION STUDENTS IN AN ENGLISH FURTHER EDUCATION COLLEGE

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ABSTRACT

This thesis reports an empirical study of identity formation among part-time higher education students in a Further Education College in England. Higher education within colleges has attracted attention from policymakers, increasingly with regard to the part-time modes of study that have traditionally dominated this provision. Yet the perspectives, identities and voices of its students have been under-reported in higher education research. Data was collected from a sample of part-time students through semi-structured interviews and analysed to examine their construction of identity. Participants described identity largely through accounts of their earlier non-participation, which in turn shaped their identity formation and their apprehension of the possibilities opened up by higher education. Their own 'adult' identities were compared to those of traditional and non-traditional 'others'. Participants also described their relationships with work organisations, along with the social and geographical constraints affecting their engagement with higher education and their aspirations beyond it. This thesis offers insights into the processes through which adults take part in and make sense of higher education in a further education setting, which have implications for the expansion, differentiation and stratification of higher education systems.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION: PURPOSE AND SCOPE OF THE STUDY

Introduction

This thesis is designed to contribute to the growing study of higher education (HE) in Further Education Colleges (FECs) in England. Whilst higher education teaching has been predominantly based in universities and other higher education institutions (HEIs), vocational higher education programmes are also taught in colleges. These institutions are better known as preparing students for higher education: their primary activities comprise 'advanced secondary' level courses (Green and Lucas, 1999). Nevertheless, around ten per cent of UK-domiciled undergraduate students in England study within FECs (Bathmaker et al., 2008). In the wake of the Dearing Report (National Council of Inquiry into Higher Education [NCIHE], 1997), and particularly since the introduction of foundation degrees, this provision has occupied a more central role in widening higher education participation policy (Parry and Thompson, 2002).

Part-time study forms the majority of higher-level provision in colleges, although not of its foundation and honours degree provision (Higher Education Funding Council for England [HEFCE], 2006). In earlier years, part-time courses dominated what was then described as 'advanced further education' in both colleges and the early polytechnics (Neave, 1976). The significance of this mode of study was re-emphasised by the 'higher-level skills' agenda during the last years of the 2005-2010 Labour government (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills [BIS], 2009a; HEFCE, 2009a; House of Commons, 2009; Department for Industry, Universities and Skills [DIUS], 2008a). This came to include an explicit revision of the fifty per cent target of higher education participation to include part-time adults (BIS,

2009b). Coalition government pronouncements have already placed some emphasis on this mode of study (Willetts, 2010). Part-time study, across higher education more broadly, has been explored in some depth during the last two decades (Schuller et al., 1999; Bourner et al., 1991; Tight 1991) and more recent studies have surveyed students on part-time foundation degrees (Callender et al., 2010; Yorke and Longden, 2010). Yet part-time study in colleges has been largely neglected by educational research.

This area provided the focus for this thesis. Its particular purpose was to discover how students engage with higher education in these locations and through these modes of study. Questions about such provision tend to receive plain answers. Colleges are 'local' (DIUS 2008b). They attract more 'non-traditional' students (Pye and Legard, 2008). Part-time students in colleges want to 'earn while they learn' (King, 2008). However, in view of the practical difficulties of part-time study, as well as the reputational and real differences between colleges and mainstream higher education institutions, more detailed answers were required. The purpose of the thesis was to examine who these students were, how they experienced and made sense of higher education participation in these settings.

These aims required a different approach from recent research into HE in FE, which has tended to focus on the evolution of policy at national and institutional levels, and has been supplemented by some practitioner accounts. The intention was to represent the perspectives of students, by giving voice to individuals able and willing to discuss these issues in depth. The study was designed around qualitative one-to-one and group interviews enabling participants to develop accounts of what it meant to be a part-time, adult higher education student within a Further Education College. The construct of identity has been used in earlier studies to explore the processes through which people take part in higher education and create their own meanings from this experience. Identity was used to focus on who these students were and how they defined themselves, both as students and in

other contexts that might complement or contradict their student roles, as well as how they experienced and managed such contradictions.

This chapter sets out an introduction to the study. The next section further explores the significance of student identity to an examination of such provision. An explanation of the contribution of the study to knowledge is set out in the following section, along with essential definitions, consideration of its scope and limitations, and some indication of its possible implications. Explanation of the research questions follows. The chapter ends with a plan of the thesis.

Colleges and higher education participation

Further Education Colleges in England – and their various precursors - have made long-standing contributions to the growth of higher education during the last half-century. Firstly, their best-known role is as providers of courses preparing students for higher-level study, including traditional A-levels, their vocational equivalents and access routes. Secondly, increases in the number of HEIs have usually come from organisations described as colleges, such as those Regional Colleges that became polytechnics in the Nineteen-sixties (Ross, 2003). Thirdly, colleges have offered opportunities for higher-level study within the institution. These opportunities have differed in various ways from the traditional experience of full-time university study: and this follows a pattern in higher education expansion internationally.

During the last half-century, international higher education expansion has entailed the growth of institutions differentiated from traditional universities, in terms of resource, reputation and students enrolled (Teichler, 2008; Meek et al., 1996). The emergence of the newer institutions has provided diversity, with wider social layers attracted to higher-level study. These differentiated forms were regarded by Martin Trow as essential to the expansion of higher education: and, as early as 1964, Trow suggested that

Further Education Colleges might provide the main focus for its growth in Britain. In the USA, the transition from 'elite' to 'mass' and 'universal' levels of participation (Trow, 1974) had already been achieved with substantially increased participation in community colleges and, although these are post-secondary institutions rather than direct equivalents of FECs, Trow (1964) suggested that colleges in Britain might similarly provide much of the growth among social groups less familiar with university study.

Colleges have continued to provide higher education in England but never assumed as central a role as Trow anticipated. England attained thirty per cent, or 'mass' participation, largely through wider access to bachelor degree courses in the polytechnics during the late Nineteen-eighties and early 'nineties. New access routes particularly for adults and part-time students played an important role in this expansion: the role of colleges as providers remained relatively marginal (Parry 2003, 2006; Scott, 1995). Nor has their recent role in foundation degree developments led to the level of growth anticipated following the Dearing Report and the introduction of foundation degrees (HEFCE, 2006). If colleges contribute to diversity and widening participation, they also give rise to 'unease and ambivalence about offering lower-status qualifications to lower-income students in lower-ranked institutions,' (Parry, 2009: 325).

Some difficulties have been identified in the differences of governance, quality, and funding that locate FECs apart from the higher education 'sector' in the country's 'learning and skills' sector (Bathmaker et al., 2008). These differences are accompanied by the varying cultural practices of institutions, such as the respective value ascribed to teaching and research in colleges and universities (Feather, 2010). With expansion and differentiation, hierarchies arise within higher education systems: if the former polytechnics have been 'represented within public and popular discourse as inauthentic spaces' (Archer, 2007: 642), colleges are to be found in the lowest ranks of the hierarchies of institutions that contribute to this discourse, if indeed they feature in them at all (Tight 2007a; Scott, 1995). The significance of such

factors is closely related to the way that potential students perceive colleges and the way that those who study in such institutions are themselves perceived. The students found in colleges are central to problems of the college contribution: Scott (2009) has pointed to the difficulties they pose for institutions:

> As 'marginal' students sometimes struggle to complete their courses, often have higher failure rates and generally receive a reduced rate of return on their higher education in the employment market, colleges face greater management challenges than higher education institutions (Scott, 2009: 410).

If full-time students are perceived as different from the traditional norms of higher education student, then part-time students, the longstanding majority in colleges, are removed even further from these norms. Concerns about these differences appear to have grown, since foundation degree developments have emphasised opportunities for progression to final year honours-level study. Student progression from college to final-year university study has become more frequent, raising concerns about the readiness or suitability of these students for higher-level study (Greenbank, 2007).

In this context, identity has been used to explore the persistent influence of other social identifications, or more generally of social structure. The thesis has drawn on various conceptualisations of identity but was particularly sensitive towards the question of whether part-time students in colleges, drawn from backgrounds where higher education study has been exceptional, might be seen as failing to construct identities appropriate to higher education study. These questions of student participation and identity, then, are central to the problematic contribution that colleges make to higher education. The following section summarises how the thesis has examined these questions.

Contribution of the thesis: definitions, scope and limitations

This thesis offers a number of contributions to the study of higher education. Firstly, it discusses part-time study in English colleges, a neglected area of a sub-field that is itself rarely discussed. Secondly, it directly examines the ways in which outcomes of education policy at national and institutional levels are played out in the student experience, as opposed to addressing these issues by critiques of national or institutional policy. Thirdly, it addresses issues that affect student participation beyond statements of their motives or evaluations of their learning experience. Fourthly, its methodology draws on data gathered from key participants to provide interpretive accounts of the process of identity formation before, during and beyond higher education study.

The focus on part-time study in colleges requires some definition of the essential terms used in the thesis, many of which are open to a variety of interpretations. By Further Education College is meant those institutions in the Learning and Skills Sector designated as Further Education Corporations under the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act. Part-time study is defined here as pursuing a course of higher education, having registered as a part-time student. This rather simple classification avoids the more complex definitions by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) and HEFCE, as well as those used in further education. Notwithstanding the erosion of traditional notions of 'full-time study' by the increasing numbers of full-time students holding part-time jobs during term-time (Callender and Kemp, 2000), a distinction remains between those for whom study is the dominant activity and those for whom this is additional to full-time work.

This distinction is usually also one of age. Whilst mature students are usually defined as over the age of twenty-five, 'adult' is used here to mean those who have progressed into higher education following work experience rather than directly from secondary education. There are students at various institutions who are registered as full-time but who are also working adults,

with many similarities to those students discussed here. The term 'non-traditional' is widely used in the literature, to denote those who by factors such as age, social class, or ethnicity, differ from the traditional norms of participation. In the United States, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) suggests that, 'Most often age (especially being over the age of 24) has been the defining characteristic for this population,' (NCES, n.d.) whilst race, gender, residence (off-campus) and work are also 'circumstances that can interfere with successful completion of educational objectives' (ibid.). This list omits to mention social class, which has been identified as the most significant determinant of route taken into higher education (Reay et al., 2005). The 'tradition' referred to during this thesis is that of full-time, resident students progressing within a year of leaving secondary education. Although this now constitutes a minority of higher education students, it remains the normative mode of study in popular discourse, compared to which others may be 'pathologised' as differing from this normalised formulation (Webb, 1997).

Nor is this the only problematic definition. Higher education is frequently discussed in terms of HEFCE-funded courses, such as those pursued by participants in this research. Here, the term is used to describe study above 'level three', the level of advanced general certificate education that constitutes the final stage of secondary education. 'Non-prescribed' higher education courses have contributed substantially to higher-level study in colleges, particularly for part-timers (Clark, 2002). That these are locally funded, and not by HEFCE, reflects the way part-time study has been marginalised by policy in earlier years. Such ill-defined boundaries, along with the difficulties of data collection across hundreds of varied institutions, have long made the size and shape of college HE difficult to define. This in turn places limits on the methodology of studies in the field, particularly in terms of constituting 'representative' samples.

In describing the approach of the thesis, it may be useful to compare this to approaches taken in earlier HE in FE literature. Earlier research focused on

institutional arrangements between HEIs and colleges, particularly during the growth of franchise arrangements in the Nineteen-nineties (Mitchell, 1998; Abramson et al., 1996; Bocock and Scott, 1994). This area is likely to command renewed interest, since such arrangements have been central to recent developments and are likely to come under strain as funding is reduced. Studies focusing directly on national policy have traced its evolution from a purposeful neglect of 'residual' provision in colleges to its assigning them a more central purpose in widening HE participation (Parry, 2003, 2006; Scott, 2009; Young, 2006; Parry and Thompson, 2002). The boundaries between 'higher' and 'further' education systems and institutions have become an important issue in this field, particularly in terms of the institutions which negotiate these boundaries or seek to transcend them (Bathmaker and Thomas, 2007, 2009; Garrod and MacFarlane, 2007, 2009; Burns, 2007). This became the focus of a major research project for the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), the 'FurtherHigher' Project (Bathmaker et al., 2008; Parry et al., 2008). The study of the field has drawn in particular on theoretical perspectives and concepts from organisation theory. More recently, discussion of higher education practice, written mainly from the perspective of tutors in colleges, has been published (Burkhill et al., 2008; Harwood and Harwood, 2004).

Empirical research has informed some of these accounts, yet limited use has been made of students' experience and perspectives. This area provided one strand for the 'FurtherHigher Project,' drawing on empirical data from students at or approaching the point of transition from earlier levels of study (Bathmaker, 2009). In view of that project's emphasis on boundaries and their permeability, a focus on student perspectives during such transitions was used to complement its studies of national policy (Parry, 2009) and of specific institutions (Smith, 2009). This thesis argues that student perspectives that draw on their experience during their higher-level studies also have significance for institutional and national policies. Moreover, this goes beyond simple evaluation of their experience within the institution but

extends to the possibility of their constructing a coherent concept of a self that is engaged both in study and in other identifications important to the subject. The thesis therefore focuses on policy development (at national and institutional levels) as context for the study, rather than as constituting the main object of analysis. Its main emphasis is the perspectives of students as they construct and negotiate their identities.

In this, the thesis draws on important traditions in the study of part-time and adult higher education. Particularly during the upsurge of adult study on bachelor programmes during the Nineteen-nineties, and of the access programmes that fed into many of these, research into the experiences of mature students explored their difficulties in adapting to student roles. Such practical issues as the time or financial resources to study were sometimes explored using survey data (Bourner et al., 1991). Psychological obstacles also arose among adults from non-traditional and disadvantaged backgrounds. Conflicts between students' earlier identifications or relationships and their development of cultural capital were also explored through qualitative studies (Baxter and Britton, 2001). In conceptualising the research, it was recognised that some of these issues might also be important to the more non-traditional students in colleges. Conversely, if certain of these features of the adult experience did not reappear in the context of part-time study in colleges, this raises issues about whether their processes of identity formation served to problematise their participation in higher education study.

The study was therefore designed to focus on the processes by which part-time students came to adopt student identities, and continued to do so; and on the relationship of their student selves to other roles and identifications. This focus excluded any evaluation of the specific teaching, learning or assessment activities that contributed to participants' direct experience of study at college. The study analysed how these adults participated in higher education study in colleges, using identity to locate this process within a wider social and economic context.

The study was constructed from accounts of students within a single college, triangulated through the use of focus groups composed of the same participants. The purpose of this design was to gather data about a single case and to use the time available to develop a deeper understanding of its issues (Wolcott, 1994), rather than to make comparisons with, for example, non-participants, 'traditional' students or part-time university students. The findings are presented as valid accounts of identity construction, whilst the design itself provided further opportunities for active identity construction. Chapter Four sets out the research design in detail, addressing the issues of sampling and of the use of key informants.

The conclusions of such a study cannot, of course, provide any normative model of what an HE experience in a college should look like. Nevertheless, the study does indicate areas of possibility. The practices through which students in colleges are taught depend on the way their choices of study are constructed. If participation in colleges were found to reflect identities inappropriate to such studies, this might justify the kind of normalising remedial activities that make up a substantial part of US college education (Deil-Amen and Rosenbaum, 2002). Diverse experiences might suggest approaches that draw on students' knowledge, in the traditions of adult education.

Beyond this, such perspectives suggest implications for policy. Colleges with substantial and successful higher education provision have in the past become candidates for elevation to university status; and this usually entails the reinforcement of 'attributes more characteristic of an elite system,' (Scott 2009: 416). If study in colleges facilitates for adults the combination of learning with work through management of conflicting identifications, this might suggest ways to build on differences from as well as similarities to traditional higher education. The thesis cannot pretend to provide a resolution to such discussions. It does however illustrate several issues in these contemporary debates and some comments are made towards the end of the thesis.

Having outlined the purposes of the thesis and the broad features of the research design, the use of research questions is explained below. The study was structured around a central research question and a series of supplementary questions.

Research questions and their rationale

The aim of the study, to explore the perspectives of part-time students in colleges, conceptualised in terms of identity, was to be realised through a series of linked questions focusing the study on ways in which part-time higher education students used their experience in colleges and beyond in the construction of identity. The primary research question was:

> How do part-time students in an English Further Education College construct identity in and beyond higher education?

The study aimed to establish the active, relational processes of identifying oneself with others who share similar history, circumstances, ways of making sense of the world and outlook on the future. But identity is also created through difference (Hall, 1996). A focus on the formation of college HE students' identity implied the need to compare their perceptions of their own identities to their perceptions of more traditional settings and those who study in them. This was perceived as important, given that colleges tend to draw students from areas where university study has been unusual, and gave rise to the first subsidiary question:

> 1. How do students perceive their identities in relation to those of students engaged in other higher education experiences?

As has been outlined above, discussion of adult students' engagement in their higher education experience has been linked to the negotiation of tensions with other identifications such as ethnicity, gender, or social class. This might have further significance among college students. A further question asked:

2. What relationship exists between the construction of student identity and other identifications linked to community, class, gender, or ethnicity?

The concept of identity was thus intended to draw on social relations beyond the institution and to relate the broader social and economic context to students' engagement with educational practice: to capture the tensions that might be generated by conflicting identifications.

This suggests a dynamic process, since identity construction is likely to change with emerging social formations and individuals' changing relationships with them. Moreover, since studentship is itself a transitory state, a third question sought to examine the extent to which student transitions are expected to lead to some kind of (unspecified) transformation:

3. How do they expect their graduate futures to be shaped by their identities as part-time college students?

This question anticipated the possibilities and limitations of participants' lives after graduation, including, although not limited to, employment roles. Since HE students in colleges are engaged on vocational programmes, their studies bear a close relationship to their experience in the workplace, suggesting the question:

4. To what extent are their emerging identities shaped by the requirements of their work organisations?

The final question emerged during the course of the study. Although the original focus had been on students' experiences during higher education and their future expectations, the role of their earlier educational and other experiences in shaping their transitions into part-time study emerged as an important consideration for participants in the study. This led to the addition of a further question:

5. Through what past personal experiences have participants come to adopt student identities?

Whilst these questions provided the basis for data collection, the study ranged widely around these areas and the findings do not provide neat answers to be matched to the individual research questions.

Structure of the thesis

Following this chapter, in which the key themes of the study have been set out along with the research questions, the remainder of the thesis is set out in three parts. These respectively frame, set out and draw conclusions from the data.

Three chapters make up Part Two, which provides the framework for the study. The first, Chapter Two, sets out key issues in the literature, in order to provide the context of the study. This begins with an overview of Further Education Colleges in England and their evolving contribution to higher education. Some international perspectives are provided in the shape of American analysis of this contribution and its potential, as well as through some analysis of American experience of expansion through community colleges. This chapter also draws on key debates about the difficulties of engaging wider social layers in higher education, including the challenges posed by adult participation. The next, Chapter Three, explains the use of identity as a lens for the study, placing this in the context of identity research carried out in education and elsewhere. The Chapter Four explains the qualitative approach taken, describes the specific design of the research and the methods used for sample construction, for collection of individual and focus group interview data, and for data analysis.

In Part Three, three chapters set out the empirical data. Chapter Five introduces the data and introduces three forms of narrative that students used to describe their earlier non-participation in higher education. Chapter

Six examines the key dimensions of student identity set out in their accounts, including their construction of adult identities validated by their relationship with work organisation, which they opposed to traditional student identities. Chapter Seven explores the way identities were framed by the geographical and social locations within which colleges are situated.

In Part Four, the thesis summarises the conclusions from the data in Chapter Eight. In Chapter Nine, some suggestions about the implications of the study for policy and practice are attached. Finally, Chapter Ten takes the form of an end-note. It includes some personal reflection on the study and possible alternative approaches, as well as reporting responses to a final focus group.

This chapter has set out the fundamental purposes of the thesis as a contribution to the discussion of higher education in English Colleges. The following chapter provides an overview of key aspects of this discussion, in the form of a literature review.

PART TWO: FRAMING THE STUDY

CHAPTER 2: COLLEGE STUDENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION EXPANSION

Introduction

Between 2006 and 2007, HEFCE carried out a consultation that was to lead to substantial initiatives in relation to colleges offering higher education. The consultation document acknowledged that such provision had grown up largely from local level, rather than as the product of national initiatives (HEFCE, 2006, para. 7) and sought to identify the key features of the college contribution in providing greater access to HE:

> HE in FECs is already a distinctive part of the HE system. While it is dangerous to over-generalise about a diverse system, HE students in FECs are more likely to be over 25, more likely to study part-time, and more likely to come from areas with low rates of participation in HE than students in HEIs. They are more likely to be studying foundation degrees and sub-degree programmes such as HNCs and HNDs. These distinctive features derive from the particular place that FECs occupy in their communities and the nature of the FE curriculum on which the HE provision is often based. (HEFCE, 2006, para. 32-33.)

The central feature of this type of higher education was thus identified as its non-traditional students and so, implicitly, its capacity to widen participation into new areas. The document identified the reason for colleges' appeal with their role as local providers of further education: in other words with those activities specifically classed as belonging to a sector outside higher education. The further addition of colleges' association with their 'absolutely essential' contribution 'to progression and delivery of higher level skills' (2006, para. 34) completed this thumbnail sketch of what was seen as the essence of the college contribution.

This characterisation suggests provision at the margins of the higher education system, whose main contribution is to provide growth in problematic areas. Its potential for bringing new layers of the population into higher education was suggested by Martin Trow nearly half a century ago, on

the basis of its attraction to those least likely to apply to university. This chapter explores the contradiction between this attraction and the problems it presents, in the light of key commentators' analysis of massification in the United States (in which community colleges played a substantial role) and in England (where mass higher education arrived via the polytechnics, substantially through adult and part-time study).

In preference to a comprehensive review of the growing literature of HE in English FE, or of part-time higher education, this chapter particularly explores the significance of the student body to such expansion. This is explored through discussion of that student body, the nature of colleges, the distinctive, uneven and contradictory processes through which college HE has developed - its origins lie considerably further in the past than casual observers might imagine – and through discussion of problems in part-time HE.

The chapter begins with an examination of current participation in college HE, linking this to the primary purposes of Further Education Colleges. Later sections trace the background of their contribution to higher education and Trow's analysis of its potential to contribute to the massification of higher education. Some lessons are drawn from Trow's main source of reference in this, the experience of community colleges in America. The chapter then examines the historical process of massification in England, including the contribution of adult and part-time study, which have provided important themes for this study. The chapter then returns to colleges, to discuss the problems entailed in FECs' enhanced position in widening participation during recent years.

Further Education Colleges in England

Further Education Colleges are best known as sites for earlier levels of study, having emerged from the 1960s primarily as sites for vocational education and training (Cantor and Roberts, 1979). They now combine this role with

academic studies at A-level and other routes into higher education. Higher-level provision is sometimes linked to this curriculum at lower levels, as HEFCE (2006) suggests; but these links are uneven in many areas (Bathmaker and Thomas, 2009). However, colleges have long traditions in localities where university study was unusual until very recently. Green and Lucas (1999) traced colleges' diverse history back to three voluntarist strands: craft training in the workplace, based on the apprenticeship system; the Mechanics' Institutes, focusing variously on practical craft instruction and on general, scientific and technical education; and an adult tradition associated with labour and co-operative organisations, developing literacy, cultural and political awareness. Public technical education developed in the late nineteenth century and grew significantly during the Second World War and in the long period of post-war economic growth.

Whilst no longer dominated by technical and craft provision as in the past, this sector still focuses chiefly on vocational education. This places much College activity within an economic agenda epitomised by the concept of 'lifelong learning' and reinforced by the Leitch Report (Department for Education and Skills [DfES], 2006; Department for Children, Schools and Families [DCSF], 2007). Green and Lucas (1999) cited the vocational qualifications that provided training for those on the succession of youth employment and training initiatives during the 'eighties as a key development. The designation of colleges, along with surviving community provision and training providers, as the 'skills sector,' and an accompanying denotation of 'higher-level skills' for its more advanced provision (BIS 2009a, 2009b), confirmed the dominant view of education in this sector as preparation for work.

A further area of growth during the Nineteen-seventies and 'eighties was in the provision of academic courses, including adults looking for a second chance to take A-levels, the traditional advanced secondary qualification, with 40% of A-Levels taught in colleges by the end of the Nineteen-eighties (Green and Lucas, 1999). This provision facilitates progression into higher

education, so that FECs now provide around a third of entrants to HE. As colleges have become significant providers at A-level and of their vocational equivalents, they have become widely regarded as sites of preparation for, rather than providers of, higher education study.

This reflects a further distinguishing feature of FECs. In addition to their vocational role, colleges are also distinguished by their inclusivity. At the same time as allocating the lowest funding of any major sector of education, policy has given colleges the responsibility of drawing in the most disadvantaged learners (Stanton *et al.*, 2008; FEFC, 1997). Their mission to compensate for the effects of social disadvantage is supported by designated funding streams and has also been linked to a 'compensatory' ethos shared by teachers in the sector (Jephcote and Salisbury, 2009). The admissions policies of colleges draw in the most disadvantaged learners, including at A-level, where colleges have tended to draw in disproportionate numbers of adults and 'second chance' students who had difficult experiences at school (Green and Lucas, 1999).

Higher education provision is offered at most of these institutions but in most cases plays a minor role. This frequently small-scale provision has persisted over many years, seldom attaining the scale, for example, of the higher education provision at community colleges in the United States. HEFCE in 2004-05 were funding (directly and indirectly) 287 colleges, nearly three quarters of the total; yet 77% of these had less than 500 students (HEFCE, 2006, Annex C, Figure 1). Of 132 that were directly-funded in 2008, a third had less than a hundred full-time equivalents (HEFCE, 2008). Their significance is examined in the following section.

Further Education Colleges and Widening Participation

The traditions and associations of colleges, described above, differ significantly from those of universities. The assumption that colleges attract

'non-traditional' students forms the starting point of much analysis. A commentary produced for the Learning and Skills Council described colleges as 'considerably more effective than HEIs at targeting disadvantaged learners,' (Pye and Legard, 2008:6). Yet, owing to the shortage of definite data within an ill-defined field, such statements have often lacked a statistical basis. Data published by HEFCE (2007, 2008b, 2010) provides a broad contrast between full-time foundation degree participants (across both universities and colleges) who are predominantly young and male, as against the female, older majority of part-time students. Most significantly, around a quarter of mature foundation degree students in colleges are identified as coming from low-participation neighbourhoods (LPNs) (HEFCE 2010: 29) compared to less than one-in-six at HEIs.

Rashid and Brooks (2009) used both the Participation of Local Areas (POLAR) data on low-participation neighbourhoods and the Index of Multiple Deprivation to compare participation in colleges to that of universities for 2004-05 and 2005-06. Whilst all institutions had a proportion of students from ethnic minorities and of women at least comparable to the population, they found that courses in HEIs had higher proportions from less deprived and high-participation areas. Non-franchised college provision, by contrast, had roughly equal proportions for all areas:

> The two proxies for social class show the expected trend towards higher proportions entering from more middle-class areas in HEIs (again including the OU), but the FECs showed no such trend and were recruiting roughly equally from all areas: this we interpret as showing that the FECs were making a detectable contribution to widening participation. (2009: 5).

This statistical data provides some insight into the attractions of higher education in colleges. Its analysis suggests that many students in colleges tend to come from areas where college, rather than university, is the normal location of post-compulsory education. Other local differences are also possible: in some areas, colleges may offer the only higher-level provision within travelling distances acceptable to many students. Since the data also

shows that participation in colleges is not limited to those resident in LPNs, more detailed explanations of the characteristics of students in colleges is required.

This data may not fully represent mature students' associations with particular localities or social groupings. Students are likely to have moved away from the area were they grew up (HEFCE 2010: 29). Static definitions of social class, based on such geo-demographic profiling or even on economic activity, may also fail to capture the shifting, unstable basis of social class as a process experienced in relation to inequality and to identity (Lawler, 2005, 2008; Walkerdine et al, 2001). Contemporary analyses of class as social process suggest that identifications drawn from the past might be added to the meanings students ascribe to their experience of higher education, as well as considerations of their current social status.

A fuller understanding of participation by adults in HE in FE therefore requires a knowledge of the past as well as the present. The traditions of college-based higher education are important to such an understanding. At the same time, the historical development of this provision has shaped its present forms. Such processes are a major theme of this chapter: the following section discusses the roots of HE in colleges.

Advanced further education

Although higher and further education are today designated as separate 'sectors', vocational higher education programmes - formerly described as 'advanced further education' (AFE) - were taught across a range of colleges and in the polytechnics. The Higher National courses that dominated this provision for almost the whole of the last hundred years were first established as a progression from lower-level vocational qualifications in engineering shortly after the First World War. They reflected the focus of technical colleges of the time and were specifically developed with industry:

the Board of Education had worked in collaboration with the Institute of Mechanical Engineers to standardise technical qualifications. Higher National Certificates (HNCs) in mechanical engineering at 'advanced' level were introduced at the same time as Ordinary National Certificates (ONCs) at 'senior' level (Foden, 1951).

The first examinations were held in 1922 and by 1923-24 the Board recorded 31 schools putting forward 239 candidates for the HNC of whom 166 passed (Board of Education, 1925, in Foden, 1951). The number of HNC passes in engineering grew to 1 053 in 1939 and to 3 963 by 1948. The Electrical Engineering Institute and the Institute of Chemistry took up the Nationals shortly afterwards, with building, metallurgy and physics among those added before the Second World War. HNCs in 'commerce' were slower to be established, owing to disagreements between the Institutes of Export, Grocers and Chartered Secretaries (Foden, 1951). Green and Lucas (1999) refer to four thousand students in technical colleges during the war following six-month HNC programmes. By 1965-6, over 25 000 students were enrolled on the Higher Nationals in the polytechnics alone (Neave, 1976).

Commentaries on this provision raised issues familiar today. Adams (1960) surveyed holders of the construction HNC, of whom many regretted the low degree of recognition accorded by employers and professional bodies, whilst others criticised teaching methods. Foden (1951) complained that many of the teachers on HNC programmes were themselves graduates of the Nationals, lacking degree or teaching qualifications. Concerned at the rule of the Chemistry HNC that its standard should be that of a pass degree 'within the limits of the subjects covered,' Foden commented that, 'It does not seem desirable that the HNC should come to be regarded as a satisfactory alternative to a degree in technology,' (1951: 45).

Part-time, short-cycle provision dominated: Jenkinson (1971) noted that his was the *Vocational Aspect's* first article on the Higher National Diploma (HND), even though by 1969 it had 5 658 entries, half of them outside the

polytechnics. Despite the relatively small scale of such provision (even in comparison to the numbers then entering universities) it provided an alternative point of access to a slowly expanding university sector. This was the provision that Martin Trow saw as having the potential to change patterns of HE participation in Britain.

Trow and mass higher education

Trow's (1974) framework has provided the most widely-used model of higher education expansion. By the 1960s, the United States had already moved from levels of participation constituting an 'elite' system, expanding to 'mass' levels of participation at around 20% and a 'universal' system at levels of around 50% participation and above. Whilst Trow's later articles (1987, 1989) on the potential contribution of colleges to higher education have attracted most attention, perhaps his most remarkable insight was published soon after the Robbins Report.

Trow (1964) questioned the expansion of universities widely expected at the time. Robbins had anticipated that, out of every eight additional places planned, five would be in universities, two in teacher training institutions and one in further education. Trow suggested that more flexible provision would be needed for the expansion required by the society emerging in Britain, which could not develop with a higher education system where children of higher professionals were thirty-three times more likely to go to university than the children of semi-skilled and unskilled workers (Robbins, Table 21 in Trow, 1964).

Whilst Trow reflected concerns about contemporary universities that would lead to the establishment of the polytechnics, he was concerned not with elevating a small number of institutions but with an enhanced role for the whole non-university sector. Specifically noting the expansion of colleges in Britain during recent years and their students' increased attainment at

higher levels, Trow pointed to widespread aversion to university traditions, based on:

> ...the structure of British education and the values and perspectives of its working class. Together they make it seem very likely that the class distribution of students in universities in 1980 will not be very much different from what it is in 1963.
>
> If the American experience has any relevance, the first experience of modern working-class youth in institutions of higher education will be not in honours courses in universities, but in the schools and colleges where higher education is more directly linked to the world (Trow, 1964: 146).

Trow was far from confusing the role of American community colleges with that of English institutions. He drew on American experience but also advanced specific reasons for the difficulty in Britain of democratising higher education through the expansion of universities:

> ... differences in language, cultural resources, class attitudes toward education... But in so far as Britain aims to reduce class differences and democratize possession of and participation in the national culture, then it has to provide the kinds of institutions that first generation students will find attractive and rewarding (1964: 146-147).

These observations were not made in isolation. The general pattern of higher education expansion prior to the Nineteen-Sixties had been the admission of selected colleges with largely local missions into the fold of higher education. The Robbins Report had led to expectations that this process would largely continue. However, the 1964-66 Labour government decided to end the expansion of the university sector. Instead, higher education institutions of a new type were created in 1965, when the first polytechnics were created from regional colleges, partly through amalgamations. These institutions were intended to provide a new focus for higher education growth, based on vocational qualifications with a significant emphasis on part-time study and short-cycle qualifications (Ross, 2003). Whilst this provided an alternative

route to higher education growth, it would turn out rather differently from the course that Trow had suggested.

Problems of massification: colleges and polytechnics

From one perspective, the creation of polytechnics created a binary higher education system. Universities remained on the one side whilst 'local' higher education stood on the other. Both polytechnics and the remaining colleges were funded by Local Authorities and, at higher levels offered largely vocational qualifications from national bodies. Differences in purpose existed on either side of the divide. The universities now included the Colleges of Advanced Technology (CATs) that had first gained degree-awarding powers in 1956, as well as the 'new' universities created on green-field sites at the beginning of the Nineteen-sixties. Scott (2009) has questioned the extent to which, for example, the CATs differed from the polytechnics, despite the designation of the latter as distinctive, 'whether more radical and popular, more vocational and professional, or, simply, subordinate and second-tier' (2009: 405).

More significantly for this analysis, divisions widened among the 'local' institutions. In the wake of a White Paper advocating – not for the last time – the consolidation of higher-level courses in a smaller number of colleges, Jenkinson (1967) voiced the concerns within colleges that the polytechnics might seek to be the sole providers of AFE. The polytechnics also began to differentiate themselves from the remaining colleges by taking on many of the attributes of universities, competing with them for undergraduates, building their postgraduate provision and expanding their research activities (Ross, 2003). Data from only the first seven years of the polytechnics' existence reveal the speed of this process.

By 1971-2, HNC numbers in polytechnics had fallen from nearly one in three to one in ten of enrolments. During the same period, bachelor degrees rose

from 19% to 34%: degree and postgraduate studies nearly doubled to 40% against a corresponding fall in sub-degree programmes and professional studies (Neave, 1976). Part-time students fell from 73% to only 50% of enrolments and Trow (1969) pointed out that polytechnics' increased emphasis on full-time provision would enable the middle class to dominate these opportunities. Whilst polytechnics enrolled far more students with non-A-level qualifications than universities (26% against 2%), the difference in social class was considerably less marked, with 36% against 27% coming from 'manual' working-class backgrounds (Whitburn 1972 in Neave, 1976).

This imitation of elite forms was described as 'academic drift' by Pratt and Burgess (1972) or as a 'rapprochement' with traditional models by Neave (1989). Van Vught (1996) explained such processes in terms of the concept of 'organisational isomorphism,' whereby institutions with differentiated missions tend to assume the characteristics of successful organisations operating in the same field. Trow (1989) continued to warn that the English system risked continually creating new institutions on the old pattern. Commitment to academic standards - and to the 'gold standard' of the bachelor degree - required a parity of resources inherent in the 'parity of esteem' that Anthony Crosland had proclaimed in announcing the polytechnics:

> As for the polytechnics having a distinctive character, it was clear from the beginning that having been promised parity of esteem, the state then had to provide them rough equality of academic standard, and of cost as well (Trow, 1989: 67).

Trow (1987) argued that higher education should not be defined by attainment of a bachelor degree. A more limited higher education experience might still develop the 'qualities of mind and spirit' associated with the university, which Trow argued was possible:

> ... even outside of Oxbridge, even in the absence of the individual tutor, even in non-residential institutions, and for older part-time students who have not earned two 'A' level passes (Trow, 1987: 281).

Writing after twenty years of the binary divide, Trow now envisaged the achievement of mass higher education through a greater diversity within English higher education than was being provided by the polytechnics or by other innovations – notably, the Open University - constructed on largely traditional lines. Either colleges might yet, like community colleges in the USA, become integrated into the planning of post-compulsory education; or increased differentiation would arrive through the expansion of existing HEIs, with increased numbers of students, many of them part-time. Such a course would place great strains on the system as some institutions were forced to absorb greater numbers and to constitute a sector with lower resources and less autonomy.

For Trow (1987) this was not simply a matter of vocational focus: he reiterated his earlier (1974) argument that mass higher education should not be defined by reference to the (liberal or vocational) content of the curriculum but by:

> the character of the students and the nature of instruction. Thus, mass, by contrast to elite, higher education is marked by its relatively open access to a more heterogeneous student body, many of whom are older, work part-time, are less well prepared, less highly motivated, with higher rates of attrition (wastage), taught less intensively, and to lower standards of achievement (1987: 269).

Two significant aspects of Trow's analysis were emphasised in this passage. Trow argued that such students were likely to be taught differently. Such differences in practice between colleges and other settings for 'mass' higher education are discussed in practitioner literature but are not specifically evaluated here. More importantly for this thesis, Trow identified the varied nature of the student body in diversified institutions as the key characteristic of mass higher education. The accomplishment of universal levels of higher education in America had been based largely on community colleges and these developments are described in the following section.

Massification in America: the role of Community Colleges

Mass participation was first achieved in the USA: and, within this expansion, community colleges had played a distinctive role in facilitating wider participation by ethnic minorities and other disadvantaged groups. The dominant research-led American universities had emerged from colleges during the late nineteenth century, supported by a range of public and private colleges with four-year degree programmes. The institutions known at first as 'junior colleges', but latterly more widely as community colleges, emerged during the twentieth century. These offered two-year programmes, from which students could transfer onto four-year degrees elsewhere (Dougherty, 1994). Junior colleges developed from middle-class institutions, which offered transfer courses to 'men of character', but, during the inter-war period, junior colleges began to offer terminal programmes of a more vocational nature (Stephan and Rosenbaum, 2007). Although the institution remains far from universal across the United States, their number had grown from one junior college at the beginning of the twentieth century to twelve hundred such colleges by 1980 (Brint and Karabel, 1989).

The contradiction between the aspirations of students and the limited numbers achieving successful transfer to bachelor programmes has attracted much attention. For Brint and Karabel (1989) community colleges had come to play a central role in meeting popular aspirations by enabling the participation particularly of students from ethnic minorities. However, given the limited availability of professional job roles, these aspirations were bound to be disappointed. For supporters of their central thesis, the activities of community colleges have served to divert students away from state colleges and universities, insulating these against the influx of non-traditional students (Wells, 2008; Brint and Karabel, 1989). Empirical evidence suggests that the numbers of community college students completing degree programmes remains substantially smaller than those of similar backgrounds completing at universities (Dougherty, 1994). The remedial provision to which students are directed appears to delay as much as to ensure

completion (Deil-Amen and Rosenbaum, 2002). For other commentators, colleges create opportunities for inclusion. Particularly where transfer arrangements are strong, they remain an entrenched element of the various locally administered higher education systems across the USA (Dougherty, 2009).

Among the most influential accounts of these institutions has been Burton Clark's study of San Jose Junior College (Clark, 1960a). The democratic aspiration for college education in the post-war period had led to the establishment of an 'open door' institution in which all were free to choose their own programme and three quarters of these chose transfer programs. Yet only a third of these succeeded in transferring. Clark observed that, despite avowed commitments to support those students who had gained entrance through its 'open access' policies, the college carefully counselled the rest – half the college's enrolment – from transfer and onto terminal courses. Those on terminal courses were destined for technical roles in local industry: the most common placement for those seeking the Associate of Arts degree was that of TV repair man (Clark, 1960a: 78). Borrowing a term from Goffman, Clark described this process as 'cooling-out'.

For Clark, cooling-out was the consequence of a contradiction between democratic aspirations for degree education and the imperative of maintaining academic standards. The patient counselling of 'latent terminals' to accept that they would not be able to transfer was the consequence of this 'broad disjunction between ends and means,' (1960a: 161). From Clark's functionalist perspective, cooling-out was a key function of the college: his journal articles (Clark 1960b, 1980) emphasised its role in covertly balancing the democratic aspirations of the college's open door policy with the 'meritocratic' limitation of access to higher-level courses and professional employment. This process had at least the merit of offering alternative study on terminal programmes, where a state college would simply fail those who did not attain its requirements at a similar stage.

Other important aspects of Clark's account have been overshadowed by discussion of cooling-out. Clark was concerned with the relationship of the junior college to other institutions, including schools, state colleges, and local authorities who sought to promote terminal programmes, in order to provide local businesses with vocationally trained labour. But important observations related to the student body, which Clark regarded as central to the character of the junior college, and which was critical to the way that the teaching staff identified with the institution. Clark observed that staff were generally recruited from among high-school trained teachers because they were likely to see junior college students in a favourable light: tutors surveyed by Clark as to what they 'like[d] best about working in a junior college' cited the characteristics of the students, such as their maturity and motivation (1960a: 125). Those who had earlier taught at (state) colleges described the students' characteristics – in this case, their diverse abilities, motivation and backgrounds - as, after the teaching hours, what they liked least.

Clark associated the academic ability of junior college students with its social class profile, which broadly matched that of local high schools. (Whilst children of more privileged families aspired to state college or university, many poorer children had withdrawn from education by this point.) Rather than seeking to draw on student abilities which might have emerged at a late stage, senior colleges and universities discriminated against applicants who had entered junior college without school-leaving qualifications sufficient for senior college entrance. These 'ineligibles' were subjected to 'a higher admission requirement at the time of transfer,' (1960a: 70). Like school students in Britain, barred from higher-level GCSEs on the strength of tests at thirteen and fourteen (Gilborn, 2002), these applicants were subject to higher barriers because of school failures in earlier years. Clark regarded the junior college as the object of 'a general democratic ethos... translated... into a doctrine that all have a right to enter college' (1960a: 161) yet which carried out a (covert) selection process among its students. As a result, the University of California and its constituents were:

... saved from contending with even larger student bodies than they now have, and are somewhat proctected against demands for a less selective admission policy (Clark, 1960a: 167).

Thus, both of the leading American higher education scholars placed students at the centre of their analysis of the contribution made by differentiated institutions. However, whilst Clark identified a selective role played by American community colleges, Trow's analysis regarded English FECs' less academically selective policies and short-cycle provision as essential for massification in England, irrespective of transfers to honours level. In the event, the polytechnics came to lead expansion by greater flexibility in admission to bachelor programmes. These developments are discussed in the following section.

That expansion to mass levels took place in the Nineteen-eighties and early 'nineties, through rapid growth in bachelor degree courses, does not negate the significance of Trow's analysis. The questions that this expansion raises are to do with why colleges did not lead this growth, which have much to do with adult participation in polytechnics. The process is analysed below.

Mass higher education in England: part-time and adult participation

Higher education attained mass proportions in England after five years of rapid growth between 1988 and 1992, with the age-participation rate climbing steeply at a time of falling birth-rate. Colleges' role in this expansion was primarily as franchisees, where Universities could not accommodate growth within their existing resources (Abramson et al., 1996). Colleges also served as providers of more flexible access routes that were now recognised by the government as a legitimate route into full-time higher education for adults (Wakeford, 1993). In this period, mature and part-time participation were already rising. Blackburn and Jarman (1993) noted an increase of 145% in part-time higher education students overall, overwhelmingly at polytechnics and colleges between 1970 and 1989, compared to a 49%

increase in full-time study at universities. Part-time study in the polytechnics never regained its initial predominance, however, possibly owing to the growth of bachelor as opposed to short-cycle courses. Some estimates have suggested that part-time numbers at polytechnics fell from three-quarters of enrolments to one-third by the polytechnics' final year, 1991 (Ross, 2003).

Polytechnics used more flexible admissions criteria to build their provision at a lower unit of resource. At the same time, and during the very period that England reached mass levels of participation, colleges were placed further from the mainstream by legislation. In 1988, the duty to fund polytechnics was moved from Local Authorities to the Polytechnics Funding Council. Four years later the Further and Higher Education Act of 1992 turned the polytechnics into universities and colleges into Further Education Corporations, funded by the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC). The 1988 and 1992 Acts drew a line between a higher education sector in universities - including the former polytechnics - and a further education sector, based in colleges. Higher education provision in colleges was from this point regarded as residual and funded according to a 'prescribed' list. Notably, this list initially included the part-time HNC, which had been a core contribution of colleges and the early polytechnics (Parry and Thompson, 2002).

As a result of the new and enhanced routes into higher education for adults, a literature of part-time and mature participation developed, observing significant differences in the student experience. Tight (1991) suggested that part-time study was 'in general more valuable than full-time higher education,' (1991: 119). Schuller et al. (1999) included among its advantages the possibility to relate learning to experiences at work and at home; whilst part-time study tended to take place at a stage in life when students would have a clear purpose and strong motivation. Because of its appeal to adults, it might 'correct the social regressiveness' (1999: 11) of higher education in Britain. At times of economic uncertainty, Schuller et al. suggested that adults might prefer to hold on to their job whilst studying, in the hope of preserving

or improving their chances in the labour market. From the outset, this literature was also concerned with the composition of the part-time student body and what led to students failing to complete their courses (Bourner et al, 1991; Schuller et al., 1999). Studies of the experience of 'non-traditional' students indicate difficulties particularly where these are studying in mixed cohorts, and more so in 'traditional' institutions such as 'civic' universities (Tett, 2004).

Whilst part-time study offered new opportunities for adults to enter higher education, others entered full-time study by way of access programmes, usually part-time and frequently located in colleges . The academic nature of such courses, leading to full time study at HEIs, differentiates this work from much part-time provision. Yet many similar themes arise in accounts of the access experience, which balanced descriptions of material hardship with accounts of positive self-identification (Williams, 1997; Skeggs, 1997; McGivney, 1996). Avis (1997) described a 'celebratory' discursive framework, positioning access students 'as hard-working, motivated, and committed,' (1997: 83). Warmington (2002) described the discursive production of a self-defined 'mature' student ethic, 'othering' traditional students who did not share their commitment, maturity and peer support. Despite their differences, the part-time and access literatures together constitute a useful range of perspectives on adult experiences of higher-level study.

An important theme in such literature has described practical difficulties for adults: the balancing of such resources as time and money with such aspects of life as families or employment has led them to describe education as a struggle (Reay et al., 2002; Blaxter and Tight, 1994). Despite its limited extension to part-time students in recent years, state financial support remains overwhelmingly focused on full-time students (Jackson and Jamieson, 2009; King, 2008). Watts et al. (2006) have suggested that the advantages and disadvantages of part-time participation – notably, the

possibility of balancing family, work and study commitments – are 'often the different sides of the same coin,' (2006: iii).

These material hardships are mirrored by the different rewards that part-time adults and their 'traditional' equivalents can expect on completion. Considerable debate has surrounded statistics on the rewards of academic study, particularly among different social groups. Whilst Wolf et al. (2006) suggest that between 1991 and 2000 higher levels of education were among the few at which adult study increased participants' earnings, these differentials remain significantly lower than those that accrue to early graduates. Research into General Household Survey data has also shown differences between the earnings of mature and traditional graduates, as well as identifying the social class of graduates and their institutions as significant factors (Egerton and Parry, 2001). Jenkins et al. (2007) have questioned the financial returns to the individual of vocational qualifications, drawing on Labour Force Survey data, and suggest a limited value for sub-degree work. McIntosh (2006), comparing the returns to students with different levels of school achievement, pointed out that disadvantaged students have more to gain from intermediate qualifications than those who achieved well earlier in life: the latter's A-levels achieved slightly better financial returns than the former's Higher Nationals. Dearden et al. (2004) provided some tentative indications that, whilst 'marginal' students gained lower returns from higher education studies, they achieved substantial returns compared to their peers who did not participate. None of these claims, of course, suggest equity in rewards; but they do indicate that disadvantaged students have reasons to study at higher levels and particularly to degree level.

In addition to material pressures, studies of mature students also reported psychological and social pressures on adults from 'non-traditional' backgrounds. Leger (1996), in a study on the stresses facing returning adults from a clinical perspective, identified problems of time management, role management, institutional barriers, self-doubt, lack of psychological support, as well as health and energy issues. Particular sources of ambiguity were the

mixture of young and older students, as well as the degree of support available from work organisations. Baxter and Britton (2001) described the tensions created when mature, mainly working-class students reported 'becoming more assertive and confident', whilst 'taking on a new language of academia,' which the authors characterised as 'acquiring new forms of cultural capital through education,' (Baxter and Britton, 2001: 93). Adult students, interacting with relatives, neighbours and friends who had never have been higher education students, found themselves torn between existing social ties and the aspirations and habits associated with their studies. Much of the literature of adult higher education emphasises this experience of the individual, not as a solitary being but as the product of a social environment within and beyond the locus of study.

These difficulties provide some background to a recent report on the success rates of part-time bachelor programmes. HEFCE (2009b) found that of part-time students enrolled for a first degree at non-Open University (OU) HEIs eleven years earlier, only 41% had completed or were still active on their degree course and only 39% had completed their degree eleven years later. These figures fell to 26% and 22% for OU students. More recently, a renewed emphasis on short-cycle provision appears to have achieved more rapid results. By comparison, 42% of foundation degree students enrolled in 2006-07 on three-year programmes had completed by the end of their course (HEFCE, 2010: 42). Nevertheless, many of the problems reported in earlier studies have re-emerged in relation to these programmes (Yorke and Longden, 2010). This renewed emphasis on intermediate, vocational programmes has been tied to a renewed emphasis on colleges and this is discussed in the following section.

Building the College Contribution: HE in FE since Dearing

The Dearing Report proposed a definite role for colleges, which had been largely neglected by policy in the wake of the 1988 and 1992 Acts, as

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providers of intermediate qualifications below honours level. This was envisaged as similar to that of colleges in Scotland, teaching Higher Nationals with established transfer arrangements (Gallacher, 2006), or of community colleges' transfer programmes in the United States. Whilst the government did not provide colleges with this specific role (or narrow definition), they were allocated a central role in the foundation degree. This new, short-cycle qualification was to be validated by universities and with arrangements for progression to honours level. Foundation degrees were to be developed in partnership with employers, where colleges tend to have stronger links. Two thirds of full-time and nearly half of part-time foundation degree students were taught wholly or partly in colleges during 2006-07 (HEFCE, 2010: 16). From providing less than half of the institutions offering these qualifications in their first year (2001-02), 275 colleges comprised three quarters of the offering institutions in 2006-07 (HEFCE 2010: 13).

Foundation degrees effected some changes to the relationships between colleges and universities. Whilst college students completing the HND were not guaranteed entry onto final-year honours courses, the expectation of foundation degree progression arrangements was that graduates would go straight onto the final year of an honours degree. However, universities now had a direct hand in the quality arrangements of colleges. Where quality assurance of the Higher Nationals had been provided by national bodies (Business Education Council [BEC], Technical Education Council [TEC], and later BTEC), now universities became directly involved in validation and external examination (Quality Assurance Agency [QAA], 2010). Other policy initiatives aimed at building the college contribution emphasised collaboration with HEI partners, most recently embodied in the Lifelong Learning Networks.

These initiatives appear to have achieved uneven results. Foundation degrees grew rapidly and, across all institutions, were only 525 short of their target 100 000 enrolments by 2009-10, a year ahead of target (HEFCE, 2010: 10). Since foundation degrees were more generously funded, some of this growth

may have taken place at the expense of the Higher Nationals. The target of fifty per cent participation in higher education was not attained in terms of the youth cohort but was re-framed as a target to include adult participation (BIS 2010a). Long before higher education numbers began to be restricted in response to the recession after 2008, HEFCE (2006) already observed that college numbers appeared to have been static, or even to have declined.

A number of continuing policy dilemmas were identified by commentators during this period. These included separate sectors with their own funding arrangements (with higher education predominantly funded by HEFCE and most college provision funded first by LSCs and now returning partly to Local Authority control). Partnership arrangements left indirectly-funded colleges vulnerable to the demand management activities of HEIs, a particular problem in times of falling enrolments and funding. The burden of dual quality regimes on colleges falls particularly on those with small numbers of provision (Bathmaker et al., 2008). Higher Education Institutions were drawn into 'patrolling the borders' (West, 2006) between the sectors. Articulation and transfer arrangements remained much more varied in England than, for example in the USA or Scotland. The limited scale of HE beyond the twenty-odd 'mixed economy' institutions with substantial provision remained a concern of policymakers (HEFCE, 2004). The persistence of such concerns is indicated by the request for college HE strategies (HEFCE, 2009c), although Scott (2009) has pointed out that there is limited evidence that these pockets necessarily offer worse provision, reflecting back on the long tradition of non-linear, uneven and organic development of higher education (Scott 1995; Clark, 1983).

The practices that characterise higher education within colleges have been addressed by a limited, largely practitioner-based, literature. Some tutors have claimed to use practices more appropriate to colleges, for example teaching activities beyond the traditional lecture (Burkhill et al., 2008). The greater emphasis on teaching within colleges may support students more effectively but detract in other ways from what might be deemed the

'higherness' of the experience. Harwood and Harwood (2004) discussed the difficulties of college staff developing research interests in an FEC culture that required them to be in classrooms regularly. Child (2006) has observed the difference in how professionalism is judged within the two sectors, with the HE emphasis on research giving way to the emphasis on teaching practice in colleges. As a minority practice in most colleges, higher education is likely to depend on local and personal initiatives that may not be understood or trusted elsewhere in FECs. Suspicion and resentment of opportunities for HE tutors have been reported among their colleagues mainly teaching FE programmes (Turner et al., 2008). In such climates, colleges' ability to deal effectively with disadvantaged, less confident students may come under strain as class sizes grow and teaching commitments, already higher in most FECs than in other HE teaching, increase.

Conversely, questions arise as to whether such FEC practices are appropriate in higher education. Greenbank (2007) studied college FD graduates transferring to a final year and identified difficulties in their transition, although the final results of college-based foundation degree graduates were close to those of three-year honours students. Problems included a more transmission-based model of teaching and learning in the final year, poor preparation at the FEC for the academic skills required at honours level and the lack of final-year student access to HEI staff who had research interests and were seen as remote. Bathmaker et al. (2008), reporting an ESRC investigation into transitions to HE within FECs, observed such initiatives as bridging courses and extended transfers to honours level for foundation degree graduates. Conversely, the same researchers reported tutors who were:

> ... critical of the supportive structures of teaching and learning in further education, such as open door policies for student support, the extensive use of formative assessment and... practices... considered at odds with the demands of higher education and therefore equally inappropriate on courses preparing students for these levels (Bathmaker et al., 2008: 134).

These studies, based on data gathered from full-time HE in FE (or potential HE in FE) students, have led to some attempts to outline an 'HE in FE' student identity, for example of learners, frequently from disadvantaged backgrounds who find HE 'hard' (Bathmaker, 2007) and seek progression within these culturally limited contexts. Similar themes have arisen in studies that specifically examine the experience of working-class students and these occupy a central place in the context of this study. They are the subject of its concluding section.

HE in FE and social class

Several recent accounts have explicitly linked the practices through which FECs support their students to the social and cultural backgrounds of these students. Morrison (2009) has used the concept of 'institutional habitus' to link the decisions of students to continue to higher education within a college (albeit one that is now in the HE sector, in an interesting example of the permeability of these boundaries). Reay et al (2001 in Morrison, 2009: 217)Reay, Crozier and Clayton (2009) studied working-class HE students in a range of institutions. Their analysis ascribed to both the college and post-92 HEI students the same attributes that are commonly associated with part-time study:

> [W]here the students have to manage competing demands of paid work and family responsibilities with being a student, the students only partially absorb a sense of themselves as students. (2009: 8-9).

These characteristics, associated here ethnic minority or working-class origins, and also specifically with partial identity, are said to result in a lower level of engagement. This is theorised as the 'congruence between individual and institutional habitus.' The writers oppose a 'sense of security' to the intensive learning culture of elite institutions (2009:6). Whilst these comments are made of both FEC and post-92 sites, Reay et al. (2009) also

provide survey data suggesting that FEC students rank their institution most highly, along with the elite site, for access to tutors and academic support. This might be taken as evidence that students at the limits of expansion are less able to cope with the demands for 'independent learning' in the massified post-92 institutions, preferring the scale of higher education in colleges.

These analyses draw on an important literature over the last two decades that has described the reproduction of social structure, through the dispositions of participants and their choices among institutions (Reay et al., 2005; Archer et al, 2003). This work uses Bourdieu's concepts, notably those of field, habitus, and the capitals necessary to operate effectively in particular fields. They describe higher education's tendency to reward middle-class students for their possession of cultural capital and the possibilities for its conversion into social and ultimately economic capital. Perhaps most significantly for this discussion, they ascribe the choices of working-class and ethnic minority students to attend lower-ranked institutions to habitus: a disposition to limit themselves to participation in institutions accommodating 'people like us.'

Part-time and adult education have also long been seen as activities for the marginalised. Following the rapid growth of higher education to mass levels, Egerton and Halsey (1993) observed that, 'The proportions of students from an intermediate or working-class background are much higher among mature students than among those who were educated in the decade after leaving school.' Blackburn and Jarman (1993) noted that the increase in part-time HE during the Nineteen-seventies and 'eighties was 67% among men but 630% among women. For evening classes outside the universities, male participation declined during the same period but female participation increased five times over (Halsey, 1992 in Blackburn and Jarman, 1993).

For researchers into HE choice, these forms of study have been represented as alternatives that may be chosen by risk-averse, disadvantaged students

who have declined to apply for traditional HE study. Archer and Leathwood (2003) have described those who have constructed traditional higher education as 'not for us,' and have been drawn to:

> ...fractured spaces within higher education... where people 'like us' can participate without damaging or changing valued working-class identities... [such as] part-time, evening and/or distance learning (Archer and Leathwood, 2003: 178).

This passage associates differentiated higher education settings directly with social class. To suggest that such provision constitutes a 'fractured' form of higher education appears to carry an inference that working-class identities may be incompatible with authentic higher education. A simpler observation was made by Scott (2009):

> There remain important social groups reluctant to access higher education even in the most inclusive post-1992 university (2009: 417).

The complexities of identification with studenthood and with social formations are at the heart of this thesis. This chapter has sought to locate student identity and its significance to an understanding of higher education in colleges, within the social and historical context of such provision. A number of theoretical concepts that have characterised the literature, particularly of adult participation, have emerged during this discussion. The purpose of the following two chapters is to construct from among these a theoretical framework for the thesis.

CHAPTER 3: APPROACHES TO IDENTITY

Introduction

Nearly forty years ago in America, Clark (1973) divided the emerging field of sociology of higher education into two broad categories: the study of inequality, using organisation theory concepts to discuss systems and institutions, and the study of students, using concepts from social psychology. The study of identity has been largely associated with the latter and for Strauss (1959) social psychology constituted the study of identity. However, since this construct includes identification with social groupings and differences from others outside them (Jenkins, 2008), identity itself has been used to link inequity to the individual, both in accounts of adults' participation and in studies of higher education choice among school-leavers, as described above. In this chapter, various approaches to identity are explored in order to develop a coherent methodological approach to the study.

Moreover, whilst organisation theory constructs, most notably that of boundaries, have been used to make sense of HE in FE in recent studies, these have most value in addressing boundaries between sectors or institutions (Bathmaker et al., 2008). Organisation theory makes use of a further construct, more appropriate for the study of the individual: identity, in the context of the organisation. Given the location of part-time students both in colleges and in work organisations, this seems a valuable starting point for analysis.

This chapter begins with an examination of the way classical uses of the construct of identity have been reflected in earlier studies of student identity, including in some accounts of adult participation. These are compared to more dynamic and de-centred views of identity, which have been influential in studies of adults, drawing on post-modernist and post-structuralist approaches. Interactionism, which also presents a dynamic view of identity,

has been influential in recent work on post-compulsory transitions and these are also addressed in this chapter. A further tension is presented between those who see narratives of identity as reflecting increased opportunities for agency and others who see in identity reflections of social structure. Some uses of the concept in organisational studies are set out. Finally, the use of these concepts in this study is summarised as a methodological basis for the thesis.

Fixed and dynamic approaches to identity

The notion of an essential self, sometimes associated with the work of James and Cooling early in the Twentieth Century, has been extensively questioned by recent analysis: early theorists were interested in notions of salient features of identity that were static, unified and took little account of social structure (Jenkins, 2008). These approaches suggested an essential, inner core of the self, although they recognised that identity varies in different social situations (Mead, 1934). Such static notions of identity seem quite inappropriate to the study of student identity, given the significant transformation that higher education study is generally supposed to effect.

Identity has been used in 'emancipatory' accounts of adult education that appear to be strongly influenced by humanist ideas. These sometimes treat identity as a relatively unproblematic construct, exploring the processes by which individuals have experienced personal growth and emancipation. Mercer (2007) drew on interviews with mature further and higher education students to describe their studies as a process of re-negotiating the self. Mercer divided the personal transformation entailed into increased confidence and self-awareness on the one hand, and opportunities for 'resolving the past' on the other (2007: 23). These approaches may reflect the aspirations of mature students: Burke (2002) has described mature students as desiring self-discovery and indicates that this may be a strong reason for re-entering education as adults. On the other hand Burke (2004) has

expressed concerns about the emancipatory narratives that may be constructed by adult learners, cautioning against the neglect of class, gender and ethnicity inequalities in these accounts. The idealised accounts provided by mature students during their studies may suggest a relatively simple view of emerging identities but these may fail to acknowledge the social structures within which these processes take place. Nevertheless, they provide evidence of the dynamic nature of identity

Dynamic concepts of identity find theoretical support in the wake of post-modernist de-centring of identity and emphasis on discourse (Stronach and MacLure, 1997) and particularly in the light of post-structuralist approaches. Aynsley and Crossouard (2008), for example, have drawn on post-structuralist understandings to examine transitions within vocational education and have described identity as an essentialist concept 'under erasure,' contingent and fragmented. These analyses have explored the way that identity is continually constructed by discourse. The daily use of language reinforces the categories used in education, assigns people to relevant categories and reinforces what is appropriate behaviour within each category:

> People do not simply 'belong' to these categories; rather, belonging is 'made to happen' in and through the talk. And it is done anew each time people speak or write. It is not the case that you simply 'are' a teacher, a mother or a student. You have to 'bring off' each particular identity as a practical accomplishment, repeatedly, every time afresh... Claiming a particular identity brings obligations to (be seen to) act in consensually 'appropriate' ways (Maclure, 2003: 55).

If these are difficult tasks to accomplish for socially defined roles such as that of schoolteacher, they acquire further difficulties for those accomplishing multiple roles. For the part-time student, identities constructed within particular workplaces or communities have to be negotiated with those required by academic study. Thus, the challenges entailed in the construction through discourse of coherent identities for part-time, adult students seem even greater.

These approaches appear to offer some basis to question normative constructions of student identity, based on unspoken assumptions of the traditional university student as constituting the legitimate participant in higher education. Such normative accounts would draw on assumptions reconstructed frequently through daily speech and, by marking those aspects of students' identity beyond their studies against 'proper' student identities, would discursively place part-time, adult students 'outside' higher education. This normative discourse appears to be reflected in Wakeford's (1994) account of 'becoming' a student, describing the anxieties of mature students about their identity. They achieved student identities with difficulty, largely through the help of other members of the group: Wakeford cited an informant who did not feel like a student but felt that she was 'going to university,' (1994: 244). This is reminiscent of those young working-class students who, like Archer and Leathwood's informant, '...go through university, uni doesn't go through them,' (2003: 177). The normative discourse of such accounts constructs a gap between the 'non-traditional' student and the university, presumably to be closed by changes to the identity of the student, rather than any changes to the institution. Shah (1994) described a similar access experience (in this case, autobiographical) which entailed a feeling of not being a real student but an imposter, eventually coming to think of herself as 'a mature student,' in itself a problematic form of identity.

Shah (1994) drew on post-structuralist ideas to question humanist notions of the unified, autonomous individual, positing the role of language and discourse in identity construction. She described the contradictions in the multiple roles ascribed to her following the break-up of her marriage and her enrolment on the programme: as 'a "fallen woman," an "independent woman," a "member of the underclass," a "victim" and a "single parent,"' contradictory identities, rather than simply multiple roles, yet all partially true (1994: 261). Shah concluded that, 'As subjects we are constructed kaleidoscopically within networks of power' (1994: 268). This places her

account firmly within a post-structuralist discourse but also raises serious issues about the complexity of adult identities. For vocational students, these networks of power have further dimensions in relation to their positions in work organisations.

Dynamic conceptualisations of identity have a lengthy history. Symbolic interactionists developed the concept of identity, drawing attention both to its transient nature and to the complex processes of interaction that underpin identity formation. Strauss (1959) explored the relationship of group membership to identity, and also discussed the role of language in its constitution; Goffman (1969) explored the processes by which identity is presented. Interactionists also developed methodologies to research these concepts and these are discussed below in relation to qualitative research methods. Their detailed attention to the dynamic and relational nature of identity has influenced contemporary writing on educational transitions, notably through the concept of the learning career.

Contemporary writers on post-compulsory education have drawn on symbolic interaction theory to capture the shifting nature of identity and its influence on the ways in learners' dispositions change over time. Bloomer and Hodkinson (1997, 1999, 2000) have developed the concept of the learning career, to capture the shifting processes through which learners engage in education. Colley *et al.* (2003) have discussed this concept in relation to vocational education, describing a 'vocational habitus,' and Gallacher *et al.* (2002) have used the 'learning career' in relation to adult learners. These studies have explored the localised relationships connecting the acts of individuals to structure, viewing inequalities as the products of in institutional boundaries and economic outcomes, but also as embedded in the personal aspirations and expectations of disadvantaged participants; their direct interactions with particular institutions and agents reflect and contribute to the re-structuring of society.

Such dynamic views of identity may also emphasise biographical or narrative approaches to adults' lives. However, accounts that emphasise the use of narratives in turn raise questions about who is able to construct such narratives and the extent to which these narratives take place within lines established by existing social structure. These questions about the relative significance of agency and structure have assumed a more dominant role in higher education research during recent studies and these issues are explored in the following section.

Identity, agency and structure

The ascendancy of more fluid views of identity has co-incided with an emphasis by some researchers on the agency of the individual. This emphasis, as Colley et al. (2003) acknowledge, tends to be overshadowed by the dominant view that identity work amounts to a 'reflexive project of the self' (Giddens, 1991). This links to suggestions that the development of the individual is less circumscribed by social structure than in the past (Beck, Giddens and Lash, 1994; Beck 1992; Giddens, 1991). From this perspective, the construction of identity could be seen as the process of students being able to make conscious choices, and creating discursive frameworks that make sense of their choices and actions. Identity construction would be less constrained than formerly by social ties and identifications with family and social groupings, which are in turn associated with particular localities, economic activities, ethnicities or social class. Fuller (2007) has associated these processes with the increase in adult participation in higher education. Avis has written (1997:84) about 'an inter-relationship between processes that are simultaneously constitutive and are themselves being reconstituted... akin to Gidden's notion of structuration.' Questions have been raised about the extent to which some accounts acknowledge the persistent influence of structure.

Narratives are unlikely to be shaped by events entirely within the control of the subject: Warren and Webb (2007) have argued that, without framing learners' dispositions in the historical, social, economic and political context within which they make choices, researchers into post-compulsory education risk 'being captured by the discourse,' of policy. This places learners' responsibilities in the discursive framework of a move from a 'protected' past of lifetime employment to a future of competitive certification. This is not to say that identities might not be enabled by changes in orientation caused by participation in significant events. For Davis and Williams (2004), drawing on the experience of community activists moving into study, identity formation might be shaped both by the external challenges and by personal responses.

Researchers who have emphasised the persistent significance of structure through habitus have also used the construct of identity, which Archer and Leathwood (2003) described as 'central to the ways in which middle-class and working-class people (are able to) negotiate educational systems,' (2003: 175). Reay has suggested (2004: 436-7) that the concept of habitus can be used to focus on the way that attitudes of cultural superiority and inferiority derived from gender, race and other forms of social advantage and disadvantage are expressed and reinforced through daily interactions. Notwithstanding these concerns with its immediate manifestations in daily interaction, researchers drawing on Bourdieu's concepts of field, habitus and various types of capital are concerned with the way these reflect dominant structures in society, predominantly social class. Bourdieu's work chiefly focuses on class, and Reay (2005) has contrasted the existence of 'long established discourses of race and gender equality' (even if practice does not always match these espousals) to contemporary practices where '... class inequalities are rarely questioned, individualized out of our collective conscience' (2005: 924). Lawler (2005) describes class inequality as inseparable from other inequalities, notwithstanding earlier attempts to

diminish its importance compared to those of race and gender and to deny class inequality on the premise of educational opportunity.

Researchers emphasising structure have argued against its under-emphasis: Ecclestone (2007: 122), arguing that identity has come to dominate agency and structure as the focus of interest in educational research, also suggests that traditional interpretations of 'structure' in terms of class, 'race' and gender have given way to looser meanings. Ecclestone points out that such terms as:

> 'Structural environment' ('temporal relational contexts of action'), 'resources', 'context' and 'social circumstance' are not... synonymous with structure (2007: 126).

However, whilst widely-understood aspects of structure may have wider meanings than some more technical (or even euphemistic) phrases, the way that students are likely to come into contact with structure is through institutions that reflect the inequalities of structure: they may not explicitly recognise aspects of social structure but may reflect on its experience through intermediate agencies. Warren and Webb (2007) argue that structure will impact on students' lives through the mediation of localised agencies and circuits of employment and education, which may or may not be seen as linked to structural factors.

Indeed, studies of adults necessitate a concern with aspects of structure beyond the immediate relationships within the classroom. Avis has distinguished between work drawing on Bourdieu's concepts that 'is centrally concerned with the articulation of structure and agency and the playing out of class in educational and classroom processes,' and the possibility of addressing the reproduction or contestation of social structure more directly, examining processes by which:

> learner dispositions are re-formed leading to a break from their previous cultural locations. It is here that notions of 'othering', hierarchicalisation and differentiation play a part (2008: 47).

Avis points to a need for close documentation of the social processes framing educational identities. For the purpose of this study, the importance of this analysis is in the need to focus beyond the classroom rather than simply within it, both to capture the nature of identity and to interrupt its reproductive logic.

An important area to examine these processes beyond the classroom is in relation to work organisations. As explained in the introduction to this chapter, concepts from organisation theory have an increasing relevance to higher education study, particularly in vocational areas of study and in institutions such as colleges.

Organisation theory and identity

Organisation theory has explored identity not only in the broad terms of the relationship between the subject and social structure but also in the more immediate tension between the individual and the organisation. Whilst the direct involvement of employer organisations in educational activities may be limited in practice, the relationships between students and others in employer organisations are central to the lives of working adults. Compared, for example, to the experience of Shah (1994), for whom the experience of lived intertextuality provided opportunities to re-locate herself as a subject, those whose progress is subject to the approval of work organisations may find their studies a less idealised, emancipatory experience. Collinson (2003) has suggested that, particularly in low-trust workplaces, organisations may provide considerable employee insecurity around identity: employees may respond to 'the organisational gaze' by variously constructing conformist, dramaturgical or resistant selves. For others, identity is a significant and increasingly important means of organisational control (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002).

Within organisation theory, discussion of identity is similarly fragmented. Relative emphases on essentialist or integrated conceptions, as opposed to those that emphasise de-centred or ambiguous conceptions of identity, mingle with concerns about the agency of the individual, relative to the contextual influences – variously, managerial regimes, social structure, hyper-modern instability, discourses and so on - that act externally on the self. Alvesson (2010) has provided an overview of the field that begins with these two dimensions – the degree of uncertainty and the degree of agency - and from these has constructed seven images of identity from the literature. These are intended to capture important elements in the field, rather than to represent specific theories; but they provide a useful 'map' of the contemporary state of identity theory within organisation studies.

Alvesson (2010) begins with those images that most emphasise contemporary insecurity. 'Self-doubters' are either affected by existential anxieties, or these doubts are created, or aggravated, by economic insecurity. For 'strugglers,' dealing with such insecurity may be possible through self-reflexivity and dialogue, this conscious identity work being grounded in self-doubt and self-openness: this image, of course, suggests greater possibilities of agency. 'Surfers,' often suggested by post-structuralist ideas, have less aspiration for a stable identity than these first two: identity is seen as a process, usually shaped by the discourse. With less pain and resistance than the earlier images, this image suggests apparently smooth shifts in subjectivity.

Four images are more suggestive of the possibilities of direction and coherence. 'Storytellers' construct their self-identity through reflexively organized narratives assembled from cultural raw material such as language, meanings and values, drawn from interactions and with the capacity to integrate past, present and anticipated future; the coherence and credibility of such narratives are likely to be open to question, particularly as the narrative is told and questioned by others. This image, with its obvious links to the work of Giddens (1991), clearly emphasises agency strongly and

minimizes any need to struggle against external forces (or surf with them). The image of 'strategist' emphasises an interest-driven, intentional aspect of identity. This is suggestive of career facilitation which, although Alvesson (2010) does not mention this specifically, may well include some form of professional or vocational credentialisation. For the final two images, external influences provide the coherence in identity formation: 'stencils' are subject to a dominant, usually institutionalised discourse that disciplines them into the formation of an ideal self, supported by the usual normative experts to be found in Foucauldian accounts (Hollway, 1991; Foucault, 1977); soldiers perceive themselves as at one with the organisation, in a fairly static identity defined by its attributes.

This model is set out at some length here, not because it provides a neat compartmentalisation of the field but because of the possibilities it raises for thinking more flexibly about identity. Alvesson suggests its use in empirical work, either as a framework for questions and lines of inquiry or as 'a set of resources for inductive work' (2010: 212). Whilst the model is focused on organisation theory, it also reflects the broader sociological and philosophical ideas that underpin various writings in this field; and the same ideas are influential in the field of educational research.

Thus, to paint student research onto this canvas with the broadest of brushes, the purposeful accounts of fragmented identity of access students above are reminiscent of strugglers (and less successful accounts of self-doubters). Both policy documents and their critics often emphasise more integrated views of identity. Publicists for vocational programmes portray storytelling agency or vocational strategising in their 'case studies' of students. Critical accounts of applicants to less prestigious institutions may, where their direction is determined by employer organisations, suggest the habitus of soldiers or the helplessness of stencils. Whilst it would be an excessive simplification to force the data of this study into these categories, they have suggested some directions for reviewing the data.

One of the perhaps surprising features in Alvesson's framework is the dominant number of models that emphasise a relatively fixed and integrated view of identity, compared in particular to those espoused in educational research. This reflects the constraints of organisational life, to which part-time vocational students are certainly subject. The final section of this thesis includes a return to this framework, in order to discuss the empirical data presented in Part Three. Within several of the conceptualisations of identity described by Alvesson, the role of discourse again emerges as an important factor, for example in maintaining the structures that limit the possibilities of identity, or in opening up possibilities for its renegotiation. This term has already been encountered within the literature that has explored adult participation: and its use carries both theoretical and methodological implications. The following section therefore examines the various uses of this term in the literature, in order to explain its broader significance to the thesis.

Discourse and Identity

Attention to the role of language has come to permeate many fields of study in recent years: of particular relevance here is its role in constructing difference. Derrida (1978) drew on Saussure's suggestion that words are defined by their difference from other terms, rather than by any resemblance to the objects that they represent, in order to explain the way language is used to create categories and to include, or exclude, groups and individuals from these categories. In this study, the categorisation of different types of social actor, student or employee, for example, is seen to emerge from various discourses, which range from the language of policy documents and quality systems to everyday speech in the workplace.

Interest in the way that discourse contributes to participation in education has included close attention to the day-to-day speech acts that make up educational practices, as well as a broader interest in the role of discourse in

constituting society and the categories, roles or identities that may be acceptable within it. Gee (1999) described these respectively as discourse with a little 'd' and Discourse with a capital 'D'. Fairclough (2003) has characterised this as a distinction between work focusing on texts, but not engaging with social theoretical issues, and work inspired by social theory that tends not to analyse texts, with Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) attempting to bridge this gap by using detailed textual analysis to draw social conclusions. Nevertheless, it will be useful to clarify the use of discourse here in terms of these two broad approaches, that of textual analysis and that of social theory.

The possibilities offered up by textual analysis suggested the methodological consideration of established methods to examine various discourses that are constitutive of higher education within FECs. Within this field generally, such forms of discourse analysis might include detailed consideration of policy texts, at national or institutional level. A strong tradition of discourse analysis within the classroom has also contributed to our understanding of educational practices (Sinclair and Coulthard, 1975) and empirical data might have reported classroom interactions or have examined the way writing was used in these students' constructions of identity (Ivanic, 1998). However, given the focus of the study on gathering empirical accounts of the way identity was constructed beyond the classroom, a possible approach for this study might have examined the accounts offered by students, using prescribed methods of quantitative analysis, for example counting keywords, or detailed qualitative analysis which examined the patterns of speech. However, the aim of the research was to capture the perspectives of the participants in the study, whilst textual analysis of this type threatened to present an objectified view of their accounts. The use of extensive extracts from their accounts seemed a better method of capturing the discourses that shaped their identities, appropriate to Fairclough's description of discourse as 'a particular way of representing some part of the (physical, social,

psychological) world' (2003: 17). These methodological issues are discussed further in the following chapter.

However, the main interest in discourse from a theoretical perspective arises from its role in constituting identity. Much of the literature in adult education is influenced by post-structuralist ideas and specifically those of Michel Foucault, for whom people were made subjects through their involvement in discourse. Of particular interest to this study is Foucault's connection of discourses to institutions and disciplines as he sought to discover the rules that governed bodies of texts and speech acts. These institutions are fundamental to Foucault's conception of knowledge and power. Yet Foucault's notion of power at least admits of the possibility of resistance, including that of oppositional discourses (Foucault, 1979: 290). In the thesis, these ideas are not adopted as a coherent and comprehensive explanation of society and the identities that may be constructed within it, since the mechanisms by which society is constituted are not seen as limited to discursive acts. The thesis does acknowledge the way in which these discourses are constitutive of what is acceptable for particular social categories and identities. However, it places value on accounts that may be contrary to the official discourses of institutions, as is explained below in the final section.

Identity and narrative

So far, this chapter has reviewed some of the key debates in identity theory. A key question arising from these is the extent to which individuals are able to provide accounts of identity. Just as the image of 'storytelling' is suggestive of agency, a recent emphasis on narrative research requires attention to the possibility of drawing on these accounts. For many commentators, particularly those influenced by Bourdieu, such accounts will also reflect the persistent influence of structure in determining their actions and interpretations.

Whilst post-modern and post-structural approaches have suggested more complex views of the study of identity, the work of Jacques Ranciere has recently attracted some attention in relation to education (Bingham et al., 2010; Hey and Evans, 2009; Pelletier, 2009a, 2009b). In an examination of philosophers' frequent invocation of the poor, Ranciere (2004) detected a continuing determination to fix these subjects immutably in particular social locations. Beginning with Plato's use of the three metals, fixing in place the gold rulers, silver defenders and bronze craftsmen of the city, Ranciere (2004) traced through Marx and Sartre to Bourdieu a continuing concern for the labouring classes to labour and to do nothing else.

Pelletier (2009a) is among those to have drawn on Ranciere's critique of an 'often noted tension in Bourdieu's work, between the denunciation of domination and the modelling of its ineluctable reproduction,' (2009a: 138). Ranciere questioned social science's definition of its objects of study in terms of their social attributes and their statements as expressions of their position in the social order. Thus, for Ranciere, social science secures its own domain of knowledge by critiquing a domination it 'knows' cannot change, (Pelletier, 2009b: 271). Pelletier has suggested an educational research that moves beyond social categorisation, which tends to order people 'into the more and the less valuable, the more and the less significant,' (Pelletier, 2009b: 268). This would attempt, inter alia, 'the disruption of... categories in educational practice,' such as the distinction between vocational and academic speech, or students (Pelletier, 2009b: 281).

Hey and Evans (2009) have drawn on this work to argue for the possibility of constructing accounts of success, even amongst those whose choices lead them to different points in the higher education hierarchy. Without wishing to imitate the 'success stories' that populate marketing materials, such research would avoid any practice of marking participation in particular higher education strata as indicative of deficiency. This opens up the possibility of including the accounts of participants in vocational education, not as reflections of 'false consciousness' but as valid elements of

methodologies for research in these settings. The following chapter, which sets out the methodology of the study, draws on this approach.

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CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

Introduction

The specific research methods used in this case flowed directly from the broader purposes of the study, its use of the construct of identity and the specific research questions that the study sought to answer. In contrast to studies that have constructed a broad picture of the size and shape of participation in particular forms of education, through the use of quantitative datasets, the exploration of identity suggested a qualitative methodology. In this, the study builds on a long tradition of qualitative research into identity (Strauss, 1992).

The focus on identity required an approach that drew on participants' personal interpretations of their experiences yet also sought to discover patterns that would explain their relationship to broader social phenomena. The methods were designed to explore identity both in terms of the associative acts by which participants identified themselves as part-time students in a college and the dissociative acts by which boundaries around this identity were drawn. The latter might involve comparison and interaction with others to whom notions of studentship were strange, or who had different experiences of studentship, or graduate identity; or with those who shared aspects of identity related to work occupations, local communities, family or ethnic groups. The study sought to examine how students either accommodated contradictions with these identities, or drew boundaries between former identities and those that they were constructing as students and potential graduates. These issues were raised in the research questions set out in Chapter One.

The foregoing chapter has already discussed various uses of identity, explaining the intention of this study both to capture the inherent determinacy of structure and the possibilities of agency. The research design reflects this purpose through a balance between attention to individuals'

constructions of narrative accounts and an awareness of the social and economic context in which these accounts were offered. This balance also contributes to the validity of the study: in choosing the research methods, selecting the sample and in analysing the data, the aim has been to produce an account that provides the depth of insight available only through close attention to the lived experience of individual respondents; but which provides the possibility to examine rigorously patterns within the data and to confirm these through careful triangulation.

This chapter begins by explaining the use of qualitative methods and the methodological approach that informed the study. Details of its design follow, including the location and sample selection. The ethical issues that arose are discussed at this point. The chosen methods and their use are described, followed by the process used to analyse the data.

A qualitative inquiry

The qualitative approach of this study is not offered in opposition to the use of quantitative data but in order to bring to light further dimensions of student participation. In particular, the breadth and indeterminacy of a focus on identity and its relationship to higher education participation suggests either a non-empirical or a qualitative approach: such matters are not easily counted. The methods of this study were designed not as an alternative to quantitative approaches but in order to capture the interpretive processes through which those studying in colleges add meaning to their own experiences.

Quantitative techniques have been used to examine the size and shape of higher education provision and, for example, to make judgements about stratification in higher education. Arum, Gamoran and Shavit's (2007) variable-oriented comparative case studies represent a complex exploration of participation data. Quantitative methods have demonstrated HE's unequal

rewards, recalling the 'political arithmetic' tradition (Heath, 2000; Halsey *et al.* 1980) and these remain the most appropriate methods for assessing the scale and shape of participation. Further, mass surveys, of the kind undertaken by Bourner et al. (1991) in relation to part-time students, also may provide some broadly-based returns on particular aspects of student participation, perception and motivation. However, qualitative study opens up additional opportunities to discover how this participation takes place, by exploring in depth the responses of a smaller group of participants.

Qualitative inquiry has been associated with a focus on identity since the work of the Chicago School. Whilst their qualitative approaches date back to the nineteen-twenties, interactionists began to use field observation and interview methods in the study of identity during the nineteen-fifties, as a rejection of functionalist survey research that emphasised current events, 'a rather crude view of human responses [and] an unquestioning positivism' (Strauss, 1992: 3). These approaches are still influential for those examining processes by which individuals shape and perform their own identities, including those describing the 'learning career' (Colley, 2006; Colley et al, 2003; Crossan, 2003; Gallacher etal, 2002; Bloomer and Hodkinson, 1997, 1999, 2000). These studies have also mainly drawn on interview data. Drawing on these approaches, the study planned to discover the processes by which students created meanings from particular experiences and social phenomena, in order to choose and construct their identities as students and as potential graduates.

Identity construction was conceptualised here as an interactive process by which students negotiated the meaning of their various roles with significant others, for example within families, local communities or the workplace. This broadly interpretive approach views these interactions as processes of social construction (Watzlawick, 2008; Searle, 1995; Berger and Luckmann, 1971; Garfinkel 1967). Constructs, such as the hierarchies of higher education, which are often represented in popular discourse as objective realities, have particular meanings for different social actors. This *socially negotiated*

process was not seen to contradict the existence of any objective realities but to recognise the co-existence of a world that exists independently of human consciousness and socially determined knowledge (Bhaskar, 1997).

For example, a reality exists in which schools in the outlying areas of the study sent small numbers of students to university during the nineteen-nineties. This is demonstrable by school reports and other official data. Participants in the study claimed that this did not happen and this flies in the face of an independently verifiable reality. Yet their perceptions appear to represent contributory factors in these students' identity formation. Since identity was seen as a social process constructed interactively with others, such accounts were regarded as valid contributions to understanding, notwithstanding their contradictions of real-world events.

In this sense, the thesis draws on critical realism's endeavour to maintain the existence of a reality that entails structure, stratification and differentiation and which also changes. From this perspective, all social phenomena, including the concepts and interpretations offered by actors, have a material dimension which is independent of their descriptions of existence. Whilst this reality can only become known from the accounts of social actors, the purpose of social science is to discover the mechanisms that exist in this reality beyond their explanations. At the same time, critical realism also entails the recognition of the significance of these accounts as shaping practices. In addition to seeking to cut across the binary divides of quantitative versus qualitative approaches, or between theory and practice, it also claims to cut across the longstanding divide between the search for laws governing the social world and the idiographic description of diverse phenomena, by searching for mechanisms within empirical data (Danermark et al, 2002). The thesis seeks to balance this view of reality and its implications for research with an attention to accounts of social practice that are constitutive of reality. To this extent, the study remains an essentially interpretive account.

The study sought to provide within its research encounters opportunities within the data collection process for participants to present, negotiate and enact their identities. Whilst it would not be practical in a limited study of this character to carry out the kind of extensive observation that might begin to capture the range of interactions by which identity was constructed, opportunities were sought to capture something of these processes. The study took the form of semi-structured individual and focus group interviews with students in a single college. Both methods were guided by the desire to enable students to construct their own narratives whilst providing an appropriate structure to enable rigorous analysis of the data.

Research design: narrative, structure and interaction

The design of the study entailed important choices about the degree of structure both in data collection and analysis. Decisions were required about how far data should attempt to provide detailed, longitudinal accounts of individuals' experiences and their personal interpretations of significant events; and to what extent data should consist of responses to directed areas of inquiry. Given the changing nature of identity discussed above, the collection of extended narratives, drawing on students' life-experiences to provide long-term accounts of emerging identity, appeared attractive. On the other hand, the possibilities of comparison and analysis diminish with any lessening of structure; and, whilst survey-based large-scale data collection was unlikely to yield the kind of understandings sought here, narratives without any kind of structural framework might provide fewer possibilities for analysis than a more structured interview framework. Thus, whilst it was expected that data collection would yield some form of more or less coherent narratives by informants, these would be constructed through carefully planned interactions between the researcher and informants and analysed to discover patterns in the data.

Narrative-based accounts were attractive in view of the above emphasis on the importance and authenticity of participants' accounts. Research based on narratives of extended experience, sometimes spanning informants' lives, have been used, particularly in relation to adult learning, across many European countries (West et al., 2007; Chamberlayne et al., 2000, 2004; West, 1996). The TLRP project 'Learning Lives' drew on narrative studies by adults 'focusing on individual adults and their learning biographies and trajectories and the interrelationships between learning, identity and agency in their lives' (Biesta et al., 2004: 15). Life history has been defined as narratives that acknowledge the influence of historical events in participants' lives (Goodson, 1992) although some researchers (Gallacher *et al.* 2002, for instance) use this term more loosely. Life-history data has been used to make sense of decisions that have led adults back into education, using both qualitative and quantitative methods, (Biesta, 2008; Biesta et al., 2004). Such approaches are frequently constructed around a single interview question: Chamberlayne et al. (2000; 2004) asked respondents, 'Was university a life-changing experience for you?' with subsequent probes to seek elaboration. Biesta et al. (2004) asked informants to 'Tell me about your life.' Historical narrative by its nature represents the special case of an individual, and, whilst theory can generalise from such narratives in order to provide wider meanings, it does seem likely that narratives will emphasise either agency, or at least the more immediate phenomena through which structure is realised, although such narratives – and even their subjects – are 'often conspicuously constructed in relation to others' (Mason 2004 in Evans, 2009).

Whilst such methods afford respondents considerable latitude, this does not imply any methodological purity or 'innocence' (Stronach and MacLure, 1997): their construction into coherent accounts then requires extensive interpretation (Denzin, 1989). Semi-structured interviews, on the other hand, provide some structure for comparability, whilst allowing respondents to answer on their own terms to a greater extent than in structured interviews (May 2001:123). Such interviews might address specific questions about

relationships with others in the family, community or workplace and how these affected perceptions of education. This would direct the interviews into areas that less structured narrative approaches might either fail to cover or engage with only as a result of the researcher's extensive interpretation.

At the same time, more intensive, qualitative interviews might explore in greater depth some of the problematic questions raised by survey data. Bourner et al. (1991) for example carried out a wide-ranging survey of part-time students with a high response rate, yielding useful data about student perceptions of their courses. However, the pressures that furthest surpassed student expectations were, apart from time, competing interests (43%), job demands (38%) and family commitments (30%) (1991: 85). More recently, Yorke and Longden's (2010) foundation degree survey discovered that part-time students in colleges rated their learning experience as highly or slightly better than respondents in universities. However, in terms of issues related to external factors – difficulties with balancing commitments, the academic workload, finance and studying in the home – college students reported higher levels of concern than their HEI peers. These issues, to do with students' experiences beyond education, require complex answers that may be connected to social factors. These are unlikely to be discovered through survey data alone.

These are, moreover, areas where student experience and identity are constructed through negotiation with others. The research design therefore sought to capture some element of these negotiated processes. Semi-structured interviews might discover by questioning something about these processes; whilst group interviews would also enable the observation of identity construction. Participation in the study might itself provide opportunities for students to construct and enact identity. Johnson and Watson (2004) reported interviews with students who used these interactions to construct a fit between their own identities and those that they perceived academics to desire. Biesta and Tedder (2007: 135) described classroom situations where students were encouraged to understand their

own 'agentic orientations and how they "play out in one's life,"' (2007: 135). On these views, participation in such research as this is in itself an act of identity construction: as well as describing identity, it constructs and reconstructs it. From these broad design issues flowed the practicalities of constructing a sample and specific methods to carry out the research. Such methods required careful consideration of whether they would meet criteria by which the study might be judged adequate, in the sense of having 'value' or being 'good' or 'authentic'. These are considered in the following section.

Criteria for adequacy

Notwithstanding the long traditions of qualitative research, these methods may raise concerns about the value and credibility of such a study. The traditional proofs of natural science, such as the repeatability of experiments, are inappropriate in any study of particularity, yet the extent to which the findings are of interest beyond the location of the research remains an important consideration in a study that considers the effect of national systems. Discussion of these difficulties has included challenges to such traditional criteria as validity and reliability, as well as discussion on how such criteria might be met.

Wolcott (1994) has challenged the notion that 'validity', traditionally associated with the accuracy of tests, is a useful criterion for qualitative research at all. Whilst enjoining what might generally be described as honest and transparent practices in the interest of validity, Wolcott questioned whether validity was in any case a useful criterion for qualitative researchers. Guba and Lincoln (1989) pointed to the limitations of earlier criteria for judging the adequacy of research, which corresponded to a positivist requirement for 'objectivity' or 'scientific' neutrality, countering these with criteria more suited to interpretive approaches. The latter included credibility, which might be maintained by checking with those who participated in the research: such activities took place in this study mainly

through the focus groups, which began with an account of the research findings so far. Instead of generalisability, Guba and Lincoln recommended transferability, with the responsibility on the receiver rather than the inquirer and with the main technique for determining its extent as 'thick description', the nature of which remained unresolved. Dependability, an auditable consistency that could withstand modifications to research design, replaced the reliability of fixed designs; whilst confirmability, with the findings rooted in the data rather than the author's imagination, replaced objectivity. In this study, not only the data but the means used to process this are described in detail in the thesis and are available for external inspection. Moreover, the iterative nature of qualitative data collection promotes a shared understanding of the data. As Guba and Lincoln put it (1989: 244), 'The hermeneutic process is its own quality control,' with data fed back immediately: the possibilities of error are considerably lessened when understandings are developed collaboratively.

Silverman (2001) has on the other hand examined a number of ways in which tests of validity and reliability might be made in qualitative studies. Reluctant to accept such anthropological standards as Agar's 'intensive personal involvement', which might slip into anecdotalism, Silverman set out (2001: 229-230) guidelines by which interview data might satisfy the criterion of 'low-inference descriptors'. These included tape-recording face-to-face interviews, their transcription according to the needs of analysis (rather than handing these over to a third-party audio typist) and presenting long extracts of data that included the question. These principles have largely been adhered to in this thesis. Silverman's discussion of validity distanced his analysis from traditional proofs yet in large part rests on the importance of deploying quantitative techniques where possible. This study has made limited use of these techniques, not because of any disregard for quantitative methods, but because it is designed to complement quantitative studies with an inquiry into trajectories that were more appropriately captured in narrative form. More importantly, Silverman (2001) discussed the extent to

which case studies should attempt some form of generalisability. This depended on the selection of appropriate cases and on sampling: these are discussed in the following sections.

Location of the study

The research was located in the researcher's own workplace, an English Further Education College in the North Midlands. This location was convenient for data collection in terms of access to possible participants and issues relating to the construction of a sample are considered in the following section. However, its location, in a sub-region with a less developed tradition of higher education than in neighbouring cities, was identified as an appropriate context to examine the college contribution. There is some evidence that college-based higher education is most developed within locations where there are limited opportunities to study in HEIs (DIUS 2008b). Two towns in this sub-region were among the twenty-eight in England with over a hundred thousand occupants and no Higher Education Institution listed by Tight (2007b). Although there were five universities within a thirty-mile radius and full-time students frequently commuted to these, this might appear less practical to some part-time students.

Economic developments in this area also reflected relevant national trends. Structural changes during the last twenty years had led to the diminution of traditional employment in favour of service-based industries, notably in communications and distribution. Until late in the Twentieth Century, the local economy had been dominated by manufacturing and primary industry: this had provided a relatively stable economic and social structure, in which higher education qualifications had been less common than in nearby cities which offered significant levels of graduate employment. Recent changes in employment had coincided with initiatives designed to increase higher education participation in the area.

Local variations in historic employment patterns emerged as significant for the study. The college was located in a traditional centre of engineering, an industry with a strong tradition of vocational education and training. Whilst this had been largely replaced by service industries, participation in vocational education remained higher than in nearby localities, where strong economic and social traditions had been inherited from coal mining and from such heavy industries as coal products and chemicals. Whilst the more rural District to the East made up a relatively high percentage of the college's 16-19-year-old students, reflecting the lack of a sixth form across the whole of the District Council area, participation among adults in the same District was significantly lower. These variations and demographic changes were not untypical of many areas of the industrial Midlands and North of England. At the same time, they provided important elements of the specific local context of the study.

The college was a medium-range provider of higher education, having some five hundred students on HEFCE-funded programmes, mainly part-time, enrolled at the time of the study, as well as nearly two hundred on higher-level non-prescribed programmes. Partnerships existed with two local universities and with a wider network of colleges around a third university. The institution was party to three Lifelong Learning Networks, one originally designed to regenerate former coalfield areas. The college's HE provision combined long-standing programmes in business, engineering and IT, with a more recent growth in additional vocational areas, including some where professional requirements had led to significant increases. Whilst most provision had taken took the form of Higher Nationals until the middle of the present decade, the college had gradually increased its offer of foundation degrees from 2005. A small number of Honours-level top-ups followed from 2007. Whilst a significant minority of this provision was offered to full-time students progressing from earlier levels within the college, other areas were dominated by part-time courses. This included students who, having progressed onto Honours level, had acquired significant experience of higher

education study in the college and were likely to be able to contribute to a study in this field.

The college, then, whilst not represented here as a typical, or representative example of colleges providing higher education, was a medium-sized provider. Dishman et al.'s (2010) study initially characterised the largest college providers of HE as the 'new polytechnics' (although this term was later abandoned as an inaccurate representation of those colleges' intentions) and the smallest as 'franchisee colleges' with small levels of outreach provision for an HE partner. The institution in this study formed what Dishman et al. characterised as a 'mixed economy' college, with a broader range of provision, some directly funded (not to be confused with the Mixed Economy Group of colleges with high levels of HE provision). This location was felt to be a useful context within which to study part-time participation, being neither one of those institutions that may be hoping to recast itself as a mainstream provider (perhaps with foundation degree-awarding powers) nor as one of those whose provision contemporary policies may seek to curtail in the coming years. This criterion for the location of the study – being neither strictly representative nor remarkably exceptional but of general interest – has some similarity to the selection of the sample.

Sampling and participant selection

The selection of potential participants in the study was determined by the requirements of the study. The decision to carry out a qualitative study, based on individual and group interviews, had already determined that the sample size would be relatively small. Consideration had been given to a comparative study, which would compare the responses of college and HEI students: this would have required fairly structured forms of data collection. Alternatively, because of the significance of external factors, some consideration was given to capturing interactions between these participants

and significant others. However, the decision was taken to focus the limited resources available on capturing in-depth data from the participant group. Wolcott (1994) described his qualitative studies, including a single village, a single high-school principal and a single school drop-out, as the best use of time that would otherwise have been divided among different research sites. In seeking to focus attention on one group of participants in a single college, the intention was to maximise the time available for capturing, triangulating and analysing their personal accounts.

Important issues in sample selection included the representativeness of the sample and the extent to which it was likely to provide potentially illuminating data. The construction of representative samples is a crucial issue in survey data collection and in other areas where the findings from the group will be presented as valid for a broader population. In qualitative studies, the ability of informants to provide rich and illuminating data has a somewhat different significance.

The construction of representative samples in an essential element of quantitative and of survey data collection. As Fink (1995) put it, 'A good sample is a miniature version of the population – just like it only smaller' (Fink in May, 2001: 93). Probability or random samples aim to select from the population using mathematical techniques. These may be stratified in order to capture the dimensions of the population represented that will affect the responses and their representativeness. In contrast to these and other types of purposive sampling, convenience or availability sampling techniques draw data from limited or elusive sources: these may include referrals as in snowball sampling.

The sample for this study could not be designed to achieve the kind of validity usually claimed for representative statistical samples. The absence of comprehensive data about higher education in colleges meant in effect the absence of a sampling frame. Nevertheless, the selection was undertaken with regard for balance in such areas as gender, age and ethnicity.

Participants were chosen in order to be sufficiently representative of a local study, set at a particular historical juncture, with specific geographical, economic and social variables. Despite its size, the sample shared broad characteristics with wide numbers of part-time HE students in colleges (see Fig. 1). Ages ranged from twenty-one to forty-eight. Five were male and seven female and within this distribution, women made up the older group.

Gender:	Male	Female
Age: 19-29	3	3
Age: 30-39	1	2
Age: 40-49	1	2

FIGURE 1: KEY CHARACTERISTICS OF PARTICIPANT SAMPLE

This resembles a notable feature of HE in FE participation: that males predominate amongst younger students, possibly reflecting lower levels of achievement, whilst women returning to study are the larger group amongst older students (HEFCE, 2010).

Two participants, the two oldest males, came from South Asian family backgrounds. Although the college and its catchment area have a relatively small black and minority ethnic population, higher education in general has a higher participation rate by minority ethnicities, although in colleges the proportion of ethnic minority students roughly matches that of the population as a whole (Rashid and Brooks, 2009).

The social class of participants is not defined in the simple terms used in most surveys and they were not asked to self-assign. As discussed in Chapter Two, discussion of social class needed to go beyond their economic occupation or current address. Their social origins, identifications and aspirations emerged from the data in far richer detail than such

classifications could indicate. Ten of the twelve participants described themselves during the interviews as having parents employed in local industries dominant in their own areas. Two participants described more middle-class origins, one growing up on a farm and the other in a former mining village with a father who was the local GP. During the interviews, most of the older participants referred to partners engaged in manual occupations. All had been engaged, with varying success, in constructing careers in the service-based and distributive industries that had come to play a more significant part in the local economy: their studies were linked to these careers. The uncertain boundaries dividing their backgrounds, current status and aspirations precluded the use of tags such as 'white, working-class, 25' that are found in many qualitative accounts. These labels also seemed inappropriate to the fundamental aims of the research.

Although this sample has many of the characteristics of availability or convenience samples, its claims to validity also derive from the significance of the participants as 'key informants'. For some qualitative researchers, the difficulties of accessing 'thick' data (Geertz, 1973) have led to an emphasis on individuals who are able to provide particularly rich insights. Agar (1997) has discussed the ethnographic tradition of 'key informants,' individuals with particularly detailed knowledge who provide the initial contact and key insights to the researcher. Wellington (2000:73) has cautioned against over-reliance on the reliability of such informants; and reasons for care are suggested by Agar's descriptions of 'deviants' and 'stranger-handlers', who may be the first to speak openly to researchers but are less likely to be representative. However, such informants may be exceptionally able to express their experiences effectively (Shostak, 2000). These participants were likewise chosen on the basis of their potential contribution to the study.

The chief requirement in participant selection was that students would be able to describe their perceptions based on a substantial experience of higher education in a college. Although study at honours level is less common in colleges than intermediate-level programmes such as foundation degrees, all

had completed studies at these earlier levels. Whilst their position as honours-year students might be taken to indicate higher levels of motivation or satisfaction and persistence, their experience had also provided them with greater opportunities for reflection on the issues raised by the study. This choice may be contrasted with the ESRC project 'Universal Access and Dual Regimes of Further and Higher Education', which involved the collection of empirical data from sites where young people might be expected to encounter 'easier' transitions between sectors (Bathmaker, 2009). This sought to capture their consciousness at the point of transition and the data appears to reflect their early anticipation of higher education.

Students were recruited from four groups on programmes at honours level. All students studying at this level on the college's programmes were told about the study. No incentives were offered and no pressure was applied to take part. Volunteers came forward, ranging from some of the most academically successful students in the groups to some of those finding most difficulty with their course. A small number of volunteers were rejected because their employment within education complicated their engagement with the issues in the study. The final twelve participants were drawn fairly evenly from four groups studying at this level. Rather than outsiders or 'deviants', they were more prepared to talk than some of their peers. All were located in what may broadly be described as the business area; some on the kind of broad-based programme long dominant, especially through the business and engineering areas, in college-based higher education (Pye and Legard, 2008), whilst others studied a vocational specialist supply-chain programme, reflecting the increased importance of logistics and the diminished role of manufacturing in the UK economy.

All of the participants were known to the researcher, who had taught each of them at some stage in their studies. No other relationships existed besides those of tutor-student and researcher-participant. This raised a number of methodological and ethical issues. Although the study specifically avoided such issues as the experience of teaching and learning within the college

environment, this experience still compromised any claim to a 'neutral' objectivity. The focus on identity excluded the evaluation of specific teaching, learning or assessment activities that made up participants' direct experience of study at college: data collection was structured around questions of what it meant to be a student. Claims to 'objectivity' have become less frequent in recent years as researchers have become more conscious of their own role in the construction of accounts (Clifford, 1986). 'Insider' research has embraced relativism and the continuing diminution of the researcher's authority (Loxley and Seery, 2008). Moreover, the possibility of gathering data of interest depended on the existence of some relationship of trust between the researcher and participants.

Nevertheless, the research methods were chosen in order to maintain claims of validity in this context. Interview methods were used precisely because of their greater claim to validity than the use of observation data (Wolcott, 1994). In addition, any use of observational data or field notes was excluded when it became clear that some distance between researcher and participants needed to be maintained. The ethical issues are discussed in the following section, which sets out the use of the university's ethics procedures.

Ethics and voices

Asymmetrical power relationships are, despite the best of researchers' intentions, present in all research encounters, whilst problems of power and politics are inherent within all educational institutions. These ethical issues were particularly important when carrying out a project in the researcher's own workplace. The focus on student identity, with participants rendering accounts of their own perceptions of identity and relationships, and how these were constructed in their daily lives, facilitated a shift in focus away from direct encounters in formal educational settings. Even with this focus, it would have been possible to draw on accounts rendered in formal settings, for example in coursework produced by students that reflected on their

'personal development,' or on personal observations during the time of the study. The study could not be focused on educational encounters with participants, using documents or ethnographic observation data, since these encounters would be distorted by the relationships of power between tutor and student. Instead, fieldwork was limited to interactions that were clearly recognised by all parties as part of the research and not part of their studies.

In order to minimise misunderstandings about the purpose of the research, the study was carried out entirely openly. Statements explaining the purpose and methods of the study were made to students and staff in the areas where the research was carried out about the purposes of the research. In particular, it was emphasised that no evaluative judgements were being made about the participants, about any staff teaching in the area of their studies, or about the performance of any part of the institution.

The participants selected were adults competent to make their own decisions about taking part. Their established relations of trust with the researcher minimised any possibility of coercion. They were specifically selected on the basis of an observed capacity for independent judgement and the tendency clearly to articulate their own perceptions and needs, since these behaviours were judged important for participants to be able to contribute usefully to such research. This should not be confused either with high levels of satisfaction with their programme, or with high levels of achievement: neither was characteristic of all the participants.

A written statement was provided to all those who agreed to participate, explaining the purposes of the research, and indicating that they were not obliged to take part in any or all parts of the interview procedures. Although participants were approached individually, their classes were made fully aware of the research. Those who showed most interest were invited to take part in the interviews. An exception to this method was that students who were themselves working in education – three potential informants were college employees, whilst others worked for a neighbouring college – were

excluded from the research: their perspectives might reflect their employment roles as well as their position as students.

An application to the university's ethics review procedures set out the range of individual and group interviews planned. No disadvantages or risks to participants' physical health or welfare were anticipated, since the research consisted entirely of verbal interactions, and because of an absolute right not to answer any question. This was made clear in the information sheet that provided the basis for informed consent. The research was duly approved. In the event, the interviews did clearly raise issues, relating usually to earlier educational experiences or life outside education, which caused participants some discomfort. Participants were later asked about the use of such data and specifically agreed for it to be used in anonymised form. With one exception, all participants continued to take part in the group interviews that constituted the later stages of the study, indicating their willingness to take part in spite of any emotional difficulties.

It was made clear to participants that outputs of the research would make reference neither to institutions nor individuals, other than in anonymised form. Statements made in interviews might be quoted during conference presentations and in publications. No other use would be made of them without participants' written permission, and no one outside the research (i.e. other than the researcher, examiners and participants) would be allowed access to the original recordings.

None of these procedures entirely negates the key ethical problem of the study: what might be seen as an asymmetrical power relationship between the researcher and other participants in the study. Both 'researcher' and 'researched' experienced the same educational settings, albeit in different ways, and have lived for many years in the same locations and communities. The aspiration to make their voices heard in this account does not entirely redress the power imbalance: their words that appear in this thesis have been selected in the analysis phase, although their approval has been sought

for the use of these quotations. The citations that appear in the text should also serve as a reminder that these are selections rather than the unedited reproduction of their accounts. The methods by which these accounts were constructed are described in the following sections.

Data collection methods: one-to-one interviews

The data collection methods comprised qualitative one-to-one interviews, with two focus groups designed to provide opportunities for this data to be reflected back to participants. The individual interviews gathered data on students' experiences up to and during their current studies. These were semi-structured, using an interview guide to cover such areas as participants' identification with student roles, their expectations of higher education, tensions with other roles, the response of others to their new identifications and their expectations for the future. Participants were encouraged to develop their own narratives to connect their experience, identity and expectations through the use of probes and supplementary questions. The questions were not designed to provoke standard responses, or to draw directly comparable data, but to deal with specific issues raised by the research question and sub-questions. This method and the interview schedule were initially tested through a pilot interview adhering to the ethical procedures indicated above. Whilst the pilot interviewee's responses gave rise to some concern that the schedule might be too detailed and allow too few opportunities to develop participants' own perspectives, a minor re-framing of the schedule eliminated these problems in later interviews.

The questions specifically focused on the interactive process of identity formation rather than more broadly on life history, or directly on the participants' experience of study. This involved discussion of issues external to their direct experience of education but relevant to this, including such issues as the wider relationships, including family, community and employment. The data collected did reproduce characteristics of life history

accounts, as participants made reference to the social and economic structures that had enabled and constrained their pathways into higher education. As the interviews progressed, specific questions about earlier experiences were incorporated into the interview schedule. The schedule is reproduced as an appendix.

Probes and interactions during the one-to-one interviews focused on clarifying and expanding on the meanings offered by respondents. Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) suggested that qualitative interviews conducted within a phenomenological framework should seek to 'cover both a factual and a meaning level,' (2009:30) and should seek to 'formulate the implicit message' (ibid.) in order to confirm or disconfirm this with the interviewee. This would imply interpretation prior to any detailed processes of coding or analysis after the event. It seemed more practical during this stage for interviews to focus on obtaining participants' descriptions of events, capturing the subjective views of the participant, rather than on developing the researcher's analysis during the interview and seeking confirmation from the interviewee. The opportunity to discover meanings at a deeper level arose during initial coding of the data, allowing these to be reflected back at the focus group stage.

Analysing the data

The process of data analysis sought to balance the intention of capturing and re-presenting the authentic voice of participants with the possibilities of presenting a valid and coherent account in the thesis. The former required the authentic reproduction of participants' narratives; the latter implied the need to re-construct the data into manageable forms. Whilst taping and careful transcription preserved the integrity of the data, its presentation in the thesis required a process of coding and analysis.

Wolcott (1994) has represented qualitative study as a balance of description, analysis and interpretation. From this anthropological perspective, the descriptive representation of social actors is the dominant purpose of all qualitative accounts; analysis of patterns within the data are likely to make a more modest contribution; wider interpretations, linking the study to and developing theory, should play a more modest role. Yet, even in such a predominantly descriptive account such as this, the data cannot simply be reproduced in its original form. As Miles and Huberman (1994) have observed, data is comprehended more easily when represented more succinctly than in many pages of words. The abstraction of any wider meanings from the data also requires some transformation of participants' original words. Whilst the careful taping, transcription and reproduction of the original interviews is reflected in the extracts in the following four chapters, their significance depends on the process of data coding and analysis.

A list of codes was developed during and after the one-to-one interviews. Some of these codings had been developed during the construction of the interview schedule and described such areas as, for example, relations with work organisations. In these cases, the interviews, revealing a range of responses to the questions, gave rise to sub-codes. Other, new codes emerged during the interviews. The themes of location and mobility, for example, were introduced by participants, as were accounts of earlier educational experiences and accounts of changing economic structure.

The widespread use of coding has its origins in grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). A series of prescribed steps, including 'constant comparison' and the search for 'axial codes', has continued to dominate some of these approaches (Glaser, 1978, 1992). However, a greater emphasis is placed on the construction of narratives of meaning than on these routines among other grounded theorists in recent years (Corbin, 2009; Corbin and Strauss, 2008; Charmaz, 2006, 2009). In this case, no single dominant or 'axial' code emerged.

Key themes in the data did emerge during analysis of the initial interviews. Participants' three compensatory narrative types, their construction of adult identities and 'othering' of traditional students, their difficult engagements with work organisations and the structuring of their perspectives on mobility and location were not listed in the initial stages but emerged as meta-themes during the analysis of coded interviews. This enabled them to be reflected back to participants at the focus group interview stage.

Focus group design and analysis

In the design of the study, focus groups had been included in order to combine both interview and observation data. Such data would capture interaction among participants, reflecting interactionist perspectives that emphasise social actors' recognition of, and responses to, the perceived judgements and behaviours of others. For Kitzinger and Barbour (1999) focus groups are 'distinguished from the broader category of group interviews by the explicit use of group interaction to produce data,' (1999: 4). Morgan (1997) defined them as producing data and insights that arise only from interaction in a group. From this perspective, the focus group could be used to reveal how accounts are articulated, contested and changed through group interaction.

This suggested encouraging participants to discuss with one another rather than directly with the researcher. The discussion was planned to develop in the direction of participants' own interests and concerns. The possibility of including the researcher's own observations was also contemplated, as it had been in relation to the individual interviews, where it had been envisaged that visual and other cues, material markers of identity, might emerge in the process of data-collection (Allen Collinson, 2007).

In the event, the collection of observation data was ruled out for the same methodological reasons as it had in the individual interviews. The primacy of

participant data, and the intention to minimise distortion by the researcher's intervention, ruled out the use of such methods. Moreover, the most significant interactions in their construction of identity were, in terms of the thesis, not those with their fellow-students but those with others from family, workplace and local environments. The one-to-one interviews had already offered students the chance to describe the interactions through which they had sought to construct and legitimate their own identities. By the time the first focus group took place, the intention to collect observation data had already been abandoned in favour of triangulation by seeking feedback on early research findings. A summary of key findings was presented to each of the focus groups, to which participants were invited to respond. The sessions were taped and, in the first case, transcribed in full. Nine participants attended the first of these, which took place soon after the initial interviews. Six attended a second focus group over a year after the initial interviews took place. Some checking of individual details and informal discussion of lines of inquiry had taken place in the interim.

Two focus groups were carried out: one shortly after the transcription of the one-to-one interviews was completed in June 2009. A second was carried out after further analysis of the data in April 2010. These events allowed participants opportunities to revisit some of the themes raised earlier and to respond to tentative analysis offered by the researcher. Perhaps inevitably, these revealed less personalised data than the one-to-one interviews. Despite careful attempts to secure balance and ensure wide participation, some participants took a greater part in discussion than others. Whilst Krueger and Casey (2000) have suggested that the focus group's main purpose is to provide a setting for 'self-disclosure,' Michell's (1999) seems the more accurate description: sensitive issues can be discussed more openly in interviews, whilst the focus group provides a view of social processes. This tendency was compounded by male dominance of the focus group discussions, whereas women had made some of the most significant observations in the one-to-one interviews.

Following the focus group, the list of codes was revised and data from both individual and group interviews re-coded. The elaboration of the major themes described above developed from this re-coding. From this, the data was reviewed for illustrations of these themes. These illustrations appear in the following three chapters

These methods represent the various attempts made to resolve the tension between capturing the accounts of individuals and discovering the common features of their experience. This does not amount to a search for a universal, or even a common, identity. Describing the collection of data for the 'FurtherHigher Project,' Bathmaker (2009) described a tension in the literature on widening participation: whilst emphasising diversity, it tends to:

> inscribe "ideal type" attributes to students who are named "widening participation", "non-traditional", or "further education" students (2009: 5).

The same report observed a tendency for 'students who tended to be less secure and less successful academic learners,' (2009: 1) to go on to higher levels within the same 'dual sector' institutions, thus naming these 'non-traditional' students. A key tension in this thesis, which has also sought to escape the tyranny of 'non-traditional' stereotypes, has been to capture the diverse, lived experience of individuals, whilst producing a coherent account of patterns in the data, in order for it to offer meaning beyond the life of the individual. The next part of the thesis sets out these accounts and indicates such patterns.

PART THREE: FIELD DATA

CHAPTER 5: NARRATIVES OF TRANSITION

Introduction

The following chapters set out the data from the individual interviews and focus groups. This chapter reports participants' descriptions of how they became part-time higher education students in a college. The survey design had not specifically aimed to collect data about prior experiences; but it emerged by the end of the third one-to-one interview that participants were constructing their identities substantially through such narratives. Rather than explanations of their later decisions to take part in higher education, these narratives emerged as reflections on their earlier non-participation: they explained why they had not gone on to study higher education at eighteen.

Data analysis suggested three patterns of such narratives, differing according to the social norms that participants identified in their own families and communities. For the first group, these narratives described norms in their own communities of non-participation in higher, or even of further, education. They claimed to have conformed to these norms and their accounts are called 'narratives of conformity.' The second group's narratives described social norms of participation in undergraduate study. For them, events beyond their control had prevented them from going to university at eighteen. Since these events made them exceptions to the norms they described, these are described as 'narratives of exception.' A third pattern fell between these two: These participants had grown up in environments that shared similarities with the earlier experience of the first group; but all three had gone on to secondary schools which had a strong focus on university entrance. Failing to fit in these institutions, these students had eventually entered higher education through vocational studies later in their lives. The paths they describe include unsuccessful attempts to transgress from their earlier pathways onto another track, frustrated through a failure to adapt to

the norms of new institutions: these are described as 'narratives of transgression'.

Whilst these may be seen as compensatory narratives, through which participants explained reasons for studying part-time and in a college, their main emphasis was on their reason for studying later in life, as opposed to at a 'normal' age. By contrast with studies of young people's transitions that have focused on their choices to remain in or leave school or higher education (Mare, 1980) the paths which bring adults to higher education are diverse and require adaptive identity work. They are described here as extended and (dis)located transitions, extending over sometimes considerable periods and entailing a relationship with their earlier trajectories.

These accounts serve to introduce the participants in the study. They also represent an aspect of their accounts prioritised by participants themselves. Further, they relate to fine-grained aspects of social structure, which have further significance for patterns in the data, discussed in Chapter Eight. The three types are exemplified in turn.

Narratives of conformity: norms of non-participation

Five of the participants in the study produced accounts of growing up in communities where going to university had been unusual, if not unheard-of, at the time when they left school. Bob, Clare, Paula and Pervez came from small towns a few miles from the college, which had formerly been dominated by mining and heavy industry. Jayne, who grew up in a farming family, fits more closely into this pattern of narrative than any other. Their narratives all suggested social norms of non-participation in higher education after school. Since these accounts were offered as explanations for their narrators' not going on to higher education at eighteen, they are described as 'narratives of conformity' to such norms. For them, the

possibility of higher education never arose. Pervez left school in the mid nineteen-eighties:

> *Pervez:* I went to a school [where] out of our entire year, there was not, I can't recall a single person that was going, or wanted to go, to university. Whether that's changed or not, I don't know... It just wasn't even on the cards to be doing that. Everybody went out to work, simple as that. It was certainly something my family never discussed (Pervez, #69).

> *Claire:* I came from a mining background – community - and at that time, I left school at 16, I did a secretarial course. But that was the only option I was offered in that time. And things have changed a lot since then but going back thirty-odd years - (FG1, #80).

These participants left school before the massification of higher education in the late nineteen-eighties and early 'nineties. Their accounts reflect a period of relatively low participation in higher or even further education, particularly in communities where relatively high wages were possible with virtually no qualifications. The situation that Allen and Ainley (2010) have described in relation to the early 1970s, with forty percent of school leavers going to unskilled jobs, continued longer in such communities where local economies had developed around extractive and heavy industries such as steel products and chemicals. For those who went to university, going to college usually represented a point of more or less permanent exit from those communities. If widening participation has changed the numbers going to university, even within these communities, this past appears to cast a continuing shadow.

But similar narratives were also constructed by students who had left school within the last ten years. Younger participants also suggested that non-participation in higher education was the norm for their age-group. Bob grew up in another small town with a strong tradition of primary and heavy industry, where the local school presently has no sixth form (although it had in the past) and described progression when he left school in 1996:

> *Bob:* Quite a few people went to the college - I think they had a sixth form [i.e. at his school] but they stopped it - but you could see a lot of people going to college because they were too bone [idle] to get a job: they'd probably tell you as well. So there was some of that but I can't think of anybody I know who went on to get a qualification. Can't think of one. There must have been - not many - a low percentage (Bob, #71).

Bob re-iterated this at the first focus group:

> I can't recall any of my friends who went to university or have done anything since, really (FG1, #104).

Paula, the youngest in this group, expressed this rather more ambivalently. Growing up in another town with a past of heavy industry, she too described a community in which going to university was unusual. To an extent, this reflected the influence of the past, through such channels as family:

> *Paula:* My family's not really into education or anything else like that, so when I got my GCSEs it were never a very big deal or anything, even though I thought I did really well. ... But she [i. e. her mother] never asks about it, I don't think she sees me as a student. ... She sees that I'm at college and that I'm doing it for work (Paula, #50).

Not for the last time, higher education was explained here as 'for work': a view shared across very different groups of students. A contradiction in this account is that Paula described in detail the difficulties of her relationships with friends who did go to university from school. Some of these had lived in the more affluent areas within her school's catchment area; within her own community, going to university was represented as a distinctive achievement:

> *Paula:* So the actual people that I grew up with in my village, only one person in our group went to university (Paula, #75).

Changes in the level of participation have taken place in these areas as higher education has expanded. Yet this process has limitations, as indicated in the accounts of older participants such as Clare, whose own children have gone on to higher education:

Clare: One or two [of her daughters' contemporaries] continued but most of them didn't. I don't know whether it's the school they went to: at that particular school they didn't do [A-levels]. From what I believe a lot of them haven't got jobs but have a family of their own. The school has come on and a small number go on to [local school with sixth form], some come to college. One went to [local Roman Catholic shool]. But most of them left at sixteen. I see them pushing pushchairs and that (Clare, #59).

In the locations where these students grew up, where well-paid work was formerly available without high levels of qualification, education may be discursively opposed to hard work, as Bob's comments above suggest. The difficulties for students from such areas, then, do not only include a perceived need to study whilst working: they include a need to be seen as hard-working. At the same time, many students are cautious of appearing academic and therefore alien. Paula expressed both of sides of this:*Paula*: I like to be perceived like that, that I've always got something on. I'm quite hard-working and I like to be doing something all the time. ... So me saying I'm at college probably reinforces that - that I've got something extra on, that I'm a bit busier than them, probably a bit more driven (Paula, #85).

Paula: I do downplay it. I don't want to look like a snob. Not a snob but - How do you describe it? A swot (Paula, #20).

This difficulty of naming education – something that might all too easily be opposed to work - featured strongly in the narratives of conformity. Clare expressed this opposition in her own identity:

Clare: People see me, they don't see me as a student at all, they see me as a working person (Clare, #10).

These accounts are described as narratives of conformity because they describe respondents' earlier pathways in terms of local norms of non-participation. For these students, higher education had in the past been constituted as 'not for us,' us meaning those different from the middle-class, white, male participants in higher education, in the past and continuing today.

Perhaps surprisingly, Jayne, from a farming background, also described similar norms:

Jayne: My mum's a teacher, so why she didn't make me, I don't know. My brother went but my dad's a farmer, he was just, do whatever you're going to be happy with, he's got no formal qualifications, he worked with my grandfather, so he's not used to anything like that (Jayne, #52).

This contrast with brothers who went on to higher education suggests the gendered norms of higher education in the past, an issue raised fleetingly at the focus group by Jo, one of the older participants, but not taken up. What Jayne did have in common with other participants in this group is the size of community in which she grew up: as we will see, this emerged as a difference between the different narrative types.

As indicated above, the areas described above have changed substantially during the last thirty years. Relatively stable patterns of employment in traditional industries – not only male employment in heavy industry but also some areas, such as textiles, which provided stable employment for women – have given way to new patterns of employment that may be perceived as shorter-term and more unstable. This is, of course, part of the discourse of lifelong learning: the need for education and training to fit people for working in this environment. But, particularly in the communities where these participants grew up, new industries and the disappearance of traditional firms are frequently associated with new low-skill, low-wage employment. In these circumstances, fears of the risks associated with these changes appear to serve to discourage higher education. These themes also emerged in the narratives of conformity.

Conformity and the 'risk' discourse

Several participants offering narratives of conformity justified their own decisions (conscious or otherwise) not to participate at eighteen by comparing their own successes to the difficulties encountered by others who had studied full time. Their difficulties allowed participants in the study to construct their own choices as more prudent:

> *Jayne*: Some of them got into debt at university and a lot of them aren't even using those degrees. They're doing jobs completely unrelated. I know you need a degree to get into some jobs, or some company or something. And I know definitely two of my friends that have got degrees, and good degrees, they're not earning any more money than I am, we're sort of on an even keel really. If anything, their jobs and the prospects in their jobs aren't as good as mine are. And I know one of my friends said that's what she should have done, found something that you like to do, then get their qualification, I know it's not necessarily the right way but for me it's worked ok (Jayne, #28).

Earlier studies of non-participation have reported working-class and ethnic minority respondents who rationalised their own career choices through accounts of the risks entailed in HE participation (Watts and Bridges, 2006; Archer 2003; Archer and Hutchings, 2000). Archer (2003) has drawn on Beck's (1992) proposition that 'risk' is a central characteristic of modern life, implicated in social inequality: working-class respondents perceived the expense of higher-level study as unjustified by the uncertainties at the end. 'For working-class students, university remained more of a gamble, with higher stakes, than for middle-class students,' (2003: 136). Their structurally riskier positions made higher education a riskier choice, with no guarantee that the social and economic gains would compensate for the loss of time, money, relationships and identity entailed.

For those constructing narratives of conformity, their structural positions led them to construct part-time, local study as a less risky option. Full-time higher education was represented as a relative disadvantage, by opposing it to work experience.

> *Bob:* One of my older cousins, he'd just done a degree, science and something on those lines, he ended up in a factory. He couldn't get a job, so he'd gone through all that and couldn't get a job. I think to be honest he's all right now. But for a long, long time, he struggled to get any work; he'd not got any experience (Bob, #74).

The extent to which work and higher education were intertwined in these accounts is discussed further in Chapter Seven. At this point, the importance

of work in the construction of identity is linked to the notion of work as something stable and secure, as opposed to higher education as a greater gamble. This is particularly the case among those offering narratives of conformity. Having suggested that these narratives have been shaped by social and geographical locations, the thesis will go on to discuss ways in which these are perpetuated. But this is better explained in relation to the 'narratives of exception.' These are introduced next.

Narratives of exception: special circumstances of non-participation

The four narratives that belong to this group described reasons for not entering into full-time higher education at eighteen as the result of accidental circumstances. These personal reasons varied; but an underlying assumption of their narratives was that higher education was perfectly natural for 'people like us,' or indeed for anyone. The special circumstances that had affected them had led to their non-participation at this age.

These were not the children of privileged backgrounds. All four participants in this category had parents who had not gone to university. These four participants – Brian, Jas, Lauren and Phil – all grew up in engineering towns, mainly with fathers employed in various roles in that industry and their accounts drew on traditions of vocational education in that area, rather than any family tradition of university education. Yet they described their own participation as exceptional, based on particular individual circumstances which prevented them following a 'normal route'.

For Brian, the youngest participant, an eye condition prevented him completing his A-levels within two years and, after finally completing them, he eventually took on a full-time job. Phil described temporary financial circumstances as his reason for non-participation on leaving school. Lauren described a more significant turn of events:

Lauren: My dad died. He died at New Year's Day, in the year I took my A-levels. And I had three months out of college at the time, so then I had to take the decision: we couldn't afford for me to go to university, someone needed to go and get a job. So I went to work as a part-time receptionist at a vet's. And a sales post at a call centre the rest of the time to make the time up so I had a full-time wage. It meant that I couldn't carry on going to university (Lauren, #32).

Lauren's account includes a useful reminder that these are not the accounts of children of the professional classes: she described being unaware of any alternatives:

Lauren: When I decided I couldn't follow that route, at the time I didn't think I would ever do something by an alternative route, I thought, that was it... I didn't think there was another option or another way... I didn't look into it at the time. I just thought, that's it (Lauren, #38).

This is markedly different from the accounts produced by children, whose access to detailed, effective guidance about university study 'is taken for granted; it is beyond discussion' (Reay et al., 2005: 81) quite apart from any financial considerations. Nevertheless, the presentation of this account as an unfortunate personal experience, like others in this group, marks significant differences from the narratives of conformity.

Jas offered the most dramatic account of 'failure' to progress to university. One of the older participants, he linked his lack of opportunity to study full-time to his account of problems in school, where he described bullying by a teacher:

Jas: From my junior years, the four formative years of my life, I was beaten by a particular teacher every single day at school. So by the end of the last year in junior school I had disengaged with the educational process.

And I remember each day. Some people say it couldn't be that bad but I actually remember each day, and I remember the resolutions that were attempted by my parents. You know, they brought councillors and members of the higher community to talk to the teacher, who would then take it out on me for doing that.

It wasn't worth the effort in the end. So by the time I'd got to secondary school, I'd already given up on the educational system. So, you know, I left school without even learning to read (Jas, #16).

Jas, like the others in this group, represented full-time university study at eighteen as the norm for people like himself. This account was not presented, and is not offered here, as a 'typical' experience of education. The participants who presented this type of narrative described their experiences and their consequences as exceptions to social norms of participation in higher education.

Given the difference of these accounts from both the narratives of conformity to non-participation and the expectations of middle-class young people, the question then arises as to what patterns of participation, what social norms, are referred to in these accounts. These accounts also reflect employment traditions; but in a very different way.

Narratives of exception: social norms

Whilst those putting forward narratives of conformity share the characteristics of coming from relatively small communities, those providing narratives of exception came from larger towns. Although those in this category had parents who had not gone to university, they viewed their own non-participation at eighteen as exceptional for the social groups with which they identified. Their links to parental employment in an industry where education and training have been more highly valued emerged in some accounts. Lauren attributed her former intention to take a traditional route to the influence of her father. He had become a transport manager in one of the town's biggest engineering firms:

Lauren: He was at technical college, or something, different education system at the time, he went and did an apprenticeship at [local engineering business, now closed], he was in the drawing office there. He did National Service for three or four years. When he came out of the RAF, the whole system had changed, somehow

he ended up as transport manager at [local engineering employer, now relocated]. He was probably more my motivation. I remember when I decided I couldn't carry on and go to university at that time, thinking he would turn in his grave. It was the last thing he would have wanted (Lauren, #55-57).

The two organisations mentioned here had been, for much of the late Twentieth Century, well-known engineering firms in the same town as the college. References to her father's apprenticeship, and to his later manager's role, identify him with more highly skilled sections of the workforce: and in particular with the traditions of education and training in the engineering industry. Whilst these traditions sometimes take the form of training for narrow and limiting roles – the 'restrictive environments' described by Fuller and Unwin (2004) – they nevertheless validate education and training as important activities that provide opportunities for career development: such traditions do not have the same resonance in the industries that dominated the satellite towns a little further from the college.

Brian's father worked in the same industry and his interview combined reports of relatives who thought that that 'college isn't necessarily the right place for higher education and university is the right place for it,' (Brian, #84) with some elusive references to the family's only earlier graduate. An uncle whose financial success was not seen as entirely legitimate was presented less as a role model than an example of how one might go astray:

> Brian: In some respects I am like my uncle… and there was a thought that if I went to university, I'd get thoughts in my head, something like that (Brian, #92).

In these circumstances, college had the attraction of being a safer option. Nevertheless, Brian presented higher education as a normal expectation for people like him, influenced by family expectations.

Jas's account also reflected the influence of the traditions in manufacturing industry, having grown up in an inner-city area of Derby, his father working in one of the large foundries in the town. This was mediated by his identity as

part of a family of Asian descent in a community where higher education was highly valued:

> *Jas*: I was in the inner city, it wasn't a fantastic area or anything but in our community, if you don't go to university, who are you? We had a couple of promising footballers, one was an apprentice at Manchester United but it was so frowned upon he came home and went to do teacher training. It was a big deal. I'm the only one in my family who didn't go (FG, #101).

Whilst this account draws on traditions of education among Indian communities in the UK, Jas also drew on the traditions of engineering and other manufacturing industries. In the focus group, he suggested that these industries had in themselves provided routes to opportunity for many of his contemporaries.

> *Jas*: The reason why our schools did so well back then was partially because it was an engineering town, with Rolls Royce, Ceylanese, Leys, railway [engineering works] who all didn't go to university, they got apprenticeships, then they got sent to university by those organisations as well, so some of my friends who are quite high up in Rolls Royce they went as draughts - apprentices, trainee draughtspeople and then became buyers and so on (FG, #109).

In addition to these direct associations with skilled work in urban settings, Lauren's account also included the representation of significant differences from the communities where those presenting narratives of conformity grew up. Lauren represented her husband and his family as typical of these communities and linked their differences in outlook explicitly to geographical and social locations:

> *Lauren:* Alan's family, completely different background. Alan left school at sixteen; they talked him out of carrying on with his education. What do you want with education? Go and work in a factory. So it's almost not discussed. Alan's family don't discuss it... He wanted to stay on and go to college. And they talked him out of it, you don't need to go to college, just go and get a job.

Alan's mum's never worked. Alan's dad was a miner. His brother-in-law's worked in various jobs. His sister doesn't work. She's still at

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home. They don't discuss it. He left school at 16. He wanted to stay on and go to college. And they talked him out of it: *you don't need to go to college, just go and get a job.* Typical mining sort of family background. And I don't mean that in any sort of derogatory sense - that's just – different (Lauren, #47-50)Thus, the narratives of exception not only drew on the traditions of education and training around skilled work in the engineering industry: they included constructions of difference from other communities where post-compulsory study was seen as less valued. For those putting forward narratives of exception, university was presented as the valid form of post-compulsory education; yet their identities also drew on other educational traditions. As we have seen in Chapter Two, colleges have not only emerged from traditions of vocational and particularly technical education; their contribution to higher education also has its longest traditions in engineering. Whilst these traditions would hardly have been in the forefront of participants' decisions about study, they have contributed to the awareness of young people about the circuits of education in such (formerly) industrial towns as these, just as limited family knowledge of post-compulsory education affected those offering narratives of conformity. The way participants travelled through these circuits also have some interest and these are discussed in the following section.

Narratives of exception: pathways into higher education

For the younger members of this group, the route back into education came, broadly, through the workplace. Brian took a trainee manager's job with a construction supply firm that required him to enrol on a higher education programme and led him onto a foundation degree. Later, he financed his own progression on to honours level. Phil was able to find sponsorship for a non-prescribed course from which he financed his own progression. Jas's path, however, had been much more protracted, owing to his earlier experiences:

> *Jas:* I was an accidental social worker. Because I worked in factories, I worked on building sites and all kind of different things. And then someone asked me to apply for a job working with children, working in a children's home, which I did; and one of the worst things for me was filling the logbook. I had to get a dictionary and I'd be challenging myself to do these things. And each time I managed it, I became credible and people started to respect me and I was encouraged, challenged to do something else.

> Hence my role, because it's took twenty-two years to get here, most people don't take that long to become a manager, so that's how I have evolved. ... I've never really had that student life, you know, which I kind of feel I kind of missed out on. Because I think had I had a better academic experience, I would have got the whole package, I kind of feel I've been cheated on (Jas, #18-24).

Jas experienced higher education first in his professional training in social work and later on a non-prescribed management course in a college, where he encountered 'a learning environment that was nurturing,' (#52) before moving onto a higher education route. Lauren, on the other hand, worked purposefully for five years of evening study through the part-time routes available through her local college at the time.

> *Lauren:* After six, seven years with the vet's, it was like a glass ceiling: I couldn't go any further: it was a family firm. I got frustrated, I didn't want to be a receptionist all my life, so that's what prompted me to come back and do my HNC and work my way to towards getting a degree this way rather than the way I'd originally intended to do (Lauren, #32).

Earlier in this interview, Lauren had identified her path through college as an alternative that she was unaware of when she first abandoned plans for university and went to work. According to this narrative, Lauren's decision was a rational response to the frustrations she encountered in less skilled roles; her engagement with the college was prompted by convenience:

> *Lauren:* When I originally started, location was the real key for me. I was working [nearby] at the time. It was just once a week at the time. I worked the time. But as I was working 12 hours a day at the time, it was quite easy (Lauren, #61).

Later during the interview, Lauren constructed this process differently in response to a suggested alternative explanation for her re-entry into education. Having said earlier that she never talked about her studies to anyone, she later elaborated:

> *Lauren:* I probably talk more about [it to] the people I go running with than I do with my family. I spend a lot of time with them... when I'm chatting, talking about what I'm doing, sorting [a course project] out... So I probably talk to them more than to my family and my husband. I think I do actually, yeah.

> *BE:* And that's interesting. Why do you think that is? Why are they more interested than your family or Alan?

> *Lauren:* It's just different backgrounds with them. They've all got reasonably good jobs; they've all sort of gone to college, university, different forms of education themselves. I suppose talking to them, I've got, probably, more of a feel that they know what I'm doing, and what I'm on with, more than my family do. So, I can go along and say I'm doing this on the supply chain or whatever and I need to do this, you get different points of view about how they approach it... Maybe I feel it's more acceptable to discuss things with them.

> *BE:* And of course this doesn't have any effect on your motivation - or did it?

> *Lauren:* I'm just trying to think. I was 21, 22 when I joined the club. I don't know actually, because I joined the club, I started the course a year later. I don't know. I never actually linked the two. Possibly, possibly it did. I never thought it did. When you think back, I sort of spent twelve months running with them... then suddenly I decided I was going to go back to college. And I'd been a member of the club for twelve months. Maybe it did. I'd never linked the two. Because I was running in a group of people that it is reasonably acceptable to want to do better and to achieve that within your job. Yeah. Maybe (Lauren, #88-101).

This interview identifies two periods of time when it seemed acceptable and feasible to enter higher education: the time before Lauren's father's death and the time after she had become an accepted member of the running club.

Both periods are characterised by the influence of significant others who regarded entering higher education as a 'normal' course of action: her father during the first period and graduates in the running club during the second. Whilst the intervening period was represented as a time when she needed to earn money, it was a time when others who urged such a course of action appear to have been absent. Lauren made no distinction between her earlier intentions to move away to university and her later decision to study at college, explicitly (and unusually, compared to other participants) suggesting that the choice of institution was unimportant.

The accounts offered by this group suggest one pattern by which some adults have come to participate in college-based higher education. Entering this level of study later in life, their decisions were at no point determined by the contacts and insider knowledge that have enabled middle-class families to garner most of the opportunities presented by 'widening participation' for their children (Reay et al., 2005: 61-82). The traditions of vocational education, in which colleges were the best-known local institutions, even though they regarded universities as the 'normal' location of higher education study, appear to have exerted some influence on their decisions.

The routes by which this group eventually reached higher education varied; but all set out with some intention of studying at higher levels, even if their purposes were deflected. The final group also had this intention, or at least their parents had it for them. They, however, undertook different paths.

Narratives of transgression

Finally, three of the participants described unsuccessful earlier attempts to move to new social locations. All three were women who left school before English higher education had reached the present levels of participation; but had gone to schools with a strong emphasis on university entrance.

Nevertheless, they had all failed to adapt to these environments and had not gone to university. Later, through work-related opportunities, they returned to higher education study at college. These are described as narratives of transgression.

Jackie described her family as having little experience of education; and represented them as distant from her recent studies:

> *Jackie:* My family have never done any, like, going to college. I've got a brother, years and years ago he had to go to college, he's an electrician, and he has to keep up to date in all his things; but other than that, it's just... They just – 'What's that?' and then – 'Sss! Don't know what you're talking about.' (Jackie, #20).

Yet her parents moved her at thirteen to a school more focused on academic achievement than their earlier, community based secondary schools. Jackie presented the transition as difficult because of the focus on academic subjects and the absence of other learning opportunities, such as the use of computers, which she had experienced at her earlier school.

The participants who offered these narratives grew up in three very different communities. Jackie and Jo grew up in areas where higher education was less usual but apparently in families where their potential to access higher-level was valued. Jackie was a little ambivalent about these questions:

> *Jackie:* I don't even know why I swapped schools, because none of my friend even went. ... I wonder if I did it so my mum and dad would be proud that, you know, I was going to grammar school. None of my friends went. I went to [the local secondary school]. All my friends were there and everything, I just decided I wanted to go.
>
> *BE:* So how did your friends react when you went?
>
> *Jackie:* I still kept in touch. It was good in one way because I made another network of friends. So, I'd got a lot more friends than what I'd had before, but, yeah, they used to rib me, and sometimes, it's all, you can't play, you can't come out with us, you can't be seen with us, sort of thing (Jackie, #49-51).

Eventually, Jackie and her new school began to move apart:

> *Jackie:* I just got to a point where I just thought, I don't want to stay on. And because I didn't want to stay on, I lost a lot of the support in class because they weren't really bothered about those who weren't staying on and doing sixth form (Jackie, #26).

More than any other participant in the study, Jackie described her employer as pushing her into study, far beyond the level at which she wanted to take part in higher education. She had done an HNC ten years previously; then her employer had asked her to convert this, first to a Foundation Degree and then to honours level. She had chosen the college as a familiar environment, perhaps reflecting a more general reluctance to engage with unfamiliar surroundings:

> *Jackie:* I'd been to [the HE campus] before, rather than going somewhere else and not knowing where things are and things like that (Jackie, #26).

However, Jackie continued to regard the acquisition of qualifications with some hesitation. She regarded her employer's enthusiasm for qualifications with suspicion:

> *Jackie:* I'm a hands-on person, I don't go to work and think, let me think about so-and-so's theory and how, you know, how would that be? I just go and do my job. How is that going to help me do my job any better? But as somebody said to me when I was out once and they were trying to get me to continue and do my masters, it just makes you think more about things. And I'm, like, well, I don't know, does it?(Jackie, #139).

Jo, also an NHS employee, presented an account with similarities, although, she displayed more enthusiasm for her course than Jackie. There had been an expectation within her family that she would progress to university. She failed the 'eleven plus' examination and went to the local school in the former mining village where her father, who had grown up in Plaistow and studied medicine as a mature student, was the General Practitioner. Having

performed successfully at the local secondary school, Jo moved to a selective school in a nearby town.

> *Jo:* In the third year, they took the top so many out of each class and they got moved to [a nearby selective school]. And I just couldn't do it, I just, just was crap. Just didn't work for me. ... So I did my O-levels, left. Then I came to college, to do my A-levels. And I was doing chemistry, biology, but I hated them. I was doing them because my mum and dad wanted me to do them, which, right or wrong, was how it was.

> Then, before I did my A-levels I got a job working in the labs as a trainee MSO, did my ONC. Did my first, was it, 18 months of my HND, got pregnant and left. And then obviously I stayed at home with the kids, then went back to work just screening smears part-time. So I suppose I just didn't go down the route, I don't know what I wanted at the time (Jo, #42-46).

Jo contrasted her story with those of successful siblings; like Jackie, she hinted at some of the difficulties of making transitions to a different social milieu in a selective school:

> *Jo*: I hated it. I left all my friends, I think that's what it was and I think you've got to feel comfortable about where you are (Jo, #50).

Finally, Emma also encountered rejection in a school with a successful reputation to defend. She described herself as less academically successful at school than her dominant twin:

> *Emma:* I think I wasn't as driven at that point so I didn't really care what I did actually at 16, it didn't bother me at all. I felt I had to do further education because my parents would have wanted that and I didn't want to let them down (Emma, #86).

> *Emma:* I left school, did this BTEC in Business Studies, which was quite strange really, at sixteen, and dropped out of that after six months of that. I went to this college and did Electrical Engineering. I was quite good at it, just the pure maths I couldn't do, I was quite good at the practical stuff. I floundered for a couple of years, did voluntary work with the homeless, two projects in Sheffield (Emma, #21).

Eventually, Emma became a psychiatric nurse; later, she returned to study a professional management programme and moved on to an honours degree in Business and Management. Like most of the participants in the study, she had acquired a range of other responsibilities and identities along the way. In common with Jo and Jackie, she returned to study in a college some years after leaving school.

None of these three participants made any explicit link between the selective schools where they had earlier failed to fit in and the selective universities which their academic abilities might have taken them into. Nor did they associate colleges, as local and inclusive institutions, with the local schools that they had left to follow these selective routes. These were issues that were not explored in the interviews. This pattern may reflect the experience of other HE students in colleges from a variety of backgrounds. Whilst Jackie grew up on the edge of a major town, Emma and Jo grew up in rural locations (and in two very different communities). The differences in their backgrounds may have as much significance as their common experience. It remains to summarise the significance of these diverse narratives.

Conclusion: extended and (dis)located transitions

The classification of narratives into three 'types' seeks neither to describe comprehensively the lived reality of any individual participant in the study, nor to allocate these sub-groups into specific social categories. Firstly, it illustrates the diversity of these narratives; secondly, it identifies patterns in the data that are linked to social and geographical locations; finally, it represents a complexity that appears common to adult accounts of higher education study yet is seldom explicitly discussed in consideration of national and institutional policies. Whilst these patterns will re-emerge in later discussion of the data, some initial summary comments are made at this point.

The diversity of accounts, even among a small group from one college, illustrates the complexity of the groups drawn to HE in colleges. Bathmaker (2009) is among those who have noted the tensions between a discourse of diversity in the literature of widening participation and the tendency to ascribe the attributes of an 'ideal type' to 'widening participation' students, including those in colleges. Such characterisations then suffer a tendency to be compared to 'traditional' students and their behaviours, which in turn reinforces these as an 'ideal type' of its own. Similar tendencies have been noted in studies of US community college students (Kim, 2002).

Although these narratives describe students' personal choices and actions, they do appear to reflect particular geographical and social locations. These are not narratives that reflect simply 'middle-class' or 'working-class' origins, or the ethnicity or gender of different participants. Almost all of the participants in this study had grown up in families linked to traditional industries in the area; all were engaged, to varying extents, in attempting to develop technical or professional careers in the wake of the decline or disappearance of the area's traditional industries. Differences in their earlier locations nevertheless appear significant for their pathways into higher education, and were frequently identified by the participants themselves as such. Fig. 2 illustrates the key differences.

The first two narratives, and to a lesser extent the narratives of transgression, are distinguished by the size of community in which the narrators grew up, and by the occupations that typified these communities. The way participants made sense of their own relationships to social norms in their own locations appears to have been important in both their non-participation after leaving school and their later educational choices. Whilst these locations were not on their own decisive in determining pathways in life and education, they did affect the compensatory narratives that were constructed. Further, differences in the aspirations of participants may also

Narrative type:	Conformity	Exception	Transgression
Participants	Bob Claire Jayne Paula Pervez	Brian Jas Lauren Phil	Emma Jackie Jo
Population of location at 18	< 20 000	>50 000	< 20 000
Local industries in twentieth century	Primary and heavy industry	Manufacturing	Primary and heavy industry
Family background	Semi-skilled, unskilled occupations	Engineering, usually skilled occupations	Mixed
Normative view of higher education	'Not for people like us'	'For people like us'	'Not for the people we were'
Rationale for non-participation at 18	Social norms – risk discourse	Personal circumstances	Non-integration in elite schooling
Location of 'imagined futures'	Restricted	Expansive	Restricted

FIG. 2: NARRATIVE TYPOLOGY

be traced to 'membership' of these different groups: these are discussed in Chapter Eight. For now, this typology serves to emphasise the dissimilarities among these accounts; but it also indicates the persistent effects of social structure.

Much of what appears in these narratives appears to reflect a past which policy discourses tend to portray as disappearing. The mining and heavy industry-based communities of the past, in which post-compulsory education was often seen as an irrelevance, have shrunk considerably in the UK (although their successors are growing prodigiously overseas). Manufacturing industry has also contracted and associated studies dominate neither further nor higher education in colleges in the way that they did in the past. There may be increased emphasis, even in selective schools, on success for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. However, the past casts a long shadow. Moreover, low-participation neighbourhoods are an acknowledged fact, notwithstanding the changing nature of employment; and personal tragedies, failures to fit in and acts of personal rebellion will no doubt continue to occur. In these circumstances, it seems likely that adults will continue to seek opportunities to participate in higher education and that many from such backgrounds will be disinclined to look to selective institutions.

The notion of 'transitions' has been used to examine inequality in higher education (Arum, Gamoran and Shavit, 2007) following earlier studies of school continuation (Mare, 1980). According to this view, at each transition point, the children of more advantaged classes are more likely to continue with their studies; those from disadvantaged backgrounds more likely either to drop out or to select the less advantageous track. For adults like those in this study, at least one of the latter decisions had already been made by the time they applied to higher education. But a multiplicity of such decisions may have been made already during their lives, preparing decisions to participate in institutions seen as more appropriate to their earlier studies.

In view of these complexities, the transitions of these adults may be described as extended and (dis)located transitions. That participants in this study chose, largely without prompting, to talk about their earlier educational experiences whilst reflecting on their current identities, indicates that they at least regard their educational journeys as in some senses continuous, and in this sense deserving of the name transition. The extensive nature of the transitions between different stages is derived from the length of the process and the many steps entailed. The dislocation stems from the apparent need of all participants to relocate themselves from their earlier positioning in relation to social norms and to their own personal biographies. According to narratives described here, this might mean seeking to move beyond locations in which higher education is supposedly excluded, re-orienting themselves following earlier accidental circumstances, or seeking new paths towards higher education following earlier unsuccessful steps towards university in this direction. However, there remains a sense in which their earlier locations remain with them, a theme explored in greater depth in Chapter Eight. This gives rise to the term (dis)location: the dislocation is not complete, albeit for some participants more than others.

Extended and (dis)located transitions might well involve movements into higher education and decisions to postpone or withdraw temporarily from study. National and institutional policies, strongly focused on achievement within identified time-scales and currently seeking to enhance this within lower-ranked institutions, tend to present more straightforward models of participation. Conversely, opportunities for drawn-out study and for remedial activity have also been the object of criticism in America because of their 'diversionary' tendencies. Whilst this limited study cannot provide evidence about the wisdom or otherwise of such policies, some such implications of the study are discussed in later chapters.

However, the transitions, or rather the narratives themselves, constitute only one part of the substance of the thesis: the complex processes of identity construction. Later chapters will set out the processes by which students

constructed their identities within higher education. Chapter Six explains the process by which participants constructed 'adult' identities that they opposed to traditional 'others' and locates their accounts in the context of changing work environments. Chapter Seven analyses the way identities were shaped by, and in turn pre-figured, the geographical and social locations of students' lives. However, the emphasis placed on these narratives of early non-participation in one-to-one interviews demonstrates the importance of these accounts to those who took part in the study. The following chapter moves on to describe how students' identities were constructed during their studies.

CHAPTER 6: STATEMENTS OF IDENTITY

Introduction

This chapter presents a view of the identities constructed by participants in the study. Drawn from their own perceptions and from their interpretation of comments and judgements made by those around them, the data reported constitutes their representations of what it means to be a part-time student in a college. The data also indicates the processes by which identity was constructed. As Hall (1996) has pointed out, identity is constructed not only through the associative acts by which individuals affirm their membership of groups with shared experience and history, but also through the drawing of boundaries that differentiate them from members of other groups. In this case, the boundaries were reciprocally drawn – or were perceived to be drawn - by those on its other side.

Initial descriptions of fragmented identity are set in the context of participants' multiple roles and identifications. Their experience of the stresses of part-time study was used to construct 'adult' identities, not least in that it provided the basis for an othering of traditional students. Their construction of college as an adult and even participative environment appears to be influenced both by personal experience and by the opportunities provided for distance from younger undergraduates. Participants also presented themselves as less torn by the conflicts of multiple identities than students from disadvantaged backgrounds in some earlier studies. Yet most participants had encountered discourses which challenged their right to claim the same legitimacy, as students and potential graduates, as others: their identity was at least partly constructed in opposition to this discourse.

Conflicting roles and coherent identities

All participants replied to initial, direct questions by offering qualified definitions of themselves as 'part-time' or as 'mature' students, or declining to identify themselves as students at all. Only three students said they considered themselves either a 'higher education student' or a 'degree student' and as many said – not without hesitation - that they preferred to describe themselves as 'college students':

> *Brian:* I would have said more 'college student.' Because it doesn't feel like I'm at higher education although I am doing higher education, it doesn't feel, similar, the same, doesn't feel like I should be classed as a university student.... I just, I don't know, it's just you go to the college, it's just the title, you're not a university student, doing something a little bit more than, a little bit higher than the average college student (Brian, #10, #12).

These assertions were linked to differences between themselves and traditional university students, as much as to identifications with college and with work. Students' identification with the institution owed something to prior experiences. At the first focus group, it emerged that eight of nine participants had been enrolled on courses at colleges within a short time of leaving school. Yet these associations did not emerge in the individual interviews. Moreover, their primary identification appeared to be less with college than with work, in a reminder of the narratives of conformity:

> *Clare:* Like being a degree student, it doesn't really hit home that you're actually doing a degree so I always think of myself as a higher education [student] although it's the same. So if anyone was to ask me what you're doing, I'd say I'm doing higher education. If they say, what are you doing, I'd say I'm doing a degree... People see me, they don't see me as a student at all, they see me as a working person (Clare, #10).

These statements do not suggest a reluctance to engage with higher education study but do indicate a preference for identity with work. This is not predicated on the vocational nature of the course but on a personal identification. It appeared stronger with older respondents. Paula, who said

that she 'love[d] telling people I go to college,' was among the younger participants. Here, too, the identification was with college rather than 'higher-level' study.

As well as the dilemmas of identifying with college or higher education, respondents also had to negotiate the experience of part-time study. The most easily-identified problems of part-time study are practical ones. Whilst part-time study provides opportunities to continue working, and often to apply learning to practice in the workplace, this also creates additional demands on students' time. The same concerns have been raised in the earlier studies of part-time HE, as well as in recent studies of courses dominated by adults (Snape and Finch, 2006, for example). Participants in this study also described the difficulties of studying whilst balancing their other responsibilities. This included recognition of limitations that this placed on their engagement with their courses.

> *Emma:* If I was to prioritise my roles, the first would be mother, then service manager, then student, I suppose. So I suppose having to balance and prioritise that, I don't prioritise being a higher education student, even though it's important to me. I'd love to have the time to be a student properly (Emma, #24).

> *Paula:* I used to leave work at one [on an earlier course] and it's more relaxing, whereas now I've done a full day at work: I probably don't take in as much in class as I used to before. And that's after you've had a full day at work as well (Paula, #30).

These accounts are reminiscent of literature that describes adult higher education as a 'struggle' (Leathwood and O'Connell, 2003). This may be dominated by material hardship for adults who study full-time; intensive time pressures, juggling family, work and study commitments, are correspondingly difficult for part-time students.

But this stressful balance between different responsibilities was described as the only practical option for busy adults. In a focus group discussion, it was suggested that, for adults at least, full-time education was an option for the prosperous:

> *Jas*: the best way is always the chance to fully understand and philosophise, to go away and immerse yourself in the study of what you do. You can only do that if you've got all the money in the world and nothing else to do (FG1, #70).

These are not statements of lack of commitment but assertions of practical difficulties. Moreover, this is only the material aspect of the story. The practical difficulties and pressures of part-time study also serve to provide a rationale to enhance their self-worth.

Part-time students in qualitative studies have repeatedly described their identity not as an inferior or partial version of a student identity but as gaining in value through its own characteristics: the sacrifices entailed, the maturity and commitment of adult students, and so on. The inconveniences of part-time study led to the construction of an identity differentiated from full-time students:

> *Bob:* They're surprised that you're doing some kind of degree part-time on top of your job. And they respond pretty positively to it, I think a lot of people who have done degrees in the past know that it's kind of tough. If you're doing it part-time as well, they respond quite positively. So, yeah, that's what I get first, surprised, then a positive outlook on it (Bob, #22).

> *Brian:* [T]here's a certain aura about people who are - I don't know if aura is the right word - about people who are working and at college doing it (Brian, #14).

In the sense that the struggles of part-time study provide a basis for regarding one's own qualifications as hard-won and therefore in many ways better than those gained by full-time study, there are echoes of earlier literature, such as the access literature described above (Warmington, 2002; Avis,1997). The same accounts have explained how this can provide a rationale for 'othering' traditional students. A similar narrative also emerged in this study.

Being a part-time student: constructing 'difference'

Empirical research cited above has reported a weaker engagement with higher education among full-time HE in FE students (Morrison, 2009; Reay et al, 2009). Those who participated in this study constructed identities differentiated from those of traditional students. But they did so not by expressions of 'partial' student identity, constructed as less engaged, or in any way less valid than those of traditional students, but by describing traditional students as less committed. At the first focus group there was enthusiastic support for the idea that eighteen-year-olds would not be able to cope with the stresses of part-time study. To some, this was simply a matter of maturity:

> *Pervez:* Sometimes you're just not ready when you're young to do more education and you need that thing between, need other work-life experiences before you perhaps continue (Pervez, #50).

The last observation provides an interesting counter to the concept of university being a 'time between.' The implication is that for working-class young people, work provides opportunities to mature and to develop an orientation to study that may not be present after years of preparation for limited career opportunities.

In some of this data, work and study were constructed as complementary. Paula talked about her studies supporting a hard-working image she liked to cultivate: 'I like to be perceived like that, that I've always got something on,' (Paula, #85). Clare described a similar identity of 'hard work:'

> *Clare:* 'Some people, they think a degree is out of reach and it's not achievable, but... a lot of people are prepared to work that hard and at the end of the day, you've got to work hard if you want to get something.' (Clare, #16).

Beyond this, some participants moved on to an explicit and distinctive 'othering' of traditional students. This sometimes expressed itself as a resentment of colleagues who had already obtained degrees in other institutions:

Jackie: They [i.e. work colleagues with earlier HE qualifications] think that they're better than you: it's a status thing. And... they did it years ago, when they did it full-time. They're not doing it nowadays when they've got a family and they've got a job. It's totally different, so I just think...

BE: You just think their experience was easier than yours? Would that be fair to say?

J: Well, when I hear them talk, yeah! You know, they didn't, they didn't work weeks on weeks on weeks like I do on assignments. They did nothing and then arsed about in pubs, wrote assignments the night before in pubs. That's how it comes across. I think their experience is totally different to mine (Jackie, #40-42).

Brian: [P]eople see full-time students as wasters: wasters and a drain on public money. But there is a certain respect for people working and doing a college degree. Certainly I will play up to that occasionally (Brian, #14).

Sometimes graduates' unfamiliarity with workplace practices itself provided opportunities for othering:

Paula: ...friends I've got that have been to university: some things they know about the subject that they're doing at the moment but in other areas they lack things. We've had graduates start where I work and sometimes they can be a laughing stock: because in some ways they can know about what they've been brought in for and in some ways they've got no common sense. I probably look down on students a bit now because, where I work, I've been there eight years now, so I suppose I know what's going on. Sometimes when they start, and I feel bad for doing it, but I think, O God, where have they been? (Paula, #89).

Some of the more experienced students were responsible as managers for recent graduates and a focus group discussion centred on the what view should be taken of graduates applying for jobs, with Bob suggesting that, 'If I had someone who had done a degree part-time, I think I'd have more respect for them' (FG, #18). This ascription of value to work raises important issues about the relationship between higher education and vocational students.

Work and the search for valid identities

The significance of work in participants' construction of identity has already been observed. Students' were anxious to emphasise their identity as 'working' people, above their identity as students or professionals, in order to avoid popular characterisations in traditional communities of students as evading work. Something approaching an economic rationale was shared by participants who spoke of economic advantages to themselves and to their employers. Sometimes, higher education was even opposed to learning at work.

> *Paula:* I just thought that going to university holds you back a bit and you learn a lot at work anyway. So from my point of view I think it's better to work and get experience and have your education on the side of that (Paula, #89).

Such comments came more frequently from those offering 'narratives of conformity,' apparently reflecting social norms in which university was excluded. These were linked to the value of work experience and to risk at a time of uncertainty, the themes discussed in relation to this group in Chapter Five.

This is not the same as believing that work is the sole rationale for higher education. Yet increased emphasis on vocational higher education, not to mention the attraction of credentials that may result in material rewards, may appear counter to traditional associations of higher education with liberal studies. Vocational fields of study have for many decades dominated college-based higher education. Specifically, engineering disciplines, along with the business area and associated professional courses, have provided the most substantial numbers (Pye and Legard, 2008; Parry and Thompson, 2002). Recently, Foundation Degrees in other vocational areas, including education, have arisen in response to professional requirements (HEFCE, 2010). In addition to the vocational foundation degree, with its explicit requirements for work-based studies, new apprenticeship frameworks extend to higher education levels.

Yet these decisions were not offered as straightforward accounts of enhancing skills and employability. Like young people using discourses of risk in earlier studies, participants' accounts also reflected economic instability. Their studies were often seen as a protection against insecurity and obsolescence rather than as an opportunity to learn new skills and expand their opportunities. These may have reflected the uncertain time that the interviews took place, in early 2009. But there were longer-term issues of structural change.

Pervez, for example, had plenty of work experience and had built up his own small haulage business. Although the transport sector has grown significantly whilst manufacturing industry has contracted, Pervez justified his move into study specifically on the grounds of economic insecurity:

> *Pervez:* The working environment is difficult. The particular business I'm in, our customer base is shrinking at a rapid rate, because the town, particularly the engineering side, is vanishing at a rapid rate, so this for me is a fallback.
>
> As well as the fact that I'm learning new things for my job, it's also giving me the paperwork, should I say. I've got twenty-odd years in business and I'm hoping this, the business plus the paperwork, should keep me in employment for a long time. Or should I say, be able to go into a certain type of place and secure a certain type of job of a particular layer with a certain type of income. If you can say anything, fireproofing yourself (Pervez, #60).

Whilst several participants saw their studies as contributing to their development as employees, others cited conflicting motives for study. Paula contrasted an economised view held by other employees not engaged in study to her own, more diffuse views:

> *Paula:* I think, is it that good really? Not the course itself or what you learn, I think it's all about the outcome, the qualification at the end. I think it'll probably get looked upon [that way] because somebody at work asked, 'Are you going to go for a decent job then?' Not meaning that what I'm doing isn't a decent job, but I think he just meant, there's certain jobs that you think, well, when you've got a degree you'll go and do that job. I didn't even think

about that, I went, 'No, it's just to help me in the job I'm doing now...'

> You know a lot of people at our place are quite money-focused, so they'd probably think if you went out and got a job that earnt a lot more money, they'd probably think, yeah, it's quite a good thing going to college. It's not about knowledge to some people, whereas me, I like to know a lot of things. I could probably go to college at night for the rest of my life, probably... To the people who work in the warehouse, they probably think that... the end outcome, the qualification, the piece of paper is a good thing. But for me, probably learning some extra things. That's the value to me (Paula, #98,100).

Such accounts serve to problematise the notion that vocational studies can only be motivated by a purely economic rationale. A further complication to arise from this was the relationship of their studies to employer organisations.

Employer organisations and higher education

The question of who benefits and who bears the costs of vocational education continues to be contested (Williams and Wilson, 2010; Watts et al., 2006). Jackson and Jamieson (2009) have recently pointed out that, whilst employers may be wary of financing their competitors' future employees, students may find that their new qualifications are more highly valued by new employers. One result is that existing employers may not benefit from the development of employees. From the employer's perspective, there are sound reasons for caution: the cost of education and training may be lost when the employee uses these qualifications to leave for better-rewarded employment elsewhere:

> *Lauren:* My boss has asked me what I'm planning to do when I've finished. He can't see me once I've finished my degree wanting to stay in the job that I'm doing. And he's quite right. But I'm obviously not going to say that. But I'd like to move into other areas (Lauren, #40.)

As a result of these tensions, as well as the additional pressures of combining work with study, relationships may well become strained during the period of study. In this research, a further complication arises from the fact that participants were studying beyond the foundation degree level that most of their employers had originally agreed to sponsor. Thus, although most participants were still sponsored or allowed time off for study, this was rarely represented as unqualified support. Participants represented the workplace as a source of both support and tension.

> *Emma:* At work, they can see where, why, how [the course] might impact on my development as service manager and as a practitioner, I suppose vocational worker as well. I suppose that influences how I do my job, but they probably don't have any idea about the practical difficulties really (Emma, #54).

> *Emma:* I don't know how much they do value it. So since they tried to not let me do it at all, they don't want to give me four hours a week. They don't see it as absolutely necessary for the job that I'm doing. But given my development plan looks at moving up from that, they see that they ought to let me have that opportunity because they've identified it in the plan (Emma, #100).

Relationships with managers could still be a source of problems, even where managers adopted a helpful stance. This may have been because some students feared the hierarchical relationships of the workplace finding their way onto their course.

> *Jackie:* And it's like, I don't really want to get into conversations at work about stuff, either. Like, the line manager, he'll say, you know, is it going all right, he don't ask me a lot now, because I tend not to talk about it. If I want his help or anything or to discuss stuff, I just feel that I can't. It's a confidence thing (Jackie, #8).

From the perspective of these participants, then, the relationship between study and economic motivations is more complex than is usually portrayed in contemporary discussions. Power-based relationships in the workplace may not readily transfer into mentor-type support of higher education activity. Participants described an engagement with their studies that drew on their experience in the workplace. But even in their own work organisations, there

was some uncertainty about how far their learning was valued. Such concerns included questions about credentialisation:

> *Bob:* The only thing that concerns me is devaluing it. I guess the more people that have a degree, just a standard degree, how do you stand out against everybody that's got one? Does it mean that everybody's got to have an MBA and where does that then stop? (FG, #71).

Yet learning was not described as a process of simple credentialisation. Vocational higher education may encounter issues far more contentious than emerge from wide areas of community-based adult education. This in turn may contribute to a new critical awareness. Every respondent mentioned an increasing tendency to think critically and this usually manifested itself in critical apprehension of issues in the workplace.

> *Bob:* I think there's quite a lot of times when I've started to become that bit frustrated in what I'm doing, thinking, Is this the right way of doing things, or there's a better way of doing it? Or with my current boss, I'll see things that he does that I don't agree with... You become frustrated... you start to think that's probably not the best way of doing, you need more wider thinking, it's a short-lived view on some things. So for example I'd say getting a new supplier in, we'd always beat them up over the head with cost, cost, cost and we're not looking at the wider things of service and what it's going to be like in the long term and we should be expanding on that (Bob, #62-64).

> *Emma:* [S]eeing things out of the perspective of an NHS institution and learning from other people from other backgrounds as well... has been absolutely valuable because it does make you think differently. I think you can become quite insular when you work for dinosaur-type organisations, you don't think anything else exists outside of there. So coming to a course like this actually takes you out of that. Makes you question it a bit more (Emma, #106).

This raises a question about the nature of higher education. If the key purpose of higher education is to develop this kind of criticality (Barnett, 1997) vocational study in colleges appears to have no less potential to contribute to these purposes than other modes of study. If vocational higher

education were simply a matter of socialisation, it would not promote challenges to dominant ideas. However, it appears from this study that the vocational purposes of study do not prevent such a possibility.

For many adults coming from social locations where student identities remain problematic, vocational courses are seen as the most likely route into higher education. These are often funded and supported by work organisations. The data in this particular study relates to those studying at honours level: as economic data cited in Chapter Two has illustrated, this constitutes the point at which students are more likely to acquire significant returns. Whilst relationships with employer organisations are uneven, part-time programmes in colleges still provide opportunities to engage with critical ideas whilst working. They also provide opportunities to maintain valued identities associated with work. These identities are apparent even where participants described apparently different motivations:

> *Paula:* I think that because a lot of my friends went down traditional education routes, so a lot of them went straight to university, and I was, sort of, one that started work: so then when they were at uni, you know how, 'Ooh yeah, I'm earning money,' and they were skint all the time, so it was a bit different. And then, I think, in a way, I was sort of jealous, because I did want to do that; but for monetary reasons, I thought no, I'll get stuck into work. (Paula, #6.)

At first sight, Paula's motivation appears as mainly financial. Yet these motives are intertwined with concepts that are important to identity. 'Earning [one's own] money' and 'getting stuck into work' are choices that would be widely approved as well as less risky and more financially rewarding. For higher education to be approved of in many communities, it had to be associated with work and sacrifice.

However, the association with work emerged evenly across the data and was not a specific characteristic of those who had grown up in particular communities. If there was a noticeable difference among the participants, it was between those in organisations where higher education forms a

commonly accepted basis for professional expertise (mainly, among this sample, amongst those in health and social care organisations) and those where it is less common (in private sector businesses). As indicated below, it was in those organisations where higher education was more commonplace that participants encountered a questioning of their identities as students. For both groups, an association between work and study appeared an important element of identity.

The positive self-identification based on a simultaneous identification with work and an 'othering' of traditional students was mediated by location in a college. Participants were therefore faced with a choice of how to represent themselves, in comparison to the alternative of mature university study. Having constructed their adult, work-oriented student identities as superior to those of young full-time students, they constructed college as the setting in which working adults would find the best opportunities for study.

College as an 'adult' location

For students such as those in the study, Further Education Colleges, for all their limited resources, have represented opportunities to find a way into higher education. Their earlier studies, as well as their higher education, constituted a marker of difference from traditional university students, since these are drawn overwhelmingly from young A-level students. Colleges may represent continuity for those who have already experienced vocational or academic courses in such an environment. Yet higher education is overwhelmingly associated with universities rather than colleges: the term itself is probably better understood in terms of the former institution. As participants pointed out themselves in the final focus group, colleges themselves seek to demonstrate their credentials by publicising their arrangements with partner universities. Whilst part-time students' experiences have sometimes been represented in a sympathetic light during

earlier research, constructing difference from university students would be counter to established hierarchies.

Nevertheless, participants compared aspects of study at college favourably to study at universities. Whilst only Emma and Jas had personal experience of university study (for nursing and social work studies respectively), others drew on hearsay to represent constructions of the nature of study in, particularly, the mass HE of the post-92 institutions. A frequent theme was the 'adult' nature of college study, constructing university as being the setting of education for 18-21-year-olds.

> *Clare:* Initially, I thought they'd all be a lot younger than me and there'd be like a lot of say twenty-year olds, the same age as my children so I felt a little bit intimidated, they'd be up to date with the latest techniques and experiences for having education which I wasn't... but when I started to attend I realised there were a lot of people like myself, they were mature students with families, or single people, different kinds of backgrounds, really (Clare, #4).

> *Jas:* At university... you're learning with people who've had very little life experience, when you're try to engage with those people about your understanding of something, you're using experiences they can't relate to, so they have no dialogue back with you often, ... you've got people finishing A-levels coming along, you know, doing coursework, writing stuff, not really engaging in a more kind of active learning environment... I think colleges are more accessible to people like me, particularly courses like the one I'm on now because I'm able to learn with... people who are a similar age to me, they reflect a similar understanding, you know, different experiences... if you're talking to one of our group, they sometimes can have dialogue about their experiences, so that you can have an involving, learning act (Jas, #32).

Whilst these two accounts pose the presence of younger students in different ways, they both express a desire for separation. This may or may not be available at different colleges: Burns (2007) reported adults at a nearby college, who perceived their HE experience as damaged by the presence of younger students. Whilst colleges' domination by 16-19-year-old students may give rise to problems for some students, universities' domination by undergraduates has its own issues. Some colleges, as in this case, may have

sites which provide a more 'adult' setting for such groups, which may be perceived as more necessary in some settings. The notion of college as an 'adult' environment was also linked to teaching approaches. Participants opposed a representation of mass lectures at universities to the more student-centred approaches of colleges:

> *Bob:* You have that stereotypical [idea of university], being in a big kind of room, having a lecture, and really not being able to put in that much. Whereas with the mix of people we've got quite a varied range of experience, and the conversation, we can talk it through... we can also throw other things in the pot. So I guess that's more relaxed than what I thought it'd be. So you have more actual input, which is good (Bob, #15).

> *Jayne:* I think I'm probably better studying here than at a university, where the groups would probably be a lot bigger but this is only my view of it because I've never actually been. In my mind I just think I'm better here. We're in, it's not a huge group and everyone feels able to speak up and say what they think. I know I do. And I don't know if I'd feel like that if I was in a big university in a big lecture theatre and I probably wouldn't get the same understanding of things (Jayne, #23).

Such comments also refer to perceived advantages of study in the more supportive atmosphere of small-scale provision. Aspects of this may not survive the expansion of higher education in colleges, or, conversely, its rationalisation in response to cuts in funding. The scale and nature of provision inevitably varies across and within instutions, which manage and resource higher education according to the priorities of each college. Opportunities for such support may diminish, either if HE in colleges draws in greater numbers, or if HE in FE is restricted to larger provision. But the process of identity formation described here clearly drew on perceptions of a more appropriate learning environment as preferable to their perceptions of student experience in other, 'massified' institutions.

The data provides a more subtle view than generalised explanations that part-timers attend colleges simply for the convenience of location. Whilst the arrangements that characterised much college-based higher education in the

past, with small groups on specialist courses enjoying a less 'massified' experience, are likely to come under strain in current economic circumstances, this strand of higher education tradition has continued for many years largely undocumented.

The supportive learning environment described here extended beyond the college. Families were generally constructed as supportive. Most participants appeared to have reached accommodations with those around them that allowed them not only to commit the necessary time but to construct identities appropriate to their varying roles and responsibilities. In this respect, these accounts differed from those such as. Baxter and Britton's (2001) report of tensions created when mature, mainly working-class students reported 'becoming more assertive and confident', whilst 'taking on a new language of academia,' which the authors characterised as 'acquiring new forms of cultural capital through education,' (Baxter and Britton, 2001: 93). This absence of conflicting identities may suggest reasons why colleges are able to attract students from social locations that appear more resistant to traditional institutions.

It would be naive to suggest that conflicts never arose from study. Jackie described conflicts that echoes the tensions in earlier literature:

> *Jackie:* My husband is convinced that I'm different; I don't know whether that's different in a good way or not... But my view is, 'You're not understanding what I'm saying,' and 'Why can't you understand what I'm saying to you?' But his view is, 'I ain't got a clue what you're bloody talking about, so why do that, then?' (Jackie, #97-101).

Yet this kind of mutual misunderstanding was rarely reported. More often, participants reported the support they had received and suggested that their studies enabled them to help others. Here and there, it was possible to detect an absence of enthusiasm from students' closest relatives but hardly on a significant scale. Bob described his parents' being 'concerned that, as they do, parents, you're not taking too much on,' (Bob, #23). Emma described her

parents as a source of motivation because of the values she had inherited, of being reliable, trustworthy and honest. Tension arose, not because her acquisition of cultural capital had taken her above what she described as working-class values, but because she felt unable to live up to them:

> *Emma*: And I think that's where you get conflict, internal conflict and you can't be reliable because you get too many time pressures, and how that makes you feel... You're actually investing yourself and doing, I suppose, what your core beliefs want you to do. Which is just to make the most of the opportunities, really. You make your own opportunities in life generally, they don't just land on your doorstep.

> But the conflict with that is when you've got too many, when you try and achieve, I suppose, perfection, meeting those values, because it's not possible to meet what that sort of expectation is (Emma, #74-76).

The majority of participants described their immediate families as supportive, which was perhaps inevitable, given that they had all completed several years of study. Of the six participants who made reference to their partners' work roles, all were in manual occupations, which may also suggest another reason why college might be seen as a more acceptable learning environment. Beyond families and local communities, however, students encountered the popular discourse of hierarchy.

Accounts of hierarchy

Some students claimed to have little experience of the way their studies at college might be subject to unfavourable comparisons. In the final focus group, Bob maintained that he had never heard of any differentiation among institutions other than in the study. This seems to reflect his industrial employment, since Lauren, working in a similar role, expressed a similar view:

> *Lauren:* I wouldn't have thought it mattered. Nobody ever really asks, at the end, which university. I'm not really sure, actually. I

suppose if you think about it, if someone's stood there with a degree from, say, Oxford, I suppose it's different, it's just perceived as different. (Lauren, # 65).

For others, however, their identities were constructed in the face of a discourse of hierarchy. This included the experience of those students working in professional environments, where comparisons among institutions were frequently made:

> *Jas:* I think society has a hierarchy of where you study and you can't get away from that... In social work? They are too nice to say things, you know. Every now and then, they will say, how do you know that? It's subtle. (Jas, #57.)

Similar accounts were offered from Health Service employees and this seems to reflect the greater frequency of higher education qualifications within public service organisations.

However, the most detailed accounts of hierarchy came from one of the younger participants. Having grown up in a small industrial town with a long tradition of heavy industry and more recently of high unemployment and related social problems, Paula still lived in the same town at the time of the study. Friends, who had lived in the more affluent areas covered by the local comprehensive school, had gone on to university. Her description of their relationship provides an insight into how the stratification of higher education is constructed far beyond the newspaper 'league' tables of universities.

Paula's account combined assertions of equality with her friends, who 'have got this thing that they've done something special and they're just a little bit better because they're educated,' (Paula, #71) with expressions of regret for not having followed their path. She combined a positive view of her (college) student identity with a reticence to make claims for it:

> *Paula:* I usually say 'college,' so I don't think people who talk about it really realise or know what level I'm sort of at. 'Cause some people say, 'What course are you on?' and I just go, 'Oh, just

business at college,' so I probably play it down a bit. You know, people don't actually know which course I'm on; and I always think you can't say 'uni' because they'll say 'What, Sheffield?' I don't think people would actually take [the location] as higher education. So no one really knows, unless you're in the know, you know what I mean? So I'd probably say, I'm doing business at college. Or, if I said I was doing a degree, they'd go 'What, at college?' and they'd go, 'No, she's not.' Maybe. (Paula, #18.)

Significantly, Paula described this process not in relation to better-qualified superiors in the workplace but to her own friends. As higher education has become more commonplace in locations where it was formerly almost unknown, notions of hierarchy have begun to appear even in these communities:

Paula: Some of my friends have gone to university, and I've mentioned that it's at college, they don't really ask me a lot of questions about it, or what I'm studying. Whereas when they're together they're always talking about when they were at university, you know, things they had to hand in and work they had to do. But they've never asked me about it. So they obviously don't think that's what I'm doing. Probably I'm not describing it right. But they'll talk about dissertations and stuff they've had to do, did you have to do this, did you have to do that, it's a bit of a clique.

You know, they'll talk about it together but they'll never ask me. My best friend, she never asks me about college, she's always talking about qualifications she's done, she never asks me about [it] whereas, probably if I were going to a university she might ask me them questions. So I don't know, I don't think they think it's the same. (Paula, #38.)

Paula: Sometimes when people talk about their course, I'll say, oh, I've got to stop in tonight, I've got some college work to do. And that's about as far as it goes... I think everyone forgets. Even on a Wednesday, you get invited out, I keep saying, no, I'm at college on a Wednesday, no one even remembers...I think sometimes if I have got some work to do, I think they don't really take it that seriously. So I don't make out how important it is or anything like that. So I don't think I'm viewed as a student whatsoever. (Paula, #44, #50-52.)

Thus, in interpreting their own experiences of higher education in colleges, students encounter comparisons to others' experience and qualifications that are more highly valued by a popular discourse. In this case, the comparison is made with what are themselves relatively low-status institutions.

Comparisons between 'non-traditional' students, 'marked' for their failure to participate in higher education at an acceptable age (and location) have a long pedigree. Earlier accounts recorded the construction of the 'new student' when the 1960s new campuses were located away from industrial centres, in order to avoid working-class students being distracted by the attractions of their peers' social lives (Maton, 2005). Webb (1997) observed that the classification of 'non-traditional' student necessarily constructs someone different from the 'normal student,' there as of right, as opposed to those, pathologised as deficient, for whom special measures, lower standards and 'dumbing down' might be necessary. The tendency to standardise the 'non-traditional' despite their inherent diversity has been observed internationally (Kim, 2002).

Yet what emerges from these accounts is not simply a popular discourse according to which diversified experiences are pathologised in comparison with traditional models of studentship. Here, the experience of those studying at a college is pathologised through comparisons with studentship in diversified institutions. Perhaps, like the categories of the 'old new universities' and the 'new new universities' that appear in certain hierarchies of institutions (Tight, 2007a; Scott, 1995), the time has come to talk of the 'traditional non-traditional students,' able to compare themselves favourably to the 'non-traditional non-traditional students' in a college.

In these encounters with the superior identities of traditional (or less non-traditional) others, it is specifically studying at college that is used to construct identities as inferior, rather than part-time study as adults. This marks a difference from the compensatory narratives described in the previous chapter, which focused on participants' reasons for studying as

adults. In their efforts to construct authentic identities, participants emphasised their location as part-time, adult students constructing partial and fragmented identities within the context of their multiple roles and responsibilities. Nevertheless, authenticity required a response to the hierarchical discourse.

For the more confident participants, such responses came relatively easily. Emma had survived the difficulties of her earlier unsuccessful transgression to develop a nursing career and was now working as a manager of mental health services. She was dismissive about suggestions of hierarchy:

> *Emma:* At the end of the day it's about the course, the qualification you've chosen, not the institution that you're doing it at. It's about the experience. So, if from previous experience I knew learning here would be a positive thing for me, I didn't need the elitist thing of going to a formal university, personally. (Emma, #92).

Emma was the only participant with direct personal experience of a civic university, from her nursing studies. One can only speculate whether this assured statement reflects the confidence with which civic universities' graduates are imbued, or a more negative perception of that experience. At all events, it was different from those of less confident respondents:

> *Phil:* A college student, I say, as opposed to university, for the simple reason that that's where I do my studying, even though it's recorded by the university. Other people might interpret it that because I'm not studying at the university it devalues it. So I take that step out of it and say, I'm just studying at college. (Phil, #6.)

In comparison to this rather apologetic identification, Jas, the other participant with direct personal experience of university study, described his detractors more forcefully:

> *Jas:* People have these prejudices. They say to me where did you do your BA honours? They say, do they do it there? I say, of course they do. They're out of touch with the way universities and colleges work, that a college can do a BA honours degree is only starting to sink in with people. (Jas, #55.)

Younger participants from the 'conformist' group expressed their responses in terms of the need to 'prove something' by succeeding in higher education:

> *Paula*: I think I have to prove things to people as well. I do hate being like that but I am. So in a way it benefits me to stay where I live because then the people, people who - I don't, it's weird to say - I suppose you're like, it's probably proving to them that I've done it. Probably subconsciously, if that's the right thing to say - because I don't actively walk round thinking that but it probably is something to do with that - so a few friends that went to university, I was probably a bit jealous at the time and thought, you know, wish I were going. But I probably feel better about that now, I've probably proved to myself that, you know, don't feel that bad about it, you can do it anyway, you've just done it a different way round. (Paula, #89.)

Paula's achievement here is measured in terms of her relative success by local standards, by comparison to the 'people you're like'; yet at the same time it situates her in the same geographical location as before. Bob's ambition is also described in narrowly situated terms:

> *Bob*: I guess I come from what, a working background, so I've never really until a few years ago, I never wanted to pursue anything academic, I look back and a lot of my friends, they've not either. So I've kind of come from that kind of background where it weren't in the forefront of your mind, it kind of comes through. And I guess when I describe myself now, it's wanting it, it's being a bit more, I don't know, to better yourself slightly, I guess prove people wrong as well, so where people were looking at you and making judgements, it's that part of it as well. And to prove to myself, that I can do things that I've set my mind to. So that were a big part of coming on to this course, it wasn't just bettering myself, it was proving to myself that I can do something like this. Coming from, a working-class, it's not even working-class, I don't know what you class it as, like a working-class family or background and wanting to go on a little bit, don't know if that's the right word to use. (Bob, #62-68.)

Within this hesitant discourse lies an assertion of self-worth offered in response to unnamed and indefinite attempts to diminish people who

seemed beyond the grasp of higher education. It both locates Bob within this discourse and challenges it. These comments about 'proving something' reflect responses to attempts to enhance the 'positional goods' of university graduates.

They also express something of a less competitive ethos than has characterised some institutions. As well as representing the institutions where they had earlier experienced education as locations appropriate for adult study, or as participative environments for learning, they suggested that colleges were environments less dominated by notions of hierarchy. An interesting discussion at the first focus group illustrated this:

> *Jas*: I think that when you came to value education. If you take its basic form and you say everyone has this one book, and everyone's learning to read this book, and it's a really good book, and at the end of it you become enlightened -

> *Bob*: With what?

> *Jas*: I'm just making it simple, it enlightens you to knowledge. Just because everyone's read that book, it doesn't mean that it's any less enlightening, does it?

> *Bob*: No, no, no.

> *Jas*: It enriches the community that you're in. So if everyone has a degree and they all follow the same programme, and they've put the same level of effort into it. It's kind of an argument put forward by academics and kind of middle class people of today, Oh, everyone's got a degree it's not like the degree I've got, everyone can do maths O-level and it's not as hard, people can't touch the maths O-levels of today.

> *Emma*: You've got to be able to complete it, haven't you? If the standards don't drop, everyone should have the opportunity. (FG #165-172.)

These discussions raise interesting issues about the role of colleges in higher education. They suggest a contestation of the traditions of higher education as representing 'excellence' in the sense of surpassing one's peers. Interestingly, the discussion last cited moved on to a discussion of credentialisation and the difficulty of making one's mark when degrees had

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become commonly-held credentials. One of the key issues for students in colleges is the extent to which their studies offer the possibilities of personal transformation; and this is frequently envisaged in terms of social class.

In this chapter, some important dimensions of student identity have been established. These included the significance of work to their identities, the differentiation of their 'adult' identities from those of traditional students, their identification with the college as a local institution and as an adult environment for study. The previous chapter examined their routes into higher education and the next will explore the possibilities beyond study. A critical factor that has already been discussed in Chapter Five will contribute strongly to this analysis: the role of geographical and social location in determining the pathways available to students.

CHAPTER 7: LOCATING IDENTITY

Introduction

The foregoing chapters have drawn on participants' accounts to examine their construction of identity from two perspectives: their compensatory narratives of non-participation prior to their studies and the 'working adult' identities that they were constructing during their studies. This chapter moves on to their aspirations beyond their studies.

In this respect, their accounts indicated that constraints leading participants to study locally would also limit their choices beyond graduation. These difficulties were not perceived equally by all participants. They assumed different levels of importance, which appear broadly related to the geographical and social locations that framed the narrative types described in Chapter Five. Just as these factors had shaped participants' transitions into education, they appeared likely to constrain their futures. For at least some participants, the possibility of local study – like the possibility of studying whilst working – entailed potentially negative consequences.

At the most basic level, the location of colleges constitutes an important element of their contribution to higher education. But the significance of location is more complex than the simple convenience of shorter journeys from work to college. The potential to move between different locations – along with the limitations to such mobility - implies the potential to move beyond the locations to which people are assigned by social structure. The data illustrated the discursive frameworks through which such mobility was contemplated and, at times, denied. Whilst participants' student identities drew on their study in an institution defined by its locality, questions of location also affected their apprehension of their future 'graduate' identities.

These geographical factors bear a close relationship to social structure. The relationship between the construction of student identity and other identifications linked to community, class, gender, or ethnicity was raised in the research questions because of its centrality to earlier accounts of participation in higher education. This chapter returns to these questions, first raised, in Chapter Five, in relation to student transitions away from and into higher education. Here, these factors are analysed in relation to transitions beyond higher education. The significance of the 'local' dimension in the college contribution is illustrated through student accounts of the possibilities beyond their graduation that these students apprehended.

In this chapter, the significance of location to their accounts is illustrated by the data. Some differences are suggested among the accounts offered by the three different types of narrative. Connections between location and social structure are suggested, again drawing on the data. Finally, the chapter suggests that these locations were discursively reinforced during the study as part of the construction of student identity.

Location and mobility

Mobility – both geographical and social – has become a key theme in discussion of widening participation in higher education. Whilst it has become widespread practice for students going through traditional higher education from the age of eighteen or nineteen to live away from their families in university towns, this has become increasingly difficult for more disadvantaged students. Working-class students and those from ethnic minorities are more likely to travel to nearby universities on a daily basis and this in turn has been used to question whether they conform to traditional notions of student identity (Holdsworth, 2006). Adults with family commitments, for whom living away would pose particular difficulties, have additional reasons to participate in local institutions. They are likely to have similar reasons to remain in fairly local employment.

Colleges themselves serve as a nexus for geographical and social location. Asked about reasons for studying at the college, seven respondents directly mentioned location: the same factor emerged in focus groups. In addition to their local convenience, colleges have been shown above to provide what participants described as a more congenial learning environment for part-time, mature students. In these settings, students whose previous experience has been predominantly located within particular communities were able to avoid the conflicts with hostile social environments that they might encounter in traditional institutions. Such students' difficulties in elite settings have recently been noted by Tett (2004) and by such analyses as Jackson and Marsden's account of working-class children in a grammar school fifty years ago (1962, cited in Baxter and Britton, 2001: 95). These have been shown to be largely absent from the accounts of participants in this study. Yet some data about geographical mobility suggests that such tensions may also arise as these students begin to develop their career aspirations following study.

This theme of geographical mobility, and its connection to social mobility, arose in a number of interviews. Jo described her sons' scepticism about her studies, which would not enable her to escape the town in the same way that their studies had taken them to Manchester and to better-rewarded roles. Whilst participants usually described family as a source of support during their studies, family responsibilities also constrained the possibilities beyond completion of their programmes. A number of respondents were already scaling down their aspirations at the time of their studies. Sometimes this reflected concern for the needs of children or elderly relatives, such as Emma's daughter or Jo's elderly parents: these are always likely to be of greater concern to older students than to young graduates.

Nor was the idea of 'staying local' confined to older participants with family responsibilities. Paula, for example, had decided against moving away from her home town on leaving school. She recognised in this the limitations she had already imposed on herself:

> *Paula:* [It's] not the main reason, but probably, looking back now, I probably wouldn't have left where I live. I probably wasn't adventurous enough to do that. Whereas at the time I didn't want anyone to think that. So at the time I just [said], 'No, I wanted a job, I'm doing this the right way round.' Where a lot of my friends live in different places now, because of where they went to university and everything.
>
> You know, I look back now and think I wish I'd done something like that, because I still live in the same village, same town, probably just for that reason (Paula, #12).

Here Paula explained her motives for leaving school at eighteen in terms of a personal decision. She linked this to location and to a personal reluctance to break with existing ties, or with known experience. Her friends, growing up in different communities lacked similar ties. Paula's reluctance to move away and to study at college was expressed in terms of personal choice. Later, talking about the possibilities of further study, she described the way her outlook served to limit her ambitions. In this passage, she appears to consider undertaking further studies, perhaps of a less vocational nature, to move away from her present role:

> *Paula:* Maybe in the future I might not be wanting to learn something that's relevant to my job, because it [i.e. the purpose of her future studies] might be to move me away from it [i.e. the job]. I probably would choose something and try to fund it myself.
>
> Choosing what you want to do is the hardest thing. I suppose where I work now I'm safe and everyone... I don't know. I take an easy route. It's like university all over again (Paula, #122).

The close ties in some local communities, the risks entailed in full-time study, and the anxieties of a turbulent economy all contribute to the context of these short comments. Paula appeared to view her uncertainty as a personal failing. Immediately afterwards, she said, 'It's like a counselling session, isn't it?' (#122) and later, 'I think I hold myself back more than anyone, really,' (#126). But these frustrations reflected an outlook shared widely among those growing up in such communities.

The same aspects of social structure that were expressed in the narrative typology of Chapter Five were reproduced in participants' accounts of their future intentions. Of those participants who offered narratives of conformity, three were under thirty and had no children. Yet none planned to move away from their localities. The 'transgressors' expressed caution about the possibilities of moving on. These formed a slightly older group, whose children or parents provided a motive for staying put. Having found alien social locations uncomfortable as children, their ambitions might also have been discouraged.

The 'exceptions' expressed no such reservations. Brian had already tried moving to America and, at the time the study ended, was looking for employment further afield. Phil walked out of his job between the individual interview and the first focus group. By the time of the second, he was reported as either in Asia or America. A third member of this group provided the sharpest illustration of the differences in outlook. Lauren had also described choosing the college as the location for her studies because of its close proximity to her work. But, talking about the possibilities that she saw opening up beyond her degree, she reflected on the difficulties that might arise in terms of the mobility that she described her studies as facilitating:

> *Lauren:* I'm hoping get a better job, just being able to apply for more challenging roles. My only worry is, just going back to the whole family thing, obviously within my family, everybody around me has a different perspective than I have on, sort of, education and, sort of, jobs. I do worry, I want to go in one direction, my family don't want to come with me. That's my biggest concern... I might have to sort of travel a bit further afield for that. And the worry for me is what would I do if the right job came along, I really wanted to go and do; and my family don't want to come along with me for that. And that has crossed my mind. Of course that vision affects me (Lauren, #115).

At the time of this interview, Lauren's immediate family consisted of her husband: his close ties to the area and to his own family constrained her geographical mobility:

> *Lauren:* I keep saying to Alan: 'Shall we emigrate?' 'Oh, we'll see.'
> So I'll definitely have some issue. In this position, if I decided to do
> that, I don't know where that might leave me with my family. I
> don't know. Cross that bridge when I get to it. If those
> opportunities came along. But if an amazing job offer fell on the
> table, that meant you doing a little bit of travelling or working a
> little bit further away, I'd take it. That might be a problem, that I
> don't think I'd want to turn it down (Lauren, #133).

For Lauren, this was presented as a matter of personal choice and character, apparently independent of any predispositions that might be linked to social structure. Yet, as was shown in the earlier chapter, her comparisons between her own outlook and her husband's family suggest the influence of social structure on her participation. In the passages cited here, social structure appears to be playing a continuing role in determining the possibilities of life beyond the institution.

The differences of geographical location were thus linked to differences of social location. In discussing the possibility of moving away after graduation, Lauren described attitudes to mobility as being shaped by the existing dispositions of those around her. Lauren constructed these differences from her own (and her father's) outlook in terms of different dispositions towards education and the possibilities of career development to which it might give rise. In this interview, these differences were framed in of both geographical and related social locations:

> *Lauren:* I expect my family to be a little more negative... I think it's
> just different, different backgrounds, different views, different
> dreams. My mum and Alan's parents, anything outside the town is
> miles away (Lauren, # 119-121).

These remarks capture the extent to which social structure still constrains the possibilities of agency in contemporary society. Since this constitutes an important discussion in the literature, the following section compares participants' accounts to the key debates in this field.

Social structure and location

The literature of HE choice discussed in Chapter Two has contested ideas that the diminishing importance of social structure has created greater possibilities for students from disadvantaged backgrounds According to these accounts, individuals from working-class backgrounds, who have internalised particular assumptions on the basis of their experience, come to regard higher education in general, and its elite institutions in particular, as 'not for them.' These (young) people tend to participate in less 'risky' forms of higher education. Positioning themselves 'outside' higher education (Ball et al, 2000:4) they construct it as an 'alien place,' (Tett, 2004). Although these accounts focus on young people's choices of university, elements of this analysis might be extended to adults in colleges. Archer and Leathwood (2003) have referred to those who:

> '...subverted notions of 'changing identities' ... [and] resisted the middle-class transformative ideal of higher education participation (2003: 178).

Although these analyses appear to portray circumstances in which some adults might be attracted to colleges, the data has indicated a range of different ways in which adults from different social groups might engage with higher education.

In Chapter Five, these accounts were described above as structured by the geographical locations in which these participants grew up and went to school. Only the 'narratives of conformity' suggest a belief on the part of all these participants that higher education is not normally for 'people like us.' For all of these participants identity was not constructed as a straightforward conformity to 'working-class' norms. Whilst notions of social class were seldom raised, however, the characteristics of specific geographical localities became an issue in most of the interviews. This reflects to some extent the geographical (and class-based) nature of secondary education. It also indicates the role of place in the construction of identity.

Interestingly, participants' consciousness of such issues was also indicated by the narrative types. Those offering narratives of conformity to the norms of communities with strong class traditions tended to evade these associations, disavowing ideas about social structure and classed locations. Paula said, 'I wouldn't want to be classified by where I'm from or where I went to school,' (Paula, #65.) Clare expressed herself in terms strongly reminiscent of Beck's work, even to the extent of opposing a 'modern' identity to earlier social constructions (presumably those of social class and, possibly, gender):

> *Clare*: Well, sometimes I think of myself as a modern person. I think I move with the times. And I do fit into other classes like you've mentioned. But I think things are moving so quickly, people have got to change with the times and change with the environment and everything, so I think putting yourself in like a particular group all the time, it's, er, you won't move out of that group, so, I don't know, I think you've got to have an open mind. It can all revolve around training and bettering yourself, 'cause the only way you can provide a better class is by probably a better education.
>
> ... I don't think it would hurt, anyway, to better yourself in that way. But I don't know, I just think you've got to be adaptable, flexible, get your opportunities to better yourself. But I don't class myself in any class, although if you were to ask me I'd put myself in various classes (Clare, #40).

This statement denies social class explicitly, only to concede its existence at the end. Such oblique references to class occurred throughout the 'narratives of conformity. Comments by Bob and Paula about 'proving themselves' (see p. 140 above) suggest that they would expect normally to be excluded from higher education, perhaps because higher education has, by their own accounts, been unusual in their geographical and social locations.

The 'exceptions' made fewer references to location. Jas referred to the Indian community in which he grew up only to stress the normalcy of higher education. For the others, higher education was represented as a normal route and differentiation in society was rarely mentioned. These participants gave the vaguest responses about such aspects of identity. Lauren said she

never thought about putting herself 'in specific groups' except when she had to fill in a form and put 'white British.' Brian was similarly indefinite:

> *Brian:* I describe myself as a working man [pause] I've never classed myself, obviously I'm male, I've never classed myself in any other way than that. I don't think of myself in any national, religious, political or any other group. I've never really classed myself like that, I've just classed myself as myself (Brian, #46).

The 'transgressors', however, had experienced gradations in society. Jackie had encountered social differences when she moved to a selective school. Jo referred to herself as:

> *Jo:* ...the opposite because both my parents were professionals. I'm the black sheep of the family (FG1, #81).

However, Jo had spent her early years in a village where social deprivation was at least as commonplace as in the communities where Bob, Paula, Clare and Pervez grew up. She left home to start a family where her husband worked long hours in a manual job. Jo described her sons' higher education as the means of preventing them from having to undergo the same experience.

Emma represented class in a more positive sense than many contemporary accounts. She identified with:

> *Emma:* ...a working-class background, because I have quite a high value-based system and family's very important, and local community's very important, and that obviously influences how I perceive and see myself and obviously impacts on how I am as a student as well, I would have thought.

> It's really quite difficult because both of my parents didn't do education. Not because they didn't want to but because they didn't have that choice. And I suppose they always had that drive that our children will, they will do better, really; and always values that if you work hard, get on with things, are reliable, trustworthy and honest, you'll do all right, you know. And you know, you sow what you reap, really, so I suppose that does influence how I get on with things, my self-motivation, the desire to learn and develop as well.

BE: Has being reliable, trustworthy and honest, kept things ok for your parents and - ?

Emma: I would say, yes, absolutely. And they are beliefs I share (Emma, #68-74).

This view of class seldom appears in contemporary social science. It appeared still more interesting for coming from one of the most articulate, career-focused participants. The association of conscientiousness with working-class identity presents an interesting contrast to those analyses which present working-class participation as weak and fragile.

If social class remains the prime determinant of educational outcomes, the marginality of FECs within higher education in some ways echoes the persistent marginality of working-class people within higher education. Yet participants in this study provided little evidence of a 'weak' engagement because of social class. For Emma, the problem was that the pressures of study made it hard to keep up to working-class standards. All this, however, focuses on social class; wider structural issues were entailed.

Issues of social class are overlaid with issues of gender and 'race.' Neither of these questions emerged as a strong theme in the interviews, possibly because of female and Asian-descended participants' perceptions of the interviewer's identity. The themes raised in the interviews focused overwhelmingly on the social norms of particular geographical and social locations. The two Asian participants presented their identities very differently. Jas spoke at length about religious belief: he gave the most definite definition of self, describing himself unhesitatingly as, '... a Sikh man, living in British society' (Jas, #42). He presented the norms of the Indian community in which he grew up as one that encouraged academic achievement. He denied that his bullying by a teacher was racially motivated (since the school was dominated by Indian children) but his raising this idea demonstrated his awareness of the significance of racism; he explained his father's expectations of education in terms of Indian village schools. Pervez's

narrative is focused strongly on the social norms of the geographical location where he grew up. At no point did Pervez refer to his family's Pakistani origins, although he talked extensively about his family. His account showed greater awareness than any other of the changing economic environment in the area.

Gender issues were rarely mentioned, although they appeared significant in such areas as Jayne's experience of older brothers going to university. They were raised fleetingly at the first focus group:

> *Jo:* When I went into the sixth form there were only two girls in the sixth form, girls just didn't do it.
>
> *Pervez:* We didn't even have a sixth form -
>
> *Jo:* Girls just didn't stay on -
>
> *Emma:* Well I was basically told, 'we don't really want you.' (FG, #85-88.)

Beyond this attempt to raise the issue, the significance of female roles in society was only raised implicitly, for example in relation to some female participants' perceived responsibility for vulnerable relatives. The key issues to be raised explicitly related to locations that can be linked to social class, a defining feature of colleges.

These accounts were not specifically accounts of classed relationships to higher education. Whilst ten of the participants had origins that are broadly identifiable as working-class (and the others had attended local schools in working-class communities) all of them had begun to develop the beginnings of professional or managerial careers, albeit some at early stages and at modest levels. Yet they described themselves not only in denial of traditional student identity but also by denying professional and managerial identities. Only one of the twelve participants identified herself explicitly in terms of her professional management role: and she did so using a form of dialect speech that she did not use at any other point in the interview. Consciously or

otherwise, this served to distance her from norms of 'educated speech' that might be expected in such a role. This pattern of denial was one of the few areas that was replicated in every interview. If discourse plays a role in sustaining social structure, this was clear evidence of a problem in the development of graduate identities. This idea is developed further in the following section.

Social structure and discourse

Although the participants were nearly all making progress in their careers, most identified themselves with work in general rather than the status that their roles might convey. Those in health and social care roles took care to describe these functions of their work, rather than their responsibilities for managing these services:

> *Jas:* When people say what are you I say, a regular guy seeking to protect children in a society where they need help. I don't like to say social worker because they have a bad reputation but when I'm pushed that's what I'll do, it's about protecting children. And I like to see myself not as a manager but who nurtures some good work out of some capable people (Jas, #42).

Jackie answered a direct question about her job title:

> *Jackie:* Primary Care and Support Development Manager. But I won't tell you that. [It] don't come across, then?

> *BE:* I'm interested that you say you woudn't use that term. How would you describe yourself in terms of a work role? If I was just someone talking at [her local] Post Office and said, what do you do, then, what would you say?

> *Jackie:* I'd say, I work with GP practices to help and support them. I wouldn't say manage. I don't like that term (Jackie, #41-43).

However, private-sector employees also described themselves in diminished ways. Bob, for example, described himself as:

> *Bob:* Father, skivvy. I wouldn't think I'm a expert in one particular area, a distribution-type person, a distribution-type manager. (Bob, #15.)

For Pervez, with his own long-running haulage business:

> *Pervez:* It's either a transport manager, or a lorry driver, one or the other. Erm...I don't... there's no airs and graces about me, I'm quite, what you see is what you get. That's how I started as a lorry driver and I still do that sort of thing but there's a lot more that I do at work now, so, that's why I've more or less said that I'm a transport manager now, 'cause there's a lot to encompass within it (Pervez, #40).

The reasons for this reluctance to speak of their status are not immediately obvious. It suggests ambivalence about emerging professional and graduate identities, as these students acquire social and cultural capital. A simple explanation might be that these individuals are still in the process of social transition to more professional roles in society and are tied to aspects of social structure from their earlier lives.

However, data analysis from the one-to-one interviews raised the possibility of a relationship between these denials and the denials of their student identities. Accordingly, the question was raised at the first focus group. Responses were limited before the group returned to talking about the value of qualifications. But there were interesting comments:

> *Bob:* I wouldn't have a problem with my qualification. But my occupation, I would play it down. So I think people are trying to play it down.

> *Brian:* Do you think they change their role according to who they're talking to?

> *Emma:* I think it depends on your background. I describe myself as a nurse first as a manager second.

> *Jas:* A different kind of management, empowering people and not oppressing them.

> *Emma:* It's almost like they've got two identities.

> *Pervez:* I'll say that I'm going to college. And when they ask me about that, I'll tell them. It's about broadening your horizons. It's for me and nobody else.

What these statements have in common is their ambivalence about both graduate and professional identities. For the students, it was largely through speech that they enacted, or performed, their various identities. Their social locations, just like their position in the hierarchy of higher education, were not simply pre-ordained by society but were continually re-constructed through discourse. This is, of course, the same medium through which their studies and qualifications might be subject to discourses of inferiority compared to other institutions. More significantly, this discourse appears to be an important part of the construction of identities which embrace earlier identifications.

This chapter has indicated that, if colleges offer a more supportive environment in terms of the learning experience, and if local study enables students to access the support of family and workplace networks, a long-term cost to the student may be entailed. This localised engagement is also framed by the same aspects of social structure discussed in relation to their transitions into higher education. Like the stratification of institutions, their social locations in the longer term are to some extent subject to their re-location by discourse. Geographical location constitutes one way in which such re-location is constrained. These issues are examined further in the conclusion of the thesis which follows.

PART FOUR: CONCLUSIONS

CHAPTER 8: CONCLUSIONS: DIVERSE AND DIVERGENT IDENTITIES

Introduction

The previous three chapters have reported the data gathered during the empirical study. This chapter analyses the contribution that this data and its analysis make to knowledge about this field. It relates the findings to contemporary debates in this area.

This study was designed to throw light on the possibilities and limitations of the college contribution to higher education. The introductory chapters explained the significance of the student body to problems of the college contribution, identified by scholars writing from a perspective of plural and diverse sites for higher education. The data has revealed something of the diversity to be found among part-time students in colleges. This suggests that colleges have a role beyond simply providing access routes for 'marginal' or 'non-traditional' students. The data has also indicated some distinguishing features of the students using this provision. This provides some background to the problems of the college contribution.

In this chapter, the findings in the previous three chapters are summarised as showing identity formation that differed both from non-traditional stereotypes and from traditional norms of studentship. The following section summarises these aspects of diversity and difference. The findings are then reviewed in comparison with the original research questions. The process of identity construction is discussed, drawing on concepts presented in Chapter Three. Finally, the chapter uses the findings to address the broader question of how students' identity construction is significant to the expansion, differentiation and stratification of higher education.

Diverse and divergent identities

Participants' accounts may be summarised as the construction of diverse and divergent identities. Even among these twelve participants, there is evidence of considerable diversity. The divergence is to be found in their significant differences from 'non-traditional' students and from adults in earlier studies. These are not two separate aspects of the study's findings but are complementary: a wider constituency than the 'disadvantaged' and 'non-traditional' make up the range of students more likely to participate in colleges part-time than to go to university.

The diversity of this student body is among the most important conclusions to be drawn from this study, even if it seems the most simple. Colleges do not attract a single 'non-traditional type' even within one location and within related vocational areas. Their diversity was exemplified by their narratives of 'conformity', 'exception' and 'transgression' describing their pathways away from and back into higher education and shaping their identity beyond higher education. Yet all of these individuals felt able to adapt to this form of higher education participation in their own ways. None of them presented identities of insecure learners whose engagement is partial and fragile.

Earlier studies have identified young people in colleges who have chosen to continue their studies within familiar environments and this has been variously interpreted as a sign of weak engagement, or a lack of confidence associated with working-class students. Bocock et al. (1996, in Bocock et al., 1999) for example, whilst identifying that HE students in colleges more frequently came from socio-economic groups C2, D and E, and were over 21, drew attention to their lack of confidence. These students:

> ... expressed greater doubts about their ability to cope with the course, although... *the proportion of students with non-standard or no qualifications was similar in FE and HE* [institutions] (1999: 289 – added emphasis.)

On such an interpretation, college students are not defined as less 'academically able' (i.e. unable to meet the traditional entry requirements) or

socially disadvantaged but by their lack of confidence because of social factors. The data provides a basis to question blanket assertions in this area. Whilst hesitancy and uncertainty emerged at times during their accounts, the latter reflected a complex range of personal and social factors.

One response to this diversity might be to question whether higher education in colleges is likely to attract more middle-class students, seizing opportunities to access public services at a relatively low cost. For example, within a few years of the introduction of Access programmes, Britton and Baxter (1994) were expressing anxieties about their domination by middle-class students who saw them as a less academically demanding route into HE. However, even the most confident and successful students in this study seemed to identify with colleges more because of their associations with local industries and communities than because of such value propositions. In the sense that their studies represented continuation from earlier vocational and academic studies in colleges, their participation had extended over lengthy periods of time. Their choice to study again in the same institution appeared to reflect identifications that formed the basis of, and were sustained by, their earlier experiences of study at a college. Their identities had, however, developed during their part-time higher education studies, into identities that were definably different from those of other students.

Working adult identities

The 'adult' identities they presented diverged not only from those of 'traditional' students often presented as the norm but also from non-traditional students represented in other studies. An essential feature of their divergence is their participation in vocational education. This was presented not as the passive internalisation of industry practices but as entailing critical engagement in work organisations and adaptations to increasing insecurity. In this sense, their identities were not constructed through a partial or

'vocationalised' engagement with higher education but were constituted in response to their multiple roles.

This group has not been represented as 'typical' of college HE students: their specific geographical locations have been emphasised throughout. Moreover, their participation in the study served to deepen their perspectives on the meaning of their studies and their position in society; and this in turn rendered them less typical of the body of HE students in colleges. Nevertheless, the data indicates some essential features of part-time, adult students on HE programmes in colleges. They reported the process of managing diverse practical and social pressures. Coming from less privileged backgrounds than the majority of university students, they were engaged on vocational programmes. Their identities and aspirations were limited by these existing social locations: they took pains to explain how their prior experience had contributed to their mode of study and would in turn constrain their futures.

For many participants, their identity was constructed not simply in relation to their learning or to their earlier identifications with family, community, class, ethnicity or gender. The location of these students 'outside' higher education, which they had encountered in popular discourse, has deeper roots elsewhere in society. These discourses, enhancing the 'positional goods' of university graduates, construct students in colleges as inferior both to traditional and to what have been described above as 'traditional non-traditional' students. Participants' responses included emphasising their achievement in the face of multiple claims both on their practical resources, notably time, and their psychic energies. They also used this part-time experience and representations of an 'adult' identity to counter those discourses that represented their educational location as inferior, even to the 'traditional non-traditional' students in post-92 institutions.

This is not to suggest that these students were untroubled by these many pressures. Whilst Yorke and Longden (2010) suggest that their data indicates

broadly similarity between part-time foundation degree students in FE and HE institutions, their respondents in FECs generally reported somewhat greater satisfaction with their learning experience but more difficulty in managing external factors. In the study reported here, participants' uncertainties emerged particularly in relation to the workplace and to their own futures in a world of economic change, where increasing credentialisation threatened to diminish the value of their qualifications, relative to those of the graduates of traditional institutions.

This broad summary of their identity construction may be amplified by returning to the research questions which provided a framework for the study and by exploring some relationships between the answers. The primary research question is answered first, in relation to the roles played by social structure and by discourse in relation to identity construction.

The identity process: structure and discourse

So far, this chapter has described the identities that the college HE students in this study constructed. However, the principal research question specifically asked, 'How do part-time students in an English Further Education College construct identity in and beyond higher education?' It will be useful, then, to deepen our understanding of the 'how': to examine process by returning to theories of identity.

The thesis has made repeated references to two dominant theoretical approaches. A well-known critique of contemporary policy, drawing heavily on sociological perspectives and using the conceptual tools of Bourdieu, has been used to examine the influence of identity on young people choosing post-compulsory institutions (Reay et al., 2005, for example). Post-structuralist perspectives have been used by writers on adult participation, particularly those wishing to emphasise the plurality of roles and identifications more frequently found among adult learners, such as Shah

(1994). Given the additional importance of understanding these students' simultaneous participation in work organisations, it will also be useful to recall uses of identity in organisation theory. This section therefore deals in succession with matters of social structure and of discourse, before returning to Alvesson's (2010) images of organisational identity.

For those drawing on Bourdieusian approaches, the 'how' of identity construction is largely through the inherent, if malleable, dispositions of habitus. The influence of social structure has been shown to play a significant role in shaping students' choices of institution and expectations of higher education. All those taking part in the study had connections to social locations where the college was an accepted setting for education. Various aspects of social structure differentiated the processes by which they constructed their narratives of (dis)location and their identities. The same constraints limited their geographical and social aspirations, since their dispositions to move on were in turn based on their ties to these earlier locations. In these senses, the study bears out those analyses that accord a role to social structure in continuing to shape participation in higher education and its outcomes, through the prior dispositions of students. These social structures were differentiated and complex: although class appears as the dominant determinant, this was overlaid with considerations of gender and ethnicity. At the same time, all of the participants had in some sense already embarked on some kind of professional or managerial career, although they were generally in its early stages. As Britton and Baxter (1999) pointed out of mature students generally, some upward mobility has frequently taken place before adults enrol in higher education. Nevertheless, social stratification continued to affect their perceptions and their identity formation.

Yet the students' transitions could not be explained in terms of social structure alone. Although social locations appeared to determine the narrative types which had strong implications for students' futures, these narratives were not constructed in isolation. Particularly in relation to the

hierarchy of institutions, their accounts described interactions with others, which in turn drew on the discursive frameworks through which such hierarchies are brought into existence and maintained. And in turn, participants' accounts were constructed in response to these discourses of hierarchy, demonstrating the significance of discourse in shaping participation and its outcomes. Colleges are themselves bound up in discursive frameworks that link them to geographical and classed locations that may contribute to the marginalisation of their students and constrain their outcomes either through choice or labour market mechanisms. This raises the question of what discourses are decisive in sustaining this marginalisation of college-based students.

Whilst these discourses are ultimately rooted in the diversification of (higher) education, this in itself need not necessarily lead to the construction of hierarchies. Different programmes of study might simply lead to preparation for different work roles. Instead the most work-focused institutions find themselves at the bottom of a hierarchy, which constructs the most academic courses as superior and eases the access of their graduates to elite jobs. At the most elementary level, this hierarchy exists in popular discourse, sustained by vague reputations and analogies of football divisions (Times Higher Education, 2009). This is perpetuated through the apparatus which guides 'successful' school students towards elite universities and ensures their elite employment on graduation: the knowledge bases of employers, the advice services of schools and the league tables of newspapers. For these sources, the question of 'difference' is not one of divergence between the purposes of different institutions or sectors; but of their relative success and failure in the production of 'positional goods' (Halsey et al., 1980; Hirsch, 1977).

Archer (2007) has suggested that the policy discourse itself sustains this hierarchical discourse, citing Charles Clarke's speech about gold, silver and bronze universities. Policy-makers have acted at times to place particular provision 'outside' higher education, as happened with (temporarily) the

HNC and with non-prescribed higher education and there are certainly difficulties with the policy discourse. Yet critical policy research itself may be seen as sustaining the same discourse through its critique. This is a risk that any research runs: this study itself served to raise the profile of these ideas among participants in the study. However, it is also entailed in the way critical research sometimes appears to place the college contribution outside legitimate higher education. There is a marked contrast between the emancipatory representation of access programmes in the literature and that of colleges. It is unclear how far this represents approval of their aspiration to build participation in more traditional forms of higher education.

For example, Hutchings (2003) – in a section on information and advice – asserts that:

> Further Education (usually sub-degree level) takes place in colleges, and higher education (usually degree and postgraduate level) in universities (2003: 100-101).

This is something of a simplification, given that, in addition to the substantial numbers of HE students in FECs, substantial numbers of FE students are to be found in HEIs. Leathwood and Hutchings (2003) expressed scepticism about foundation degrees' possibilities for expansion in higher education participation, since 'many of the institutions offering these courses are FE ones' (2003: 141). The difficulty here is that these contributions, whilst not directly responsible for the popular discourse, tend to reinforce the stratification they critique.

Having reviewed the significance of both structure and of discourse, it is now possible to return to Alvesson's (2010) images of organisational identity and to choose among these approaches. This representation of the field suggested a choice between essentialist or integrated conceptions, characterised by coherence and robustness, against those emphasising de-centred or ambiguous conceptions of identity. The experiences of part-time study have been shown to reveal rather more insecurity and fluidity than the policy

discourse of vocational education might suggest. The second axis of Alvesson's conceptual map opposes the agency of the individual to such contextual influences as managerial regimes, social structure, hyper-modern instability or discourse. Here, both the immanence of social structure and the hierarchical discourse of higher education have been shown to undermine, or at least severely constrain, the possibilities of agency.

Two images in Alvesson's framework fit this categorisation. Those who view organisational members as 'surfers' tend to describe identity as a process and the subject as shaped by the discourse. There can be no stable identity, since to speak of this would be to assume an 'essential core': the post-structuralist ideas espoused by many supporters of this view reject the autonomous, unitary individual as the centre of the social universe. Ashforth and Mael (1989 in Alvesson, 2010) claim that conflicts between the demands of multiple identities are resolved:

> ... by ordering, separating, or buffering them. This compartmentalization of identities suggests the possibilities of double standards, apparent hypocrisy and selective forgetting' (1989: 154).

In this relatively painless (if alarmingly sceptical) view of identity, the self adapts to changing discourses without much inertia.

The second image is rather less optimistic. 'Self-doubters' are either existentially anxious; or economic and organisational insecurity exacerbates these doubts. According to Collinson (2003) attempts to develop strong identities tend to reinforce the very insecurity they were designed to overcome. This image suggests that contemporary conditions make it especially difficult to create security and satisfaction in working life. Whilst student identities are inevitably fluid, and those of part-time students subject to contradictions, the comparison with a normative 'traditional' identity rooted in the past and in privilege makes fixed subjectivities difficult to sustain. Given the instability of contemporary society and its work organisations, and in the face of the discourses of hierarchy and stratification,

the students in this account faced an uphill struggle maintaining identities appropriate to study, work and the other demands on their physical and psychological resources. The subsidiary questions of the study addressed some of these issues and they are dealt with in the following section.

Subsidiary research questions

The earlier parts of this chapter have presented conclusions drawn from the data as it came to be structured in the thesis. This section returns to the specific issues raised by the subsidiary research questions.

1. How do students perceive their identities in relation to those of students in other higher education settings?

These issues were largely addressed in Chapter Six. Participants constructed 'adult' identities which they used to differentiate their own participation in higher education from those in other institutions or on other modes of study. They characterised their own identities in relation to a multiplicity of roles that required them to balance the time and social pressures entailed in part-time study. They then used these experiences to assert their greater achievement, relative to full-time students with fewer distractions and demands. Some students pointed to advantages of their mode of study. Thus, although most had encountered discourses of hierarchy that positioned them as inferior to full-time university students, they felt able to assert the authenticity of their own experience.

From the students' own perspective, then, part-time study in college was seen as a valid experience of higher education. From a methodological perspective, which emphasises the meanings participants placed on their experience, this is to accept their ability to construct accounts that can be taken as representations of their experienced reality. This alone does not serve to refute a possible view that they were victims of an inauthentic experience that had not armed them with the critical skills to perceive its

own limitations. Moreover, their enacting 'adult' identities to legitimate their college-based experience, including their 'othering' of traditional students, may be seen to reflect some anxieties about their position within a hierarchical system.

2. What relationship exists between the construction of student identity and other identifications linked to community, class, gender, or ethnicity?

The participation of non-traditional students represents one of colleges' principal claims to make a significant contribution to higher education. Thus, it was to be expected that participants would identify strongly with the same aspects of social structure that constitute them as 'non-traditional', even though most of them were in work roles that had begun to move them away from such identifications.

Several indicators suggested that college represented less of a break from earlier identifications than might participation by, for example, young working-class people in elite institutions. Participants generally provided accounts of supportive family relationships, drew on local identifications and on earlier experiences of college-based education in attempts to create secure identities. The possibilities of combining student identity with other roles and identifications appeared as a significant element in these accounts. By contrast, 'practical' advantages such as the convenience of studying whilst working were seldom mentioned and were most frequently described as a disadvantage.

Whilst issues of class, gender, or ethnicity were seldom raised explicitly, their role in structuring educational opportunity and participation was evident throughout the study. In particular, the narratives reported in Chapter Five indicated the roles played by subtle differences in social class. Ethnicity and gender also contributed to these accounts of participation. If some participants wished to disassociate themselves from their origins, others worried about upholding the values they had grown up with.

That such students tend to study where these identifications are able to survive intact does not, however, prove that such settings cannot constitute 'transformative' higher education. Such a conclusion would assume that higher education requires people from less privileged backgrounds to cast off undesirable earlier habits and associations: that education is incompatible with working-class identity. Such an assumption would be difficult to reconcile with a democratic approach to higher education.

3. How do they expect their graduate futures to be shaped by their identities as part-time college students?

Even among the small sample here, differences of expectation clearly emerged among those with subtly different social backgrounds. Their accounts described the way that participants with backgrounds of social exclusion continued to exclude themselves from higher-level employment, particularly through considerations of geographical mobility. These factors appeared to predict inequality in the lives of graduates. Adults who have studied part-time do not benefit financially to the same extent as young graduates of full-time study; and, whilst specific data for HE in FE graduates is not available, the data did provide some explanations of why this is to be expected.

4. To what extent are their emerging identities shaped by the requirements of their work organisations?

Participants' identities were closely associated with the combination of study and work. The vocational nature of their studies and the constraints of employment relationships had provided opportunities for study but sometimes created tensions in the workplace: identity was not constructed simply in response to the requirements of work organisations. Their roles in work organisations - and the opportunities to reflect on these experiences through their studies – provided new opportunities for critical engagement.

Rather than fragile learner identities, their position as *vocational students* reflected an increasingly insecure economy and contested work environments. Participants responded to economic change and increased risk with concerns about a world of increased credentialisation.

5. Through what past personal experiences have participants come to adopt student identities?

This final question was added in response to the results of early data collection. Yet it has in many senses provided answers to all of the earlier questions. The compensatory narratives, apparently intended to legitimate 'failure' to participate at eighteen, were influential in the construction of identity and in shaping participants' plans for the future. Linked to nuanced elements of social structure, they indicated its persistent role in determining participation and lives beyond higher education.

These lengthy transitions have been described above as extended and (dis)located transitions. The idea that adult participation may draw on experiences some years in the past raises questions about the appropriateness of the term 'transition' here. It has been used in work on the 'learning career' and on full-time students staying in colleges for higher education to examine short-term transitions, as well as providing the basis for such theoretical formulations as 'maximally maintained inequality' (Mare 1980). However, the accounts offered by participants in this study explicitly linked their participation to their earlier studies and this appeared to be an important factor in their studying in college. The linking of their withdrawal from study and return to the same locations gave rise to their characterisation as extended and (dis)located transitions. This also has some implication for the way that higher-level study might be organised; but this is a matter for the following chapter.

The construct of identity has provided valuable opportunities to explore the experience of participants. For this reason, it has proved a more useful tool at this level than the construct of boundaries, used in earlier studies to make

sense of the conceptual wall erected between post-compulsory educational sectors. The final section discusses the contribution made by these findings to contemporary discussions of higher education expansion and diversity.

Identity and higher education expansion: contributing to understanding

The concluding part of this chapter examines the contribution of the study to contemporary debates on higher education expansion and diversification. Important questions were raised in Chapter Two in relation to the potential for expanding higher education through diversified institutions. A further consideration was whether the identity of particular groups, including part-time students in colleges served to place them 'outside' authentic higher education. Issues were raised as to whether this protected traditional institutions from pressure to allow the participation of students from less privileged backgrounds.

These accounts have revealed something of the ways in which certain students' identities are tied to the same geographical and social locations that are associated with colleges. In addition to the practical convenience of local study for those whose lives excluded farther travel, their earlier experience of college study had at least met their expectations. The possibility of assimilating this experience into their existing lives, or at least of compartmentalising this alongside local, work and working-class identities distinguishes these institutions even from such attempts as the binary system to diversify higher education. Colleges remain the institutions most effective in attracting applicants from less privileged backgrounds because of their local and vocational traditions. As Arum, Gamoran and Shavit (2007) have argued, greater diversification appears to hold the most promise for genuinely widening educational opportunity: and colleges remain distinctive in a way that has been largely abandoned by isomorphism in post-92 institutions. All this indicates the possibilities of a sustained college contribution to higher education.

However, the study also indicates some reasons for the limited attractions of this contribution, whereby higher education in colleges has not expanded significantly during the past decade. A problematic aspect of the identities discussed above is not their weakness but the way the discourse constitutes them against the norm of the traditional student and the emergent norm of the traditional non-traditional student. Whilst financial and practical considerations may encourage some students to undertake college-based studies, those who do enrol find themselves constructing identities in the face of popular discourses of hierarchy. Such discourses – and these have been shown to find support here and there in the literature - place college students 'outside' higher education.

The suggestion examined here is not that membership of a particular social class, grouping or organisation might make one ineligible for higher education; but that such identifications might lead one to engage in an 'inauthentic' higher education experience. To the extent that this study made reference to students' direct experience of learning, there was some evidence to support the notion that students valued the more small-scale experience that many colleges offer. This does not prove that higher education students are innately weak. Whilst an uncritical vocationalism may be found here and there in colleges (and elsewhere) the study indicates the possibilities of questioning and critique in these settings. Insofar as the differences in background, outlook and mode of study contribute to differences in identity from traditional students, these alone cannot serve to place these students outside higher education, unless these differences led applicants to seek a specifically lower-level experience. A more coherent explanation would be that applicants who already have multiple roles and responsibilities seek institutions where they can manage these alongside their programmes of study. Without these possibilities, they would probably not participate: this alone indicates a positive contribution, rather than diversion.

The 'diversionary' argument frequently mounted in America has relevance here. The notion that diversified organisations detract from the possibility of

democratising elite institutions has merit in terms of educational ideals. After all, Trow (1987, 1989) was arguing that colleges should provide a diminished version of higher education. This directly opposes notions of parity among the qualifications offered by different institutions, based on the External Examiner system, that still command widespread support in the UK.

However, the concept of diversion itself normalises traditional modes of study (full-time, residential) and elite institutions. Yet these institutional forms are temporary, if longstanding, and fulfil particular educational functions. The civic institutions in their early days attracted local applicants who travelled in daily: at their foundation, they were the local choice, as indeed Oxford and Cambridge had been the local alternative to the University of Paris (White, 2009). Yet other institutions are drawn into imitating them, or risking unfavourable comparison. The differences between institutions might equally well constitute possible alternative forms of study, fulfilling different social needs.

The ESRC 'FurtherHigher project' included in its End of Award Report (Parry et al., 2008) a summary of the patterns of participation it found. This draws extensively on the full-time experience and is worth quoting at length in order to compare the findings of this study:

> General further education colleges make a distinctive contribution to widening participation, both in qualifying individuals for entry to undergraduate education and in providing programmes of higher education. Compared to those transferring to higher education institutions, a larger proportion of students staying in further education colleges for their undergraduate education come from low participation neighbourhoods and areas of deprivation. The same is the case for the one in nine of all higher education students taught in further education colleges, compared to those studying in higher education establishments (Parry et al, 2008: 16).

This thesis illustrates some of the complexities of the contribution colleges make to widening participation. This goes well beyond participation from residents of low participation neighbourhoods and areas of deprivation. For a significant layer of adults considering higher education, colleges offer a

proposition that is attractive largely because of the associations of colleges with particular communities, localities and industries.

The FurtherHigher report continues with comments on progression arrangements, which are more easily measured for full-timers owing to their progression within a year or so of their earlier studies. Longer-term transitions have been discussed in the thesis. The report continues:

> Only a minority of higher education students in further education colleges enter with qualifications gained from the same establishment, at the least in the previous year. Most are adults in employment who study part-time, but around half those completing foundation degrees will move internally or externally to a bachelor degree. An expansion of work-focused higher education will place new demands on the access and transfer functions of further-higher institutions (ibid.).

The complexity of the relationships between part-time students and their earlier studies constitutes one area which the thesis has discussed but which has potential for further investigation. The possibilities for further progression, to honours level and beyond, are also suggested by the thesis in passing, since the data was collected from students who had attained this level in colleges. However, the thesis has also indicated some of the difficulties of such progression in the shape of the problematic identities constructed by students in these settings. These also are discussed in the report:

> Asymmetries of power and status define the relationship between further and higher education, with dual regimes associated with dependence and subordination (Brint and Karabel, 1989). In other respects, the boundary between the two sectors is permissive and permeable. On its own, the concept of duality – our original core construct – is a limited tool of analysis, especially when applied to organisational fields, learning cultures and student identities (ibid.).

The present study has discussed identities rather than boundaries and the 'asymmetries of power and status' have been reflected in the lived experience of the participants. Stratification in higher education ultimately reflects

stratification in society. This was formerly expressed in the level of study attained. Education prepares people for various job roles and for participation in democratic societies. There seems no real reason why preparation for elite jobs should require something known as 'higher education' whilst preparation for technical roles is excluded. Even less desirable is the notion that education should select people into these roles according to the particular social locations of their earlier lives. If taking part in something called 'higher education' is the appropriate preparation for full participation in democratic societies, the exclusion of wide sections of the population seems difficult to justify. Conversely, if all post-compulsory institutions are engaged in this preparation, this raises important questions about what form(s) this might take.

To contest the discourse of higher education hierarchy that draws on and reproduces social inequalities would be to enhance the college contribution to higher education and HE's contribution to adults' lives. This would create significant but necessary challenges for policy, practice and educational research. These are the subject of the tentative suggestions in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 9: IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE AND POLICY

Introduction

This study of a small sample of students has provided detailed data about the processes through which adults take part in higher education within Further Education Colleges. Whilst no attempt is made here to develop detailed critiques of contemporary policy or practice, its findings illuminate some areas relevant to policy and practice. It seems appropriate, then, to make some suggestions about its implications. In particular, its questioning of routine assumptions about identity problematises the assumptions that support deficit models of educational practice and imitative patterns of higher education growth.

The discussion of these themes at this point is not intended to suggest that the study has proved a case for particular directions of national or institutional policy. The study has covered a limited field and makes no claims to universal generalisability. Any consideration of its implications is likely to be limited and tenuous. Conversely, however, it may be said that a good deal of national and institutional policy has been conceived on the strength of minimal empirical data, or none, about the way that part-time students engage in these institutions. Thus, this seems an appropriate point to reflect on the way that part-time HE participation in colleges has been conceptualised in the past and to offer some ideas for discussion amongst educators in this field. Such educators, as well as researchers into the field of HE in FE and more generally into differentiation in higher education, comprise the intended audience for this discussion.

This brief chapter tentatively explores notions about higher education that are based on the broadest conclusions of the study: that part-time students in colleges are 'different' from, rather than simply inferior to, 'traditional' university students, full-time HE students in colleges, and even adults,

including part-time students, in universities. This raises some issues about what programmes and what educational practices this implies for those who have rejected some traditional aspects of higher education. This in turn touches on discussion about how their knowledge is constructed. Beyond this, the broader question arises about what contribution colleges ought to make to post-compulsory education in England.

From the deficit model of learning...

The complexities of identity offered by these accounts suggest programmes of study that complement students' various responsibilities. This implies diverse models of participation and support, rather than asking students to accommodate themselves to models predicated on the full-time experience. The study has shown how part-time students may regard their engagement in higher education as a process of extended transition, in which they have opportunities to overcome the effects of earlier unsuccessful experiences, personal difficulties or simply limited awareness. Given the contemporary doctrine of 'lifelong learning', the notion of leaving education to rejoin it later would seem entirely natural. However, within higher education, this is not quite straightforward.

Whilst adult admission to higher education has become commonplace, the possibility of further withdrawal and re-entry is no easy matter. If those in this study showed persistence in completing their courses, this was because their choices were simple. Students who are unable to travel far and have multiple demands on their time and resources seem the most likely to move in and out of higher education over time. Yet short courses at higher levels remain largely the preserve of universities. The students in this study had all studied intermediate qualifications, such as foundation degrees or HNDs, before moving onto a top-up and this seems an improvement on a long-term commitment to full-length honours programmes. Shorter-cycle provision and credit frameworks that would allow more uneven transitions could enhance

these possibilities. However, these are difficult to administer and smaller colleges might not achieve the numbers to make some programmes viable. Students themselves are frequently anxious to gain valued qualifications in as short a time as possible. Nevertheless, the continuous intensity of current higher education programmes sits uneasily with the life-course of the adult learner.

More importantly, once enrolled in higher education, students may encounter further misperceptions. The identity of higher education students in colleges is widely perceived as a defective version of the traditional higher education student: this provides the basis for deficit models of educational practice which seek to provide the 'study skills' that college students lack. Whilst some tutors point out that higher education in colleges benefits from more varied methods of engagement (Harwood and Harwood, 2004) other practices and procedures appear to be based on assumptions about college students' lack of confidence and problems in adapting to standard academic practices. Thus higher education practice in colleges, as elsewhere, increasingly emphasises the importance of study skills and the development of cultural capital. Some of these practices are reminiscent of the remedial classes and referrals which even today extend the pathways of American college students.

The identities of adult students described in the thesis differed substantially from those of hesitant and unconfident learners coming directly from colleges or in schools at eighteen. They did not regard themselves as inferior to their full-time contemporaries and regarded themselves as making valid contributions to each other's learning. Their enthusiasm for ideas, concepts, theories and contemporary practices drew on the possibility of making their own contributions. In the vocational areas of learning where colleges specialise, students may have opportunities to acquire knowledge of contemporary practices that is more up-to-date than their tutors. The assumption that adults will have worthwhile knowledge to contribute is taken for granted in such practices as accreditation of their prior experiential

learning, as well as in traditions of adult education. Yet their unfamiliarity with academic conventions and the patterns of language accepted in higher education may create significant difficulties for these students.

These latter aspects of academic practice are currently being strengthened at the very time when knowledge is becoming de-centred. The tradition that university teaching is based on universities' research has become a little tarnished in many institutions (Scanlon et al, 2007). The university's monopoly on knowledge has been challenged by the thesis that its reproduction is no longer located solely within the academy (Nowotny et al., 2001; Gibbons et al., 1994). These are stronger challenges to academic tradition than colleges and their adult students are likely to mount; but colleges may be better prepared to engage with external organisations than many universities and more adaptable to emerging conceptualisations of knowledge. As Bridges (2000) puts it:

> Insofar as universities recognise and acknowledge (accredit) knowledge derived from outside the academy they threaten their own privileged position of authority in its construction (2000: 47).

Thus, students in colleges are seeking to conform to a model that itself is under attack. In this situation, not only is the 'academic deficit' model inappropriate for teaching part-timers in colleges, the broad process that has shaped institutional development over the last fifty years is increasingly open to question.

... to the deficit model of institutions

The study has demonstrated the possibilities for colleges to reach adults who are less likely to engage in traditional aspects of higher education: this has broadened participation in directions that have ceased to be attractive to the post-92 universities. Whilst the latter institutions also have useful experiences in these fields, based on long experience of leading the expansion of higher education during the last thirty years; they may be seen as remote

by some students in many senses: overwhelming in scale, geographically distant from many communities, and heavily associated with academic traditions that are culturally alien to many potential applicants. Colleges, despite their limitations, appear to retain some advantages in dealing with disadvantage and diversity.

Yet current policy levers include a quality regime that judges colleges largely by their similarity to the practices of universities. The post-92 institutions, which formerly taught degrees first on behalf of the old universities and later those validated by the CNAA, have become the guarantors of quality in colleges. Even directly-funded colleges have become dependent on universities, as the Higher Nationals have been largely replaced by foundation degrees which require university validation. Among the ironies of these practices, is that colleges, which are usually seen by policy-makers to require strong direction of their activities, are increasingly managed through their relationships with universities, the more diverse institutions.

These practices, by which the universities have become further engaged in managing college provision, reflect a tradition of elevating to higher education status the institutions most similar to those already in existence. If the expansion of higher education during the last half-century has been characterised by the creation of new institutions in the image of the old, the academic drift of the polytechnics and their later absorption into the university sector marks a continuing tendency to model the new in the shape of the ancient.

This raises the question of whether the search for institutions most like the existing universities should be replaced by a search for institutional forms that meet the needs of adults, whether in search of traditional or vocational qualifications. Learning environments in which adults feel able to take an active part appear from the data to be found in settings where there is some degree of separation from younger learners (see also Burns, 2007). The details of such institutional forms are well beyond the scope of this study. The dominant view is that universities constitute the norm, although there

are aspects of less prestigious institutions which their adult students find more attractive than the resource-rich, research-based institutions. Yet, in a credentialised society, the status of university qualifications was still valued by participants in this study. This suggests some reasons for the low take-up of the opportunities created by the 2007 Act allowing colleges to apply for degree-awarding powers. Institutions which draw elements from both university and college models may provide future opportunities for many students.

In contemporary society at least, traditional patterns of study are clearly unattractive to many. Similarly, the notion of universal full-time attendance at contemporary elite institutions seems an unlikely blueprint for a learning society. New institutional forms are likely to reflect contemporary social change but will doubtless be subject to contestation. Meanwhile, educators working with non-elite students will seek to provide the best learning opportunities possible with the resources available. Educational research also has a role to play here.

A research agenda

Even during the time of this study, a considerable increase in the literature on higher education in colleges has taken place, variously focusing on national and institutional policy, as well as practice. In one sense, HE in FE has emerged from its earlier position as a 'dark continent' of higher education, in which the size and shape of the provision was hardly known with certainty and where major issues were seldom discussed. At least the existence of these institutions and those who study and work in them has begun to be acknowledged more widely.

Comparing the research output of the last decade to the suggestions Parry and Thompson made (2002: 73) for the future direction of research, progress has been relatively slow. Institutional-level research into such areas as curriculum, teaching, staff development, interaction of students and

allocation of resources has been limited. These are difficult areas in which to collect data with any degree of objectivity. Meanwhile, comparative research into student experience in colleges and universities, comparing approaches to teaching and learning, the comparability of university settings, concepts of studentship and learner identity, and the expectations and experiences of students is still awaited: this would more richly illustrate some of the concepts explored in this study and beyond.

However, new challenges have opened up in this field. Relationships between universities and colleges have assumed new forms. Greater policy emphasis on engagement with work organisations has given rise to new forms of practice. The retrenchment of the state at a time of renewed and intensified international competition is unlikely to leave any institutions unchanged. All of these areas are fertile fields for research.

Critical research into higher education during the last decade has studied the dispositions of those who are inclined to study at institutions unlike traditional universities. It would be regrettable if, whilst contributing to critique of contemporary policy, such approaches were to constitute a barrier to methodical study of second-track institutions, their institutional policies and those who study and work in them. Any systematic understanding of vocational routes and diversified institutions requires a serious effort to comprehend their role in post-compulsory education. This thesis, whilst focused on a small-scale study, is offered as a contribution to such endeavours.

CHAPTER 10: CODA

Introduction

Whilst the foregoing chapters are offered as a coherent account of the study undertaken, this chapter provides some additional material. Firstly, it provides some detail on the author's personal experience and perspectives and on their role in this study. Secondly, it discusses some alternative ways in which the thesis might have been developed. Finally, it includes a final word about the participants at the centre of the study.

The thesis has been represented as a valid account based on the careful representation of student perspectives, with conclusions soundly based on the findings of the study. This claim is based on the methodological approach described in the framework of the study. This is not an 'insider account' that privileges the perspectives of those involved in a specific educational setting. It specifically avoids the kind of direct discussion of educational practice that characterises practitioner research.

However, the aspiration to 'give voice' to others inevitably raises the question of one's own role in their transmission. The author remains the final arbiter of the text. A 'crisis of representation' continues to haunt qualitative research, whether the author is temporarily or continuously engaged in the field. As Jackson and Mazzei (2008) put it:

> Letting readers 'hear' participant voices and presenting their 'exact words' as if they are transparent is a move that fails to consider how as researchers we are already shaping those 'exact words' through the unequal power relationships present and by our own exploitative research agendas and timelines (2008: 2).

The validity of such work is hardly to be enhanced by any mask of scientific neutrality. The next section briefly provides some personal perspective.

Personal perspectives

Like many outsiders, I was hardly aware that higher education in colleges existed until I began to teach it. As traditional industries declined, I looked to other locations for employment, including my local college. Here I was despatched by a departmental head to a distant campus, where I was surprised to discover that professional part-time programmes of a type I had studied earlier at a university were being taught in my local college. Alongside these were higher nationals, which I vaguely knew were taught in colleges. I began to undertake some evening teaching in this area.

I had found an entirely unexpected opportunity to work with adult students who were different in many ways from those I had encountered earlier. What some of these lacked in earlier achievement, they made up for with their motivation. In spite of their predictable diversity, they tended to share backgrounds, approaches and aspirations that differed from students in my earlier experience. They were based in local communities and industries that I had come to know well in my twenty years in this area. A common assumption was that, after their studies were complete, they would continue to contribute largely to the same communities and industries.

Although the educational experience on offer was somewhat different from my own earlier studies, many of the differences were perceived by students (insofar as they perceived them at all) as positive. I began to teach full-time and shortly afterwards assumed responsibility for an area of HE and professional programmes. In response to local and national demands, our team developed first a range of foundation degrees and later honours progression routes. I worked with other teams across the college on similar developments in other areas and with colleagues based in partner universities.

As a relative newcomer to education, I enrolled on a succession of courses to deepen my understanding, not of educational practice alone, but also the social and political context within which these practices took place. My initial

application to the EdD programme at Sheffield provides some my concerns in these areas:

> Notwithstanding such initiatives as the Learning and Skills Research Network, systematic research into practice remains in Colleges an occasional activity, carried out by a small minority. ...

> Interestingly, the traditional academic research community has produced a rather limited response [to the development of foundation degrees] ... the research now being created by practitioners and by the government-funded bodies supporting FDs and their consultants... seems to be a little impressionistic and descriptive.... I feel that a more systematic and rigorous approach to such research is called for. A significant part of what I hope to achieve on the EdD is the development of research into these qualifications that is underpinned by rigorous research methodology (personal statement, EdD application, September 2006).

Some of these concerns were temporarily forgotten as I was drawn into a wide range of discussion on issues in contemporary education. I became interested in the discussions between those scholars exploring new forms of access to higher-level study and those who perceived this as a threat to the fundamentals of higher education. However, the impression that I suggested in my EdD application was borne out by further research: college-based provision seldom merited a mention in such discussions. These routes enabled people to take part who would be less likely to go to university. They were located outside the normal sphere of higher education and were growing in my own and neighbouring colleges: policy documents expressed a clear intention to develop this provision further. Yet the problems relating to these developments seemed rarely to be addressed by academic research.

I therefore decided, despite alternative attractions, to engage in research in this area. I had the advantage of studying at the University of Sheffield, which was leading the substantial ESRC project mentioned in Chapter One. Since I began this research, that project has concluded and published a substantial number of outputs in this area. Along with other recent publications in this field, this has begun to develop a more substantial literature in the field (see

Chapter One). A focus within that project on 'dual access' and on transitions tended to result in a focus, in its empirical work, on those undertaking or contemplating full-time study.

However, my own interest was in those part-time modes of study where I was most interested in developing provision. My impression was that colleges tended to access full-time students who had not been able, for various reasons, to access university education, but who shared many characteristics with the students to be found in those institutions. Part-time students seemed to be something different: people who had been placed or who had placed themselves outside higher education for a prolonged period but were now endeavouring to return to it.

This raised simple questions, to begin with. Why did this happen? For that matter, why did it not happen more often? Who were the people who undertook these routes? However, I was familiar with more critical approaches to participation in higher education and was also interested in those sociological frameworks which suggested that participation followed particular pathways because of social factors. I sought approaches that were appropriate to these interests. The methodology adopted has been described in Chapter Three. In the following section, I consider some of the alternatives.

Alternative approaches

In reflecting back on the approach taken by the study, I can now review key dimensions of the thesis. Conceptually, was this an appropriate way to investigate part-time study in colleges? Methodologically, did the focus on the sample contribute to knowledge in this area? Analytically, might alternative approaches to the data have yielded greater understanding? These issues are addressed in turn.

In conceptualising the research, I was concerned with contemporary attempts to widen participation in higher education along two important

dimensions: by institution and by mode of attendance. On both dimensions, my concern was with the less traditional points of access, namely colleges and part-time study. (A third dimension might have been added in the shape of the distance of particular courses and qualifications from the traditional bachelor's degree.) From the perspective of higher education policy and practice in general, my particular concern was with the role of Further Education Colleges as providers, which was the area least researched, rather than part-time study. However, the part-time literature provided interesting concepts with which to explore the field.

Thus, it might be said very broadly that the thesis examines colleges using the policy literature of colleges and theoretical concepts drawn from the literature of part-time participation. One way to question the design of the study would be to suggest a reversal of these approaches. But there was no intention to question or to problematise current literature on part-time study.

Several choices presented themselves in the design of this research. In deciding between empirical and entirely theoretical research, I was concerned to make the most worthwhile contribution that might be made by someone in my own position. I concluded that others might be better placed to carry out extensive study of policy documents and texts, whilst I had opportunities to gather data from areas that seemed barely touched by empirical research. In particular, there would be opportunities to collect qualitative data of value. In retrospect, this decision appears justified by the collection of data which has been received with far greater interest by readers and by conference audiences than I suspect my own theoretical observations might have been. Moreover, the qualitative nature of this data has provided its greatest interest: it seems unlikely that, for example, survey data, would have yielded the same interest, whilst this would have been more difficult for me to accomplish.

Such practical considerations also decided the question of whether this should be a comparative study or one located in a particular field. Whilst greater insights might have been offered by a study which compared, for example, part-time college students to part-timers at an HEI, access to a comparator group would pose its own problems. Students who regarded the researcher as an 'outsider' might be less willing to talk about private details. This was also justified in the event, by the way that some participants, even though I had known all of them in similar capacities, appeared more willing than others to talk about particular details. The analysis of data did periodically suggest that some themes might have been illustrated better by comparison with other students in a different context. Yet it was never easy to see how this could have been obtained in quite the same way. These dilemmas suggested to me to that comparative study is more easily accomplished, and with greater force, through quantitative data.

Having collected the data, questions of how this might be interpreted and put to use arose even during the process of transcription. Should the data be transcribed complete with attempts to show emphases, pauses, intakes of breath, or laughter? If the intention was to convey the research interaction as accurately as possible, was anything less not an inadequate representation? Such micro-analysis of the data might have assisted such forms of analysis as count the frequency of particular phrases or words (or, perhaps, pauses, intakes of breath, or laughter) or draw meanings from peculiarities of syntax. I have already explained my purpose in representing the words of the participants as faithfully and accurately as possible, seeking to do as little violence as possible to their intentions. This is not to say that others could not have attempted, with equal validity, to interpret their accounts differently, using more sophisticated techniques of analysis. Others, again, might have chosen to make more explicit reference to these exchanges as being themselves part of the construction of identity through interaction, or by providing a more detailed commentary on the social, political and economic context within which they took place. In retrospect, I am happy to

leave these sophisticated methodologies to others: in my own design of the study, I was seeking to complement existing policy commentary and the accounts of practitioners. Whilst recognising the limitations of any claims to a naturalistic approach or authorial innocence I have tried to do so by what I believe is an accurate representation of participants' intended meanings. In the spirit of this aspiration, I conclude with some final comments from those who took part.

Participant afterwords

The final research encounter took the form of a second focus group over a year after the one-to-one interviews had taken place. Six of the original participants attended. Two had finished their studies a year previously and the others were at the point of completion. Of the original sample, one was still far from completion, whilst some others had completed at high levels. (Causal relationships between their motivation as students and their self-selection for the study may exist in either direction but there is no attempt here to prove either.)

The session began informally with an informal discussion of the routes that those attending, as well as other participants, had taken in the intervening year. Interestingly, most of the conformists and the trangressors (using the terms of the 'narrative typology' developed in Chapter Five of the thesis) seemed to be achieving some career success, building on their achievements in their studies, usually within their own organisations. The 'exceptions' had taken more varied routes and had moved on to new jobs, families or continents.

I explained something of the findings and talked about the role colleges play in providing routes for students who might otherwise be excluded from higher education. Responding to this, participants were now concerned to minimise differences between their identities and those of any other

graduates. They were still aware of advantages of studying at college and aware of the way society differentiates between institutions:

> *Jas:* When you've been to university, you see there's no real difference. But I work with people who prefer to go to [civic universities in the region] and they go on to hire people. So, they think, when they're hiring, I'm not sure about where you did yours (FG2).

Others still spoke of advantages in, for example, the scale of college study. But, compared to earlier interviews, their emphasis had shifted from the differences of their experience from that of traditional students. Now they were more concerned to compare their status with that of other graduates.

> *Jas:* You say that colleges are different but it's sold on the fact that it's backed up by [the partner university]. You get your degree from [the partner university].
>
> *Pervez:* It's the same syllabus, the same –
>
> *Paula:* It's more like a location thing. I didn't want to drive to [neighbouring universities]. Do they even do part-time?
>
> *Bob:* I've never, ever encountered anyone who's questioned me in terms of where I've done my qualification (FG2).

Whilst this discussion appears to centre on the nature of credentials, it also reflects the way these participants wanted to be valued as graduates. This provides a rather different emphasis from that in Chapter Six, reflecting the identities they wanted to construct at or near the end of their studies. Whilst as their narratives as students had emphasised the difficulties of their studies, at this point they were concerned to establish parity with other graduates. One suggestion was that colleges were 'making it worse' by expanding the numbers of graduates, indicating a shift in perspective.

Nevertheless, they remained conscious of differences between the identities of those graduates and their own. Some anxiety appeared about whether they had done something 'easier':

Paula: A lot of it we applied to work and you can get all that information, all that data. If you're an eighteen, nineteen-year-old student at university, surely you've got to do more work to get that, so it's harder... I thought we had it easier (FG2).

As students, they had gained from their work experience, not only by the possibilities of drawing on current working practices but by the opportunities to apply course concepts. Yet they remained aware that some young undergraduates could expect significantly greater financial returns from their studies. Those who study in the less prestigious institutions, however they evaluate their experience of study, are concerned to secure equal recognition of their achievement.

This seems an entirely reasonable aim but a difficult one. Continuing stratification in both higher education and society has emerged as a theme throughout the thesis. Contesting the discourse through which stratification is reproduced is difficult and elusive: to contribute to such discussion is in one sense to perpetuate the discourse. Giving voice to such students may be one way in which such contestation might be attempted, however imperfectly.

This study has no pretensions to have explained how such difficulties may be resolved. It offers no prescriptions for policy or practice, whatever ideas about either the author may entertain. Nevertheless, it offers a valid contribution to understanding the individuals involved in this significant mode and location of higher-level study. Such considerations ought to have some significance for policy at institutional and wider levels, as well as for educators concerned with the democratic development of higher education.

APPENDIX: INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

First of all, I'm interested in how you make sense of your own experience as a student and how you communicate this to others. You have been a student on higher education programmes for the last _ years.

- Do you think of yourself as a student?
- Do you describe yourself to others as a student?
- What aspects of your experience do you talk about to others?

I'm interested in the particular ways you might do this, so:

- Would you qualify your description in any way, e.g. college student, higher education, degree
- Do you use any of these terms with others?

I'm interested in how your experience compares to your expectations, to what you thought being on these courses might be like before you started them.

- Have your experiences as a student borne out your expectations of what they would be like?
- How do you think these expectations were shaped by any comparisons that you have made between your studies in higher education and earlier experiences?
- Do you think this affects the way that you describe yourself and your experiences to others?

I'm interested in how other people respond to the accounts that you give of your studies and your experience.

- What do other people, for example at work, or members of your family, say about your being a student?
- Do you think they respond positively to the experience you're going through during your studies?
- How do you respond to any misunderstandings about your experience, or your aspirations?

An important issue for this research revolves around your choice to study in the college, as opposed to at other institutions.

- What do you think is the significance to you of your studying at the college, as opposed, say, to nearby universities?

- Are there particular reasons that you've chosen to come here?
- Do you think the fact that you're studying here makes any difference to the way that others regard your studies?
- Do others ever express any view of these differences?
- How [if applicable] have you responded to this?

I'm also interested in how you negotiate your experience as a student with other roles and responsibilities.

- In what other ways do you describe yourself, for example in terms of work, family or other responsibilities
- Do you think your experience as a student has helped you in this role?
- Has it created any difficulties?
- How do you explain these difficulties to others in [this field]?
- And how do they respond?

Perhaps we can talk about this from a slightly different perspective. Some people describe themselves in various ways according to where they live, their gender, nationality, social class etc.
- In what other ways do you describe yourself? [some probes – or silence – may be necessary]
- Do you think your experience as a student has created any tensions with this?
- Can you give any examples?
- How do you explain these difficulties to others in [this field]?

Another area that I'd like to talk about is whether your views and your aspirations have changed as your studies have progressed.

- Do you feel that your views of your various roles – as a student, employee, etc. [examples as appropriate] – and their importance have changed during your studies?
- Do you feel that your relationship to other people in these roles has changed?
- What have you done in response to any such changes?

And, finally, I'd like to ask about your hopes for the future.

- What, do you think, will be the main changes in your life as a result of your studies?
- How do you plan to build on your current studies in the future?
- How do you expect others around you to respond to these aspirations?

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